“Not Just Supporting But Leading”: The Involvement of the Women of the South Wales Coalfield in the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike

By Rebecca Davies

Enrolment: 00068411

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ABSTRACT

The 1984-85 miners’ strike dramatically changed the face of the South Wales Valleys. This dissertation will show that the women’s groups that played such a crucial supportive role in it were not the homogenous entity that has often been portrayed. They shared some comparable features with similar groups in English pit villages but there were also qualitative differences between the South Wales groups and their English counterparts and between the different Welsh groups themselves. There is evidence of tensions between the Welsh groups and disputes with the communities they were trying to assist, as well as clashes with local miners’ lodges and the South Wales NUM. At the same time women’s support groups, various in structure and purpose but united in the aim of supporting the miners, challenged and shifted the balance of established gender roles.

The miners’ strike evokes warm memories of communities bonding together to fight for their survival. This thesis investigates in detail the women involved in support groups to discover what impact their involvement made on their lives afterwards. Their role is contextualised by the long-standing tradition of Welsh women’s involvement in popular politics and industrial disputes; however, not all women discovered a new confidence arising from their involvement. But others did and for them this self-belief survived the strike and, in some cases, permanently altered their own lives. The activities of the women’s support groups confirmed changes in the social role of women that had been occurring since the 1960s in the coalfield communities of South Wales, and thereby contributed to a revision of the traditional notion of ‘communities’ which were changed by the very process of being defended.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Countless people have helped with this dissertation along the way. Firstly I would like to thank all the women interviewed who were so generous in sharing their time and memories. Without them, this work would not have been possible. Secondly, for the help and support of my tutors, the late Ursula Masson, Gareth Williams and Tim Jones. And lastly my family and friends, who were there to pick me up and urge me along when I needed a good push! Thank you.
‘The greatest solidarity of all was from the women of the coalfields, not just supporting, but leading the miners alongside us.’

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\textsuperscript{3} Hywel Francis, \textit{History on our Side: Wales and the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike} (Ferryside: Iconau, 2009).
INTRODUCTION

The Miners’ Strike began on 12 March 1984 when the National Union of Mineworkers called out miners from all over Britain to stand against the National Coal Board and Government’s decision to close ‘unprofitable’ pits. The strike lasted for twelve months and many women played a prominent role. It has been said that they ‘organised and campaigned for the survival and future of their communities’.¹

This thesis will explore the involvement of the women of South Wales in the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike. Many historians have commented that the strike is remembered for the fact that women organised together and helped on a scale that had not previously been seen.² It might be expected that this significant shift must have had an impact on gender relations within the mining communities. The investigation of two main topics will therefore form the basis of this thesis: firstly, the historical nature of women’s involvement in the strike, in that their work will be examined in relation to its historical context, and secondly, its impact on gender relations. The main focus will be on the Welsh women’s support groups, on how they were formed, and on the nature and scale of their activities compared with previous disputes (1926, 1970s). In my view, discussing the historical context of Welsh women’s involvement in previous activities as a way of understanding their involvement in the 1984-85 dispute, and comparing these with support groups in other coalfields, will address the issue of the qualitative difference of the 1984-85 dispute which has been suggested by commentators. Secondly, the thesis asks the question did the dispute, and women’s involvement in it, bring about changes in gender relations which enabled the

formation of new social identities? This question will require an analysis of continuing and widening activism and longer term change in the lives of individuals.

The particular social configuration, culture and history of the South Wales Valleys had put constraints on the involvement women could have in public life before the strike. This also relates to how the strike itself emerged; the South Wales coalfield was different from other coalfields in that the collieries were so central to daily life and village communities. More than anywhere else in Britain, the communities of South Wales found the pits to be integral to their survival. This was mainly due to the geography of the South Wales Valleys in that the landscape made it very difficult for people to travel far to work on public transport, apart from south towards the coast in places such as Cardiff. This makes it an excellent area to study. Overall, the thesis will add to the work done on the strike itself. Comparisons can be drawn with other areas to understand whether or not women had similar experiences during the strike; there is for example, an excellent comparative account of the women’s activities in Nottinghamshire3 This dissertation will hopefully add to the growing body of continuing historical feminist research.4

Having grown up in the South Wales Valleys in a mining family, I soon became interested in mining history and the 1984-85 miners’ strike which led on to an interest in how the women of South Wales were involved in the strike.5 There is a substantial historiography that draws attention to the fact that the women of South Wales are often marginalized in the writing of history. Angela V. John and Deirdre Beddoe were the standard bearers of this investigation and Stefan Berger has reiterated the claim

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more recently. He recognises that just as South Wales once relied on male-dominated industries (coal, iron and to some extent steel), so the history of the area is also male-dominated.\(^6\) Over the past forty years in Britain and thirty in Wales, there has been much more research into the history of women in Britain, and works such as those by Triona Holden,\(^7\) Sheila Rowbotham and Stephanie Linkogle,\(^8\) are additions to a growing historiography. Many books have been written about the strike in both Wales and Britain in general,\(^9\) and even about specific locations;\(^10\) women feature little in these accounts. Some works have analysed the role of women in the strike in other coalfields such as that by Joan Witham.\(^11\) For a perspective from the Welsh coalfield there is Jill Miller’s collection of interviews from the women of the Abertillery Women’s Group.\(^12\) However, this work does not analyse the effect the strike had on these women or how their lives continued afterwards. It is also geographically limited to one location.

Another study by Jean Stead is an excellent account of what women did throughout Britain during the strike, yet does not assess whether this effort was historically different from anything women had been involved in during previous strikes. Its methodology is mainly oral interviews. As the book was published soon

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\(^12\) Jill Miller, *You Can’t Kill the Spirit: Women in a Welsh Mining Valley* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd, 1986)
after the strike, there is no assessment of later developments. Triona Holden’s *Queen Coal* (2005) is a more recent work and looks with hindsight at the strike and the women involved. This still focuses on individuals’ experiences, but none from South Wales. It is also an account aimed at a wide readership, so although a useful source, it does not have a thorough scholarly basis. Generally speaking the historiography of women in the strike is not academic. The literature mostly gives a participant perspective and is based on interviews. The fact that much of the work was written shortly after the strike means it often lacks objectivity. Even Holden’s *Queen Coal* is not distanced in ideas though it is chronologically. A more academic, analytical approach is provided by John Murphy’s study of Armthorpe (Lincs.) where he concludes that women in the strike in this area ‘were able, through participation in collective activity, to create a new social identity’. However, my thesis examines whether this new ‘social identity’ meant that the South Wales women could make a new role for themselves within their communities. This has not previously been examined.

Throughout the course of this work, the term ‘community’ will be examined. Historians such as David Gilbert have commented that the reason so many were willing to fight during the strike was to save their communities and way of life. It is ironic then that women’s unprecedented fight against change could actually have transformed their communities forever. David Adamson and Stuart Jones comment that the South Wales Valleys are always stereotypically thought to have close-knit

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15 Ibid. p. 365.
However, just as many historians have struggled with the term and much has been written on the subject, I will be questioning this concept of community as it could be said to have already changed by this time because, among other factors, miners were travelling to work from other areas due to pit closures.

When the 1984-85 strike began, many local collieries had already become casualties of the NCB pit closure programme which had begun in the 1960s. This meant that miners who wanted to continue in the industry had to travel to other collieries to work. For example, men travelled from Aberdare and Ebbw Vale to work at the Merthyr Vale Colliery, and Maerdy was the only pit left in the Rhondda Valley. This is ironic as it was one of the most militant areas during the strike although it had few collieries left to fight for; more than one member of the community has stated that this was because they knew it was the last fight for the coal industry in South Wales. All other pits in the area had closed and they knew the impact that this had already had on their local community. Those fighting to keep the pit open were not disillusioned by the work that went on there. They knew it was severely hard work and often mothers did not want their sons to choose mining as a career. Yet for many it was the only option available to them. Mining communities such as that at Maerdy knew that if their colliery closed then unemployment would increase massively as there was nothing else for people to transfer to. The heart of the community would be gone and the majority of workers lucky enough to find work after the pit would have to travel widely to their new employment.

Different methodologies have been used to research this thesis. I have adopted a comparative and contextual approach as there is a wealth of secondary literature that

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18 For example, Daniel Williams (ed.), Who Speaks For Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity, Raymond
can be referred to. Therefore I have used work written about women in other areas to
draw comparisons with South Wales,\textsuperscript{19} as well as examining the history of Welsh
women in previous strikes.\textsuperscript{20} This will enable us to draw similarities and contrasts
with other coalfields as well as other strikes. There is also substantial primary material
that has been accessed: the Glamorgan Record Office holds minute books from the
South Wales Women’s Support Group meetings that took place throughout 1984-86,
while the South Wales Miners Library at Swansea has an extensive oral history
collection that includes interviews as well as videos, recorded with both individual
men and women, as well as groups about their feelings about the women’s
involvement at the time of the strike. There are also many interviews which detail
involvement in earlier strikes. The Library’s large collection includes photographs
from the strike, as well as minute books from women’s support groups, lodges and the
NUM. Naturally, local and national newspapers have also been particularly useful,
especially the \textit{Merthyr Express, Rhondda Leader, Western Mail} and \textit{South Wales Echo}.

In addition to my archival research, I have generated my own oral history
material. Since one can get a sense of the mood and atmosphere of the time by talking
to the people involved, I have spoken to seventeen women, all with varying degrees of
involvement in the strike and its activities. The women interviewed were from a wide-
ranging area, but mostly from the eastern section of the coalfield. To balance the
research, interviews deposited at the South Wales Miner’s Library in Swansea by Dr
Hywel Francis were used to gain a wider perspective. Even non-Welsh historians have

\textit{Williams} (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{19} For example, Jonathan & Ruth Winterton, \textit{Coal Crisis and Conflict}; and Roger Steifert & John
Urwin \textit{Struggle Without End: The 1984/5 Miners’ Strike in North Staffordshire} (Newcastle: Penrhos
\textsuperscript{20} For Example, Deirdre Beddoe, \textit{Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales}
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).
noted that the eastern coalfield of South Wales has a different history from the mining communities found in the western sector, a testament to the fact that it has always been linguistically, culturally and socially different.21

There are of course theoretical and methodological issues when using oral testimony as a historical source. Many people question the reliability and validity of information collected in this way; the accuracy of memory is an issue, as is the question of bias.22 However, interviews can be cross-referenced to other historical material to check their accuracy.23 There is also a wealth of literature about the mechanism by which people actually remember events in their lives and then share them.24 These ‘problems’ centre on unease about the subjectivity of oral evidence. Since my thesis concerns in part the way in which women experienced and understood the changes in their own lives in the course of, and as a result of, the dispute, subjectivity is a strength of the source, and the subject of analysis.

Joan Sangster poses the argument that ‘gender, race and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory.’25 Her research examines the idea that an interviewee’s background would not only make her views on specific events, and therefore her discussion of them, different to that of anyone else, but goes further by suggesting that women remember things differently to men and are more likely to underestimate their involvement in history and to downplay their role.26 This has not necessarily been found when looking at women’s

26 Ibid. p. 89.
description about their involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike but related to this is the idea that an interviewee is more likely to be truthful and open with someone they believe to be the “same” as themselves, with the same values and ideas. This could mean cultural, gender, race or class similarities.\textsuperscript{27} Sherna Gluck has investigated this topic and readily discusses ‘the problems of a mismatch between interviewer and interviewee and suggests that race (and particularly sex) differences can inhibit the success of interviews.’\textsuperscript{28} She says that people are less willing to talk to ‘outsiders’.\textsuperscript{29}

My dissertation will begin by examining Welsh women’s involvement in disputes and events throughout the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, which will in turn provide a basis for comparison within which their involvement in the strike of 1985-85 can be examined. There is often an impression that women’s involvement was an exceptionally novel experience, that the women had never before provided such organised support within their communities on such a grand scale. However, this is not actually the case. Women had always supported their men folk and their communities in difficult times. To prove this point there will be an examination into women’s activities in the industrial revolution, women’s work, home lives and ‘traditional’ gender roles: in other words, women’s activities within the workforce as well as within their home lives and community. This will also help to characterise the mining communities within the South Wales coalfield and the idealised image of the ‘Welsh Mam’.

Proceeding into the twentieth century, women’s activities during World War One and World War Two and then later in the 1960s and 1970s in the newer

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. p. 96.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. p. 221.
industrialised workforce will be examined. The dissertation then moves on to look at women’s historical involvement in public protests in the nineteenth century from the ceffyl pren, to the Scotch Cattle, involvement in the Merthyr Riots and the Chartist movement, and briefly, the Rebecca Riots. Women’s involvement in politics is then considered. This includes women’s work in auxiliary political party movements of the late nineteenth century, Women’s Liberal Associations, Women’s Labour League, and Women’s Co-operative Guild, as well as work within the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), and the Welsh Nationalist Party. Temperance societies are then examined, as well as the suffrage movement, which prepared the way for women’s movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Women’s Liberation Movement, Women For Life On Earth and women’s involvement in Plaid Cymru. This chapter concludes by discussing women’s involvement in struggles, with industrial protests, demonstrations and riots, as well as women’s participation in previous strikes such as that of 1926.

Following this thorough grounding in the history of Welsh women and the activities they were involved in previous to the 1984-95 miners’ strike, a general description of the strike itself is then provided. This includes a comparison with previous disputes, as well as an investigation into the elastic term ‘community’ with close reference to the industrial changes during the South Wales Valleys throughout the 1960s and 1970s which impacted on the local communities. The government’s preparations for the 1984-85 strike throughout the 1970s and early 1980s are then discussed, such as changes to legislation, and on the other hand the support received from within the mining communities and support groups, as well as the activities of those on strike, such as picketing. Gender relationships are also touched upon, as well
as tensions caused by involvement in the strike.

Chapter 3 examines how women in other coalfields throughout Britain showed their support for the 1984-85 strike. This will enable us to discover whether there are any differences or similarities in experience. The South Wales coalfield has always believed itself to have been an area dissimilar to any other in Britain with its strong community bonds and vibrant history of militancy, which was also true of the miners themselves. This chapter, which examines whether these alleged differences enabled the women of South Wales to gain a different experience of strike support, therefore includes an examination of the women’s support groups and their organisation, whether they provided food parcels or meals, or were involved in picketing and demonstrations, whether the groups continued after the strike itself had ended, and what the women involved did afterwards. This will provide evidence for discussion of the similarities and differences among the women of South Wales who supported the striking miners.

The chapter also covers the work completed by the umbrella organisation, Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC), Greenham Common Peace Camp and the links forged between its supporters and mining communities. It examines women’s support groups in Yorkshire and County Durham and the West Midlands, and discusses similarities and differences between women and support groups in South Wales. There is also a thorough examination of the different support offered by women supporters, by observing individual women, as well as an overview of support groups. The chapter closes with an analysis of what women achieved after the strike had ended and whether or not they believed their experiences in the strike had significantly changed their lives.

The fourth chapter examines the work of Welsh women in the strike in detail,
and discusses the widely-varying differences of the women who were involved, the difference between support groups, which were by no means a homogenous entity as this chapter hopes to demonstrate. Topics examined include the different types of individual women involved, how the groups were organised, the collection of money, the distribution of food, as well as their involvement with other organisations such as lesbian and gay groups. These differences between support groups in South Wales can then be compared to support groups in other coalfields. There will be a detailed examination of the individual women involved and discussion of the correlation between women’s experience before they joined strike support groups, and the activities they became involved with therein. For example, in many instances women with some experience before becoming involved in strike support were more likely to take part in more ‘militant’ activities such as picketing. This gives an excellent background to further discuss women’s activities after the strike had ended.

The final chapter discusses how Welsh women went on to become involved in activities after the strike. This is to establish whether or not the women involved found their lives significantly changed by the strike, as many writers such as Hywel Francis suggest. There is an enduring notion that the women who were involved in strike support were politicised by the events and therefore could not go back to the lives they knew beforehand. This concluding chapter examines individual women, their lives beforehand, their involvement in the strike and their lives after it, to establish if this was actually the case. It examines initiatives set up by women after the strike such as the DOVE Workshop at Banwen, women’s entry into the workforce and education, and changes that occurred in gender and social identity.

In conclusion, although the strike has an extremely wide-ranging historiography, few have specifically examined the role of the women of South Wales
in a historical context with comparison to both women and support groups in other areas of Britain, as well as the differences within the Welsh support groups themselves.30 There is something of a myth surrounding women’s involvement in the miners’ strike, that they banded together in a homogenous, harmonious group, fell in line to support their men folk and communities, and their activities therein changed their lives forever. While many women did admirable and rightly respected work throughout the year-long strike, this portrayal is not always an entirely accurate one. This dissertation therefore examines individual women and their support to provide further proof that Welsh women have historically always gone out of their way to protect their communities in time of struggle, and in that respect the strike of 1984-85 was no different. However, women had never previously acted on the same scale and that is the difference that this dissertation will assess.

CHAPTER 1

Women in Protest in Wales: An Historical Overview

‘Welsh women often occupied a conspicuous position in their respective communities, particularly in relation to popular protest. Indeed, the militancy of women was almost proverbial’¹

A reading of many works on the 1984-85 miners’ strike gives the reader the impression that the involvement of Welsh women in strike support activities was a benchmark of activism. For example, Deirdre Beddoe writes that in comparison to earlier periods of crisis ‘this time [1984-85],’

[t]he women went further. They organised as never before. They set up a network of women’s support groups throughout the coalfield. They raised funds, ran food centres and soup kitchens, addressed public meetings throughout Britain and stood alongside men on the picket lines.²

As a foundation to examine women’s involvement in the 1984-85 strike, we must therefore first establish a historical basis for women’s lives before this period. Was what they accomplished during these times novel? Or is there evidence that similar activities took place before? For instance, are there precedents elsewhere in Welsh women’s history? Welsh history is in fact littered with such examples. These will therefore form the basis of this chapter. This will loosely be in chronological order, with subtitle headings to enable ease of subject examination. However, there will be

cross-references as history does not fit so neatly into the packages artificially created to make the subject-matter more manageable.

Little has been written about the history of women in Wales until relatively recently. As Beddoe has written, ‘Welshness …is constructed on an extremely narrow base. It has been constructed with reference to only one sex, to only one class and to only one sector of the Welsh economic base: the industrial sector.’ Even if the historiography of women’s experiences in Welsh history has greatly expanded over recent years, it is still significantly lags behind that of men. Rosemary Jones states that the work of recovering and illuminating the lives of women in the South Wales coalfield, particularly in relation to industrial protest, has barely commenced. Of course, historians could argue that it is the very history of Wales itself that has allowed the exclusion of women. The nineteenth century saw sea and rail transport boom, and the south Wales valleys had some of the best steam-raising coal in the world. As people moved from agricultural areas both in Wales and from further afield in Britain, they flocked to the industrial centres in search of employment, higher wages and a better life. Industrialisation created a new type of workforce whereby men made up its majority and women mainly undertook household and family duties, which were a full-time occupation in themselves. It is here that the beginnings of a clear gender divide are seen.

The capitalist mode of production associated with industrialisation added to this, as for the most part, male capitalists controlled economic production and therefore held the wealth and political power. This ties in with the idea of Wales being

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a strongly patriarchal society where men’s views are always dominant.\(^5\) Also, the heavy work associated with industrialisation (such as the coal mining, iron, and slate industries) was generally considered to be ‘men’s work’. By 1911, one in every three workers in industrial south Wales worked in mining, so that in theory the economic development defined and shaped the lives of both men and women.\(^6\) However, this does not mean that women did no work at all. Without their work at home, men would not have been able to carry out their manual work, but this is a subject for discussion later.

The term ‘women’ covers a wide range of individuals, lives and experiences. For example, Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams explain that,

> we are also reminded that the valleys were by no means homogeneous. Differences existed in culture and language and in the nature and quality of life depending upon background and economic circumstances. Similarly, the valleys’ women themselves were not necessarily a uniform group. Their responses to their circumstances varied according to personal and cultural factors.\(^7\)

This can then be expanded to include other areas of Wales, such as those working in agriculture, and even between the different classes in society. There was (and still is) therefore no uniform experience for women. Beddoe emphasizes this when she says, ‘we must get away from vague generalisations. … We should recoil from statements beginning “women were …”’.\(^8\) This is an important fact to be remembered throughout the course of this work. Examples will be examined, but this does not mean that these experiences applied to all women.\(^9\)

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\(^6\) Pamela Michael, Annie Williams & Neil Evans, *Introduction to Women’s History in Wales: Sources for Welsh Women’s History Bibliograph:*, Project Grace, Unit I (Bangor: University of Wales, 1994), p. 10
\(^7\) Carol White & Sian R. Williams, ‘Introduction’ in Carol White & Sian R. Williams (eds.), *Struggle or Starve: Women’s Lives in the South Wales Valleys Between the Two World Wars* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998), pp. 11-12.
Women’s work and home lives

With this in mind then, we can go on to look at the so-called ‘gender divide’, roles that have been deeply entrenched in south Wales society especially. This will be done by examining women’s work and home lives. Even in the 1980s the legacy of this gender divide can still be seen. For example, the women who were involved in the 1984-85 miners’ strike themselves believed that what they were doing was new in their lives. Even if this is not the case, in that women may have been involved in comparable ways in similar cases previously, the belief must still have been there that these women were almost revolutionary. With this in mind, it could be said that women in the early 1980s would still have been suffering the gender divide legacy of the industrial revolution, in that it was commonly believed they were extremely family and home orientated.

Due to the dominance of heavy industry in south Wales, the lives of most women were centred upon the home, in that their lives were dominated by their men’s work. Women were expected to cook, clean and prepare baths for men returning from shifts, often for several hours at different times of the day if they had one or more men at home on a different shift pattern. These conditions were not improved until labour saving devices were invented and made more affordable to the lower income earners. If women did have outside employment whilst single, they were expected to cease this work upon marriage. Some took up ‘unofficial’ employment outside the home such as childminding or cleaning, but these were seen as an additional responsibility to caring for the household rather than work on the same level as men. All aspects of home organisation were the sole responsibility of the women of the house. This would

include wife, widow or daughter. 12 Mari A. Williams comments that south Wales was an area dominated by heavy industry where males outnumbered the females, and marriage was therefore an important stage in the female life-cycle; in Glamorgan in 1931, nearly 70 percent of all females aged between 20 and 59 were married. This figure rose to over 75 percent within the mining communities. 13 The completion of household tasks underlined the gender division of the time: men would assist with some chores such as cutting wood and coal, but ‘women’s work’ was clearly defined. 14 Gwyneth Fricker, remembering her childhood, says,

> It was expected for the girls to help out, not the boys, no way! That was the wrong part of it. They’d go to work and they thought once they’d done their stint in the colliery that was enough, which I suppose was right. There was nothing else to do, just be waited on. … and they were! 15

Women were involved in the private sphere of the home while, ‘the public world of the chapels, clubs, trade unions and political parties was dominated by men.’ It is interesting to note that Lieven says that these areas were only ‘dominated’ by men, thus giving room for women to be involved in some form. 16 Their involvement will be examined throughout this chapter.

The gender divide can be clearly seen in the areas of women’s work and home lives. Miners occupy the foreground in the traditional view of the mining community, engaged in dirty and dangerous work while women fade into the background to wait and support. 17 Lieven asserts controversially that, ‘despite the pressures, there is a

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sense in which marriage and child rearing were ‘chosen’ by women.18 In a society where women were forced out of employment when married, could this choice really be feasible? There were not really many other opportunities available to them. Women’s occupations can roughly be split into three areas: that is rural, industrial and commercial. Firstly, in rural areas there were some opportunities, but with a limited range of jobs available. These were largely in agricultural labouring and domestic work. In industrial areas there were relatively few jobs and the range was limited. Again, domestic service and related areas such as shop work prevailed. The term ‘domestic service’ covers a wide range of different jobs, and from 1871 to 1901, it accounted for over half the total number of women employed in Wales.19 Women were employed in both middle and upper class homes in Wales, which could vary from having one to several domestic servants. The larger commercial towns of Wales had the best opportunities for women. Here there were more jobs, enabling more variety. Women could be employed in shops, the professions, teaching, clerical and secretarial work.20

By 1911, only one in five of the female population over 10 years’ old in the county of Glamorgan was in paid employment, and the majority of these were domestic servants. This is a typical example of an industrial area. Again, this was acceptable ‘women’s work’. Employers often imposed marriage bars to ensure that women finished employment once they married. Dot Jones comments that the Rhondda valley was typical of south Wales during the nineteenth century. It was mono-industrial; the coal industry was so dominant that it left little choice for women’s active employment outside the home. So, ‘their role was defined in relation

18 Lieven, Senghennydd, p. 146.
20 Michael et al, Women at Work in Nineteenth Century Wales, pp. 10-11.
to their husband’s occupation.’ However, there were women in employment, particularly before they married. Although they were absent from many accounts, women did work in collieries and ironworks during the nineteenth century. This was normally above ground as women were forbidden from working below ground, and included a variety of jobs such as unloading and tipping tubs, and sorting and transporting the coal. Their numbers were small (under 7,000 in Britain in the 1870s, 5,000 by 1900, but rising by another thousand in the next decade and almost doubling during wartime) but they did exist. Even here, however, a gender divide can still be seen. Men and women could work in the pit, but women were still expected to look after the house and do all the other ‘women’s work’ when they returned home, though this was recognised as essential and very different from the demands ‘in work’ it was still, nevertheless, work. It is remembered as such and could be lengthy and physically demanding.

The pit women were even given additional ‘women’s jobs’ such as cleaning. They were also discouraged from joining in with men’s recreational activities, male culture and the union. The majority of these women were made redundant from their jobs over time due to the mechanisation of the industry, and gained employment elsewhere. These included ancillary jobs at the pit (such as cleaning and canteen work), factory work, serving school meals, domestic, shop, hotel and pub work.

There are different opinions about the impact that industrialisation had on the waged work available to women. It could be said that there was virtually no waged work for women before the industrial revolution, it brought work and was therefore a process of liberation. On the other hand, there were actually many jobs that women

23 Ibid. p. 18.
did for wages outside the home before this. This included jobs such as cleaning, taking in laundry, sewing and so on. From this standpoint, the revolution is seen as destroying many of the jobs that women once did as they were heavily based in agriculture (such as spinning and weaving, for example). The modern world shifted to factory work. Pre-marital work was therefore transient and mostly (but not entirely, as has already been seen), restricted to domestic service, office or shop work. However, many did continue to take part in some paid work or do part time jobs such as cleaning or laundering after marriage, although they did not normally work outside the home. Some women did go into teaching, but again, most local education authorities introduced a ‘marriage bar’ requiring women to resign their post on marriage. This began to be phased out by the middle of the twentieth century, although it sometimes led to secret and lengthy courtships, or teachers who wished to remain in work remained unmarried.

World War One had a serious impact on women’s lives. It strengthened the gender divide even more, as many men went to fight abroad and women stayed at home. However, some women did travel with the men as auxiliaries and nurses. At home, thousands of women were recruited into the workforce to replace the gaps left by conscripted men. These years saw women’s employment rise dramatically. This was aided by the National Register whereby all women aged between 16 and 65 were asked to register by 15th August 1915. Women entered the workforce in several different ways. One example would be the ‘Voluntary Aid Detachment’ (V.A.D.) where women undertook cooking, clerical work, dispensing, and store-keeping, as well as nursing. Their services were in such high demand as the war continued, that

24 Ibid. pp. 18-21.
25 Michael et al, Women at Work in Nineteenth Century Wales, p. 10.
27 Ibid. p. 3.
the government began paying for their work in military hospitals. By September 1916, there were 8,000 V.A.D.’s serving in military hospitals. Large numbers of women also went on to work in munitions factories, producing the weapons needed for the war effort. Importantly, women worked as noncombatants in the armed services, under the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (W.A.A.C.), which was established in 1917 as a way of releasing men to the front by filling auxiliary positions with women. Similarly in November 1917, the Women’s Royal Naval Service was established where women completed clerical work, postal and communications, electrical and some engineering work. Lastly, the Women’s Royal Air Force was formed in April 1918, where most women were employed in clerical and domestic jobs, but some did become fitters, drivers, welders and carpenters.

Even early in the twentieth century then, it can be seen that women were not only homemakers, but worked in traditionally ‘male areas’ outside their homes. Here the beginnings of women’s involvement in many areas outside their home, lives that are often overlooked, can be seen. One could argue that it took an event as dramatic as war to enable these women to work outside their domestic sphere, yet they still did. Of course, the majority of these women returned to their ‘normal lives’ once the war had ended, but these are the seeds of something that could later grow. This was a massive step for women in the early twentieth century. Before this they were very limited as to the jobs they could do, if allowed to enter paid work at all. Yet here, women entered the armed forces. Of course, there must have been some prejudice, but it was still a step forward, for instance it has been commented that,

The first women to take up positions in the forces had to fight hard for the principle that women should be commanded by women. In a highly structured male hierarchy, where rank was of the utmost importance, women had great difficulty establishing their position.

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28 Ibid. p. 4.
29 Ibid. p. 5.
Women also worked in the Land Army, and by August 1916, 350 women registered for agricultural work in Brecon and Radnor, with 250-300 registering in Pembrokeshire.\(^{30}\) Again this was not new work for women, but it established farm work as a form of public service, therefore increasing its importance.

In World War Two, women were again drafted into the workforce, although this time it was on an unprecedented scale as for the first time women aged between twenty and thirty were conscripted alongside men. Women were not required to take part in the fighting, but instead they took up work in reserved occupations such as factory work and farming. The impact was much more significant in Wales because fewer Welsh women were employed in the workforce than in Britain overall. For example, in Britain in 1939, there were 39 women employed for every 100 men, but in south Wales, it was 16 to 100. In 1939, there were 94,000 women in employment in Wales, but with war work this figure rose to 204,000 by 1945.\(^{31}\) Women were drafted to cover acute labour shortages and were deployed to factories and services in Wales and further afield such as the Midlands and the south of England. However, only single women were deployed in this way. Married women were directed to industrial jobs, but only near their homes; they were not expected to move away. Married women with children were expected to undertake part-time work.\(^{32}\) In this sense then, the gender divide can still clearly be seen. Many married women’s husbands would have been in the armed forces, leaving them with as few commitments as single women. Yet because they were married, they were expected to stay at home. As in World War One, demobilisation had an immediate effect on women’s employment, in fact their numbers decreased before the end of the war. However, attitudes towards

\(^{30}\) Ibid. pp. 6-7.

women’s work did change. For example, David Rees comments that, ‘one of the impacts of the war was, that it became accepted practice for women to carry on working after they were married.’ More women were therefore used in the post World War Two workforce.

Therefore, in times of trouble, women did whatever was required of them until circumstances returned to normal and they were discarded. This could be said of south Wales women during and after the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike. As will be seen in later chapters, they rallied to help their families, men folk and communities to survive the extremely tough time. Many of them then returned to their homes and normal lives. With this in mind then, was what women did in the strike so significant and life-changing, given that we have already seen many examples of similar events occurring?

After the war though, the 1960s and 1970s saw real industrial growth in the clothing industry and electronics and electrical engineering. The latter two provided two-thirds of the total increase in female employment. A significant increase was also seen in the service sectors. Yet the 1980s saw Wales suffer the highest regional decline in women’s employment; in 1989 the proportion of Welsh women in the labour force, at 63.9 percent, was also still less than the UK average of 70.5 percent. Even into the 1990s, work for women in Wales remained characteristically low-paid. Women were employed in relatively low-skilled work with few prospects for training and promotion. However, the work women undertook was still regarded as ‘women’s work’ and normally they only undertook work that was thought to be suitable for them, even in the extreme times of war. A woman’s place was indeed in

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33 David Rees, ‘One Boss Was in Our House’ in Mark Davies (ed), The Valleys Autobiography, p. 73.
35 Teresa Rees, Women and Work: Twenty-Five Years of Gender Equality in Wales (Cardiff: University
the home, and the work they undertook outside was normally an extension of this. Women’s lives in this arena will now be examined.

Winkler states that the reason why employment rates for women in Wales was generally so low is due to the fact that they already had an occupation ready-made for them, that of a housewife and mother, which often came with marriage. In fact then, there were practical reasons why Welsh women did not find paid employment outside the home, the main reason being that although it was not statistically classed as work they still had to complete the domestic tasks within the home. It was arduous, and a lifetime commitment. Their husbands’ profession usually made this much more difficult. First and foremost, the men themselves had to be kept clean. With no running water this was by no means an easy task. Water had to be brought from outside and boiled over the fireplace for the bath situated in front of it. This was a daily task which sometimes occurred several times a day, depending on the husbands’, sons’ or lodgers’ shifts. A meal would also be expected on the men’s return from work and the children from school. Added to this would be the battle to keep the house clean with the constant fight against coal dust. Many historians argue that this endless round of back-breaking housework, ‘could really develop into a craft in which many women took pride and pleasure.’ Welsh women took immense pride in their housework; it began to be seen as a way of self-respect. It was a way in which women could triumph over such hard circumstances.

In many respects, this is the typical image of the ‘Welsh Mam’, the idealised, nonconformist, iconic Welsh woman created in the mid-nineteenth century. She was

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37 Pamela Michael et al, Women in Inter-War Wales: Project Grace, Unit 9 (Bangor: University of Wales, 1994) p. 9.
the wife and mother of miners, clean, pious and a moral custodian. These women were in charge of all aspects of organisation in the home, including financial management and childcare. If the wife or mother of the household was incapacitated for any reason, the tasks would fall to the eldest female. Men might help with some tasks such as chopping wood, but there was a clear demarcation between the two work spheres. Domestic tasks were ‘women’s work’. All of this is linked to the fact that women would do anything to hold their families and communities together. This meant doing whatever was required of them, staying home and tending the house or going out to work when needed. It also meant supporting both men and the community in times of trouble such as strikes and disturbances. Women played an absolutely essential role in Welsh society. Without them, the industries would have been unable to function. Rosemary Crook sums up a Welsh woman in a working class community when she states, ‘she provided food and baths as needed, brought up her children well and contrived to keep the family out of debt.’ Women were traditionally responsible for balancing the family budget, though they were dependent on the men in the family to support them financially.

It could be said that the women’s intense work ethic at home enabled the men folk to attend protests about their circumstances. For example, wives backed their husbands by looking after the house while they attended meetings, and supported them when they needed it. The women would be just as affected as the men by changes in working conditions and pay. There will be more examples of this support later in the chapter. Discontent at home could even be a spark for men’s militancy,

40 Ibid. p. 25.
and, ‘home life was often linked with industrial militancy.’ The woman’s home was her domain and she would fight to keep it and her family safe. Again then, there are echoes here of the women’s involvement in the 1984 miners’ strike. Here too, women supported their husbands as they fought for the stability of their jobs, family and community.

Importantly, the household was where the women spent the greatest part of their day. For them, there was not a division between home and work life or public and private, as there was for men. Men could leave work behind at the end of a shift, but women were constantly at work. Women also depended on female neighbours and relatives in times of trouble, and rallied around each other for specific events such as births, deaths, illness or misfortune. However, independence was extremely important to women’s pride, meaning they tried to return to household duties as soon as possible. For the most part, this section has concentrated on the home lives of working-class women, rather than middle and upper-class women. They too stayed at home, but for them, this was a symbol of status. If the women could afford to stay at home, then their husband must be earning sufficient wages to support the household. In all respects then, it seems that all women had their place at home.

However, women’s home lives were not constant throughout the twentieth century. Jane Pilcher conducted research into the changing attitudes and gender relations between cohabiting partners and their attitude towards domestic tasks.

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44 Ibid. p. 79.
46 Lieven, Senghennydd, pp. 144-6.
47 Williams, ‘Aspects of Women’s Working Lives in the Mining Communities of South Wales’, p. 59.
50 See Jane Pilcher, ‘Who should do the dishes? Three generations of Welsh women talking about men and housework’, in Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (eds.) Our Sisters’
There was clear gender role segregation in the domestic division of labour, therefore Pilcher interviewed a cross section of women from three generations to investigate whether this segregation and division had changed over time. The participants were families of women (mother, daughter and adult granddaughter) who had lived in Wales for at least two generations. The average age of the oldest generation was seventy-four, the middle generation, forty-six, and the youngest, twenty-two. The key question used was ‘Do you agree with men taking responsibility for housework?’ In general, the accounts given by the oldest generation were resistant to the idea of their men folk having a substantial degree of responsibility for housework. Instead, most agreed that the men would only ‘help out’ on a special occasion, such as if the woman were incapacitated due to illness. Pilcher states that this generation’s account of man and housework referred to a supportive male role.

Women from the middle generation tended to focus more on the relative employment status of their partners, in that those who worked in a tiring, manual job, would be less likely to participate in domestic tasks. However, some did agree to men’s participation in housework in a general sense and did not relate it to employment. For example, two women agreed, ‘oh yes, yes. … I feel now that any man should be prepared to take on 50 percent responsibility in the running of the household’ (Pauline Evans) and, ‘Yes, of course I do. I don’t think it’s nothing demeaning’ (Angharad Baker). However, this was normally the case when both partners worked full-time and could therefore equally share the domestic responsibilities. In the middle generation then, more women were beginning to believe that there was nothing wrong in their men completing domestic tasks. There


51 Ibid. pp. 31-33.
52 Ibid. pp. 34-36
53 Ibid. pp. 36-37.
were some women interviewed who had the same attitude as the older generation, that men would only complete housework if their partners were unable to.\textsuperscript{55}

The women from the youngest generation, overall, were not yet married nor living with their male partners, so for them, their responses were mainly beliefs based on what they hoped the future would hold for their relationships. None of the young women interviewed believed that they would be entirely responsible for domestic tasks. The majority stressed that they would not, ‘put up with’ their partners’ lack of equality with domestic tasks. Housework should be shared equally.\textsuperscript{56} Overall then, it is clear that there were very different views between the three generations of Welsh women. This, in turn, indicates that the ‘gender divide’ had already began to shift within these households, also giving evidence that if it was happening here then it was more likely to be happening on a wider scale throughout South Wales. As this work was completed in the early 1990s, it is evident that women’s increasing involvement in activities such as the 1984-85 miners’ strike and their later entry into the workforce and other areas, did in fact have an impact on gender relations. It is clear that attitudes were changing, and therefore ideas and lifestyles would follow suit.

The experiences of women at home were not the only matters women could necessarily be involved in. There are examples throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that show women did become involved in public matters. This could be seen as the foundations for the work the women of south Wales did during the 1984-85 miners’ strike, since these are clearly precedents for virtually everything women did to support the men and their communities. Women’s involvement in the public sphere will be discussed next.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. p. 37.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. pp. 37-38.
Women’s involvement in the public sphere

Just as there is discussion of whether or not the industrial revolution brought more or less opportunities for women to work outside the home, so also is there debate over female participation in the public arena. Some historians, such as Rosemary A. Jones, believe that opportunities for women to participate were eroded throughout the nineteenth century.57 Others believe that women fought against their oppressors over time and gradually came to the forefront in events such as the strike in the 1980s. Women had long been involved in popular protest. Jones comments,

Welsh women often occupied a conspicuous position in their respective communities, particularly in relation to popular protest. Indeed, the militancy of women was almost proverbial: contemporary reports on food riots, enclosure disturbances and attacks on bailiffs and other officials invariably attest to the commitment and vitality of female participation.58

This describes a ‘community protest’ and women were just as much part of the community as men and fought to keep it that way. Collective interests and values united both sexes. There are many examples of women being actively involved in public displays of communal solidarity.59 One example of this would be the ‘ceffyl pren’ or ‘wooden horse’, a ritualized community sanction that was used to punish unwanted behaviour. Most localities in Wales had similar forms of this tradition. This was a shaming ritual where wrong-doers would be publicly punished by members of their own community.60

The important part to remember about these is that they were community-wide events, meaning that a cross-section of people participated, including women and children.61 The ‘ceffyl pren’ normally occurred in tight-knit communities, and as this

58 Ibid. p. 17.
60 Ibid. pp. 17-18.
61 See above work for detailed descriptions of the ritual.
was the case, it was a form of social control. In some ways, it was a type of community policing. This meant that women participated in a number of ways. For instance, it was women who sustained the forms of gossip which detected the behaviour which needed punishing. This enabled women to play a central role in regulating community affairs; in so doing, they were afforded a real measure of public influence and power. Women also became members of the crowd which subjected the victim to the abuse. Also, women were just as likely to be victims of these attacks as men.62 The ‘ceffyl pren’ tradition was eventually stamped out by suppression from the authorities.63 Importantly though, remnants of the ‘ceffyl pren’ tradition can be seen in Wales long after its demise. It continued to re-emerge during political disputes throughout the nineteenth century.64 In fact, echoes of it can be seen in the way working miners were treated by strikers and their families. They too were ostracised by a similar form of social control.

The ‘ceffyl pren’ had little mercy for those who threatened the political integrity and cohesion of the community. In this respect, there were similarities with the ‘Scotch Cattle’ who inflicted punishment on blacklegs in the south Wales coalfield in the 1820s. Many historians confirm that the ‘Scotch Cattle’ were direct descendants of the ‘ceffyl pren’.65 The ‘Scotch Cattle’ was born in the early nineteenth century in the east valleys of South Wales, and terrorised strike-breakers.66 The purpose was to frighten both masters and men and to consider action against blacklegs and unpopular contractors. Meetings would occur as well as attacks on the

property of those who disobeyed warnings.\textsuperscript{67} Again then, there are similarities in the way that women supported the 1984-85 strike and those who had protested decades before: the protest activities of women in 1984-85 were not completely new.

Significantly, Rosemary Jones comments that although gender roles were marked in the industrialised communities, many women still continued to play a significant role in the community sanctions that accompanied industrial disputes. Even as late as the 1920s for example, the women of Markham reportedly pinned a white nightdress to a broom to intimidate a local blackleg. ‘White shirting’ processions were also carried out around this time (and were often associated with women) where a blackleg would be forced to wear a white shirt and paraded through the streets.\textsuperscript{68} Here there are echoes of the ‘ceffyl pren’ and a precedent for women’s experiences in the 1984-85 miners’ strike.

Again, there are links with other demonstrations in the coalfield. For example, there are similarities between the ‘Scotch Cattle’ and the Rebecca Riots. Participants in both disguised themselves and relied on nightly meetings, and threatened those they opposed. Both practices were adapted from the ‘ceffyl pren’. Those who broke the code of conduct in these communities were punished and ostracised.\textsuperscript{69} Female participation in these events was extremely important. Again, the fact that women took part in protests and events can be seen throughout Welsh history. Jones states,

By upholding collective standards of behaviour and ensuring that the men did not break ranks during industrial disputes, women helped to forge and cement the mutual supportive ties and strong sense of political cohesiveness which were evident characteristics of community life in many parts of Wales and upon which the success of those disputes ultimately depended.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. pp. 97-104. \\
\textsuperscript{68} Jones, ‘Women, Community and Collective Action’, p. 35-36. \\
\textsuperscript{69} Jones, \textit{Before Rebecca} pp. 105-09. \\
Women were prominent in other events too, for instance, the Merthyr Riots of 1831. Here, women played a similar role to men. David Jones even goes so far as to say, that the mob that had virtually taken hold of the town of Merthyr was composed chiefly of women, boys and very young workmen. Women were also present during attacks on houses, and were seen carrying away food stolen from the properties.71 Significantly, when the ringleaders of the events were brought to trial, two women were given one year’s imprisonment with hard labour,72 proof that women must have played an important role in these events. Rosemary Jones comments that at this time women were often in the vanguard of popular protest. They played a conspicuous role in food riots and were instrumental in the furtherance of Chartist principles during the 1830s and 1840s.73 Women rescued Chartist leaders who were being held by police in Llanidloes in 1839.74 In this respect then, the roots of working-class activism was firmly rooted within the traditional domains of the home and neighbourhood (this was the women’s domain), as well as the male-dominated domains of the workplace and trade union activity.75 ‘Rebecca’ was often mobilised in times of acute social and economic dislocation.76 The Riots began in May 1839,77 and continued into the 1840s. Male members of the community (sometimes up to 300 strong) would gather on an appointed night disguised in women’s clothing. The leader would be called ‘Rebecca’ to preserve anonymity; that is the reason for the term ‘Rebecca Riots’. They would normally destroy toll-gates on non-major roads, although some workhouses were attacked too.78

71 Jones, Before Rebecca: Popular Protests in Wales, p. 143.
72 Ibid. p. 150.
Women and politics

Women were also involved in political activity, and it is to this that we now turn our attention. As Britain headed towards a new industrial democracy, women were left behind at home, onlookers rather than participants. The exclusion of women from politics was confirmed by the succession of the nineteenth century Parliamentary Reform Acts. Again though, there is controversy over the impact of these acts. Women’s specific exclusion shows that their participation had been becoming more believable, as they were not thought of highly enough to be excluded previously. On the other hand, it could be an indication of men’s attempt to create more control over women rather than the opposite. The exclusion of women from parliament was based on the idea that they were not called to fight during wartime and therefore had no right to vote on matters that affected national security and foreign affairs. Parliament controlled these imperial affairs and as such, was out of female reach. This was not necessarily the case within local politics though. This was not so far removed from the home, that is, the female sphere.79

In fact, women were involved in party political activity during the nineteenth century. Firstly, wives, sisters and daughters of politicians were drafted in to help with canvassing during election time, a task which readily taken advantage of by the political parties. The Tories formed a large female auxiliary in 1881, and called it the Primrose League. The Liberals followed in 1887 with its Women’s Liberation Federation.80 Liberalism was more central in Welsh politics and therefore more pertinent for Welsh women. Branches of the Women’s Liberal Federation began to appear in 1890 in Wales, and the Federation was soon hosting an annual Welsh

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77 Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 76.
78 Ibid. pp. 185-92.
conference. By the early 1890s, women Liberals had developed local, regional and national structures. Local associations were founded mainly to provide electoral support for the local MP, but also to encourage women to educate themselves politically. By the mid 1890s, there were 57 associations in Wales, with 9000 members. Associations could be found in places such as Mountain Ash, Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff, Swansea, Camarthen, Tenby, Pontypridd and Aberdare.

The Aberdare Women’s Liberal Association (AWLA) was formed in the autumn of 1891. At its peak in 1893, it had 600 members. At the time, only Cardiff Women’s Liberal Association (WLA) had more members (with a thousand). The Association was an important organisation for women, for many it was their main sphere of political activity. Ursula Masson comments that they were organised around a number of demands, which included their own enfranchisement; this was before the militant age of the suffragettes but ‘far from doing so against a background of opposition from a stern, patriarchal Nonconformity, they enlisted the support of the chapels and their ministers’. The Association was popular; for example, by 1896 it welcomed twenty-five women who had succeeded in becoming Poor Law Guardians, and there were around 9,000 members of women’s Liberal organisations throughout Wales. Women could also be elected onto School Boards (from 1870), Poor Law Guardians (from 1875), Parish and District Councils (from 1894); they could vote for County Councillors (from 1889) and could even become County Councillors (from 1907).

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80 Ibid. p. 1.
81 Ibid. p. 2.
83 Ibid. p. 21.
84 Ibid. pp. 2-5.
85 Ibid. p. 4.
Elizabeth Andrews mentions that leading women had been active in the Women’s Labour League, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society, Co-operative Women’s Guilds and Suffrage Organisations.\textsuperscript{87} The Labour Representation Committee (later becoming The Labour Party in 1906), was formed in 1900 and its female policy was similar to the other political parties, whereby a separate Women’s Labour League was formed to campaign for issues especially pertinent to women, such as childcare and improved housing.\textsuperscript{88} Therefore, not all women were forced to stick to their traditional ‘female sphere’. In fact, in 1918 the Women’s Labour League (formed in 1906) was merged into the Labour Party and became the forerunner of the women’s sections. In 1919 there were three branches of the Women’s Labour League in South Wales, at Cardiff, Swansea and Newport. They helped organise the first Women’s Conferences, the first of which was held at Pontypridd, and others followed in Cardiff, Swansea and Newport. There will be a discussion later about how vital the Women’s Organisations were to relieving the distress faced by thousands during the 1926 strike in the area.

By 1920 the Labour Party divided the country into seven regions for organising work with both a male and female organiser was appointed for each region.\textsuperscript{89} Lowri Newman comments that much of the women’s political work was concerned with fund-raising, arranging social events and children’s outings, as well as educating women on political matters.\textsuperscript{90} Many women took the skills they had learned at home into the public sphere. For example, they used their organisational and domestic skills

\textsuperscript{89} Andrews, \textit{A Woman’s Work Is Never Done}, pp. 21-5.
in the Labour Halls and Clubs to arrange social events.\textsuperscript{91} The social events were not necessarily women only, some areas held them regularly (on a monthly basis) while others were held annually. They were an excellent method of raising much-needed funds for local organisations. Events would include ‘table top’ sales, jumble sales, cake and apron sales.\textsuperscript{92} All of these activities are extremely familiar, and virtually all can be seen repeated later in the women’s support of the 1984-85 miners’ strike. Women did join together to form female-only organisations and held conferences and events to raise their profile and provide support. They also organised social events within their community to raise funds such as jumble sales, cake-making, as well as organising activities for children.

However, Newman also says that it was common for this type of work to be overlooked as a serious political activity.\textsuperscript{93} Again, this was also the case during the strike. In fact, the women themselves often played down their role in events as they themselves believed them not to be as important as the men’s work, but instead saw their activities as support work which was expected of them by their family and community. Many Welsh women became more politically aware during the interwar years, firstly through the increase in the intake of female members into Labour Party ranks, and secondly through families’ involvement and interest in politics, and in the paid workforce. Many women joined Labour organisations as a way to gain some control over the forces that shaped their lives and that of their children. Many even viewed it as a kind of ‘maternal duty’.\textsuperscript{94} Importantly though, without women’s emotional and practical support at home, many men would not have been able to

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. p. 50.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. p. 73.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. pp. 50-5.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. pp. 50-5.
become so heavily involved in local and national politics.95

There are therefore striking examples of women’s involvement in politics, which according to many historians was dominated by men. It has even been commented that,

Much of this political and public activity by women in the nineteenth century has been lost sight of in the twentieth century. It has been assumed that before the struggle for the vote there was no political activity by women.96

These examples show that this is not the case. In fact, it was women’s increasing activity in politics that helped develop the demand for the vote. Not all women were forced to be stuck at home under the submission of men. Winifred Griffiths was a member of her local Women’s section of the Labour Party in 1927. She believed that nearly all the members of her organisation were miners’ wives or mothers. Some were interested in the political side of the meetings while others just attended as a form of social gathering.97 Therefore, these organisations did not just introduce women into politics; more simply, they introduced women to each other. Newman states,

It offered a form of escapism, by way of a series of day trips and social evenings, … Involvement in local Labour politics not only provided a means of working towards political reform, but also served to boost the morale of activists by providing opportunities for interaction with like-minded individuals.98

Other organisations had the same effect, such as the Women’s Co-operative Guild (a section of the Co-operative movement) which aimed to educate and inform working women on topics relevant to their lives.99 The Guild also played an important role

95 Ibid. p. 58.
96 Michael et al, Women and Politics in Wales 1880-1920, p. 3.
during the General Strike and Lockout of 1926.\textsuperscript{100}

Female members of the Communist Party played a prominent part in organising in the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM). In fact, wives of south Wales miners were described as the most militant activists.\textsuperscript{101} Women also played important parts as ‘founding mothers’ of the Welsh Nationalist Party during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Charlotte Aull Davies claims that Mai Roberts (private secretary to the Liberal nationalist MP E. T. John) was a prime mover in arranging the 1925 meeting between the two nationalist groups whose merger created the Welsh Nationalist Party.\textsuperscript{102} The novelist Kate Roberts became a leading figure in one of the party’s most effective and politicised branches (at Tonypandy) throughout the 1930s. Also, Lady Mallt Williams provided essential financial support for the party.\textsuperscript{103} However, those who were prominent in the party were normally middle-class and well-educated, mostly unmarried or married but without children (significantly, these often seem to form the core of women’s organisations). The role of the majority of rank and file women within the party was to organise fundraising activities such as jumble sales and coffee mornings.\textsuperscript{104}

There are links between the female suffrage movement and Temperance societies. It was in the 1890s that women began to become more involved in temperance activity; they began to set up major organisations of their own, completely separate from men. The movement had attracted women’s involvement from its beginnings (even as early as 1835), but societies remained mixed, leaving women’s participation limited. They therefore branched out on their own. In fact, there is

\textsuperscript{100} Coleman, ‘Working Class Women’s Protests in South Wales in the Inter-War Years’, pp. 30-32.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. p. 244.
evidence of early female-only groups being set up from the 1830s. For example, a Ladies’ Temperance Association was founded in Merthyr Tydfil in 1850. However, it was not until the 1870s that women’s groups began to be formed in significant numbers, and the British Women’s Temperance Association (BWTA) was formed.\textsuperscript{105} Within mixed societies, women were still only helpers to the men who controlled the power, but these new organisations allowed women to develop crucial skills to help themselves organise.\textsuperscript{106} Women delegates were invited to conferences to represent their communities and the North Women’s Temperance Union (Undeb Dirwestol Merched Gogledd Cymru or UDMGC) was set up; by 1896 there were 106 branches and 11,821 members. In 1901, south Wales followed suit by forming the South Wales Women’s Temperance Union (Undeb Dirwestol Merched y De, or UDMD). By 1916, there were 140 branches in the south.\textsuperscript{107} Echoes of this can be seen later in the strike with the formation of the South Wales Women’s Support Group (SWWSG), an umbrella organisation which received delegates from community support group members to discuss events on a wider scale.

Involvement in the temperance movement must have provided women with opportunities to learn skills and build confidence they would need to take part in other activities such as the suffrage movement. Its importance is that it broadened women’s horizons and they entered new activities outside the home such as public speaking, and learned important organisational skills. This included the formal organisational work of running unions such as having formal meetings and constitutions, election of officers and keeping minute books, as well as involvement with committee work. This

\textsuperscript{104} Ibis. p. 245.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. p. 136.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. pp. 137-39.
increased their self-confidence. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan comments that ‘for many women, this could be the first step leading them on the road to more radical action.’

It is exactly these points that many of the women who became involved in support work during the 1984-85 strike believe had a big impact on their lives. They also describe the skills learnt and new-found confidence that allowed them to continue into other areas of community work, employment, or political activities.

However, there was prejudice towards this first generation of women temperance workers, especially from chapel elders. Ceridwen Peris states,

> It is not easy to work against a people’s prejudice. Those sisters who started the Union were made to feel that. A woman’s action in climbing onto the stage to speak in public struck against the general idea of a woman’s place in society. The hearth and home was a woman’s place, and silence her virtue - that was the public’s opinion at the time.

Importantly then, women fought against this prejudice throughout the nineteenth century. The skills women learned by taking part in all of these events should not be underestimated. For example, women took part in religious services, and addressed women’s missionary, temperance and philanthropic gatherings. Within the Welsh churches and chapels, women played an essential organisational role, and they were vital in the Religious Revival of 1904-05. Throughout the course of the revival, ministers were kept from their pulpits by young men and women, who then played a prominent part in the chapel services. The famous revivalist Evan Roberts even travelled with an entourage of female singers and evangelists.

Charity was another important public role associated with the churches and chapels in which women could play a significant part. Philanthropic work also

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109 Ibid. p. 155.  
112 Lieven, Senghennydd, p. 148.
included public campaigns to transform society. One example of this would be Welsh women’s involvement in campaigns to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1870s and 1880s. These Acts gave police the right to medically inspect women they suspected of being prostitutes. Women canvassed for signatures for petitions, collected funds and distributed pamphlets. The Acts were suspended in 1883 and eventually repealed in 1886; this was a significant victory for women. Importantly, activities such as these gave women considerable experience of lobbying for political causes and running their own organisations.113 Gradually then, women were introduced to the possibility of political action which eventual led to their involvement in the suffrage movement.114

The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was established in 1897 and by 1914 had around 50,000 members, approximately twenty times more than the famous WSPU. In Wales evidence can be found of women campaigning for the vote as far back as the 1870s.115 The WSPU was the more militant union, and it began to invade the ‘male space’ by disrupting public meetings. Women spoke on platforms at chapels and meeting halls, as well as in open air meetings such as the Welsh National Eisteddfod.116 However, it was the non-militant NUWSS which was more popular in Wales, with the first Welsh branch being formed in 1907 in Llandudno.117 Further branches were established in Rhyl (1908), Bangor (1909) and Caernarfon (1910). Militants played a part in the 1910 elections by harassing candidates known to be hostile to votes for women.118 Therefore, this does not mean

114 Lloyd-Morgan, ‘From Temperance to Suffrage?’, p. 151.
117 Ibid. p. 167.
118 Ibid. p. 170.
that a suffrage movement was completely non-existent in Wales, far from it in fact, as this was clearly not the case. Newspaper accounts and court records describe women in Wales cutting telegraph poles, burning the Ely racecourse in Cardiff and the buildings of the intermediate school in Caernarfon.119 The Cardiff and District Women’s Suffrage Society (formed in July 1908, whose main objective was gaining votes on the same terms as men) covered much of south Wales with suffrage societies branching out as far as at Bargoed, Kidwelly, Pontypool, and the Rhondda. It was non-party and was open equally to both men and women. It ran a tea shop and organised a wide range of other activities, including open-air meetings at Cathays Park and Llandaff Fields. By 1914 there were 1,200 members, and their office premises had to move to a larger place in Queen Street to accommodate their expansion.120

On the outbreak of war in 1914, female suffrage supporters stopped the fight for their cause and instead turned to help the war effort. This was no different in Wales. However, they partially achieved their goal in 1918 when all women over thirty (as long as they were householders or married to one) were given the vote.121 Some organisations dissolved after this achievement, believing their goal had been won, others turned their attention to gaining equal status to men; for example, the minute book of the Bangor branch of the NUWSS ends in February 1921 and the Llangollen branch dissolved itself. However, the Cardiff society continued, and worked to secure the election of women to local government office. In 1921 the group changed its name to the Cardiff and District Women’s Citizenship Association. As its original aim had been achieved, it now aspired to fostering a sense of citizenship among women, and campaigned on civic, political and economic questions and securing adequate

representation for women. Women’s right to vote on an equal status to men was eventually achieved in 1928. It only took one year for Megan Lloyd George to become the first woman to win a parliamentary seat in Wales. Again, the suffrage movement was more important than simply achieving votes for women. It too allowed women to gain important experience in the political field. Women even attended summer schools to complete training in public speaking. Remnants of these suffrage associations could still be found in Wales during the 1940s with the Women’s Citizenship Associations. In 1943 there were branches in Abertillery, Ebbw Vale, Newport and Cardiff. Kay Cook and Neil Evans conclude that, ‘In a few areas of Wales, at least, the women’s suffrage movement had put down deep roots and continued its activities.’

Welsh women had always been involved in strikes, campaigns and demonstrations.

Throughout the twentieth century, Welsh women found their lives beginning to change. Deirdre Beddoe states that she believes that the last thirty years of the twentieth century saw more radical and sweeping changes in the lives of women in Wales than the rest of the century put together. This was due to two factors, the first, the growing economic change in Wales due to the closing of coal mines and the enforced transition from an industrial to post industrial society. The second was caused by the women themselves and their own actions and demands for change. Beddoe believes that this new economy and growing service sector created the conditions for women’s increasing participation in the workforce. The women

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125 Ibid. p. 179.
127 Ibid. p. 159.
themselves were the agents of change, and Wales saw the re-emergence of the Women’s Movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Although only a small number of Welsh women were involved, Beddoe states that, ‘the movement exposed and brought to public attention the existence of widespread discrimination against women and made vociferous demands for fundamental change.’

We have already seen that Welsh women were supporters of the Labour Party and Communist Party in the early twentieth century, but their involvement with political organisations did not end there. Deirdre Beddoe gives accounts of several women’s lives during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, who often described their life in relation to politics. For example, Hilda Price from Barry describes her involvement with the Communist Party. Having become involved with the war effort as an airframe fitter at RAF, St Athan, she married in 1944 and had one daughter. Yet she stresses that she had been an active trade unionist and Communist Party member for most of her adult life. She joined in 1941, and says that she attended many meetings discussing the political situation of the time, as well as organising bazaars and fetes to raise money for their newspaper the Daily Worker. Similar work is evident in the women’s support of the 1984-85 miners’ strike, of which there will be more examples later.

After the war, Hilda Price became increasingly concerned that many people were finding it difficult to afford rationed food as many had taken job cuts. She says, ‘I was concerned about these issues and, together with a group of local women, raised them with our MP, the Conservative Raymond Gower. He wasn’t interested.’

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128 Ibid. pp. 159-160.
131 Ibid. p. 275.
group also raised awareness of other issues such as the fact that Price’s housing estate was so far from the centre of town, with very few transport links, that its residents found it difficult to shop. After much petitioning to local councillors, by the late 1950s the council had built a small shopping centre at the estate.\textsuperscript{132} In the 1950s Price moved on to support the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND); she says, ‘the campaign was set up in the late 1950s as a non-political organisation which advocated the worldwide abolition of nuclear weapons and sought unilateral British initiatives to help start the multilateral process to end the arms race.’\textsuperscript{133} She attended meetings in Cardiff by its founder Bertrand Russell, as well as demonstrations in the 1960s.

On returning to work as an auxiliary nurse in 1963, she again showed her union activities by joining the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE), recruiting new members and eventually continuing to collect the weekly membership money. To show her support for the people of Vietnam during the war (1954-75), she joined a medical team which was set up in the old Transport Hall in Charles Street, Cardiff, to organise a blood transfusion service to send blood to North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{134} In her case then, although she was a married woman and mother, Price still worked and was politically active all her life. Even before their support of the 1984-85 miners’ strike women were not necessarily tied to their home by domesticity. The case of Penny Anne Windsor is similar, a Cornishwoman who had lived most of her life in Wales. She describes how she became politicised in the late 1960s and went on to take part in many demonstrations such as that in Trafalgar Square against the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{135} Even in the 1960s, women from Wales were picketing and demonstrating at mass rallies.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. p. 275. \\
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. p. 276. \\
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. pp. 276-77. \\
Also, Sian Edwards from Barry discusses her teenage years in the 1960s and her heavy involvement with Plaid Cymru. After moving to Camarthen with her family in 1963 at the age of fourteen, she joined the Camarthen Plaid Cymru Youth Branch. She took part in campaigns against men-only bars in her local area, as well as more mainstream electoral politics such as campaigning for Plaid Cymru at the General Election of 1966.\textsuperscript{136} She says, ‘it seemed to impress a lot of the people we canvassed, who thought it was novel, and rather a good thing, that school kids should be so passionate about politics.’\textsuperscript{137} Of course, these were not female-only organisations, but it is obvious that many young women were involved. Whilst attending university at Aberystwyth, she went on to join the Plaid Cymru branch and became involved in the politics of the college, while still campaigning for Plaid externally. She was even imprisoned in February 1970 for her part in a demonstration at the High Court in London against the jailing of Dafydd Iwan.\textsuperscript{138} She says that after this she became less involved in politics for a while, but on her return in 1979 she found, ‘there was now a bunch of energetic and committed women … active in the party. They were fighting to modernize and energize Plaid Cymru by rejuvenating the moribund Women’s Section and forcing Plaid Cymru to take women’s rights and equality issues more seriously.’\textsuperscript{139} This was part of the rising women’s involvement with the Women’s Liberation Movement which will be discussed shortly.

It is easy to see then, that women were involved outside the home, and not necessarily only in a time of crisis; indeed, many were active virtually all of their lives. In the case of Sian Edwards, she graduated in Welsh in 1970 and Philosophy in

\textit{Writing on the 1950s and 1960s}, pp. 278-79.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid. p. 271.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. p. 273.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. p. 273.
1971 from Aberystwyth. She went on to become Literature Officer for the Welsh Arts Council (1971-74), was a founder member of the editorial board of the political magazine *Radical Wales*, and was active in the Women’ Peace Movement. She was Plaid Cymru parliamentary candidate for Cardiff South in 1983 and 1987 and chair of Plaid Cymru from 1992 to 1993.140 With her as an example, it is difficult to believe the well-known portrayal of Welsh women as mother and homemaker with no input into life outside the home. She herself was different, she was a single women who was heavily involved in Welsh politics. The women who became involved in the support of the miners’ strike were just as individual as Sian Edwards: by the 1980s Welsh women could be mothers, homemakers, part of the workforce and politically active. As will be seen later in chapter five, these women, like Sian, often showed a continuity of activity rather that merely coming forward during the strike then retreating back to their ‘normal’ lives.

By the early 1970s, Wales was still a particularly male-dominated society, and according to Deirdre Beddoe, ‘Welsh women were becoming increasingly frustrated with their ‘powerlessness’’.141 They therefore turned to the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). At first, like the women supporters of the 1984-85 strike, these women began by organising themselves into local groups. Local groups were organised in Cardiff, Swansea, Aberystwyth, Pontypridd, Newport, Bangor, Lampeter, Harlech and Abergavenny. Their main aim was to remove barriers to allow full participation in education, work and public life, and they campaigned with four initial demands. These were, equal pay, equal education and opportunity, twenty-four hour nurseries and free contraception and abortion on demand.142 These areas of discrimination and inequality had been highlighted by parliamentary acts such as the

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140 Ibid. p. 269.
Equal Pay Act (passed in 1970, but it did not come into effect until 1975) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). These consecutively provided equal pay for equal work, and made discrimination on the grounds of sex illegal in employment, education, advertising or when providing housing, goods, services or facilities. The Equal Opportunities Commission was set up to oversee the implementation and workings of both of the Acts. With the help of these Acts, women were closer to becoming equal to men.

As with the female supporters of the miners’ strike though, the separate groups had slightly different aims and goals. For example, the Cardiff Women’s Action Group (CWAG) focused on highlighting and promoting the lunch-time abortion centre at the Heath Hospital which was not widely used. They also attended demonstrations and marches in 1975, 1979 and 1981 against parliamentary acts to dilute the 1967 Abortion Act. They were also active in promoting equal pay and campaigning against discrimination in the workplace. They even organised a conference with the National Council for Civil Liberties in Cardiff in 1974 and set up the Women’s Rights Committee for Wales (WRCW). This was a pressure group and source of information on the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). They organised marches and demonstrations against unemployment, and the Aberystwyth branch of the WLM also organised campaigns for nurseries.

As the organisation developed through the 1970s, its members became involved in a wider range of issues. For example, they became involved with the Women’s Aid movement to help abused women. With the help of the WLM, Cardiff Women’s Aid was set up in 1974 and had opened a refuge by 1975; another was opened in Swansea in 1977, and the national organisation Welsh Women’s Aid was created in the same

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142 Ibid. p. 160.
143 Ibid. p. 168.
year. By 1992, there were thirty-five refuges and thirteen information centres in Wales. Beddoe comments that, ‘Women's Aid is one of the greatest legacies of the Welsh women’s movement.’ The movement also entered into the literary sphere with the publication of magazines such as Rhiannon (launched in 1977, a feminist publication produced by women for women in Wales containing both English and Welsh language articles), Asen Adda (Adam’s Rib, a collection of feminist sociological essays) and the production of the Wales Women’s Directory (a listings guide to women’s groups, organisations and businesses throughout Wales). Women also began to band together to form social groups and networks such as the Cymdeithas y Lesbiaid a Hoywon Cymraeg eu Hiaith (CYLCH, the Society of Welsh-Speaking Lesbians and Gay Men) in Aberystwyth, and Merched y Ffin (Border Women, a contact point for rural gay women) in Ludlow. By the early 1980s Welsh WLM groups were focusing on matters such as rape and pornography, and perhaps the most common protest was that against nuclear weapons at Greenham Common.

Welsh women had long been involved with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), but with the background of the WLM, a new women’s peace movement was formed, the Women For Life on Earth (WFLOE). It was the decision to site cruise missiles at Greenham Common airbase in Berkshire in 1979 that stirred Welsh women to fight. In August 1981, Ann Pettit from Llanpumsaint in Camarthanshire organised a march to Greenham Common from Cardiff. On 5 September, when thirty-six women, four men and a few children arrived at the base, several of the women chained themselves to the fence, thus beginning the women’s

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145 Ibid. p. 162.
146 Ibid. p. 163.
147 Ibid. p. 162.
peace camp.\textsuperscript{148} There were echoes of this back in Wales where, in November 1981, five women set up a peace camp in Porth as a protest and chained themselves to railings in the town square. The nuclear-submarine tracking base at Brawdy in Pembrokeshire became the focus of marches and the site of another peace camp, and the Royal Ordnance Factory in Llanishen became the site of a peace vigil and demonstrations.\textsuperscript{149}

It is clear then, that Welsh women were extremely active and important before their involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike: ‘many of the women’s actions, particularly in the 1970s, had been on the radical fringe, but, by the mid 1980s, women were gaining a toe-, if not a foot-, hold in more mainstream organizations.’\textsuperscript{150} Women were also involved in other organisations at the same time as the strike, such as the Wales TUC Women’s Advisory Committee (set up in 1984), Wales Assembly of Women (set up in 1984 to report on the United Nations’ Conference held on women in Nairobi in 1985) and the South Glamorgan Women’s Committee (set up in 1985, the only local government body of its kind in Wales). Courses on women’s studies were also beginning to be offered in colleges and universities across Wales.\textsuperscript{151} These examples usefully contextualise Welsh women’s involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike as part of this surge of female activity. Welsh women were not housewives and mothers bound to their homes and families, suddenly released when the call to fight for the miners came. Instead, they were already showing that they could be involved in a wide-range of different activities, including women-only organisations that demonstrated and protested.

Jaclyn Gier and Laurie Mercier echo this point when they comment that,

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. p. 163.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid. pp. 163-64.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid. p. 167.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid. p. 167.
although separate spheres for men and women were part of the isolated coalfields of Wales, the Welsh tradition of female popular protest that predated industrialisation continued to be expressed by women who exercised their influence through neighbourhood networks, and through customary forms of protest during strikes and other community crises.\textsuperscript{152}

It seems that women had been always active in difficult times and so we now move on to examine women's involvement in the struggles of the labour movement.

**Women’s involvement in industrial protest**

Rosemary Jones states that in the early nineteenth century, ‘women were often in the vanguard of popular protest’.\textsuperscript{153} The typical forms of industrial protest in the early nineteenth century were demonstrations and riots, when strikes were often more violent than those that occurred later. One example of this would be the disturbances in south Wales during the autumn of 1816.\textsuperscript{154} These were part of British-wide demonstrations by ironworkers and colliers affected by the particular difficult conditions. Activities included protest meetings, demonstrations, marches and collective begging. They began because of poor harvests that year, leading to an increase in food prices.\textsuperscript{155} However, these early demonstrations differed from later strikes as, if legal protest failed, people resorted to threats and attacks on persons and property. Mass meetings would be held at night to decide on courses of action. David Jones says that the typical industrial mob was a fair cross-section of the workmen, and among these would be women and boys.\textsuperscript{156}

As Angela John explains, women’s involvement in these sorts of events were


\textsuperscript{153} Jones, ‘Sociability, Solidarity, and Social Exclusion’, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{154} Jones, *Before Rebecca*, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid. pp. 70-73.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. pp. 82-85.
normally contributory. They did not lead, they simply followed and supported their men folk.\textsuperscript{157} It is here that a difference with the women supporters of the 1984-85 strike can be seen. Those women were keen to lead their own organisations and travel in their local area, as well as further afield, raising funds, attending meetings, demonstrations and rallies. Rosemary Jones notes that women’s political activism in the nineteenth century was firmly located within their communities, therefore their role in industrial disputes was normally an extension of their normal roles within their family and neighbourhood.\textsuperscript{158} If men went on strike, this heavily affected their wives and families. For instance there would be no money coming into the household. Also, the reasons for the strike itself might have a negative effect on the family at large, for example many strikes began because of threats of wage reduction. This usually meant that women would do anything to help ease the burden everyone was suffering. They supported men because they knew their situation might be worse if the men’s fight was lost. It is easy to see why women became involved in disputes and were so negative towards strike-breakers, since these events affected them too. Women supporters of the 1984-85 strike often became involved for similar reasons.

There are many descriptions of women’s involvement in strikes. They were present at the Merthyr Rising of 1831 and again in the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s. In Llanidloes in 1839, it was women who rescued the Chartist leaders who had been arrested.\textsuperscript{159} During disputes in Monmouthshire in the 1860s, women attacked blacklegs with stones, saucepans and frying pans. Some were even jailed for their behaviour. John asserts that, ‘Oral history elicits further examples of women throwing bricks and stones at policemen and scabs. One woman declared that

\textsuperscript{157} John, ‘A Miner Struggle?’, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{158} Jones, ‘Sociability, Solidarity, and Social Exclusion’, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{159} Beddoe, ‘Images of Welsh Women’, pp. 236-37.
the women were as bad as the men once they got out into the streets’.\textsuperscript{160} Again, John draws attention to the fact that women attacked blacklegs during disputes. There is even a J. M. Staniforth cartoon in the \textit{Western Mail} in 1906 depicting women attacking strike breakers.\textsuperscript{161}

Before World War One, women were heavily involved in the campaign for pit-head baths. Neil Evans and Dot Jones comment that in order to confront the opposition there was for the baths, it was necessary to mount a propaganda campaign in its favour. Women were prominent in this, particularly with their growing organisation in the Women’s Labour League (WLL). The campaign began in 1912 when a south Wales delegate conference of the WLL was prompted to promote the issue. It developed into a national campaign and took off in 1914. Women were involved in lecture tours and meetings throughout the south Wales coalfield. Eventually, a committee of wives of miners’ agents was created. Within weeks of the creation of the committee, it formed itself into a deputation to the Executive Committee of the SWMF. It asked for financial assistance (£50) to campaign via public meetings and door-to-door canvassing. The money was readily endorsed by a special conference. Campaigning continued in local villages and lodges and was even taken up by the women’s section of the Labour Party, such as that in the Rhondda in 1919. The pit-head baths were eventually opened in significant numbers in the late 1920s and continued to built into the 1930s.\textsuperscript{162}

There is photographic evidence of women and children helping men to pick coal during strikes in 1912\textsuperscript{163} and 1921.\textsuperscript{164} In fact, women were even given a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[160] Jones, ‘Sociability, Solidarity, and Social Exclusion’, pp. 77-78.
\item[163] ‘Minimum Wage Strike 1912 - ‘National Coal Strike 1912, Searching for Coal at The Patches, Tredegar’” (D/D NCB 64/13) Photograph (Glamorgan Record Office).
\end{footnotes}
dedicated page in ‘The Colliery Workers’ Magazine’ throughout the 1920s. It covered issues such as ‘Women’s Work in Local Elections’, ‘The Women’s Part in the National Crisis’, ‘Divide and Rule’, ‘Something that a Tory Government Cannot Do’, and ‘Industrial War and its Aftermath’. It has been noted that women figured in twelve of the major prosecutions in the coalfield during the 1926 strike and that even children were present at protests. Francis and Smith comment that their involvement is one indication of the total involvement of the community in these types of activities. They quote a Western Mail description of women’s activities on 1926,

A strange feature of the disturbance is the surprisingly prominent part played by the women folk, many of whom loiter persistently … with babies in arms to witness the wretched spectacle. Their presence considerably hampered the police in their efforts to clear the streets.170

During the 1926 strike in Pencoed near Bridgend, local people ambushed a cycling blackleg, covered him in a white shirt and returned him home in a wheelbarrow. Two weeks later in August, blacklegs at Elliotstown and Phillipstown were confronted by groups of women armed with white shirts and a supply of whitewash.171 Thirty police officers were attacked by miners, women and children throwing stones at Abercwmboi. Stipendiary D. Lleufer Thomas commented, ‘I find that the women have been taking too prominent a part in these disturbances’ on issuing Mrs Elvira Bailey of Treorchy a two-month prison sentence during the 1926 dispute.172 There are similar examples of women’s involvement in disputes in 1929. Sue Bruley says that, ‘mining women were a key element in forging community

164 ‘Coal Picking 1921’ (D/D NCB 64/16) Photograph (Glamorgan Record Office).
165 Andrews, A Woman’s Work Is Never Done, p. 76.
166 Ibid. p. 84.
167 Ibid. p. 88.
168 Ibid. p. 92.
169 Ibid. p. 95.
171 Ibid. p. 59.
solidarity and providing a backbone of support for their striking men folk.’

However, it is important to remember that not all women believed that it was correct to be seen protesting and demonstrating alongside men. For example, an article in ‘The Women’s Page’ of The Colliery Worker’s Magazine states that by demonstrating, women were actually betraying their men,

‘The outing is a temptation to many women, but times are far too serious to sacrifice our welfare for an Outing (sic), and no woman who understands, and is concerned about the welfare of her husband and family, would be so foolish as to join in a Demonstration (sic) of this kind’.

Here again there are similarities with the 1984-85 miners’ strike. During the time, women’s involvement was the source of much discussion and debate. On the one hand, many were supportive of the women and their efforts of support. However, others were not as keen to allow women to become so involved in the dispute.

Women played an extremely important part in both the General Strike and Lockout of 1926 and the more recent strike of 1984-85. An important feature of both struggles is that no strike pay was paid to those involved. It must be remembered that women often supported in less obvious ways than protesting in the streets. If they had not stayed at home to care for the house and family, the men would not have been able to go out and take part in these events.

Marion Phillips describes women’s involvement in 1926 as:

the greatest effort ever known by the Women’s Section of the Labour Movement, … this wonderful effort. The collection of money, clothes, boots and their distribution to the worst areas, the arranging for choirs, bands, concerts, sales, meetings, etc., was a colossal task. … It is the women who made the great sacrifice.

172 Ibid. p. 65.
174 Andrews, A Woman’s Work Is Never Done, pp. 84-5.
175 Ibid. p. 79.
176 Marion Phillips, Women and the Miners’ Lockout: The Story of the Women’s Committee for the
During that one dispute, women raised over £310,000.\textsuperscript{177} This is made even more substantial by the fact that those involved would have struggled terribly without this support as there was no strike pay, and therefore no help was given from other organisations such as the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF). Importantly, this was the first occasion where the Labour women (among whom, women from mining areas formed a major part) used their movement to provide the services of an industrial Red Cross, and gave promise to the greater development for the women’s movement in the future.\textsuperscript{178}

Women were initially called upon by Arthur Cook to form a Committee to organise Flag Days to gather funds. The Women’s Committee for the Relief of Miners’ Wives and Children was organised by the Labour Party and made a non-political humanitarian appeal based on relief for wives and children only.\textsuperscript{179} They were eventually split into sub-committees to deal with different areas: 1) General house to house and other collections 2) Flag Days (later undertaking to deal with baby’s milk and became the Mothers’ and Babies’ Committee) 3) Entertainments. The women acted as a collecting agency for the Miners’ Federation for the women and children, and all funds collected were distributed as necessary items and not money.\textsuperscript{180} House to house and street collections took place on a regular (sometimes weekly) basis, and were expanded to include collections from factories, offices, works and other areas. Events were also organised to raise money, such as concerts and dances, visits from travelling choirs and bands, and even auctions. This was as well as

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid. pp. vii-11.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid. p. ix.
general appeals for clothes and boots, and special appeals for clothing and blankets, and a special fund to provide milk for nursing mothers and babies. Sewing parties were started in many areas, where funds and gifts were begged from the Co-operative Societies and shops to provide essential items of clothing. Elizabeth Andrews says,

we made maternity outfits, baby garments, and children’s clothes, as well as adult clothing. We cut up old clothing from parcels sent to us, and made thousands of garment this way. Boot repairing centres were established; our men worked voluntarily and thousands of our people were kept shod as a result.

These women worked extremely hard to help those in need, many ‘worked twelve hours a day for weeks on end, and wore out their strength and their shoe-leather in trying to what they could to relieve the distress.’ Altogether, 48 centres were established, covering the help of over 5,000 women. The appeal stretched as far as America, Russia and Norway, and foreign countries often sent substantial supplies of food and gifts, such as clothing, condensed milk, cocoa and baby food. Women also addressed meetings. The Women’s Committee organised speaking tours of miners’ wives to help raise funds. Two miners’ wives worked with touring male voice choirs, and a group of wives visited Russia. Andrews gives just one example where three miner’s wives attended meetings in London to speak, that being Mrs Beatrice Green of Abertillery, Mrs Johanna James of Tonypandy and Mrs Herman of Pentre. The parallels with the work undertaken by the women in 1984-85 is startling. Virtually everything here describing the work completed in 1926 can

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182 Ibid. p. 78.
183 Andrews, ‘A Woman’s Work is Never Done’ in Carol White & Sian R. Williams (eds.) Struggle or Starve, pp. 224-25.
184 Ibid. p. 70.
185 Ibid. p. 75.
186 Ibid. pp. 90-93.
188 Andrews, A Woman’s Work Is Never Done, p. 35.
be transplanted to describe that of the 1980s.

Marion Phillips even organised an adoption scheme whereby friends would look after a miner’s child throughout the lock-out. Over 800 children from Wales benefited from the scheme.\footnote{Andrews, ‘A Woman’s Work is Never Done’, p. 225.} During the strike, miners’ and their families were reliant on soup kitchens, of which there are hundreds of examples.\footnote{Vernon Evans, David Rees & Fred Fricker, ‘On a Hiding to Nothing’ in Mark Davies (ed) The Valleys Autobiography: A People’s History of the Garw, Llynfi and Ogmore Valleys (Pontypridd: Valley and Vale, 1992), p. 41. Also see Bruley, ‘Women’, pp. 234-6.} Bruley mentions that these communal kitchens fostered a strong sense of solidarity, and were very important in holding the community together throughout the dispute. There is evidence of this in the fact that those areas that provided food vouchers rather than the communal kitchens, were the areas that suffered most from black-legging. Women were also involved in the organisation of these kitchens.\footnote{Bruley, ‘Women’, p. 236.} The numbers of people involved in this communal feeding was often very large. For instance, Merthyr opened 27 communal kitchens, Aberdare had 11, in Pontypridd there were 7357 registered with the Central Distress Committee, Abertillery was feeding over 1600 a day in communal kitchens, 9000 were being fed daily in the Rhymney Valley. Bruley states that communal eating was predominately a male experience in 1926, though some areas did attempt to include women.\footnote{Bruley, ‘The Politics of Food’, pp. 64-6.} However, women were much more involved in the running of these kitchens, where both men and women shared the daily tasks and cooking. These soup kitchens were a blue print for the supporters of 1984-85. Bruley also states that, ‘Men and women worked together in public life as never before.’\footnote{Ibid. p. 67.} David Gilbert importantly points out that,

the strike was simultaneously a defence of ‘community’ and a rediscovery of its possibilities. Communal feeding, women’s support groups, welfare initiatives, and the local co-ordination of picketing were the more obvious
institutional manifestations of blossoming social contact and mutual support in villages.\textsuperscript{194}

Francis and Smith say that women took a prominent part in these demonstrations, and a reporter at one described picketing scenes where a 2,000 strong crowd gathered to stop four members of the Craftsmen’s Union working: ‘The women seemed possessed by frenzy as they beat a barbaric tattoo with their feet on the corrugated roofs of the garden sheds and poured imprecations on the heads of the workers’.\textsuperscript{195} Also, during the 1935 strike in the Taff Merthyr colliery (which mostly affected the villages of Trelewis and Bedlinog), the issue of strike-breaking created a division within the community and women and children played a prominent part in ostracising the blacklegs.\textsuperscript{196}

Women were part of strike committees too, like that at Bedlinog. Here a Council of Action was established by miners and shopkeepers but involved the whole village through miners’ lodges, local women and other workers groups and associations. Importantly though, the way strike relief was established was entirely chosen by the area and local lodge. Therefore, women’s involvement could differ from place to place. In Maerdy for instance, a township two valleys away from Bedlinog, a hall at the Miners’ Institute was used as a communal kitchen for feeding both adults and children, but the Institute and the Lodge took joint financial responsibility for it. In other words, women there had no input with help or fundraising. In larger towns such as Merthyr, there were more sophisticated Central Strike Committees which were responsible for overseeing the work of smaller sub-

\textsuperscript{196} White & Williams, ‘Poverty, Strikes and More Poverty’ in \textit{Struggle or Starve: Women’s Lives in the South Wales Valley Between the Two World Wars}, p. 111.
committees. Other areas such as Tredegar had no committee work and instead worked on things that needed doing as and when they arrived. These are similarities which will be seen later in regards to the 1984-85 miners’ strike, where there was no communal form of support, it was instead decided by specific groups in areas. In this way, the type and nature of support given and received could vary greatly from place to place.

Bruley states that there was one major difference between the women’s involvement in the two disputes (of 1926 and the later 1984-5 strike) in that following the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, women were much more conscious of gender divisions and their own collective power. In mobilising to support the men in the 1980s, women developed a feminist as well as class-based agenda. Issues of sexism were addressed by the Women Against Pit Closures movement, something which would have been unthinkable in 1926. However, Hywel Francis comments that, ‘It was the events in the [1926] lockout which irrevocably changed the social and political face of the South Wales coalfield’, perhaps hinting that the involvement of women in the community struggle did in fact help to change gender relations in some way at that time. There is evidence that the activities of the women of Maerdy spread from the communal kitchens into other areas of the miners’ institute. For example, during entertainments, they began to act as stewards, policing doors and stairs at busy times which would even give them some control over men. By November, two women (Mrs Bowen and Mrs Feltham) were acting as chairwomen for concerts at Maerdy, ‘an indication that the status of women within the community had been

199 Francis, ‘South Wales’, p. 239.
enhanced’. Bruley goes on to contradict this by maintaining that women were more concerned with upholding a class solidarity with their men than in making advances for women.

Women also supported other causes and strikes. For example, they were integral to the fight for the installation of pit-head baths. Also, Hywel Francis and Dai Smith refer to a mass meeting at a workmen’s hall during the Nantymoel stay-down strike of 1935 where, ‘the Hall was absolutely heaving, mainly with women.’ The women supported the strike and helped by sending food parcels down to the men in the pit. They eventually set up a soup kitchen on top of the pit, for the miners rather than their families. They later went on to take part in demonstrations, such as the first Hunger March organised by the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) in 1934, as well as other various campaigns throughout the 1930s. These included protests to demand an end to the Means Test, work for the Peace Movement and activities in chapels and social organisations. We have already seen Hilda Price from Barry discussing her involvement in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament during the 1950s. She went to Cardiff to hear the founder (Bertrand Russell) speak to a packed meeting. Later, in 1961, she attended a huge demonstration, again in Cardiff, in which ‘many people, including the writer Elaine Morgan, sat down in the road outside Cardiff Castle and blocked the traffic. The rest of us marched down Queen Street with our banners.’ Women were clearly involved in this fight.

As we have seen, this went further throughout the 1970s when, as Beddoe

\[201\] Ibid. p. 54.
\[204\] Ibid. p. 284.
\[206\] Ibid. pp. 28-29.
comments, ‘feminism, long thought to be dead and buried, re-emerged in the second great twentieth-century wave of women’s protest, the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM).’ Welsh women themselves were now the agents of change. Feminism took a new direction in the 1980s with the protests at Greenham Common, and some of the Greenham women went on to become heavily involved in the dispute of 1984-85. Nevertheless, Angela John rightly comments that although there is evidence to prove women had been active in political struggles long before the 1984-85 miners’ strike, it was never on such a large scale of involvement or organisation. This, then, is perhaps the significant change many historians such as John herself describe.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, women’s participation in these events is still not widely recognised. For example, Watkin Gittins from Bedlinog was interviewed in 1973 and discusses strikes and demonstrations of the 1920s. He does not mention women once. Yet Mavis Llewellyn describes similar events and includes many references to active women. Welsh women’s place was not always in the home. This was an important place for her and it did play a dominant role in her life, but this was not all she should be recognised for. There has been evidence that women had been involved in all aspects of society from the early nineteenth century, in both rural and industrial Wales. They took up employment, took part in politics and even became involved in strikes and demonstrations. Women formed their own support networks and organisations to fulfill every need imaginable. Welsh Women all over Wales strove to fight for what they believed in, be this the saving of a community, or a fight for men’s

208 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 159.
210 Watkin Gittins, Bedlinog, & Emily Gittins, Martha Jones & Elwyn Rees, Interviewed by Alun Morgan (Tape 2, Side 2. AUD/230. Transcript) 15 February 1973 (SWML).
wages. While it has been argued that women only rallied to help and support the causes of men, evidence to suggest this was not the case. They may have supported men’s strikes and so on, but they had their own reasons for doing so. They even spearheaded many campaigns associated with male activity (such as pit-head baths) and formed their own organisations for female advancement (such as the suffrage movement). Maggie Pryce Jones perfectly sums up women’s involvement in community affairs when she comments, ‘mothers the world over take arms when their children are in need, even the most gentle of them.’

\[211\] Mavis Llewellyn, Nantymoel, Interviewed by Hywel Francis.

CHAPTER 2

The Strike

‘The South Wales coalfield has always been possibly the most militant coalfield …

In the 1926 strike they were the last to go back. It’s born in them, … the knowledge

that they belong to a class … The bastion of the trade union movement … is the

South Wales miners.’

In many instances, the novelty of the involvement of women in the 1984-85 miners’
strike can be exaggerated. For instance, there has already been a thorough
investigation into women’s involvement in earlier disputes, in both Britain and Wales
specifically (some examples of which can be seen in chapter one) which proves that
what they did throughout 1984-85 was not something novel. As has been seen, there
are precedents during previous strikes in Wales for virtually all their efforts. However,
this could also be said of the strike itself. Clearly, this was not the first strike in which
miners were involved. In recent memory they had been on strike during the 1970s as
well as earlier sporadically throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of
course, the landmark in South Wales is the strike of 1926. As Hywel Francis states,
‘the use of the state apparatus through co-ordinated police action, a hostile press, fines
and imprisonment ranged against traditional collectivist responses by the miners of
mass picketing, food distribution and fundraising was so reminiscent of earlier

struggles, especially 1926’.  

There are indeed striking parallel features between the General Strike of 1926 and the miners’ strike of 1984-85. Francis describes how in 1926, the communities of South Wales survived ‘under siege’, with both a class and community consciousness, ‘community soup kitchens, jazz and comic bands, organised coal picking and outcropping, fundraising by bands and choirs, co-operative boot repairing centres and eventually the ostracising of scabs and even rioting. The introduction of imported police into the coalfield coincided with the coordinated attempt by the coal owners to accelerate a return to work through intimidation (threats of job losses)’. In fact, it is difficult to tell which strike Francis is actually describing, as all activities (with the exception of boot repairing centres) occurred in both. He also says the most important factor of the 1926 strike was that mining communities remained supportive for such a long period. This was also the case in the 1984-85 strike. On examination of the 1984-85 strike, many similarities can also be drawn with that of 1972. The main difference however, is that the 1972 strike lasted only eight weeks and concerned wages whereas that of 1984-85 lasted virtually a year and hoped to stop the pit closure programme. However, the response of communities in 1984 had been anticipated in 1972. To understand the community backing behind the miners and their collieries throughout the South Wales coalfield especially, there needs first to be an understanding of the community itself.  

The term ‘community’ is an extremely complex and ever-changing entity, just like a community itself. Malcolm Pitt explains that the nature of the mining industry created a close sense of community,

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3 Ibid. p. 5.  
4 Ibid. p. 7.
The harsh nature of the work, the close confines of the pits and the isolation of the pit villages created a solidarity and grim determination in the struggle against the coal owners which made the miners the vanguard of the trade union movement.5

However, the term covers a wide-range of varying ideas and beliefs, especially in a ‘coalfield community’. The phrase first conjures up images of a village direct from ‘How Green was My Valley’ with choirs of men returning home from work singing to find their wives waiting with baths ready to scrub their backs in front of the fire. There is always tremendous solidarity between everyone in this image with conciliation triumphing over conflict. This is the classic idea of the ‘imagined community’, though whether this was ever truly the case is questionable, as it clearly was not the case during the 1970s and 1980s. By this time South Wales had already seen many collieries close and other industries arrive in the area. For example, the Hoover Factory in Merthyr Tydfil opened in 1948 and by the mid 1970s, significant expansion meant that the numbers of its workers had reached nearly 5,000 and it was therefore the largest single employer in the borough.6 More Valleys people were working outside the coal industry in Wales at this time than there were within it. The coal industry itself had been slowly contracting throughout Britain since 1947. Phillips comments that this was accelerated throughout the 1960s due to the increased use of other energy forms such as oil.7

In fact throughout the 1970s, many people in the coal industry believed that although coal production could expand nationally, this would be at the expense of the peripheral coalfields such as Scotland, Kent, the North-East and South Wales, which

6 http://www.alangeorge.co.uk/hoover_washing_machines.htm (accessed 28 August 2008)
would suffer heavy closures. This was confirmed by the 1975 Common Market fuel and energy plans to contract production to a European profitable market level. This meant the phasing out of the peripheral coalfields. So, between 1960 and 1970, coal’s share of energy supplied in Britain dropped from 73.7 percent to 46.6 percent, and the NCB’s total average manpower fell from 517,000 in 1963-4 to 281,500 in 1971-72. Figures for Wales show a similar pattern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>108,000</td>
<td>23,913,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>99,000</td>
<td>22,822,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>48,000</td>
<td>14,505,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>27,384</td>
<td>7,624,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>20,347</td>
<td>6,720,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is easy to see, then, that by the 1980s most Welsh males were not coalminers, in fact they had not been since the 1920s. Also, not all Welsh women were housewives; in fact many had to take on part-time jobs to supplement the family income. In 1981, the national British figure of women aged 16 - 60 in paid work was 56 percent, while in Wales the figure was 42.9 percent. This also meant that even within a village with a remaining colliery, women would not necessarily be a homogenous mass of ‘miners’ wives’ as they had their own jobs and often were members of unions themselves. Due to the pit closure programme that had already started in South Wales before the 1984 strike began, even those men who were still miners did not necessarily work in their local community. Many travelled to collieries

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8 Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 10.
10 Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 16.
in neighbouring valleys. With this in mind there could even be different types of ‘coalfield communities’.

The first would be that which still had its colliery where local men would work, but there would also be ‘outsiders’ travelling from other areas to work there too. However, there were members of this geographical ‘community’ that could have no links with the local colliery, for example workers who travelled away to factories or other businesses for work. Also there would be a community where the local pit had closed and so the miners travelled elsewhere, becoming the ‘outsiders’ of the previous description. These would be a ‘pit community’ who had lost their pit. In many respects these could be just as active during the fight to keep collieries open as those who still had their collieries as they knew what others would experience if they lost their colliery too. Also, their men would lose their jobs for a second, possibly third time. The term ‘community’ therefore has a wide variety of different meanings, both geographical and through linked identity that may have no relation to where people lived, that is the scattered ‘miners’ community’ who would feel ties and bonds with each other whether they lived together or miles apart.

With this in mind then, it would be easy to misunderstand why communities therefore took a stand to fight for miners’ jobs during the 1984-85 strike. It could easily be seen that coal mining was already a contracting industry in Wales. Yet, those communities that had already lost their local colliery - Francis gives the example of Glyncorrwg, whose pit closed in 1970, who had only thirty-five miners left travelling to other pits during the 1984 strike, and still boasted a support group¹² - knew the devastation that could occur in a community once their pit had closed, and often these were the most militant. The recession of the 1970s and early 1980s also meant that

¹² Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 17.
jobs in other areas were being lost (for example the British Steel Corporation shed almost 15,000 jobs from the region\textsuperscript{13}), therefore adding to the unemployment burden. If collieries closed, people knew there would be no other jobs to transfer to.

While many similarities can be seen between the strikes of the 1970s and 1984-85, those in the 1970s did last for significantly less time than that of 1984-85 and that may be due to the fact that other unions supported the miners, helping quickly to bring Britain to a standstill, a situation which required rapid resolution. Also, public support was very strong during the 1970s. The miners in the 1970s picketed important industrial centres, and railwaymen, seamen, lorry drivers and dock workers all respected NUM picket lines and would not cross them. Soon the miners had succeeded in imposing a total blockade on the movement of coal and allied fuels. The miners also won sympathy from other members of society such as professionals, shop-keepers, and students. In effect, the miners had Britain in a stranglehold.\textsuperscript{14} The NUM gained this support in several ways, firstly and most importantly through picketing of course, but they also organised speakers and delegations of miners to attend meetings and distribute leaflets and collect money. The types of meetings attended could range from trade union branches, to political groups, student unions and workingmen’s clubs.\textsuperscript{15} There are also examples of women attending and taking part in these events.\textsuperscript{16} Already, similarities can be seen with the organisation of the 1984-85 strike, when miners used similar tactics to generate support, and there were prime examples of support from university students and London’s Gay and Lesbian Groups. However, it seems that the support was not achieved with the same scale of solidarity as it had been in 1972. Then, workers refused to cross picket lines, but in

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{14} Pitt, \textit{The World on Our Backs}, pp.17-18.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p. 167.
\textsuperscript{16} See pg. 72 for examples.
the 1980s there was not the same unwavering support from others, especially unions. Pitt observes in relation to the 1972 strike that, ‘the response to the miners’ campaign was the most impressive and widespread display of active solidarity in the history of the British labour movement.’17 Many people even those miners who took part in the 1984-85 strike themselves believe, even today, that the lack of support during the 1984-85 strike was due to the fact that there was no national ballot called.

Similar to the 1984-85 strike, during the 1970s the NUM Executive did not pay the striking miners a benefit, instead, they paid only picketing expenses, which allowed wives and families to claim social security for the duration of the strike. However, as is well-known in the context of 1984-85, here the government deducted £15 a week from the miners’ families’ social security money on the assumption that the NUM were supplying strike pay, knowing full well that this much money would have been impossible for the NUM to sustain. Therefore, although the miners were financially better off during the 1972 strike than they would be in 1984-5, they still had to raise funds to support themselves.18 In fact, this is thought to be the main catalyst for women starting up and joining support groups within their own communities, in that the government seemed to be specifically hurting them and their families and not just the striking miners by withholding this payment.19 So, the women began their organised support in earnest. Local NUM lodges appealed to trade unions and political organisations for funds, and began a scheme where pickets were asked to collect from their locations such as power stations, factories and depots. This continued and money was also regularly collected from workplaces, as well as during meetings and at marches.20

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18 Ibid.
Women also made a valuable contribution to the strike of 1972, and both miners and other union members commented that wives fully supported the strike. The main way in which they showed their solidarity and support was with the collection of food as well as funds. Importantly though, this was seen as a ‘traditional’ way in which women could help the strike effort. They were by no means fighting in a feminist or even class sense. They were simply helping their community and those that had fallen on hard times.\(^\text{21}\) In the majority of pit villages throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the female population were generally housewives or mothers (even if not to miners, but to men who worked in other industries). Some women did have part-time jobs but these were normally in low-paid occupations such as shop work, factory work, domestic work or even industries relating to their families (such as canteen workers or cleaners in schools, factories and pits). This meant that the majority of women were not involved with any unions or in turn, political parties.

Gildart agrees that ‘patriarchy in the villages was apparent’, right down to the division in local public houses where females would only be allowed to use the lounge area of most pubs and clubs.\(^\text{22}\) This is still apparent in many clubs in South Wales even today, and shows that at the time of the 1972 strike, women were still seen as the section of community ‘designed’ to assist men. Therefore, their involvement in the 1972 and 1974 strikes was still ‘traditional’ in that sense. Many women did not go out of their way to disrupt their communities, instead they fought to keep the status quo. Gildart goes on to comment that this was the case for Welsh women throughout the 1970s into the 1980s,

women of mining families identified with the pit at an early age, attracted by the inherent masculinity of the occupation, the bonds of fraternity it

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\(^{21}\) Ibid. p. 178.  
produced, and the social/cultural networks that it constructed. Even in the 1980s, mining communities would not provide a fertile ground for feminist politics.\textsuperscript{23}

He goes on to say,

a number of … women were certainly politicized by the dispute, but many remained hostile to attempts to involve them at a more overtly political level. For most women the whole dispute was about preserving a world they were losing, not the promotion of a world that would herald a new division of labour along feminist lines.\textsuperscript{24}

We shall see later whether he is right to make this sweeping generalisation.

However, women were also significant in other ways and they did go beyond helping in the ‘traditional’ sense, for example by attending rallies and meetings and often taking part in events; for instance picketing and making speeches. For example, a massive solidarity demonstration and rally was held in London on 6 February 1972, and special trains were booked to ferry miners and supporters (including wives and children) from the coalfields. Seven colliery bands performed, including the Deal Girl Pipers from Kent. Before this, on 18 January, a lobby of miners wives from Kent and Derbyshire had attended the first debate on the miners’ strike at the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{25}

In many ways, though, women were still separated from the Union in the ‘traditional’ sense, in that local lodges preferred women to get involved on their terms, and did not want them active in any political way. For example Pitt, who examines the women from the Kent area, makes a point of stating that women’s involvement with the lodge was mainly to contact their men folk while they were away picketing, ‘women would come to ask the officials to make contact with their husbands because of a domestic problem which they did not think they could solve on

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p. 122.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. p. 176.
\textsuperscript{25} Pitt, \textit{The World on Our Backs}, pp. 168-75.
their own’. This seems slightly derogatory, firstly as it implies that wives could not run their households without the advice of their husbands. It seems that the lodge was keen to maintain the status quo and persuade women to stay at home while the men completed the strike work. These sorts of comments do not often find their way into the literature of the 1984-5 strike.

However, Pitt later goes on to describe the way that women did take part in other activities, giving the example of the Kent women who attended picket lines and were even interviewed by local newspapers. While the men were picketing other locations around the country, the women took over the picket line at the local colliery, even occupying a room on NCB property as a picket office. They went on to organise a women’s committee to coordinate activities, and took part in lobbies of parliament. However, Pitt seems to imply that these women were somewhat unique in their involvement in picketing when he describes the women from Aylesham who took part in picketing with their husbands and sons, but were reprimanded:

The Union and the men thought that the picket line was the wrong place for the women when there was danger of violence from scabs or police. It was bad enough for the men to be banged about but out of the question for the women.

However, this was not an unfamiliar situation in Wales, as there was a longer tradition of women’s supporting activities. Other historians, however, do agree that ‘women quickly became politicized’ by the strike. Already there are similarities with the 1980s, as here too, women were described as being ‘politicized’ by their involvement. Many women’s support groups played a prominent role in both local and national events. For many of the women involved, even joining the formal organisation of a

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26 Ibid. p. 181.
27 Ibid. pp. 184-5.
29 Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, p. 185.
women’s group was a big step away from their traditional lifestyle. Penny Green goes on to say that women’s involvement ‘broke down traditional notions of the ‘women’s place’ in a very traditional community.’

The outcome of the strikes of 1972 and 1974 impacted on that of 1984-5. Phillips explains that the 1972 strike had been the first national strike since 1926 and it secured a significant advance in wages. In turn, this broke the informal wage restraint that was central to the Conservative government’s economic policy, and eventually broke the Heath government itself. The miners’ position was later strengthened during their strike of 1974. Again, Phillips goes on to suggest that their victory in both strikes was achieved by their well-organised picketing and blockading of power stations and coal depots. Of course, support from other union workers was essential in this respect, and showed just how powerful the miners could be if they cut off all fuel supplies in Britain. Regular power cuts began to occur only a few weeks into both strikes. In fact, by 8 February 1972, the government declared a State of Emergency to ration electricity and maintain order in both industrial and domestic life. However, this also suggested to many that as well as being extremely powerful, trade unions were also dangerous in British society: ‘this physical force encouraged the view that trade unions were generally undemocratic institutions that wielded power irresponsibly, threatening public order and economic ‘stability’.

Margaret Thatcher (Secretary of State for Education during this time between 1970 and 1974) became Heath’s successor as leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and was determined the Conservatives would not be humiliated in the same way again. Instead, she patiently prepared for the next strike which she knew would

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32 Ibid. p. 193.
33 Ibid. p. 189.
eventually come, as it did in 1984-85. She began to slowly isolate trade unions and their support, and her economic policies accelerated change, and the unions’ capacity to take effective industrial action was further diminished by new laws on employment and industrial relations.\(^{34}\) Thatcher used the argument that the unions were unruly, dangerous and even tyrannous.\(^{35}\) She succeeded in a thorough preparation for a confrontation with the miners and their union, and as Gildart states, the miners’ could not compete against the government;

The strategies and institutions which they had traditionally used to provide a barrier against the excesses of the market, such as union solidarity and a powerful Labour Party, were no longer effective weapons against the politics of Thatcherism.\(^{36}\)

Gibbon explains that from the point when the coal industry was nationalised in 1945 until 1979, British government policy had been corporatist with respect to energy and industrial relations. That means that it was not run as a profit-making organisation. When Margaret Thatcher came to power, this signalled the beginning of a transition from corporatism to ‘a combination of ‘free market and strong state’, whereby the NCB had to become a competitive business organisation, with a view to eventual privatisation. Of course, it was known that the miners would fight these changes so plans were put into action to counteract any form of protest. The hold of the NUM had to be cut down, and the state would be reasserted as the main source of authority. The Conservative government made major preparations for this, by making sympathetic appointments at the head of the major organisations (such as Ian MacGregor who was Chief Executive of the British Steel Corporation, at the NCB),

\(^{35}\) Gildart, \textit{North Wales Miners}, p. 156.
implementing new employment legislation and stockpiling coal.\textsuperscript{37} They also prepared the way for the importation of coal from abroad, encouraged hauliers to recruit non-union drivers, introduced dual fuel at power stations so that coal was not essential to their running, established a large, mobile police force to deal with picketing and cut off financial supply to strikers to make the Union finance themselves. In December 1979, plans were announced to construct one nuclear power station per year from 1982 for a decade, therefore increasing the nuclear contribution from twelve percent to thirty percent by the end of the 1980s and ending the reliance on coal.\textsuperscript{38}

The legislation the Conservative government brought into force was also anti-trade union in policy. For example, the 1980 Employment Act introduced restrictions on picketing and ‘secondary’ action, with a Code of Practice limiting pickets to a maximum of six at an entrance. This did have an effect later in the strike. It was also this Act that enabled Social Services to deduct the assumed strike pay from the supplementary benefit of miners’ families, whether they were in receipt of payment or not. Legislation went further in 1982 when a second Employment Act made unions financially liable in courts for ‘illegal’ action, making it more difficult to determine what industrial action was actually illegal. The government finally brought an end to its corporatist ideas with the announcement of the 1980 Coal Industry Act which declared that all operating grants given to the NCB would cease by 1983-84, and those pits would have to make their own profits. By 1983, the NCB conceded that they would need to lose 65,000 workers to break even by 1987-88.\textsuperscript{39} However, some believe that although Mrs. Thatcher had some sort of personal vendetta against the miners because of their obviously strong union, this was not the government’s only

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\textsuperscript{37} Gibbon, ‘Analysing the British Miners’ Strike of 1984-5’, pp. 141-2. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Francis, \textit{History on our Side}, pp. 10-11. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) \textit{Striking Back} (Cardiff: WCCPL and the NUM (South Wales Area), 1985), p. 11.
\end{flushright}
reason for preparing to fight and crush the NUM. As the NUM was the strongest union for workers, if the government could beat them, they could beat anyone. Goodman comments, ‘defeat the miners and you will have finally conquered the trade union disease.’

With this background to the 1984-85 strike then, the NUM leadership (mainly governed by left-wing members) pledged to fight pit closures with direct action. The leadership experienced its first major setback in January 1982, when 55 percent of the miners voted against a strike. This was the first in a series of national ballots where the call for action was dismissed. In October 1982, again miners voted 60 percent against and rejected a further ballot in 1983. A pattern had started whereby the more threatened areas would vote in favour of strike, whereas a more secure area would vote against. At the 1983 NUM Annual Conference, a vote was cast heavily in favour of an overtime ban against the NCB pay offer and on the issue of pit closures.

This was how both the 1972 and 1974 strikes had begun, but in the early 1980s miners were regularly using overtime as a way to top up their basic earnings. The situation was escalated further on 1 March 1984 by the NCB announcement of the closure of the Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire. Here began a ‘messy’ start to the 1984-85 strike. Miners were mobilised nationally without a national ballot, and several coalfields made it plain that they solidly opposed strike action over pit closures. On 5 March 1984, the Yorkshire Area of the NUM met to discuss the closure of Cortonwood, and announced that an area strike would commence one week later. A similar strike was occurring in Scotland due to the threat to the Polmaise colliery. Both closures had been for purely financial reasons and had been announced by the NCB without consultation with the NUM. Added to this, on 6 March, the

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NCB announced to the NUM that it intended to cut four million tons capacity and 20,000 jobs within a year, thereby breaching the normal codes of practice of consultation and agreement. Due to this, in a meeting on 8 March, miners’ leader Arthur Scargill announced that both local strikes were official in accordance with rule 41.

‘Rule 41’ meant that areas could strike locally to make their feelings known. In this case, there would not need to be a ballot to secure the validity of the strike. However, following the local strikes in early March, an Area Conference on 9 March recommended a strike without ballot. After discussion, delegates voted for action on 12 March, meaning that other areas of the union were called upon to support these initiatives, a call which was backed up by flying pickets attending collieries up and down the country. These areas had no ballot to agree to the strike, they were simply prevented from entering their collieries by pickets. This has been a source of much contention among miners and historians alike. It has been said that this one crucial decision proved to be the eventual downfall of the miners. Goodman, for instance, states,

Whatever the difficulties and the question marks that would have hung over a ballot, not to hold one was an error of judgement by the NUM from which it never recovered. It weakened the union’s position with the rest of the trade union movement and the Labour Party in parliament; it undermined the miners’ cause with public opinion; and it handed to the government, Coal Board and the media a weapon of rebuke which became more lethal with every picket-line flare-up.

The South Wales Area saw a ‘hesitant’ start to the strike (at meetings to discuss the initiative, South Wales lodges voted 19 to 13 against the strike) but after that it

42 Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 12.
became the most solid Area throughout the dispute. Even as late as January 1985, over ninety-nine percent of the South Wales miners’ were still on strike.\textsuperscript{46} In December 1984, 21 out of the 26 British pits that were completely ‘scab-free’ were found in South Wales alone.\textsuperscript{47} The term ‘scab’ is one that is widely used by both strikers of the time and historians of the strike. The derogatory term is, of course, used to describe those who return to work during a strike. Less emotive are the terms ‘strike breaker’ or ‘working miner’. Curtis explains that this initial hesitancy in Wales was due to recent events in the area, as historically South Wales was well-known for its militancy. In 1983, Welsh miners had travelled to every British pit in an unsuccessful attempt to save the Lewis Merthyr Colliery from closure, where they incidentally received a particularly hostile reception from Cortonwood. Area officials realised that there might be problems if the Yorkshire miners arrived to picket collieries in the area in an attempt to gather support when Wales had clearly voted against the strike. Instead, they contacted lodges which could be relied upon to act quickly and who could themselves picket and bring the coalfield out on strike. Welsh pickets were therefore sent to every colliery in South Wales. Throughout the strike, only Welsh pickets were present at South Wales collieries.

This was an important way of spreading the strike throughout the area. Due to the militancy in the area, there only needed to be a token picket at a pit head to stop the miners entering. Then, when lodges had pledged their support to the strike by not crossing picket lines, they too joined to spread the word. On 12 March, by the time the Executive was about to meet, pickets were there from both Maerdy and Tower asking to make the dispute official. Encouraged by the support received, the

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. p. 239.
Executive Committee took the decision to call the South Wales Area out on strike.\footnote{Ibid. pp. 236-7.} This decision was taken without the ballot of NUM members, with the result that, ‘a combination of unofficial militancy and Union procedures had produced a total stoppage across South Wales by Wednesday 14 March.’\footnote{Ibid. p. 238.} Francis observes that the South Wales miners and their supporters within the communities had several concerns at the start of the strike, the main one being the threat to jobs and therefore, communities. It had been calculated that unemployment in Wales would rise to over twenty percent, and in mining communities, over half of the male population would be without a job. Eventually, only three collieries would survive in Wales and 20,000 mining jobs would be lost, alongside 20,000 jobs in related industries. He plainly states, ‘mining communities would not survive’\footnote{Francis, \textit{History on our Side}, p. 13.}. It is for this reason that people began to fight so fiercely to keep their collieries.

The history of the area may be an important feature as to why the women of the area became so involved in the strike. The miners’ unions had always been linked to the community surrounding its local colliery, it ‘had a record second to none over many decades in its concern for its communities, the cultural and educational heritage of Wales and all those who struggled for peace and justice throughout the world. That is why the union commanded such loyalty from its communities in the run up to the strike, as well as from a range of people and organisations throughout Wales.’\footnote{Ibid. p. 14.} Whole ‘communities’ came together to fight the pit closures as people realised if the collieries closed, there was not significant employment in the area to fill the void. However, Curtis also explains that the strong support from both men and women in the Area is due to its militant history, ‘the strength of the Area was a product of its
traditional radicalism and also the extensive support networks which grew out of the Valleys communities.\textsuperscript{52} He believes that the two are inter-linked, that the support was strong because of the Area’s history, but the strike itself was only so solid in the area due to the support from the communities. Goodman agrees when he says that, ‘they were reacting to a call to protest; to protect their own people; to demonstrate that their special culture would not fall without resistance.’\textsuperscript{53}

From the start of the strike, single miners were not given any state benefits, despite being without income. Also, the £15 benefit cut from miners’ families under the assumption that the NUM were paying strike pay was increased by a further £1 per week from November.\textsuperscript{54} This was the main reason for the communities becoming involved and providing support for the miners and their families. On 1 August 1984 the South Wales Area NUM bank accounts and food funds were frozen, including some of the support group funds. This was due to the Area’s refusal to comply with a court order barring its secondary picketing of Port Talbot steelworks. It had been anticipated and fortunately many lodges and support groups were able to withdraw their funds before this occurred and operated using cash for the remainder of the strike.\textsuperscript{55} However, this effectively ended South Wales’ picketing activities beyond its own coalfield for the duration of the strike, and fundraising and food parcels rather than picketing became the main focus of the strike.\textsuperscript{56} Francis says, ‘the immediate impact of sequestration, then, was to clarify the strength of social and institutional relationships within the South Wales valleys. Despite the decades of decline, the social networks structures out of bonds of family and community continued to provide

\textsuperscript{53} Goodman, \textit{The Miners’ Strike}, p. 51.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. p. 260.  
\textsuperscript{56} Francis, \textit{History on our Side}, pp. 38-40.
a remarkable resource to be mobilised.’57

Gildart implies that the 1984-85 strike was not a well-organised or even a well-run operation. In many instances, it was run locally, with miners and their families often only meeting up with others in the same situation whilst travelling to picket lines up and down the country, or at rallies, demonstrations and meetings. In some cases, it was the miners and their families who set up their own support network within their communities to help raise funds and provided food for those in need. Often, this was separate from the NUM and local Lodge. Gildart echoes this when, in respect of Bersham in North Wales he comments that, ‘the lodge seemed unable to formulate a clear policy on a course of action and others were already filling the vacuum. [Keith] Hett immediately set up a miners’ support group (MSG), which took the initiative away from the officials. A situation developed in which both were operating separately and, at times, in conflict’.58

However, he is investigating the North Wales miners, whereas in contrast to this, a recent study has shown that the miners of South Wales were extremely organised:

Once the strike was underway [in South Wales], the Area was soon sending busloads of pickets to a multitude of strategic targets around Britain, with around 4-5,000 miners permanently mobilised on duty. Apart from this high level of activism, also notable was the discipline and organisation of the picketing. Each colliery established its own strike committee, whilst overall co-ordination of activities was carried out by Kim Howells, who was accountable to the Area leadership.59

Francis echoes this when he states that around twenty-five percent of the South Wales miners were permanently mobilised, ready for picketing, ‘the size of the operation was breathtaking. … The financial costs were astronomical at more than £35,000 per

57 Ibid. p. 41.
week; £1 million had been spent in the major mobilisation of the first six weeks. As well as picketing other collieries to persuade miners not to return to work, miners from South Wales also wanted to make an impact on the generation of electricity as had been done 1972 and 1974. They did this by picketing twenty-two power stations across England and Wales, as well as oil-fired and nuclear facilities. However, they were hindered by the fact that many collieries (especially in the Nottingham area) were still working and therefore still providing fuel to be distributed to the areas they were picketing.

As in the strikes of the 1970s, the miners needed support from other organisations if they were to succeed. This meant both actual assistance such as food and donations, as well as other workers standing by their cause and refusing to cross picket lines. Therefore, as early as 21 March, the NUM (South Wales Area) requested support from the Wales Trades Union Congress (TUC), and went on to try and broaden the struggle by organising rallies. The NUM were also assisted by the TUC in attempts to limit coal and coke movements into Llanwern and Port Talbot steelworks. Eventually these attempts failed as NUM national president Arthur Scargill insisted that any agreements made should be on a national and not local basis. This in turn led to the failure to win over the majority of the steel workers. The support was actually achieved more widely with the use of picketing, as those miners travelling to other areas and establishing support groups further afield to raise funds. For example, while South Wales miners from Merthyr Vale and Maerdy were picketing Didcot power station, they established links with a support group consisting mainly of car workers and students, who raised funds and items and sent them back to

60 Francis, History on our Side, p. 29.
Hett’s North Wales MSG provided support with food, money and labour, and allowed women equal status to all members of the group. The committee met regularly, but Hett deliberately decided that they should work independently from the lodge. In addition to this, Ann Hett set up a miners’ wives support group that would act as another forum for discussion and a channel for receiving donations. This was the case in many areas; as we shall see in later chapters the women of South Wales often set up their own support group, with no links to the NUM lodge. Of course, there were other groups that were affiliated to the lodge. This is one typical example of how the strike can be seen as a ‘local’ fight, in that most villages and communities had their own initiatives and organisations of support rather than any nationwide organisation.

In South Wales, even before the NUM decided to set up relief and fundraising facilities at its three main centres at Ammanford, Pontypridd and Crumlin, many local initiatives had already sprung up. In fact, the earliest recorded food collection was on 13 April by the Oakdale lodge, just one month into the strike. In the majority, most support groups were spurred into action by the impending half-term school holidays, as support groups aimed to supply all children with some kind of lunch that they would miss from being at school. Francis mentions that this coincided with a large number of South Wales women attending the first National Women’s Rally in Barnsley on 12 May, ‘South Wales women, most of whom had never visited another coalfield before, returned from the rally determined to play their full part, as they perceived it then, in the evolving struggle.’

Francis’ words, ‘as they perceived it then’ are slightly derogatory and seem to imply that these women did not necessarily

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62 Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 34.
63 Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, p. 175.
play a full part as perceived by others. He even goes on to comment that initially, women’s involvement was merely an extension of women’s traditional domestic responsibilities from the family to the wider community. Of course, later chapters will show that the case was different for each individual and support group.

Curtis comments that ‘the reappearance of “soup kitchens” in the Valleys evoked images of the heroic struggle of mining communities during the 1926 strike’. These activities subsequently grew into a massive operation, examples of which will be seen later in chapter four. Curtis claims that ‘by mid May 1984, every South Wales mining village had a support group’, which is echoed by Francis when he states that, ‘by the middle of May, every mining village and town in South Wales had its own community-based or women’s support group’. However, both quotes are somewhat ambiguous and misleading. The term ‘mining village’ itself needs an interrogation which Curtis does not supply. For example, there could be villages who no longer had a colliery, yet still had miners living there who worked elsewhere. On the other hand, there were villages where their collieries still survived. Later there will be examples of women and support groups from both of these differing areas, therefore it would appear that the remark, ‘every South Wales mining village had a support group’ is an uncritical and indeed inaccurate generalisation.

Unfortunately Curtis, like most historians of the topic, tends to give the impression that support groups were homogenous entities with the same rules, regulations and ways of working. We will see evidence later that this was not the case. He gives a very good general description of a support group,

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64 Francis, History on our Side, p. 31.
65 Ibid. p. 32.
67 Ibid. p. 245.
68 Francis, History on our Side, p. 35.
The main business of the support groups was food-collecting and fundraising, a process which was central to maintaining the strike. … money was used to buy food for each family within the groups’ ‘catchment areas’. Distribution was a sophisticated logistical operation. Each support group had its own headquarters (typically the local miners’ institute): all the food supplies were collected there, packed into weekly ‘ration bags’ by volunteers then distributed to their various ‘satellite centres’.69

However, he fails to mention that no two were actually alike. They did use similar events to raise funds and support (such as door-to-door collections, raffles and so on) but they did not have a uniform number of members, nor similar numbers of people needing support. Some had links with other support groups or the lodge or NUM, while others were completely autonomous. Many were purely ‘women’s groups’ whereas others were ‘support groups’ where men were involved, or even people completely independent of the mining community (such as local political or student groups). The Labour Research Department (LRD) shows how different the support groups were when they state, ‘the numbers of people involved in the miners’ support groups was (sic.) a wide-ranging six to 110, with most in the ten to fifty range and the average being thirty. … Many emphasised the unique value of a support group. … We include members from the Labour party, Communist party, trades council, CND, Anti-Apartheid, Hunt Saboteurs, Women’s Peace Campaigns and students.’70 Also, ‘weekly collections ranged from £25 (Waveney Town, Suffolk) to £1,000 (Isle of Wight and Kirby) but the average amount collected was almost £240 a week.’71

Francis comments how some support groups envied any greater support given to other groups in the area, how some (but not all) councils gave out vouchers to miners

70 Labour Research Department, Solidarity with the Miners (London: LRD Publications, 1985), p. 17. It is interesting that the LRD does not mention the assistance given by Plaid Cymru or even the Welsh Language Society (Cymdeithas Yr Iaith Gymraeg), although this may say more about the political assumptions underlying the strike as opposed to the support given.
71 Ibid. p. 18.
families (such as Blaenau Gwent) as well as other examples.\textsuperscript{72}

Curtis also fails to mention that there was often a lack of uniformity of aim within support groups themselves. For instance some groups provided food parcels while others opened kitchens, also in some groups, women were keen to become more politically involved rather that just showing traditional support, and this often meant attending picket lines, marches and demonstrations. Even within the groups where women did become active in this way, there were still women who were unwilling to take that extra step. Instead, they stayed at home and would even sometimes look after the other women’s families to allow them to travel further afield. He also omits to mention that women even took part in these kinds of activities, and simply mentions that they were only involved in the collection of food and fundraising. However, he does go on to mention the umbrella organisation, the South Wales Women’s Support Group (SWWSG) that was formed in June 1984, and some of the work they were involved in.\textsuperscript{73}

However, Curtis does mention that the support groups did more than just provide support for their communities; their initiatives were also key to maintaining morale. Without the work of the women, the miners would have returned to work long before they eventually did. Curtis comments that with respect to morale, the role of women grew as the strike continued, eventually having a positive effect on ‘community spirit’. He also believes that the women’s involvement in the support groups not only helped the communities, but was also a very good force for propaganda. He says that it was a good way of showing the wider public that the strike was about the defence of communities and therefore had support from every

\textsuperscript{72} Francis,\textit{ History on our Side}, p. 34.
area of the coalfields.74

The miners and their families also had help from others as well as the support groups. In South Wales, local councils had their own initiatives and ways of showing support. As early as April 1984, the council at Blaenau Gwent gave out £10 food vouchers to every miner living within its boundaries. Also, Torfaen waived any rent owed by miners for the duration of the strike. Other councils gave aid too, in the form of support by donating to food funds, loaning them use of premises or providing meals for school children.75 Of course, similar to the support groups, there was no uniformity in the support offered by the local councils. Some were more generous in their help and support than others as there were no guidelines as to what they legally were required to do. Therefore they could be as generous or as unhelpful as they felt fit. Curtis also comments that ‘crucially, industrial support from the trade union movement was much lower than in 1972 and 1974. Most assistance was of a passive type, helpful to sustain the strike but not actually to win it.’76 Gibbon explains that ‘the dispute was a reactive struggle by these communities to defend their way of life against the NCB’s efforts to impose its vision, or perhaps one might better say … fantasy, of streamlining coal production and confining operations to a limited number of super-pits, controlled by robotic technology’.77 These communities are seen as reacting to the threat, completely independent of NUM leadership or even its formal structure. Again, he is pointing up that the support of the strike was local.78

However, their support did reach further. For example, the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities was endorsed by over three hundred people who were prominent in Welsh public life, and had an aim to increase fundraising by setting

74 Ibid. p. 246.
75 Ibid. p. 248.
76 Ibid. p. 249.
up more support groups and assist the NUM in putting forward the case for coal. The support was far reaching, Francis says, ‘what emerged was a network of unexpected alliances that went far beyond the traditional labour movement. Labour and Plaid Cymru MPs shared platforms and stood on picket lines with women’s groups, church leaders, peace and Welsh language activists and, interestingly enough, a gay and lesbian support group from London (which ultimately raised over £28,000 for the coalfield).’

Goodman also mentions that mining as an industry showed more of a ‘community spirit’ compared to other areas of work such as railway drivers or dock work, due to its very nature. Strong relationships and dependence on workmates were made due to the high risk of the job. This allowed a much stronger bond within the community more widely. Of course, this slightly historic view of mining communities especially in South Wales is somewhat outdated and does not necessarily take into account all the changes that had occurred and affected these places and its people. Although this is a popular view of the strike in the way that people rallied around in support, in actual fact the strike was not organised by communities, it was organised by collieries. Without the collieries, of course there would have been no need for a strike at all. At this time, ‘communities’ and ‘collieries’ were not synonymous with each other, as Goodman states, ‘today there are pit villages without pits and pits without pit villages’. Those villages where there were still pits remaining had not had an homogenous ‘colliery culture’ for a long time, there were people living in these areas with no links to the colliery. Raphael Samuel comments that, ‘communities were something created in the process of the struggle,

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78 Ibid. p. 150.
79 Francis, History on our Side, p. 42.
However, if mining women did want to become involved in the support of the 1984-5 strike, as they were excluded from NUM membership the only way they could do this was through organising autonomously. As in all sections of society, this ‘new’ organisation was sometimes viewed with suspicion, which could mean that both male and female members of the communities disliked the women’s organisation. Men and the local NUM members would often feel that the work should be left to them, and there were often ongoing conflicts between the NUM and support groups. For example, at Markham colliery in the Sirhowy Valley, the men refused to allow women onto the picket lines, so the women split off and formed their own group and continued raising funds and collecting food. In most cases though, the NUM were content for women to perform traditional ‘female’ duties (such as working in food centres) but not keen on them participating in NUM activity (such as picketing). Also, many women could feel that it was inappropriate for other women to go out and leave their families, and felt help could be given in other ways.

This challenged gender relations both within families and collectively between men and women more generally. Typically it included the male monopolisation of certain activities (such as picketing) as well as the fact that although it seemed that women were ‘allowed’ to take part in a wider range of activities outside the home (such as working within the support group), in fact this was only when men and their family situation allowed such activities. During the strike some women made a conscious effort to go out and get involved and this meant that their husbands often had to share responsibility for the home and family. However, Gibbon’s view is that

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83 Ibid. p. 180.
women did not go on to challenge the male dominance, in that the direction of the NUM (their decision-making) was not questioned, neither at the picket line nor at home where men were still given priority if they had to go out for strike work or even leisure time. Women could take part in strike activities, but their work seems to come second to that of their husbands. He says, ‘in a working-class community a collective female initiative to take part in mass picketing is fundamentally different from one to set up a peace camp.’

The policing of this picketing is something that is well-discussed in the literature. The government allowed some unusual policing tactics such as the use of military personnel on picket lines disguised as police. There are numerous accounts of miners and their families on the picket lines recognising members of their own family dressed as police when they were known to be in the armed forces. Curtis gives two examples discussing the ‘authoritarian’ way in which the South Wales miners were treated: first it was widely believed by the miners that the police force ‘tapped’ the telephones of well-known miners and activists during the strike to gather information. Many gave accounts of hearing strange clicking noises on the line or even a third voice that would appear mid-conversation. Several miners confirmed their suspicions when they used the line in question to arrange bogus picketing arrangements, only to find police arriving at the hoax location. Beryl Fury gives a similar example from her experience, ‘We believed that our phone lines had been tapped but we couldn’t prove it. We made up a story about a group of miners travelling in a van, and that van was

\[87\] Ibid. p. 182.
stopped. Also, many local bus companies were prevented from hiring to miners, which created difficulty in organising any sort of travel arrangements. Clearly the authorities would do anything, no matter how small, to help make the lives of miners and supporters harder.

In early November 1984, the NCB orchestrated a ‘back to work’ campaign. South Wales had been the most solid coalfield in Britain, but the strike had begun to grind some miners down and they were beginning to return to work. By 19 November 1984, 99.6 percent of the South Wales miners were still on strike, which was the highest percentage in any area, compared to a national average of 73.7 percent. However, a minority had started to go back to their collieries, and the small return to work began on 5 November at Cynheidre, where sixteen men appeared for work. When looking at the location and surrounding community of Cynheidre, it is easy to see why strong community support was so vital to the continuation of the strike. It was located on the far western side of the coalfield, and faced some geographical problems. The major problem was that the workforce travelled from a wide area to work at the colliery, even from as far away as the rural villages of Carmarthenshire. Due to this, the NUM lodge was not integral to these communities and it was therefore difficult to maintain solidarity or any group support.

Curtis mentions that the differences between collieries and their communities contributed to their solidity during the strike. For example, places such Tower and Maerdy whose workforces were almost exclusively from the tight-knit surrounding communities had no strike-breakers throughout the dispute. The people in these cohesive areas would have found it much easier to obtain support if they needed it.

91 Ibid. p. 266
92 Ibid. p. 264.
Francis echoes this when he describes the beginning of a return to work at Cynheidre Colliery in the far western Gwendraeth Valley. Although fundraising and support groups had started in this area, they were still in the very early stages; he states that, ‘the threat of a return to work was helped by a lack of proper local community and women’s involvement’. In fact, a group of women went on to halt the return to work in the area where a breakaway was defeated with a rapid, coalfield-wide response, involving a group of women from the Dulais Valley, who arrived triumphantly despite police roadblocks. It seems then that Francis believes that women were invaluable to the miners and the South Wales communities staying on strike for so long.

However, the number of strike breakers in South Wales remained small, with an average number of 120 by mid December, out of a total workforce of c. 21,000. Women and the support groups in general as well as in South Wales became an important weapon in trying to deter miners from returning to work. They did this by encouraging mass pickets at the collieries where miners were returning to work. For example, Sian James from Swansea took part in a women’s occupation of the manager’s office at Cynheidre Colliery. It was an attempt to discourage men who had returned to work at the pit and the seventeen women lasted several days at the location. However, in February, twenty-six strike breakers acquired a High Court order restricting the number of pickets at each pit to just six. From then on, the lodges were able to allow only token pickets at the gate of each colliery.

It was not only the community support that kept the South Wales miners on strike for so long, but also the tradition of militancy that was almost inbred. Emlyn

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93 Francis, *History on our Side*, p. 32
94 Ibid. p. 32.
96 *Sian James & Margaret Donovan* (AUD/503) Interviewed 5 November 1986.
Williams claims that, ‘[t]he South Wales coalfield has always been possibly the most militant coalfield … In the 1926 strike they were the last to go back. It’s born in them[,] … the knowledge that they belong to a class … The bastion of the trade union movement … is the South Wales miners’. 98 However, Curtis may have a slightly sentimental view of miners and mining communities. He describes the colliery and lodge as integral to the very heart of the community, ‘the lodges were very involved in community life, whether through the miners’ institutes, local brass bands and rugby teams, or whatever. It was this cultural importance, together with the continued significance of mining within the coalfield.’ 99 However, this had changed somewhat by the time of the 1984-85 strike, miners institutes were beginning to close down and colliery brass bands were already few and far between. The support that miners received during the strike was remarkable but it must not be taken out of context. With Christmas fast approaching, the support groups and area leadership made special arrangements to help the striking miners and their families. Every family was to receive a turkey and festive food parcel, as well as children being given toys and parties.

Towards the end of the dispute, the South Wales miners could see that it was becoming less likely that they could win the struggle. By January 1985, the government was refusing to even negotiate with the NUM and was demanding that the NUM state in writing that they would accept the closure of ‘uneconomic pits’ as a precondition for discussing a resolution of the dispute. 100 The NUM entered into several talks with the TUC but were still unable to obtain an agreement acceptable to

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99 Ibid. p. 268.
100 Ibid. pp. 277-8.
both sides, and the NCB refused to talk with the NUM directly. So, despite the strength of the South Wales miners, the accelerating abandonment of the strike in other coalfields meant an increase in the miners returning to work. By the end of February, when the number back in work in the rest of the UK had risen to fifty percent, the South Wales area could not continue the strike alone. The miners’ and their communities had become weary due to the year long strike. The time and cost, as well as serious shortages of money were beginning to make the miners think about returning to work.

Therefore, on 1 March a South Wales Area Conference decided by 374 votes to 90 to accept the EC recommendation and call for a national return to work without settlement. The strike was over in South Wales. In fact, surprisingly, it was the South Wales Area, that had always been known as the vanguard of the strike, that proposed the motion to return to work without an agreement. Two votes by the NUM Executive ended in a deadlock of votes 11 to 11 with president Arthur Scargill refusing to cast his vote. The vote therefore went to the delegates from each Area; they agreed with the South Wales motion which was carried 98 to 91. An opinion poll carried out by MORI on 6 and 7 March 1985 stated that one in four of the 739 miners interviewed considered the end of the strike as a defeat for the NUM, whereas only one in seven thought it a victory. The televised videos and photographs of miners and their supporters marching back to work in the early morning are familiar, especially those from Maerdy.

The NUM decided to return even though they knew their pits would be closed in the near future and there was no way they could be saved. However, South Wales returned under a ballot to ensure the survival of the Union. In fact, the South Wales...
Area was the only coalfield in Britain where every pit returned under the collective leadership of the NUM. Hywel Francis believes that this was one of the main differences from the 1926 strike, from which the miners returned humiliated and not as a cohesive group. In 1984-85 the Welsh miners voted as a group, firstly to strike and then to return to work. If miners from South Wales drifted back to work then there would be no cohesion and the Union leadership would be ruined. At least this way there was a chance that the Union might survive to fight another day. Goodman comments,

it was a most astonishing anti-climax. The strike ended without any agreement, with no side positively claiming a victory, or admitting defeat and without anyone daring to draw on the stupefying cliché about ‘common sense prevailing’. Quite suddenly the lights went up and the miners went back to work, mostly marching behind banners, almost 12 months to the day since they had first come out strike.

As expected, as soon as the strike ended, the government began its pit closure program. In 1979, there were 235,000 miners in Britain, but by early 1992 this had dropped to just 32,000. In South Wales, before the strike, 20,000 miners had been employed at twenty eight pits, but by 1994 the government attempted to close Tower colliery, the last remaining pit in the area. The year of 1985 alone saw the closure of nine pits in South Wales. The consequences were predictable. For example, in Oakdale (where the colliery closed in 1989), the local council commented that the area was encountering social and economic devastation, and unemployment rates had jumped from fifteen to twenty-five percent overnight. According to research published in 2005, ‘South Wales remained the coalfield worst hit by the collapse, with

104 Francis, History on our Side, p. 8.
the overwhelming majority of the jobs having never been replaced.'\textsuperscript{108} 

Of course, it is the nature of memory and oral testimony, to remember events selectively, recalling good times and filtering out the less positive aspects. However, it is not only those involved in events who fall victim to this tendency: so do onlookers and researchers. For example, Hywel Francis looks back at the strike on its twenty-fifth anniversary, and in some parts, his descriptions do tend to sound slightly biased or sentimental. He says, for example,

the long hot summer - ‘strike weather’ so reminiscent of 1926, 1921 and 1898 - was dominated every weekend from May through to September by local community rallies, almost like carnivals in their atmosphere. Old banners from long-closed collieries were dug out of the archives of the South Wales Miners’ Library to haunt the NCB with memorials of its past mismanagement. Women from the coalfield joined peace protesters at the Port Talbot steelworks and at Greenham Common. Union leaders talked in terms of ‘no surrender’, of ‘hell freezing over, before returning to work’ and of the ‘heroism of the womenfolk’. MPs spoke evocatively of the revival of ‘community spirit’ in the valleys, whilst children wrote poems about their exciting new experiences, unconsciously recalling the pathos of their grandparents’ memories of 1926.\textsuperscript{109}

We have already seen that in many respects this spirit did not always prevail. In subsequent chapters the groups involved will be examined more closely, particularly the women and support groups.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. p. 285.
\textsuperscript{109} Francis, \textit{History on our Side}, pp. 36-37.
CHAPTER 3

Women in the British Coalfields During 1984-85

‘Women became the driving force behind the miners’ strike of 1984-85. … This was not the first miners’ strike, of course. … What made the 1984-85 strike unique, however, was the active involvement of women on a scale and in a form never before witnessed in any British industrial dispute.’¹

So far the history of Welsh women in earlier strikes and disputes has been examined, as well as exploring women’s activities in a wider context, in order to establish whether the actions of the women of South Wales in 1984-85 were qualitatively different to any previous experience. Chapter four will consist of a thorough investigation into these activities with specific reference to South Wales. However, an examination is now required of the role of women in other parts of Britain at this time, to discover whether there are any differences or similarities in experience. This will provide a basis on which to compare and contrast the role of women in South Wales, and women throughout Britain more generally.

There were several areas of Britain where the coalfields were as severely affected by the miners’ strike as South Wales. Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire stand out particularly in the literature, but there were others. These include North Wales, Lancashire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Northumberland and Durham, as well as the Scottish coalfield. However, for comparative purposes some of these

¹ Moiram Ali, ‘The Coal War: Women’s Struggle during the Miners’ Strike’ in Rosemary Ridd & Helen Callaway (eds.) Caught up in Conflict: Women’s Responses to Political Strife (London:
areas have been examined more thoroughly than others with reference to the strike; it is this secondary literature that will be used throughout this chapter. These areas will be discussed more frequently, if only because they dominate the historiography, but this does not mean that other areas not mentioned are less important.

Therefore this chapter will undertake a general discussion of what women did nation-wide throughout the strike to provide a context and comparison with the women of South Wales. This will include an examination of the women’s support groups, their organisation and whether they provided food parcels or meals, as well as women’s involvement in picketing and demonstrations, and whether the groups continued after the strike itself had ended, and what the women involved did afterwards. This will therefore provide evidence for discussion of the similarities or differences with the women of South Wales.

Women became involved in the miners’ strike primarily to support and provide relief for families and single miners, especially as the strike wore on and the government began to take assumed strike pay from miners. Of course, as the women became more involved in the strike, there developed more of a collective spirit, both between them women in the support and the communities at large. However the support groups provided help in more ways than just supplying food to those in need. The groups also became a forum where people could share their concerns, financial or anything else, and obtain practical advice and help. This included guidance on how to obtain benefits, and how to manage on the small amount of money many were receiving. Joan from the Highhill Support Group in Keswick, Cumbria, says, ‘you could share your troubles, it was nice to know that you had somebody in your own

Macmillan Education Ltd., 1986), pp. 84-5.
3 Ibid. p. 97.
position and you could talk about your troubles’. However, Shaw does go on to say that this was not necessarily always the case, and that often support groups did encounter conflict among its members. This was also the case in South Wales, where there will be examples that the support group were not always a homogenous entity. Moiram Ali states that,

women became the driving force behind the miners’ strike of 1984-85. The media portrayed these women as the supportive wives and daughters of miners, dutifully performing a domestic role that enabled their men to maintain the strike. Women were shown mainly carrying out activities associated with the soup kitchen and, at times, standing ‘behind their men’ on the picket line. … It is true that some women limited their participation to the practical and domestic sphere, but others became more actively involved in the political scene than some of the men. … This was not the first miners’ strike, of course. … What made the 1984-85 strike unique, however, was the active involvement of women on a scale and in a form never before witnessed in any British industrial dispute.

Vicky Seddon echoes this when she says,

1984-85 marks a particular watershed: a new form of organisation appeared amongst working class people. … the women of the coalfields decided it was time they had a say. … [Women] changed the nature of the conflict, and the struggle became not only of miners against the National Coal Board, union against government, but also of community against intransigence, women and men defying state power.

It is exactly this support that will be examined throughout this chapter. Ali also states that to begin with, women often responded to the needs of their communities rather than becoming actively involved. Meg Allen reiterates this when she says that, ‘their sense of community was often what motivated them (women)’.  

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4 Ibid. p. 98.
5 Ibid. p. 98.
The term ‘community’ covers a multitude of meanings, and for the women in the mining communities, it was wider than just their geographical area. It was a sense of belonging and connection with others. Allen proceeds to explain that the term was interpreted in three ways by the women themselves. The first was geographically to describe their locality and the people in it. This overlapped with the second which described the collective practical needs and actions of that same group. Finally, the term could be used in a more ideological sense, where the group were brought together not by locality, but instead by a sense of common cause and belief, virtually a shared identity. However, at the time of the 1984-85 strike, the idea of a close-knit ‘pit community’ had been somewhat shattered due to the pit closure programme, and the fact that many miners had to travel several miles to work at another colliery. This was often far from their geographical community. This was the case throughout most of the British coalfields as well as that in South Wales. One example of this would be the figures given of approximately 270,000 miners in South Wales in 1921, which had decreased to less than 20,000 by 1984-85. The number of pits in South Wales had dropped to just thirty-one in March 1985, with 158 collieries closing in South Wales between 1947 and 1979. Communities of miners without a colliery did exist in areas of South Wales, and it is reasonable to expect that there must have been similar examples in other areas throughout Britain. However, this must be kept in mind when thinking of the term ‘community’ as it could often carry a more ideological charge rather than describe the physical reality.

The support groups themselves had no formal organisation but did join together

under an umbrella organisation called Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) whose primary function was to ease hardships within their communities. The creation of the WAPC was inspired by the Barnsley Rally held in May 1984 and organised by the Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures. The rally brought together 10,000 women from all over Britain and helped forge links between support groups. There were also sub-divisions of these organisations, such as the South Wales Women’s Support Group, which would provide help and support on a more local level. However, even with this organisation, the individual groups were still extremely diverse. For example, one woman stated, ‘the groups varied tremendously. Some of them had no democratic structure whatsoever. Some of them were so democratic they were almost inoperable.’ It seems, then, that support groups across Britain had this common feature, as those in South Wales varied widely too. One common feature of the support groups would be their differences.

One of the central arguments arising from Monica Shaw’s research is whether or not one can actually assume that all women would have a shared set of experiences that were distinctly different to men’s. Although her work relates more specifically to the women of Greenham Common, her argument is still valid when applied to the women involved in miners’ support groups. Shaw says,

it has been argued that women, excluded from certain areas of social life, are likely to construct the world differently to men or at least to have separate concerns. … This fundamental epistemological problem has been overshadowed by related debates concerning the meaning of the category ‘woman’ and whether it is valid to assume that women share a set of common experiences. … Once we have accepted that women’s experiences of oppression may differ, it is at least possible that in certain contexts they may overlap (even if they are not identical) with those of

14 Shaw, Women in Protest and Beyond, p. 12.
16 Shaw, Women in Protest and Beyond, p. 19.
men. … women in mining communities were aware of shared class oppression with their men as well as of the disadvantage of being women in a traditional class culture.¹⁷

In relation to the women of South Wales, this is not necessarily the case. In many instances support groups were just that and included both men and women instead of being all-women. With this in mind then, women could still have had very similar experiences to men. While looking at support groups outside South Wales, there are striking similarities in their organisation, the type of women involved and their activities.

These differences can be seen filtering through into the different types of women who became involved in the dispute. For instance, Allen states that some women had previously belonged to the Communist or Labour Parties, or had come from families with a history of trade union activity. There will be examples of these kinds of women in the next chapter, such as Christine Powell from Seven Sisters in South Wales who even before her involvement in the strike was a full-time teacher and Labour Party member. Others may not have been involved in party politics but had experience of community organising. There were also some who had no prior experience.¹⁸ Again, in the following chapter, Donna Jones from Blaengwynfi in the Afan Valley, provides an excellent example of a typical ‘miners wife’ with no previous experience of involvement in disputes. Shaw discusses miners’ support groups throughout Britain when she comments that their beginnings were often sporadic and reflected a regional organisation. Therefore, some support groups began extremely quickly at the start of the strike, whereas others took several weeks to form. Again, she states that their origins varied as much as the actual composition of the

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 20.
membership. They were by no means homogenous.\footnote{Shaw, 2013, p. 11.} Shaw says,

some groups were composed entirely of women, others included men and it was not unusual for there to be members of both sexes who were not directly connected to the dispute. As conveyed by the many pamphlets produced by support groups during and after the strike, each group had its own history but was also part of the broader collective effect.\footnote{Ibid. p. 12.}

Again, the experience of the South Wales support groups confirms this.

Liz Knight from Tottenham was a supporter of the miners’ strike but was not a typical ‘miners’ wife’. In fact, she was not a miner’s wife at all; instead she was a member of the Enfield Women’s Peace Group and taught at Tottenham Technical College where she was an active member of the union (NATFHE). She also went on to support the women’s peace camp at Greenham Common.\footnote{Knight et al; [Annie; Judy; Mary Millington; Vicky Smailes], ‘Mines Not Missiles: Links with the Peace Women’ in Vicky Seddon (ed.) The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 149.} Greenham Common had strong links with mining communities and their support groups. Knight says that when the strike broke out, the women from the peace camp immediately went to the mining areas that needed help, Wales, Yorkshire, Kent, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire, to give support on picket lines and in the kitchens.\footnote{Ibid. p. 152.} She states, ‘Greenham women everywhere, in support groups as well as at the camp, were inspired by the tremendous courage and organisation of women in the mining communities. We understood that the struggle was about the very survival of those communities. And it was about freedom.’\footnote{Ibid. p. 152.}

The Greenham support groups and individual women collected money to send to the Women Against Pit Closures group, or affiliated with a particular miners’ support group and undertook fundraising to send specifically to them. Women from

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Shaw, Women in Protest and Beyond, p. 11.}
\item \footnote{Ibid. p. 12.}
\item \footnote{Knight et al; [Annie; Judy; Mary Millington; Vicky Smailes], ‘Mines Not Missiles: Links with the Peace Women’ in Vicky Seddon (ed.) The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 149.}
\item \footnote{Ibid. p. 152.}
\item \footnote{Ibid. p. 152.}
\end{itemize}}
both the mining communities and Greenham supporters forged strong links and even invited each other to stay at their homes and spoke at each other’s meetings. Mary Millington states that it was actually the miners’ wives themselves who first made contact with the Greenham women, their first common trait being, ‘women: struggling against the tide of the Tory river, being persecuted for our refusal to allow the precepts of British Conservatism’. The Greenham women then went on to support the miners at demonstrations such as the walk organised from South Wales pits to Hinckley Point nuclear power station in Somerset. She believes this was the beginning of the closer connections between the two groups. Therefore, women (and men) from a wide variety of organisations supported the miners, which can also be seen in South Wales where support groups there had links as far as Oxford and even received support from abroad. However, this wide-varying support and differences between groups was not always easy to accept. For example, Millington states that the miners often showed contempt for these ‘feminist’, ‘unwashed’ women, adding ‘as Greenham women we know what it is to be spat at in the street.’ She says,

of course, we had met in a common cause, but in one sense we inhabited different worlds. We were demanding a lot of understanding and tolerance of the mining communities with our uncompromising feminism, our wild, free, perhaps insensitive sense of strength in each others’ company as women. In our turn, we need to be tolerant, listen and learn about the communities we were there to support, make real connections, person to person, woman to woman.

We will see in the following chapter that the unity often depicted between groups and

24 Ibid. pp. 155-56.
26 Ibid. p. 167.
27 Ibid. p. 168.
their supporters was not always the reality in South Wales either.

However, as in South Wales, some women from the miners’ support groups were often very active throughout the dispute, and did not undertake traditional ‘supportive’ duties such as working to supply food or raise funds. Women such as Vicky Smailes often took part in demonstrations outside the support groups. Smailes from the mining village of Rhodesia near Worksop in Nottinghamshire was a miners’ wife, very active in her support group and went on to take part in the ‘Mines not Missiles’ campaign. This included attending a ‘Mines not Missiles’ march from Capenhurst on the Wirral (a uranium enrichment plant) to Mansfield, ending with a demonstration at the pit in Sutton-in-Ashfield. Smailes echoes the differences often felt between the support group women, and other groups such as the peace group women at Greenham common when she says, ‘at first the peace women were a bit wary of us. They seemed to congregate together. Most of them are lesbians and I think they didn’t know how we would react to them. When they found out we were alright with them, they were alright with us - in fact, we got on really well.’ These differences and prejudices were often also seen in South Wales, but were lessened as people had more experience of one another during the strike.

Just as no two support groups were alike, neither was their work nor the organisation of the individual groups. There was no formal structure that the groups had to adhere to. Winterton explains the beginnings of the women’s action groups in Yorkshire. One of the earliest groups to be set up was the Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures (BWAPC), which began simply with five founder members writing into their local newspaper asking for the help of other women. They then went on to tour

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28 Ibid. p. 168.
30 Ibid. p. 172.
local villages encouraging women to set up similar organisations. As the strike continued, two separate women’s groups co-ordinated sixteen village groups. In North Yorkshire, groups began mainly to provide assistance for single miners. Eight autonomous groups first met at the Barnsley rally on 12 May 1984 and agreed to organise an area meeting. By the end of the strike there were thirty-four groups in North Yorkshire. In Sheffield, a group began with two women (Kath Mackey and Pat Berry) collecting food for the miners. They then made contact with local NUM branches and went on to arrange a meeting of around forty women, mostly from outside mining communities, from Sheffield WAPC.31

Kath Mackey was not a typical miner’s wife; in fact her husband was a steel worker, and she became involved with strike support as she had experienced strikes alongside her husband and wanted to help alleviate some of the hardship. She had vast experience of trade union activity and political activism.32 The Women Against Pit Closures group started out small but eventually gathered support from other organisations. For example, the group was invited to speak at a Sheffield Trades Council delegates meeting, where eventually the Trades Council initiated a broad support committee and the group were invited to attend meetings. They continued this throughout the strike, working within the labour and trade union movement. At the beginning, only a few women were involved, so the group’s first aim was to recruit more support. They did this by raising their profile with leaflet and poster campaigns and holding public meetings to encourage other women to join. Eventually, with more support, the women began to meet weekly, collecting food for the miners and their

families, and distributing it specific points.33

The beginnings of this group are very similar to those in South Wales. There too, women met and expanded their support the longer the strike continued. In fact, this group has many similarities to some of those found in South Wales. For example, Mackey mentions that Sheffield actually had very few collieries within its boundaries, although the area was surrounded by colliery communities. This was also the case in South Wales, in that many collieries had closed by the time of the strike, forcing miners to travel outside their local communities to work, and therefore creating ‘mining communities’ which no longer had a mine. This meant that the majority of those involved in support were not actually from a ‘mining community’, in the sense that they still had a local colliery, which was therefore similar to the groups in Sheffield. Also, Mackey states that the people who attended meetings and support groups were from a very diverse background, ‘local authority workers, unemployed, nurses, engineers, housewives, pensioners, students, bus drivers, and also the mining women from the villages.’34 This was replicated in South Wales; there too the women came from an array of different backgrounds and experiences. The group was also keen to forge links with other women and groups from different areas,35 as happened in South Wales. Mackey says, ‘our meetings were open to anyone who wished to show solidarity with the mineworkers and their families. Women from many political organisations attended,’36 which was again similar to South Wales, where there were often women involved who had no personal links to the miners or the cause. This sometimes caused friction as the women from mining communities often felt insignificant compared to those with more political experience. This was rectified in

33 Ibid. pp. 51-52.
34 Ibid. p. 52.
36 Ibid. p. 54
some areas of South Wales when miners’ wives were given priory at meetings when there was any kind of vote. This seems to also have been the case in Sheffield as Mackey states that the group worked on a principle that decisions were made by the group as a whole, but these decisions were made after open discussion with the mining women themselves.

Like many of the committees organising the groups in South Wales, the women ‘fell’ into their roles accidentally. Mackey says,

Our group was still not organised in committee terms, our meetings were open to anyone. It was a tremendous job organising the picking up of food and delivering it to areas, and eventually supporters gave money which we in turn turned into food, buying in bulk at warehouses. One of the women was requested to open a bank account to record all our finances and I continued to chair meetings, so we had a chair and a treasurer. Other women took on the jobs of picking up food, distributing leaflets, writing letters and so on.37

The group did become more organised as the strike continued, taking minutes at meetings, working by agendas, and encouraging the use of financial reports to keep track of donations and outgoings.38 However, the groups were not purely involved in food-based support work, they also organised fundraising, attended rallies and demonstrations, as well as picketing, and even helped set up advice centres to help people struggling on benefits to pay large bills. They achieved such organisation with systems such as a ‘telephone tree’ whereby one member would telephone the next, and so on. This enabled all members to mobilise quickly if need be.39 This type of system seems not to have been evident in the organisation of support groups in South Wales.

Beatrix Campbell explains that in many cases, the women’s groups seem to emerge from nowhere, normally on the initiative of the women themselves. She gives

37 Ibid. p. 53.
38 Ibid. p. 53.
the example of the mining village of Dunscroft near Doncaster where,

a miner’s wife in her thirties, Maureen Douglass, got together with some of her friends and neighbours early in the strike and organised a women’s meeting - 70 turned up. Those who couldn’t or didn’t want to be too much involved in organising and picketing, agreed to help with babysitting so that other women could.\textsuperscript{40}

This shared responsibility seems present in virtually all women’s support groups. Also, this example shows the many different ways in which women could become involved and offer help and support. While some did not want to be overly involved politically, they could assist in other areas: all the different activities would have been vital to the running of the group. For instance, the women with young children would not have been able to picket or attend demonstrations without the childcare provided by others.

Most groups began with a group of women wanting to provide help to those in need. One woman describes how her group was set up in Doncaster,

there were four of us at this Rally in Doncaster. And we heard this woman from Greenham Common. It brought it all home to us what we could do. And after it we said “Why don’t we form a kitchen where people can eat”. From there we had a meeting and asked everybody we knew to come. Got ourselves a Secretary, a Treasurer and a Chairperson. … From there we had a proper Committee … discuss things first and then take votes on everything. And that’s how it started.\textsuperscript{41}

It seems this was the case for many support groups. There are similar examples in South Wales, such as the support group at Aberdare.\textsuperscript{42}

However, not all support groups fitted the stereotypical idea of a group of ‘miners’ wives’ helping out people in their own village communities. While miners’

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[39] Ibid. pp. 53-54.
\item[41] Salt & Layzell (eds.), \textit{Here We Go!} p. 7.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
wives naturally became involved, so did many other women. For example, the Oxford Support Group began when women from the Blackbird Leys Labour Party contacted the Maerdy (Rhondda) Women’s Support Group to ask how they could provide assistance. They were told a food collection would be greatly appreciated as the food could then be parcelled at the Maerdy distribution centre.43 This was not a mining area and these were not miners’ wives, yet they still rallied to help the miners’ cause. Also, in Aberdare in South Wales, a group of people from the local CND set up a support group to help their local community.44 It was also not only women who were involved in the support groups. Similar to some groups in South Wales, Shaw describes the Castlehill Support Group from County Durham who had a regular membership of twelve women and two men, three of whose members had no links with the mining community. However, she does also mention two others, Highhill Support Group and Valley View Support Group (both from County Durham), who had only women members of nine and seven respectively.45

Women were involved in many different ways. For example, it is hard to define in specific terms the phrase ‘women’s involvement in the miners’ strike’ as almost every woman had a different way of helping. There is a tendency to imagine that every woman involved in the strike effort was a miner’s wife, but this was not necessarily the case. Women who had been involved with all different types of political groups joined miners’ support groups. For instance, the Bath Miners’ Support Group had members from the Labour Party, Communist Party, Trades

42 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
44 Interview with Ann Wilson, Christine Thomas and Christine Harvey, Aberdare, 17 April 2008.
45 Shaw, Women in Protest and Beyond, p. 31.
Council, CND, Anti-Apartheid, Women’s Peace Campaign and students. As an example, a questionnaire was completed by the women’s group in the area. Thirty-two percent of women said that they were involved in at least one activity to sustain the strike. Of the women involved, seventy-six percent were girlfriends or wives of activists who spent at least five days per week on strike-related activities. Only ten percent were associated with miners who spent fewer than three days per week on strike business. Also, women who were associated with more militant miners formed the majority of those who went picketing, more than those who worked in the kitchens.

With these figures, it seems the majority of women involved did so because of family relations and that their activity depended on the militancy of their men folk. However, even the standard ‘miners’ wives’ would have had differing levels of involvement in the strike. For example, even at a basic level a woman who purely organised the home and funds to keep the family running could be classed as assisting the strike. Although many women would not have seen this as being actively involved, without this sort of work, many miners would not have been able to stay on strike for so long and would have returned to work. Others took this further by becoming involved in community support such as support groups and food centres. These new strike roles then often took leading women activists outside their village communities and they attended demonstrations as well as picketing, and becoming more involved in the politics of the strike.

Ali describes this by explaining that women involved in the 1984-85 miners’ strike were active on three different levels. Firstly, there was the practical domestic level where women worked to ensure that family life was kept normal. This therefore

allowed the men to continue their strike-work such as attending meetings and picketing throughout the country. Importantly Ali claims that at this level, women confined themselves to their traditional role and worked *behind* their men by providing support; they were not interested in the politics of the strike. At the second level, women placed themselves *alongside* their men, where both men and women worked together in the same activities such as picketing and attending rallies and demonstrations. The women at this level believed they had an equal part in the strike effort. Lastly, the third level brought women *ahead* of the men. Ali comments that here, women committed themselves to activities that were normally only open to men who were senior members of the union. Many women received invitations to travel abroad to make contacts and continue fundraising activities.48

Shaw believes that these differing levels were actually formed as women became more involved in the strike. For example, women began in the support groups, where their main priority was the distribution of food. However, as the strike continued, the women realised that they had to become involved in other areas such as fundraising travelling to gain support from elsewhere to keep up the food supplies within their communities. They then progressed onto more political activities such as picketing and public speaking. Of course, this was not a natural progression for all women, and some were content to continue with food supplies and not go picketing nor attend demonstrations. Shaw also says that women’s involvement in the more militant activities such as picketing was often undertaken under opposition from the miners who regarded it as an unfit activity for women. She believes that this, ‘movement onto the “front line” of the struggle’ occurred firstly in Nottinghamshire, probably due to the fact that this was the area with the least amount of striking miners

and therefore had the biggest number of people to win over to the cause. Here, women protestors often managed to get through where their male counterparts had failed.49

A clearer idea of these levels can be gained by examining some of the individual women who became involved in strike activities and their lives. Mavis Watson from the Normanton and Altofts Miners Support Group in Yorkshire was a typical example of a miner’s wife. She explains that she was ‘very family’ orientated before the strike began. Her husband had been on strike in both 1972 and 1974 but she herself had not become involved. However, she explains,

but this time as the weeks went by and Maggie made her own rules as she went along, we knew this was going to be a long and bitter fight and I think us women got mad. I know I did! … I was not a political person or anything like that, I just wanted to help.50

Mavis would be an excellent example of a woman fitting into the first level of involvement in the strike. A Welsh example can be seen in Avril Carlyon of Aberdare, a miner’s wife who became involved in support after finding their community was receiving insufficient help.51

A woman described only as ‘Kath’ from Coventry would be a classic case of someone from the second level of involvement in the strike. She had become involved in working at her local kitchen organised by the women’s support group. Then, during the summer of 1984 she attended a meeting the AUEW had arranged to open their week of the action for the miners, and she was asked to speak. She then went on to speak at other meetings and became more heavily involved in the strike.52 Again, a Welsh example of this would be Margaret Donovan from Ynyswen who was reluctant

51 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
52 Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, Mummy ... What did you do in the Strike? (Coventry:
to join her local support group at first but eventually went on to become chairperson.\textsuperscript{53}

An archetypal example of a woman who became politicised by the strike and was brought \textit{ahead} of the men into the third level of involvement would be Fran Appleyard, then aged eighteen, from Sharlston near Wakefield. Her father and grandfather were both miners and she had been involved in the CND for twelve months previous to the strike. When the strike began she was asked to address a meeting of her local support group after having taken part in a twenty-mile youth CND march as the original speaker had failed to arrive. After this she became more involved in strike activities, and was invited to tour Belgium on an official NUM fundraising trip with two other delegates. On her return she began travelling the country addressing meetings and rallies.\textsuperscript{54} A Welsh example would be Ann Jones from Hirwaun who had strong activist roots and went on to chair the South Wales Women’s Support Group and travel Europe collecting funds.\textsuperscript{55}

In all cases, most types of women’s involvement in the strike have been viewed by historians as something innovative that had not been seen previously. John Murphy explains the main reason behind this when he describes the gender divisions that were evident within most mining communities. He points out that most mining areas offered few job opportunities or careers for women.\textsuperscript{56} These were normally based around the pit and therefore would be classed as ‘men’s work’. Women could hold jobs at the colliery, such as in the canteen, or at the local school or shops, but these were usually part-time as childcare facilities were rare. Due to this fact women, ‘were

\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Margaret Donovan, Ynyswen, 28 January 1985. Interviewed by Ursula Masson (Transcript), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.


\textsuperscript{56} John Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle: A Sociological Study of a Mining Village in the 1980s’
largely separated from the concerns of public life and confined to more stereotyped
gender roles in the privatised domestic arena’, and this ‘relegated coalfield women to
a position of a subordinate gender group in the local social system.’ With this basis
in mind then, it is easy to see why many would see the women’s involvement in the
strike as something extraordinary.

If it is believed that all women stayed at home and took care of the family with
little apparent interest in wider affairs (although it has already been shown with the
small sample of women that this was not the case before the strike began) then
anything that made them move to the public sphere would be a great transformation.
Shaw believes that women’s involvement in the strike helped them to cross the
political divide that had enabled men to be dominant in working-class culture. The
women had challenged this, and by taking part in the struggle alongside men, they had
advanced their own interests. Of course the dominance of men within coalfields
society is evident within South Wales communities. However, many women
themselves argue (especially those who took part in South Wales support groups), that
they became involved to protect their communities and had no desire to challenge the
status quo. Therefore, they would not necessarily have been sympathetic to feminism.
They were not trying to further their own goals, they were trying to stop change.
Many would not have labelled themselves ‘feminists’ as they believed this interfered
with their family life and communities and these were what they were struggling to
keep. Shaw agrees when she says,

\[\text{the women in mining communities did not enter the struggle out of feminist ideals, by which we might mean they did not start from an analysis of women’s oppression in society or their own opposition within mining communities and seize the chance to advance their own interests}\]

\(57\) Ibid. pp. 46-7.

\(58\) Shaw, \textit{Women in Protest and Beyond}, p. 77.
Women still highly valued their central role as homemakers and mothers, and although they admired women such as those from Greenham Common, that fight did not concern mining women as it almost encouraged Greenham women to leave their families and children for extended periods. This was something they could not themselves contemplate. This was the same for women involved in miners’ support groups in both South Wales and more widely throughout other British coalfields. However, women did begin to see that they had some things in common with other women’s groups as they continued to support the strike. Shaw states that some of the women involved believed that they had developed an almost separate women’s movement independent of middle-class feminists, an almost working-class movement.

We will now move on to look at the organisation of the support groups and how they were run, what the support groups achieved, for example food parcels or kitchens, then on to look at women’s other activities such as picketing and attending rallies and demonstrations. Murphy continues his idea of the division of gender roles by stating that at the beginning of the strike, the new institutions that were set up by women still only allowed them to fulfill their traditional role of domestic work, yet moved it into the public sphere. However, the women’s involvement in these activities then led them on to other work during the strike. He comments, ‘women, often accustomed to seeing themselves as atomised individuals (wives, mothers, or ‘housewives’) were able through participation in collective activity, to create a new

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59 Ibid. p. 77.
60 Ibid. p. 93.
61 Ibid. pp. 77-79.
62 Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, pp. 240-41.
social identity’. This new social identity was one in which women could organise their action groups and become involved in all aspects of the strike.

The first way in which women could become publicly involved in strike activities would be via the food kitchens. Often, these were set up independently from the local NUM lodge. As the following examples will show, there was also no formal structure that the groups had to adopt, so every group had a different way of working. The numbers of people involved in the miners’ support groups (as they were not necessarily all-women groups) varied from as few as six to as many as over a hundred. Most groups ranged from around ten to fifty with the average number of members being thirty. Obviously these numbers changed throughout the length of the strike, for example, many joined until their enthusiasm waned as they realised the extent of the work involved. Others joined half-way through the dispute. However, it has been stated that mostly the numbers of these groups remained fairly constant due to the fact that once a working relationship had been established by the women, they were not keen to invite new people who might upset the way the group was organised. As an approximate idea of the scale of women’s work, Winterton suggests that, ‘more women were involved in kitchens than collecting and more collected than went picketing.’ It is easier therefore to describe the three levels discussed earlier more as a pyramid effect, for most women would be involved in the first level and more involved with the second than the third.

Unfortunately, there seems to have been little organisation from the NUM, at both local and national levels, to help those in need throughout the strike. It was

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63 Ibid. p. 365.
65 Ibid. p. 178.
66 Labour Research Department, *Solidarity with the Miners*, p. 17.
therefore the women’s groups who stepped in to fill the void. Often, the women did such good work that the local lodges relinquished the organisation of the provision of food wholly to the support groups. An example of this would be Brodsworth in Yorkshire.70 There are similar examples in South Wales, such as Maerdy.71 Winterton again states that, ‘for the most part, however, the women’s groups continued to operate autonomously and any contact with the Union was usually at national level rather than with the areas’.72 This is interesting, as in the South Wales area this was not the case. We will see later73 that the support groups here had strong contacts with the union and local lodge, ranging from the men controlling either the funds or purchase of food, or both, where women were only allowed to help prepare the food parcels (in some instances they were not even permitted to help with the distribution), to many cases where lodges told the women who needed parcels or even had lodge members working within the support group, making it a non-woman specific organisation.

However, the case seems to have been different in Yorkshire. Loretta Loach echoes Winterton while discussing two sisters who were members of the Bentley Women’s Action Group in Yorkshire. The sisters explain that the union gave the group fifty pounds to start up. However, the women were keen to return the money, saying it was more of a loan, and that way they would be self-supporting and have their own control.74 Loach even goes on to say that the group rivalled the union as the key organising vehicle within that community, and that there were many others the
Winterton gives a different example from Yorkshire when he states that the Yorkshire Area NUM gave each group £120 to help it become established but they were then expected to raise their own finance. This does not seem to have been a loan and is significantly more than the £50 mentioned earlier. Therefore this is a typical example of the differences between support groups. Perhaps some did receive less than others, or perhaps some did not realise they could claim this help and started alone. As there was no overseeing organisation, variations between groups were highly probable. Murphy provides a similar example when discussing the village of Armthorpe, and says that at the start, the women did use NUM branch funds, but then decided to raise their own funds rather than relying on the NUM. There are many similarities here with the support groups of South Wales. Fund raising activities will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group had a similar way of working. The women involved explain that they would much rather have attempted things themselves than have to work with another organisation such as the Labour Party or the NUM. They knew that they could have asked these organisations for help if needed, but they would rather have taken the initiative themselves. A woman from another group says, ‘We were self-sufficient. We never asked the union for anything. … The union haven’t given us a penny. In fact, we’ve given [to] the union. Thousands of pounds we’ve raised for our union.’ She explains that the union paid for everything they themselves needed such as the cost of maintaining picket lines, whereas the women’s group would look after the community side by feeding them.

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75 Ibid. p. 175.
76 Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 125.
77 Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, p. 217.
78 Watson, Head & Web, Striking Figures, p. 16.
79 Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 29.
They carried out all of their own fundraising.\textsuperscript{80} This was not necessarily the case in South Wales, where many of the groups were happy to work alongside their local lodge. A good example would be the support group at Beddau.\textsuperscript{81}

This segregation could cause friction between the support groups and local lodges. Winterton provides an example in Barnsley where the NUM were responsible for all the funds including those of the support groups. So, when the Barnsley Panel (local NUM) went on to ask the Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures to accept responsibility for financing their kitchen, the support group refused as they believed the Panel would still try to control it although it was self-sufficient. Also in contrast, support groups in North Yorkshire had to resist attempts by the union to take control of their funds. At one point, a women’s appeal in North Yorkshire raised £16,000 and area officials demanded the money be administered by the NUM. The women were even summoned before the North Yorkshire Panel but they refused to relinquish the money.\textsuperscript{82} Similar examples will be seen in the next chapter where local NUM officials tried to requisition food collected by the Maerdy Support Group in South Wales. They too refused.\textsuperscript{83}

Campbell also has evidence that the women’s support groups in Mansfield were separated from the union, ‘like many of the women’s groups, they’re located separately from the NUM so they can reach out beyond the union’s entrance.’\textsuperscript{84} She seems to adhere to the belief of gender divisions within the mining communities, stating that the organisation of the industrial section of the strike was done by the men, whereas the women were in charge of the organisation of daily life.\textsuperscript{85} The two

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. p. 29.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{82} Winterton & Winterton, \textit{Coal Crisis and Conflict}, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{83} Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
\textsuperscript{84} Campbell, ‘The Other Miners’ Strike’, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. p. 9.
were, therefore, completely separate entities. This is not suggested by the evidence from South Wales. Of course less than five months into the strike the women’s support groups did organise into the national ‘Women Against Pit Closure’ group. They received support from left-wing and student groups, from the Greater London Council and from gay and lesbian groups.86 Evidence shows that many of the women involved in the support groups were keen for there to be a structure and official organisation, rather than just using an ad hoc approach. This is shown in the setting up of the Women Against Pit Closure group. Chrys Salt and Jim Layzell state, ‘Women were really keen to get some structure going for Women Against Pit Closures, but it was tremendously difficult. … But in the end the women sort of called it together and there were representatives sent from each pit area.’87

The support groups would normally be very well organised, with the women arranging themselves into a committee who had regular formal meetings to discuss activities. The committees did not follow a strict pattern but there would usually be a chairperson, secretary and treasurer, then whatever other positions were needed. For example, the Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group had a chairman, treasurer, secretary, letter-writer, fundraiser, a liaison person and someone to order provisions. They also explained that everyone in their support group worked together, and everyone who helped had a say in what was happening and a vote. At their meetings, there would always be an agenda, and everyone would be given a chance to voice their opinion.88

Often, these groups were not necessarily ‘women’s groups’, instead they were ‘miners’ support groups’ which meant that often men were involved. There are

87 Salt & Layzell (eds.), *Here We Go!* p. 8.
88 Watson, Head & Web, *Striking Figures*, pp. 16-17.
several examples of these groups in South Wales in the next chapter. A typical example would be the Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group which consisted of nine women and two men, one of whom was the chairperson. In Coventry, the secretary Linda explained that whilst organising a holiday for strikers’ children, she was in charge of writing letters to clubs and companies requesting assistance, as well as running a register of the children of striking miners in the area.

However, this organisation did not always work according to plan. For example, another woman from the same support group at Coventry says that,

> we found that the women in the kitchen, the women collecting and others going out speaking at meetings did not seem to be fully aware of what each other was doing and this caused several arguments at the Sunday night meetings.

As with most organisations with large groups of people, there were confrontations and the groups did not always get along. This was not just the case within the support groups themselves though, often the groups clashed with the union or local men within their communities. For instance, the Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group had disagreements with their local union branch. The support group believed that the union were organising the men and picketing well, but they also felt that they themselves could do better at organising the food and clothing distribution. On one occasion, the support group heard that some clothes had been taken to the local community centre from Belgium. The centre was filled with union men and when the women asked if they could have the clothes to distribute throughout the community, they were refused and told they were being sent to the

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89 Ibid. p. 1.  
90 Ibid. p. 17.  
92 Ibid. p. 125.  
93 Ibid. p. 126.
collieries. The support group believed that the union men thought they were interfering and were not going to be told what to do by a ‘women’s group’.\textsuperscript{94} Therefore, significant fundraising was needed by all of these support groups to ensure their survival and assistance to the community. Callinicos and Simons state, ‘as the government’s determination to starve the miners’ into submission became obvious, the sheer size of the organisation needed to maintain the mining communities grew enormously. The women’s action groups rose to the task.’\textsuperscript{95} Just as the amounts of money raised by each support group differed (for example, Waveney Town in Suffolk would raise £25 weekly whereas £1,000 could be raised weekly in the Isle of Wight),\textsuperscript{96} so did the way the money was handled by the varying support groups. For instance, one support group comments that they tried to work a fortnight in hand, so there was always cash if needed in an emergency.\textsuperscript{97} It was important for the support groups to ensure that the money collected for the miners’ families was used for that purpose, therefore the money had to be kept separate from the NUM funds that could have been used for picketing and other activities.\textsuperscript{98} Winterton states, ‘none of the money went directly to the women’s groups, but was given to the branches to decide how to use … If the women had not got themselves organised there would have been no systematic help for families in terms of food and money.’\textsuperscript{99} However, many groups would receive money from the NUM if they registered with them as an official support group.\textsuperscript{100} As will be seen in South Wales, if groups did this they were then also expected to give a certain amount of their funds to the NUM and other support groups to be redistributed.

\textsuperscript{94} Watson, Head & Web, \textit{Striking Figures}, p. 23.  
\textsuperscript{95} Callinicos & Simons, \textit{The Great Strike}, p. 181.  
\textsuperscript{96} Labour Research Department, \textit{Solidarity with the Miners}, p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{97} Salt & Layzell (eds.), \textit{Here We Go!} p. 26.  
\textsuperscript{98} Watson, Head & Web, \textit{Striking Figures}, p. 11.  
\textsuperscript{99} Winterton & Winterton, \textit{Coal Crisis and Conflict}, p. 125.
This fundraising and support was often gathered from the local community, but sometimes the groups had to go further afield to secure funds. This could mean twinning themselves with another town or city which would raise funds in their location and then send them directly to the support group.\textsuperscript{101} For example, Oxford raised both funds and goods for mining communities, and over the course of nine months the area had raised over £13,000, most of which came from street collections.\textsuperscript{102} On the other hand, organisations such as workplaces could ‘adopt’ a pit community and collect money to send to them in a similar way. Massey and Wainwright mention that the most notably supportive people in these circumstances would be marginalised and oppressed groups such as blacks, lesbian and gays. For example, by December 1984, £3,000 had been raised at collections at lesbian and gay clubs in London alone.\textsuperscript{103} Also, ambassadors could travel throughout Europe and receive funds and donations of food and clothing. This could then be advanced into sending strikers’ children on holidays to countries such as Ireland, Holland, Italy and Russia, as well as receiving guests from abroad,

We had Belgians for dinner on a Sunday once. A couple of months later, parcels were sent to Birmingham … food parcels all the way from Belgium because we had given them a dinner on a Sunday. … They’ve been fantastic out in Holland. They sent £1,200 every month.\textsuperscript{104}

Also,

I took a trip to Ireland last year, and it was out of this world. Dublin we went to. It was fantastic. … Dublin Council invited us. … These kids had never been on boats. … And just to see their faces. …We took two of our children - you had to be six to go - so my two boys went. And six other

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. p. 6.
\textsuperscript{102} Alan Thornett, ‘Shaking the Tins for the Miners: The Street Collections’ in in Alan Thornett (ed.) \textit{The Miners’ Strike in Oxford}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{103} Massey & Wainwright, ‘Beyond the Coalfields’, pp. 152-3.
\textsuperscript{104} Salt & Layzell (eds.), \textit{Here We Go!} p. 10.
children. We took eight out to Holland with us. They flew us out first class as well.105

Beryl Fury from Abergavenny is an excellent example of an ambassador who travelled Europe raising funds and organising holidays for children.106 The support groups also arranged trips for strikers’ children closer to home. For example, the Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group raised money to send 350 children to Southport for the day, each child was given a packed lunch and £3 spending money for the day.107 Similar examples can be seen in South Wales. For example, Dianne Land from Bedlinog explains that her support group raised money to send strikers children to Ireland for a short break.108

Support groups found ingenious ways of raising the desperately needed funds. The Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group gave one example where they entered a float at their local fête and gala. Anybody that entered would receive £25 so the group decorated their float with the title ‘Mining Through The Ages’ and won first prize. Altogether, they collected £200 throughout the day, with donations being given from those present.109 Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter mention that a number of miners’ wives delivered fundraising speeches in London throughout the strike.110 However, there were many other ways of raising funds. For example, local shops could donate food, or representatives could collect foodstuffs door-to-door and a hamper could be made to sell in a raffle. One group comments that this alone could raise approximately £500 a month. There are comparable examples in South Wales of Welsh women travelling to London to deliver speeches, as well as using similar fundraising ideas.

105 Ibid. p. 59.
107 Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, Mummy … What did you do in the Strike? p. 61. Also see p. 71 for description of the community taking the children on a trip to Czechoslovakia.
109 Watson, Head & Web, Striking Figures, p. 12.
Other ways of raising funds locally could include jumble sales, coffee mornings, cake stalls, bingo, sponsored events, writing and asking local companies for contributions, parties as well as evening events where acts would volunteer their services. Many groups often made badges, postcards, cards and t-shirts which they would sell to raise funds. Women also took part in meetings and rallies which also provided a source of income for the support groups. These could be large, attracting up to 1,000 people, or small, where the women would speak.\(^\text{111}\)

However the most well-used source would normally have been street collections of both money and goods.\(^\text{112}\) In many instances, pensioners were the largest group of people who contributed. This was not always a straight-forward activity though, as permission would normally have to be granted by the local council or police, and the collections could normally only take place at a specific location on a specific day. Local supermarkets were often helpful and allowed supporters to collect on their premises. This activity particularly could cause conflict within support groups, as some members were unwilling to either stand at collection points or help with door-to-door events. This caused ill feeling with those who did.\(^\text{113}\) For example, one woman comments, ‘While sitting in the Co-op we never approached anyone, we just sat there so people could put money in the tin or put food in the basket. We needed more help from other miners’ wives, but we didn’t get it. They wouldn’t sit in the Co-op because they said it was begging - but they’d let us do it for them!’\(^\text{114}\)

Murphy suggests that in the first instance, women volunteered as individuals to make snacks for pickets, using union funds. They then went on from this to organise themselves at local level in order to raise funds to supply meals or parcels to all.

\(^{111}\) Labour Research Department, *Solidarity with the Miners*, p. 18.
\(^{112}\) Salt & Layzell (eds.), *Here We Go!* pp. 26-7.
\(^{113}\) Watson, Head & Web, *Striking Figures*, pp. 3-4.
The groups did not only set up kitchens and supply food parcels, they also arranged many different activities to help the community. Some examples would be arranging stores and distribution of shoes, clothing and household items for those in need. Hywel Francis commented that the women of South Wales were recognised for setting up ‘an alternative welfare system’. However, even this could cause friction within the support groups and the community. One woman from a support group explains that they were often given clothes from European countries to use at jumble sale to raise funds. However, the group members had first pick of the goods, then what was left went on to the strikers and those in need who could take the goods. Only what was left would then be sold on to raise cash. As will be seen later, this could often cause resentment within communities in the South Wales Area. Those in need might have thought that the support group workers were ‘creaming off’ the better goods, even going so far as saying they were only involved as it would benefit themselves. This must have caused considerable discontent.

In many instances, food parcels were preferred to kitchens as they were easier to organise. This was definitely the case in South Wales. Fewer people were needed, as well as the need for specialist facilities. Many people in the community were also too proud to attend a kitchen and preferred the idea of collecting a parcel. Also, the location of the kitchen or food centre within the community could also cause problems. Similar issues were encountered in South Wales. For instance, if the kitchen was located an area where not all who needed to use it could attend (because of transport or financial difficulties), they this could often cause friction between

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114 Ibid. p. 4.
115 Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, p. 241.
117 Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 60.
118 For example see, Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, Mummy ... What did you do in the Strike?
those who were not using the facilities and those who were. A woman from the
Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group echoes this when she says, ‘we had people
complaining because they lived in outlying areas and could not afford the bus fare to
get to the kitchen.’\(^{119}\) There was an example at the Castleford area in Yorkshire where
kitchens were so close together that people had a choice of which to attend. On the
other hand, Castleford also had some areas were people did not live within close
proximity to a kitchen at all. Often kitchens were run purely by the support groups,
but sometimes the local Union would make some provisions. For example, they did
this at Barnsley Civic Hall and produced between 500 and 600 meals a day, five days
a week. In other communities, the support group and Union would co-operate to
provide food. There were massive variations which would often cause resentment.\(^{120}\)

To give an approximate estimate of the numbers of women involved in
kitchens, Winterton comments that in the Yorkshire Area strike kitchens involved
only two per cent of the region’s coalfield women. Also, as the support groups
themselves varied, so did the meals supplied by them. In some, just a snack would be
provided, whereas another might produce a full meal. The number of meals provided,
and how often, was also decided by the numbers in the support group and the funds
raised, as well as the numbers requiring assistance. For instance, the kitchen at
Kellingly produced approximately 600 meals per day, whereas Manton produced 70
to 100. Winterton also states that the majority of kitchens in the Yorkshire Area were
open on average for three days a week.\(^{121}\) There were fifty women altogether in the
Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures group who manages to organise sixteen
kitchens throughout the area, each providing 300 meals. Frickley Ladies Action
Group (which had sixteen women and one man) provided around 3,500 meals a week

\(^{119}\) Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, Mummy ... What did you do in the Strike? p. 126.
\(^{120}\) Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, pp. 123-4.
whereas the Ackworth kitchen provided 150 meals, four days a week. Keresley Food Centre in Bedworth only opened for two hours daily, Monday to Friday, to feed the children of the community which numbered around ninety. To compare, the support groups at Maerdy in South Wales provided over 500 food parcels every week, and similarly at Beddau, sixteen members of the support group met regularly to provide over 200 parcels a week.

Loach also comments that in many communities, initially, it was only men who attended kitchens as it was thought to be purely for them and not for families. Eventually though, the men brought their wives and families with them. At Armthorpe though, the chief purpose of setting up the kitchen was to feed the striking miners who were single men. Only as the work of the support group continued did this go on to include providing food parcels for the miners’ families. Importantly, many children were given free meals at school which helped with the family budget. Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group explain that they both fed their community at a kitchen and supplied parcels. At the onset, it was only the women who helped, but then as the strike continued, some of the men who could not attend the picket lines went to help at the food centre. There are similar examples in South Wales, where it seems that this was more the norm, in that the majority of support groups were attended by both men and women, rather than being specifically women-only. At the beginning of the strike the centre at Coventry fed approximately seventy or eighty, then rose to up to 400. The kitchen had a set menu for each day of the

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121 Ibid. p. 123.
123 South Wales Echo, 17 May 1984.
124 Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
125 Loach, ‘We’ll Be Here Right to the End … And After’, p. 173.
126 Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, pp. 217-8.
Salt and Layzell also echo the fact that men helped the women’s support groups at the food centres. They comment that the women raised and organised the financial side, but the men brought the food and helped make the parcels.

With these variations in mind then, it is easy to see that food parcels were the option favoured by many groups; which was certainly the case in South Wales, as kitchens were rare. However, this was not always an easy option, and even with this, many felt aggrieved by the distribution. Some groups found it difficult to establish exactly which members of the community needed a parcel. The distribution could have been organised more efficiently if the support groups had more contact with their local lodge. The lodge could then supply the group with the names of who required parcels. This was the case in many of the South Wales groups (for example Beddau). The Normanton and Altofts Miners’ Support Group explain that they had difficulties in establishing who was eligible for a food parcel,

At that first meeting some people only wanted to give food to single miners and some only wanted to give it to pickets or households where the wife wasn’t working. Being naïve we thought we could knock on every door in Normanton to tell people about the food parcels and find out if they needed one. … We soon found out our plan wouldn’t work - it wasn’t up to us to decide who was suffering hardship. We said everyone on strike was suffering some hardship so they could have a parcel.

The group went on to provide over 200 parcels a week, at a cost of around £3 each. They did this for every miner who lived in Normanton, whatever the location of the colliery they worked at. This too caused much aggravation, as it meant that some men could collect one food parcel from the pit they worked at, and another from their community support group. Dissatisfaction was compounded for the people working in

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128 Ibid. p. 130.
129 Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 30.
130 Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 125.
131 Watson, Head & Web, Striking Figures, p. 1.
the support group when they found out that many of those receiving parcels believed themselves to be ‘entitled’ to it, in that many believed it was being supplied by the NUM. This therefore completely disregarded the hard work of the group. After finding that some people were being dishonest just to claim a parcel, the group decided on a card system as identification for the men to show when they collected their parcels.132 This is reminiscent of the ‘show cards’ of an earlier period. There is no evidence of this sort of system in the support groups studied at South Wales. However, as with all other aspects of support group work, there are contradicting aspects of the way food parcels were organised. Campbell suggests that the parcels were only put together for single men, as they had no income whilst on strike.133 However, this was not the case in all communities. As in South Wales, there was no uniformity between groups as there were no guidelines which the support groups could follow. Instead, they provided the best support with what they could. However, these differences could cause tension in parts of the South Wales coalfields where many miners and families felt they were not getting enough support from their local support group and were jealous of others close by.134

Some branches used the distribution of food parcels as a way to get men to the branch and encourage support and involvement and therefore boost morale. For example, at Edlington in Yorkshire, parcels were only distributed at branch meetings, whereas at Sharlston in Yorkshire, miners had to collect them directly from branch officials at the local club. Again though, the content of these food parcels could vary enormously.135 We have already seen that other areas collected funds to then be distributed to striking areas for support groups to use to purchase food. However,

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132 Ibid. p. 3-9.
133 Campbell, ‘The Other Miners’ Strike’, p. 9.
134 See chapter 4.
135 Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 124.
several areas sent food to these areas rather than funds. This was due to the fact that many people preferred to donate food as they knew it would be used by the strikers’ families, whereas money donations could have been used by the NUM for picketing.

Christmas of 1984 also took much organisation and planning by the support groups in general. Naturally, those on strike were worried how they would cope with Christmas, especially those with children. Therefore, the support groups took it upon themselves to ease their burden, and they did this in a variety of ways. Some support groups asked those who were collecting funds and food to send toys instead. They also had a designated ‘Christmas Fund’ which people could contribute to. Many support groups provided a special Christmas food parcel which included either a chicken or a turkey and vegetables. They also had a Christmas Party for the children where they were given their toys, as well as receiving a visit from Father Christmas. One group even managed to collect enough funds to give every striking miner a £15 food voucher for the Christmas period as the food centre would be closed.136 Other groups actually provided a Christmas dinner at the food centre.137

However, the women of the support groups were not purely involved in raising funds and working in food centres. They did go on picket lines, attended rallies and demonstrations, and as has already been briefly mentioned, travelled abroad as ambassadors for the strike effort. In some instances, women attended picket lines and rallies before joining a support group, it was their way of beginning their involvement in the strike,

I think we took everybody by surprise when the women did stand up and say “We’re backing our men up. We’re going on these Rallies”. Because before we even started our Action Group, four of us went to Coventry on a thirty mile Rally and there were no Action Groups or anything then. We

136 Salt & Layzell (eds.), *Here We Go!* pp. 68-70.
walked it and that’s when we decided to start our Action Group. ¹³⁸

Not only did women attend these meetings and rallies though, very often they spoke at them. Women from support groups addressed meetings in their own areas as well as in London and even abroad. Many were keen to stress that they had no experience in this area and had to ‘learn the hard way’ but that it was a great honour to be asked to speak. One woman stated that the more she got involved, the more she wanted to. If a woman was asked to speak, her expenses were paid and she would earn £3.¹³⁹ As the strike continued, public speaking became another way women raised funds for their support groups. Eventually, it became obligatory for a woman from WAPC to be asked to speak at any rally or demonstration alongside NUM members.¹⁴⁰

For many women it was the first time they had travelled outside their own communities. This would have been a major life change for most of these women, for example, some had never even travelled abroad before, let alone travelling on their own to a country they had never been to, to meet people who did not speak their language.¹⁴¹ A good example of this will be seen in the next chapter by Beryl Fury from Abergavenny who travelled alone throughout Europe raising funds.¹⁴² One woman commented on a trip to Germany, ‘There I was sat at the same table with three women from the Soviet Union. And one of them as quite a high ranking official in the Trade Union. The only time I’d been abroad before was on day trips with my husband to France.’¹⁴³

However, not all the women involved in the support groups took part in these

¹³⁸ Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 7.
¹³⁹ Ibid. pp. 14-16.
¹⁴¹ Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! pp. 53-5.
types of activities. Many stayed closer to home and their primary focus would have been to support their local community. This could be due to several reasons: the women could have young children who needed looking after, they could be employed outside the home, the simply may not want to become involved in this way, or in some instances family circumstances would not let them leave. That is, that some husbands and miners of the community were unwilling for the women to become active. Sian James from Swansea tried to be actively involved in her local support group and even took part in an occupation of Cynheidre colliery. However, she had to leave early when her husband demanded she return home. Another woman from outside the South Wales area states,

My husband did let me go on marches and things like that. … It were great. Having a lot of kids I wouldn’t have dreamt of going away for a weekend before. But being as it was something he was involved with, it were all right.

This suggests that the fact that her husband supported her in this way was an exception to the norm, and had he not, then she would not have been able to attend such events. Seddon discusses the conflicts that often occurred between both sexes within mining communities as women became more active. She says that often the women themselves did not question their involvement, yet there were still arguments over which activities women should take part in, and how to handle their relations with the men folk, ‘sometimes, these arguments led to highly problematic strategies, but that was only to be expected, for they were challenging communities that were very traditional in how they saw the role of women.’

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143 Salt & Layzell (eds.), *Here We Go!* p. 55.
144 *Sian James (& Margaret Donovan)* (AUD/503), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
145 Salt & Layzell (eds.), *Here We Go!* p. 34.
involvement in strike support activities.

In many instances, women faced the same prejudice when trying to attend a picket line. One woman commented, ‘that was one thing that my husband was dead against - me going on picket lines. I could do meetings and demonstrations, but he didn’t want me on the picket line.’\(^{147}\) However, many women did still attend, and those who did were keen to stress that they believed themselves to be more successful than the men as they could often get through police roadblocks where miners were stopped and turned back.\(^{148}\) They also had a good success rate at turning the strike breakers back. On many occasions the women organised their own picketing activities that were independent from the NUM.\(^{149}\) However, much of the NUM were unhappy about the women attending picket lines, and although the Union had a massive input into the organisation of the men’s picketing, they refused to do the same with the women. Some NUM local branches even went so far as to refuse legal cover to women if they were arrested whilst picketing.\(^{150}\) This was not the case everywhere though, Campbell was keen to state that the men in Kent were very proud of their women’s involvement.\(^{151}\)

The women not only picketed outside their local and surrounding pits, they held special pickets outside strike breakers’ houses, and gathered to watch them come out of the colliery once the ‘working day’ was over. Many women state that they had once believed that the police would treat them differently to the other pickets as they were women. However, many found that this was not the case: ‘the police didn’t care that we were women, they treated us just the same as men. The violence that we saw -

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\(^{147}\) Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 48.
\(^{148}\) Ibid. p. 48.
\(^{149}\) Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, pp. 224-5.
\(^{150}\) Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 126.
\(^{151}\) Campbell, ‘The Other Miners’ Strike’, p. 8.
they hit us, they knocked us to the ground, they called us old slags." When the men realised that women were an important part of the strike, they then became more supportive, and as they were not working, they could help more at home. This allowed the women to take on more responsibilities outside the home. However, Gier-Viskoatoff and Porter mention that,

the miners’ wives who engaged in speech-making, fundraising, and other types of institutionalised forms of protest and political activism were the exception, … The vast majority of women participated in an indirect way, facilitating their husbands’ political activities by their work in the home. 

As an approximate idea of numbers, Winterton states that rallies involved around 3.5 per cent of coalfield women in Yorkshire.

Eventually the women’s support grew to such a degree that 11 August 1984, there was a demonstration and rally in London specifically organised for miners’ wives. Thousands of women from all over the country, including South Wales, attended. There are other examples of rallies, such as that at Hyde Park which included a march through Trafalgar Square and speeches by Arthur Scargill. Again, thousands (including Welsh men and women) attended from all over the country. There were also marches and rallies organised as a family event rather than being specifically for women, such as that at Birmingham on 7 July 1984. On a smaller scale though, women attended and even performed at meetings within their own communities. The Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, for example, volunteered to perform at their local TUC Week of Action, singing the songs they

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155 Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 127.
156 Watson, Head & Web, Striking Figures, p. 19.
normally sang on the bus on their way to meetings, rallies and demonstrations. They also performed a sketch as well as reciting poems. Arthur Scargill also visited Bedworth to speak at a meeting, and some of the women from Coventry had the opportunity to speak on the same platform and were invited to meet him later. The WAPC members also went on to take part in other campaigns such as Greenham Common Peace Camp, they also organised national rallies to promote International Women’s Day 8 March 1985. Of course, many women from South Wales had been involved with the Greenham Common Peace Camp even before their involvement in the strike. All of these activities, such as speaking and picketing grew from a genuine need to stop the return to work and raise funds for strikers and their families. Allen states that all activities were organised at a local community level, which were then extended to make national links.

All of these different activities could have caused conflict between the lodge and support group, as well as within the support groups themselves. There has already been one example of the woman who was rightly annoyed that certain members of her support group would only do specific jobs. This must have caused internal tensions. Winterton also gives an example where a Yorkshire support group did not want to include new members, ‘They just wanted to do it themselves. I felt that I wanted to help but could find no real way of doing this. Just a small clique controlled the support. They should have had more meetings and let more women come along and get involved.’ This must have caused conflict within the local community. Conflict was also seen between the NUM and support group. In many instances, women

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158 Ibid. p. 12.
159 See pp. 16-21 for examples.
161 Ibid. pp. 81-2.
163 Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 122.
activists whose husbands were branch officials were shunned by the group as they were thought to only be stating their husband’s, and therefore the Union’s, beliefs. It was this type of conflict that caused the Barnsley WAPC to split in November 1984.\(^\text{164}\) Of course, there was also conflict within support groups in South Wales, examples of which will be seen in the next chapter.

The 1984-85 strike, is often viewed through a rose-tinted lens that sees perfect harmony and collective support. However, this was not necessarily the case. Campbell states that official David McDevitt from the Barnsley NUM believed picketing to be the most important activity during the strike and, ‘All these food kitchens are watering down the strike. Women keep ringing me up and asking where’s the money gone - but we are the NUM and we don’t have to account to any women’s group’.\(^\text{165}\) This must have been demoralising to the women’s group trying to help their community, and it is easy to see why comments like this would have caused conflict. In many instances, the men were not keen to even let the women of the support groups attend ‘their’ meetings which organised the strike activities.\(^\text{166}\)

Winterton stated in 1989 that the majority of the women’s support groups intend to continue to meet after the strike had ended.\(^\text{167}\) For instance, Loach quotes one woman’s opinion about her activities, ‘We really want to stick together and we’ve said that after the strike we can’t let it go, and when we meet we always say don’t forget it’s our fight and we’ll be here right to the end and after it. We no longer stand behind the men, we stand with them.’\(^\text{168}\) However, despite their good intentions, life often got in the way of the meetings when women had to return to looking after their families and households. In some instances, the women themselves were keen to

\(^{164}\) Ibid. p. 127.
\(^{165}\) Campbell, ‘The Other Miners’ Strike’, p. 9.
\(^{167}\) Winterton & Winterton, Coal Crisis and Conflict, p. 238.
return to normality. \(^{169}\) Campbell confirms this when she states that although women organised themselves on a tremendous scale, during the strike they did so to support their men and their communities, and they therefore expected to revert to ‘normal’ afterwards, ‘inspired as they are by their own efforts and ingenuity, many still feel that politics is no place for them.’ \(^{170}\) It seems that as there was no focus for the support groups, many faded away as some women felt there was not really a cause left to fight for. Murphy comments, ‘The activity which had given them such a powerful collective identity during the strike had been entirely dependent on the strike itself. The end of the dispute, involving an almost total curtailment of collective action, threatened to reintroduce not only the re-segregation of women and men, but the atomization of women into their individual family units,’ although many support groups did continue to meet after the strike and went on to support the sacked miners and other worthwhile causes. \(^{171}\)

However, this does not necessarily mean that women were not completely unchanged by the strike. As the numbers of groups eventually declined, some women went on to join other organisations (both local and political), or simply found employment when they had not worked before, or returned to education. Later we will see the Welsh example of Sian James, a housewife and mother who returned to full-time education after her involvement with her local support group, obtained a degree and later went on to be a member of parliament. Murphy believes that there was a transformation in women’s political attitudes. Thirty of the thirty-three (that is ninety percent) women of Markham Main claimed that due to the strike, they were more

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\(^{168}\) Loach, ‘We’ll Be Here Right to the End ... And After’, p. 177.

\(^{169}\) Winterton & Winterton, *Coal Crisis and Conflict*, p. 238.

\(^{170}\) Campbell, ‘The Other Miners’ Strike’, p. 10.

\(^{171}\) Murphy, ‘Community and Struggle’, p. 375.
aware of wider social and political issues. He also says that he has evidence to suggest that the strike necessitated an increase in women’s participation in paid employment. As there was not a wide variety of jobs available to these women, it often encouraged them to return to education to gain qualifications. Some women even went on to take part in local government, as was the case of Sian James, as well as Violet John, who went on to take part in several other campaigns such as opposition to opencast mining.

Seddon echoes this when she states that some of the achievements of the women who took part in the strike was their growth in confidence, as well as their contact with other oppressed sections of communities such as lesbians and gays and black people. However, she believes their biggest success was that their communities were forced to grant the women the right to gather together in public places and to organise themselves. She says,

> it is a gain from which many others will flow. The fact that not all women have chosen to make use of that gain (for the women who were collectively active in supporting the miners’ strike have been a minority of the women in the coalfields), does not detract from that gain: that opportunity is now available for all women to use, like the vote.

Seddon makes an important point here, in that it is often believed that the majority of women from coalfield communities were involved in strike support, but this was not the case. In fact, the numbers of women involved were actually quite small. This can be said of South Wales specifically and of Britain more generally. Also, she hints at the fact that after the strike, many of the women returned to how they had lived before their involvement in the strike, in that if they had previously been active in the

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172 Ibid. pp. 409.
173 Ibid. p. 367.
community then they continued to do so. In many cases, the strike support of many women was actually a continuation of activity rather than a break from the norm. This can also be seen in South Wales women.

However, often the women themselves believed that their involvement in the strike had changed them: ‘we talked ourselves into doing things we never thought possible.’ An excerpt from an interview with the Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group suggests this,

Sue: Has the strike changed you as a person?
Margaret: Well yes, I’m more outgoing and more outspoken and more aware of what’s going on in the world.
Sue: Which you weren’t before?
Margaret: No. I was just an old fashioned housewife. My kids were my world and that was it.
Sue: So it has brought you out then, you’re doing things that you thought you’d never do?
Margaret: I’ve always been aware of the way the miners have been treated because I’m a miner’s daughter … But I realise now what’s going on with the other kinds of people besides miners.

However, this ‘change’ could be something such as facilitating friendships with the people within their communities that they did not previously know. Although this may sound trivial, it was significant to the women involved. Salt and Layzell give another example where a woman explains that it was a major step forward for the NUM to even think of allowing women to become involved in such a typically male arena. She also goes on to explain about ‘The Smoke Room’ at the local Club, which had always been men-only. But because of women’s involvement in the strike, they were now permanently allowed in. Small changes such as this must have been evident in every community, even if they were not documented. However, on the

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177 Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group, Mummy ... What did you do in the Strike? p. 73.
178 Ibid. p. 131.
179 Salt & Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! p. 78.
other hand, similar examples could be given to the contrary, in that many of these changes did occur but in some instances reverted back to the ‘norm’ after the strike had ended. Shaw’s examples of support groups in County Durham also show that women were not necessarily changed by their involvement in the strike. She says it is a common theme that women expressed the feeling that they would never be the same after the strike had ended, however few women actually experienced major life changes because of their involvement. This was mainly due to the fact that the women became involved to preserve their communities rather than to fight any oppressors of their female status.180 There are cases of women in South Wales who describe their involvement and friendships made during the strike as an extremely pleasant time, but then go on to show their disappointment afterwards that the same people could ignore them in the street and reject any friendships once they no longer needed assistance.

It was due to the fact that the women’s participation in the strike was on a scale never seen before that many writers, such as Loach, believe that things had changed so dramatically in the coalfields that there was no chance of a return to how things were before. Women did not want to lose their close bond with one another within their support groups or sense of personal achievement, and wanted to continue the group and even go on to do other things such as join the Labour Party.181 Shaw states that,

from a socialist point of view the main significance of women’s actions in the strike was that they appeared to have crossed the political divide, moving from the private domestic world into the public domain normally dominated by men. In so doing they demonstrated that they were not the conservative force which some had supposed and they undoubtedly helped to prolong the resistance of the men in the struggle.182

However, the majority of women within coalfield communities did not take part

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180 Shaw, *Women in Protest and Beyond*, p. 106.
181 Loach, ‘We’ll Be Here Right to the End ... And After’, p. 178.
in strike activities, or at least did not show active support. This could be due to several reasons: the first, as has already been mentioned, is that some groups had an almost exclusive membership, therefore leaving many reluctant to join. Secondly, some women could not have support at home and therefore could not neglect their domestic and family duties. Also, it could simply have been that the burden of running a home in such tight conditions was stressful enough, without adding anything more. Whatever the reason, it is important to state that the women who took part in support groups were a minority of the female population.\textsuperscript{183} Kate, one of the national organisers of WAPC talks about women’s involvement after the strike had ended,

\begin{quote}

everybody has always glamorised it, it was such a wonderful thing that there were millions of women active. There never were bloody millions in the first place! If there had been, we’d have won the strike. They just weren’t there. We had a silent army, like we have now, that we can fall back on, and like the London rally there were thousands of women there but those thousands of women weren’t all active.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

However, some women did believe that they had achieved something special, believing that women had proved the strength of what they could do when they joined together. Mal Finch wrote a rallying song for the women and reflected an almost ‘romantic’ spirit which the women at the centre of the action felt,

\begin{quote}
We are women, we are strong, we are fighting for our lives,
Side by side by our men who work the nation’s mines
United by the Struggle, united by the past
And it’s here we go, here we go,
For the women of the working class.\textsuperscript{185}
\end{quote}

Also, many of the women who did become involved in strike activities were actually active previous to the strike. This did not necessarily have to be in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] Shaw, \textit{Women in Protest and Beyond}, p. 76.
\item[184] Shaw, \textit{Women in Protest and Beyond}, p. 82.
\end{footnotes}
traditional political sense, but most were aware and had some involvement in community activities.\textsuperscript{186} This was also the case for those women who went on to other activities after the strike: ‘the pattern of women’s trajectories of activism is one of continuity’ writes Spence and Stephenson, ‘those that had been inactive in a traditional sense prior to the dispute were more likely to retreat from overt political action. Of those women, those that had been active within their community remained active there but with a raised political consciousness.’\textsuperscript{187} This also seems to be the case with the women of South Wales, in that a correlation can be found between their activism and experience before the strike and the activities they became involved in during the dispute.

This chapter has shown that to pinpoint ‘women’s involvement in the strike’ is no easy task. Every woman who became involved in support work had a different background and different reason for doing so. This determined their varying degrees of involvement and willingness to take part in certain activities. Similarly, the groups themselves had no formal structure and differed in the way they were run and the type of support given. Of course both similarities and differences can be seen here when compared to the women and support groups of South Wales. For instance, like support groups throughout Britain, those in South Wales varied enormously in size, structure and the type of support they provided. They were not necessarily women-only support groups, neither were the women necessarily all miners’ wives. Also, women tended to take part in activities they were comfortable with, and their activism often linked with the activism of their male counterparts. For example, a wife of a miner who was heavily involved in the strike was more likely to become involved in

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid. pp. 85-86.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid. 8.3.
‘non-traditional’ activities such as picketing and making speeches than if her husband were not militant himself. Often the men in mining communities were reluctant to let women take part in activities such as picketing. Also, fundraising activities were standard throughout the country. These features can all be found in South Wales.

However, there are also differences. For example, we have seen throughout this chapter that many support groups across Britain provided food kitchens as a way of support. This was rare in South Wales, with many groups preferring to provide food parcels rather than meals. Also, there have been examples where the NUM in parts of England completely relinquished their control and left the support groups to run themselves. Again in South Wales this was rarer; many support groups here were happier to work alongside the lodges and only the more militant groups broke away such as that at Maerdy. Many of the women in other support groups in Britain believed that the strike had a dramatic impact on their lives; however, it is difficult to determine whether this was actually the case as there is no way of understanding how different their lives would have been had they not been involved in the strike.
CHAPTER 4

Welsh Women During the Strike

_I’m proud to be a miner’s wife, I’m proud to be part of that community. I’m proud to be Welsh too … we don’t want it destroyed. We can’t give in without a fight. We have principles and values that are handed down from generation to generation. There is no prouder race than the Welsh miners and their wives and families._

It has been commonly asserted that the lives of the women involved in the 1984-85 miners’ strike were changed forever. For example, Mair Francis, referring to the women of the Neath, Swansea and Dulais Valleys, states that it was not only the political role of women that changed in those twelve months, it was also their public supportive role and their private and personal development. This was due to ‘their shared learning experience’. However, all women have different life experiences and varying family histories. The term ‘women’ cannot be generalised, on the assumption that they would all have had the same experience. This would apply even to women of the same community, involved in the same support group. Therefore, it would be more productive to examine some of these women individually to examine whether their lives were changed by their involvement in events.

The women who were involved with the support groups came from varying backgrounds. Some had been involved in community groups before the strike, some with political parties, others had had no involvement with anything similar prior to the

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support group. Many were miners’ wives, others were not, some even had no mining connection within their families, while others became involved because of their husbands’, fathers’ or sons’ involvement. Many worked full or part-time, whereas others were housewives. With only these general categories, it is easy to identify the vast differences between the women who were involved in the support group and their reasons for joining. Mair Francis makes a valid point when she states,

> it is important to note that most of the women in mining communities were not public and politically active during the dispute, even though, for some, the miners’ strike became a political watershed for their cultural and political activities.³

This suggests that women involved in the support groups were in the minority of the women within mining communities. However, a miner (whose location was not provided) discussing the involvement of women during the strike and speaking after the events disputed this. He claims it was unfair to say that only a small percentage of women were active during the strike; instead he believed that all women in mining families took an interest. This would be the case whether they were a member of a support group or not.⁴ He identified the case of his wife, who was a member of the Tredegar Support Group which disbanded shortly after the strike ended. He believed that she was still active after the strike as she still asked about his involvement at meetings and kept abreast of political issues. She did this although she was no longer a member of a support group and it was something she did not do before the strike.⁵

Therefore, although Welsh women’s involvement in the strike was not a brand new phenomenon, their roles were not confined to the more ‘traditional’ roles as they had been in previous disputes. This meant that women could become involved in areas

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³ Ibid. p. 4.
⁴ NUM Discussion Class (AUD/497), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea. [Date not provided, but probably conducted just after the strike had ended.]
such as picketing and public-speaking if they wanted to.

Added to the different type of women involved in the strike is the diversity of their actions. For example, as will be described more fully later, many women preferred to focus their activities on money and food collection, whereas others were happy to picket local collieries. Many, however, travelled widely, speaking at public meetings and on television broadcasts about their plight and raising awareness as well as funds. In some instances, the militancy of the support group allowed or inhibited the way that women could be involved. For example, two women from a support group in Beddau were keen to promote that they were a ‘support’ group and therefore preferred to focus on the collection and distribution of food rather that travelling and public speaking,\(^6\) whereas the women from Maerdy in the Rhondda could be seen as much more militant.\(^7\) Inevitably, the support groups were as different as the women involved in them; each had their own way of working, collecting, distributing and organising. Therefore an examination needs to be made of the women and the support groups individually to discover whether the women were actually changed by their involvement. However, although many different women became involved in different ways, those women who actually did became involved had one thing in common, they were all fighting for the survival of the mining communities of South Wales:

I’m proud to be a miner’s wife, I’m proud to be part of that community. I’m proud to be Welsh too; this is a wonderful place to bring up children, we don’t want it destroyed. We can’t give in without a fight. We have principles and values that are handed down from generation to generation. There is no prouder race than the Welsh miners and their wives and families.\(^8\)

For the purposes of a more thorough examination of the material, the support

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\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
\(^7\) Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
groups will be split into two geographical areas; the ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ areas of
the South Wales coalfield. The ‘Western’ sector will discuss the women and support
groups located in the Swansea, Neath and Dulais Valleys as well as Maesteg, as far as
the tip of the Rhondda Fawr. The ‘Eastern’ sector will examine those from the
Rhondda Fach across to the East, such as Maerdy, Aberdare, the Rhymney Valley and
perhaps unexpectedly Abergavenny. This admittedly artificial division has been
devised in order to divide the material into more accessible sections. These two areas
will then form the basis of a number of areas of examination into the women involved
and the support groups. These will include topics such as the different women
involved, how the group was organised, the collection of money, the distribution of
food and the other activities women became involved in, as well as their involvement
with other organisations.

Since the threat of pit closure was hardly a new phenomenon in South Wales,
and given that historians of the topic, such as Steffan Morgan,⁹ class this as the main
reason for women involving themselves in the support groups, that is that they wished
to prevent the pit closures in order to save their community, what made women wait
until the 1984-85 strike to become so involved? As has already been seen in previous
chapters, this was not necessarily the case. Women were involved in events including
previous strikes, yet the difference in 1984-85 was the sheer scale of their
involvement. At first, women’s groups in the majority of areas initially became
involved through organising food collection and distribution, and alongside this came
fundraising. Although underestimated by some as the type of assistance women
within mining communities had always given at times of trouble, this was vital work.
This was not only due to the fact that they were providing significant help, but also

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⁸ Miller, You Can’t Kill the Spirit, p. 110.
⁹ Steffan Morgan, ‘Stand by Your Man: Women, Support Groups, and the Miners’ Strike 1984-85 in
because food collection and fundraising were the first points of contact between those on strike and the rest of the community: ‘the most fundamental act of solidarity is to give food or money to a family on strike - and fund-raising events have become an important focal point for communities to show their support for the struggle.’ With this in mind let us first move on to examine the women of the ‘Western’ sector.

Women involved in the support groups of the ‘Western’ sector of the coalfield

Steffan Morgan suggests that women joined the support groups only as working-class wives and mothers and that they did so as a defence of their families’ future and the future of their communities. However, this is not necessarily the case. It seems likely that women who become involved in the support groups believed they were fighting for a just cause, and not only ‘working-class wives and mothers’ became involved.

Christine Powell from Seven Sisters would be a typical example of a woman who does not fit the criterion of ‘working-class wife’. Her husband was indeed a miner, but she was active in her own right. She had attended university and was a comprehensive school teacher at Sketty in Swansea. Before the strike began she had been active on the community council and was a Labour Party Member. She mentions that the strike did not affect her family as much as it could have done due to the fact that they had savings. She seems more a lower middle-class, politically active woman from the beginning. While conducting interviews during and after the strike, Hywel Francis contradicts Morgan when Francis states that in his experience, most women who were active during the strike had been active in previous campaigns. That

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10 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back (Cardiff: WCCPL and the NUM (South Wales Area), 1985), pp. 33-34.

11 Morgan, ‘Stand by Your Man’ p. 32.
is, they were already prominent members of the community and had been involved in the Labour Party, Trade Unions, CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and other similar organisations. This does seem to be the case with Christine Powell. However, she herself discusses her involvement in the strike as if her background were unusual,

my father always let me or encouraged me to go out and do what I wanted to do, … So I didn’t see any reason why I shouldn’t be out there doing what I was doing, why I shouldn’t go picketing, why I shouldn’t be in the support group or whatever. But I could see later on that there were a lot of women who weren’t as fortunate as me, that they were brought up in the more traditional style.

Christine could therefore be put into the category of ‘active before the strike’.

Violet John has a similar background history. Originally from Ireland, she grew up in a politically active family. Her mother was an activist in Ireland during the 1920s and spent some time in Mountjoy Prison, and her sisters had also been involved in disputes. She moved to Maesteg as a teenager, married an engineer and had several jobs at local factories. She became involved in the strike only due to feeling the need to help, rather than actually having any connection with the mining industry. She became extremely active, taking part in marches, rallies and demonstrations as well as setting up a soup kitchen at her local support group. After the strike she went on to take part in other campaigns, such as the opposition to opencast mining. Therefore she shows signs of political activity both before and after the strike that had no link to the cause itself.

In fact, different individuals seem to promote either one side of the argument or the other - either that the women involved in strike support were all related to

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12 Christine Powell (AUD/509), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
miners and had no previous experience, or on the contrary, that they gained the confidence to become involved by their previous experience in other activities. For example, one miner from the Gwent commented just after the strike that in his communities (Tredegar, Markham and Oakdale), the women had had no previous involvement with trade unions and such, ‘they were just ordinary housewives’.\(^{16}\) Another miner who did not state his community, believed that the women in his area were working women.\(^{17}\) It is more likely that individuals saw their area as the norm and therefore both sides would be correct. With this in mind, to understand whether Christine Powell and Violet John were in fact unique, requires an examination of some of the other women involved.

Donna Jones from Blaengwynfi was herself keen to promote the fact that her support group was just that, they were miners’ wives supporting their families. She mentions that many in her group could not go picketing as they could not leave their young children. Instead they helped in other ways such as organising food. Her support group became involved with the umbrella organisation, the South Wales Women’s Support Group, and it is interesting that she compares herself unfavourably to those involved with this organisation, she felt almost like a ‘little woman’ compared to them.\(^{18}\) She believed the women involved there were more militant, had been to university or were still students, as well as others being from different organisations such as CND and Greenpeace. She says they were more interested in picketing, demonstrations, and the political side of the argument, and due to this fact she felt her own work and that of her support group was ‘invisible’.\(^{19}\) This conflict is


\(^{16}\) *NUM Discussion Class* (AUD/497).

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) *NUM Discussion Class, Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones* (AUD/505), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
therefore noteworthy in that not even the women involved believed themselves to be from similar backgrounds, or even have similar agendas. Donna Jones could therefore be put into the category of ‘supporter; non-working miner’s wife’.

Other women from the Western section of the coalfield seem to have had at least some experience of community work before the strike. For example, Sian James from Morriston in Swansea had a socialist family background and had become interested in politics in 1982 with the outbreak of the Falklands War, and she joined the CND. Yet she was a miner’s wife and daughter and had young children.20 In this respect then, Sian James was perhaps a combination of both ‘active before the strike’ and ‘supporter; non-working miner’s wife’. A similar example would be Hefina Headon from Seven Sisters, who again, was a miner’s wife and daughter, but who before the strike had substantial work experience running the Post Office at the village in Onllwyn.21

One unusual example would be Margaret Donovan from Ynyswen in the upper Swansea Valley, who was a ‘reluctant starter’ within her support group, but eventually went on to become its chairperson. Although she had worked in the Royal Air Force before her marriage, she was reluctant to get involved.22 She explains that while her husband always been involved in local politics and trade union activities, she was quite content to support him as a housewife and mother. When he took over the organisation of food collection and distribution in their area, he asked for her help, which she was hesitant in giving. She says,

Our village had to get money to pay for the food so he sort of pushed me out of the house and said, sell raffle tickets, get money anywhere you can. So I was very reluctant but I said I’d do it because I could see it had to be done … from there on he again dragged me to meetings and … I haven’t

20 Sian James (& Margaret Donovan) (AUD/503), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
22 Interview with Margaret Donovan, Ynyswen, 28 January 1985, Interviewed by Ursula Masson (Transcript), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
looked back … [Before] I was quite happy to stay in the house with my children, I didn’t particularly want to be involved in anything.\textsuperscript{23}

So in some respects, she would be typical of Morgan’s idea that the women who joined the support groups were normally working-class mothers, yet the fact that she only joined because of her husband’s insistence is somewhat unique. In fact, it is not what would be typically thought of. This is perhaps an ideal example to indicate that no two women who joined the support groups were alike, nor did they have similar reasons for doing so. Also, even those women who were involved, often found themselves overwhelmed with the responsibilities and hardships encountered during the year-long strike. For example, one woman from Ammanford commented,

\begin{quote}
I get depressed every other day. One day I’m happy and I think, ‘Right, I’m going to have to fight now, and fight all the way.’ Then another day I’m very depressed and I think the opposite way. But I still turn out on rallies, and I still try to do my little bit of collecting and picketing and things like that because I think that although I’m depressed I put those things behind me because three-quarters of me wants to win anyhow … But that depression is bound to come in because we haven’t got money to live, and there’s pressures coming on you all the time.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

This shows that even the most confident and militant women sometimes felt the situation was out of their control, allowing them to become depressed. This was often eased by the support of the group who rallied around to help each other and provided emotional as well as practical help. Those women outside of the support groups would have found it even harder without being involved in the group as they were isolated with their problems. Support from others gave those involved with the groups the confidence to continue fighting the strike. This leads on to an examination of the women involved in the support groups in the ‘Eastern’ sector of the coalfield.

\textsuperscript{23} 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
\textsuperscript{24} Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 46.
Women involved in the support groups of the ‘Eastern’ sector of the coalfield

Morgan concludes that, ‘there was no doubt that in South Wales the majority of activists were wives’,25 and this was indeed the case with regard to the six women of the ‘Western’ Sector discussed above, with only one of them (Violet John) not being a wife from a mining community. The search area now needs to be widened to see if this was the same throughout the rest of South Wales.

Whilst researching in this section of the South Wales coalfield, it was interesting to discover that this was not actually the case and that the term ‘support group’ did not just cover the groups that were organised by mining communities and therefore had strong links with both the local collieries and lodges. This was proven by the involvement of the CND group that supported the miners and their families of Penywaun in Aberdare. Ann Wilson, Christine Thomas and Christine Harvey were three out of the six involved in the group that supported the miners. Wilson explains that they had all been involved in previous disputes linked with the CND such as Greenham Common, and none of the three had any family links to the mining industry. They were simply political activists who became involved in supporting the miners’ strike. They did so because the CND group itself had always had strong links with the local colliery lodges at Penrhiwceiber and Tower, they had given money to the group and provided buses and support on political marches. The three women explained that it was only natural for them to reciprocate.26 In this case then, the three women who became involved in the support group did so purely because they believed in the cause and wanted to help the fight. They were politically active despite having no personal links to the mining community. A similar example would be Joyce

25 Morgan, ‘Stand by Your Man’, p. 33.
26 Interview with Ann Wilson, Christine Thomas and Christine Harvey, Aberdare, 17 April 2008.
Giblin from Newport, who despite having a socialist background, had no real links with the mining industry either. She became involved with the support group only after attending a picket line and discovering she was appalled by the behaviour of the police.27 These women therefore contradict Morgan’s idea that the women involved in the support groups were necessarily from miners’ families.

Obviously there are also women who were both politically active in their own right, and had links with miners. Women who fall into this category have been seen in the previous section. An example from this section of the coalfield would be someone such as Ann Jones from Hirwaun. She grew up with her grandparents, and her grandfather was a local councillor, Labour Party member and union activist who took her along to meetings at an early age, allowing her to be constantly politically active. She married a miner from Tower Colliery and had children, yet continued to work herself. She became heavily involved with the strike, chairing the South Wales Women’s Support Group, picketing, speaking alongside politicians and NUM leaders as well as travelling abroad collecting funds.28 She would also not meet most expectations of a typical female supporter of the strike. A similar example would be Ann Williams from New Tredegar, who became Chairperson of the Rhymney Support Group during the strike. Before the dispute she had been involved in the Labour Party and was also a school governor. Although her husband was a miner, she owned a local shop.29

There are also women who were became involved in the strike in the main instance to help and support their husbands and families. Previous examples of this has been seen and similar cases are evident in the ‘Eastern’ Sector. Two such examples would be Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price of Aberdare who were members

28 Ibid. p. 12.
of a very small support group in their local area which only had four women members. It was not solely a women’s support group, but was composed of mainly miners and their wives. The women only became involved after finding that their community was not being supplied with sufficient food from the nearest support group at Aberaman, so decided they could do better by themselves. While Avril had worked previously and during the strike, neither had been involved in similar organisations before and became involved solely in a supportive sense. Avril was even keen to state she was glad to return to normal once the strike had ended.30 Beryl Fury from Abergavenny is a similar example. Her husband was not a miner, but she came from a mining background and set up the first food centre in Gwent. She even states that before the strike broke out, she never thought she would join a women’s group, ‘because you would be the first one to be talked about’,31 but felt so strongly about the cause that she had to do something. She believed in helping to preserve both jobs and communities. She was another without a political background.32

It is also important to remember that not all women who supported their husbands, families and communities during the strike were part of an organised support group. For instance Leanne Wood, who was only a child in Penygraig in the Rhondda at the time of the strike, clearly remembers her mother being involved in the door to door collection of food. This was not organised by any support group, but instead an informal act of goodwill to help out those in need. Leanne then had to take the foodstuffs into school where the teachers would collect it and redistribute it to the children of striking miners. She also explains that even though her mother was involved in this process, she still does not see herself as being actively involved

30 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
32 Ibid.
during the strike. This interesting mindset shows that many who helped at the time could still be unrecognised due to the belief that they were not doing anything noteworthy or out of the ordinary. They were simply ‘helping out’, when in fact, any help towards the miners should be acknowledged as support. This therefore shows that many more women could have been giving support at the time. Francis could be correct in saying that ‘most of the women in mining communities were not public and politically active during the dispute’, but that does not necessarily mean that they were not active in other ways. Leanne’s mother is only one example of this.

A similar example would be Anne England from Aberfan. She was a teacher before and during the strike and had been previously politically active as the Chair of the Welsh Anti-Nuclear Alliance (WANA). She and other members of the local churches and chapels identified that the people in her local community were no longer getting their coal supplies and organised fundraising to provide this coal. She comments,

my involvement with the strike was not with any official committee or anything … it was very low key because it wasn’t a huge group of people doing something massive, it was just seeing a need and trying to do what we could.

Again, she seems to be down-playing her role in the strike.

The women themselves were often the ones who believed that they were doing something that had changed their lives forever. It is clear from just this small sample of women discussed that they were all differently motivated, all had different backgrounds and therefore had different reasons for involving themselves in the support groups, and due to this had different experiences while they were there. Yet, most believed that no matter how they had started out, the strike did change them in

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33 Interview with Leanne Wood AM, National Assembly Building, 21 February 2008.
some way. One woman commented during an interview on a picket line,

It’s made a lot of women aware that they are capable of doing things that they didn’t realise they were capable of doing before. And now I think that there’s a changed attitude in the home, they’re out at meetings and they’re out on the picket line.36

The impact of this change will be discussed later, along with the question of whether or not one woman was correct in saying, ‘before we were content to lead normal lives. We will never go back to what we were’.37

Having discussed the different types of women who became involved in the support groups, we move now to examine the support groups themselves. This examination will provide an overview of the numbers of people and women involved (for example the support groups may not necessarily have been women only, men often helped out in a passive or managerial role); how the group itself was structured and whether it was a stand-alone organisation or had links to the local lodge or colliery; fundraising as well as other activities such as picketing; and the collection and distribution of food. From the women involved then, our attention is now turned to the support groups themselves, firstly those of the ‘Western’ coalfield.

**Support Groups in the ‘Western’ Coalfield**

Just as women cannot be categorised due to their different experiences of the strike, much the same can be said for the support groups themselves. Christine Powell (from the Seven Sisters support group) commented that all support groups had their own inner dynamic ways of working and their own leaders and co-ordinators, even though

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36 South Wales Women’s Film Group & the Community Video Workshop, Cardiff, *Something Else in the House (Interview with Women from the Maerdy Miners’ Wives in October 1984)* (Video, 1985).
they were all related to each other. Each centre operated differently.\textsuperscript{38} For example, some only gave out food parcels weekly, while others did this as well as keeping a ‘soup kitchen’ open every day to feed miners and their families.\textsuperscript{39} All the support groups also had different numbers of women involved and catered to a variety of numbers of people.

The support groups were not all set up in the same way nor at the same time. Some came into existence virtually right at the outbreak of the strike, while others took several weeks to be formed. Some were groups of people coming together to do something to try and ease the hardship but many were asked to help out by the lodge or local council. For example, in Seven Sisters, the Labour Party and Community Council played a role in the foundation of the support group. A lodge official had put his case to a special meeting at the community council to ask for assistance. The Chairman of the Council then gave £50 towards the setting up of the support group. By this time it was already six weeks into the strike.\textsuperscript{40}

From a reading of the material it seems that the average number in a support group was approximately 12-15 members, but this could range from a group as small as four, to a group as large as thirty. It seems the general trend is that many women joined the support groups at the start of the dispute, but the numbers soon tailed off. Hywel Francis believed that,

the remarkable thing is that so many people came at the start … I would say that it’s an indication of how much support there was at the beginning that so many people came and responded to the appeal … I think the drop-off would be inevitable.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Christine Powell (AUD/509).
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} NUM Discussion Class: Christine Powell & Hefina Headon (AUD/507) Interviewed 24 November 1985, South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
Although he is referring to the Neath and Dulais Valley specifically, this seems to be the case virtually all over South Wales. The group at Seven Sisters had approximately fifteen women, and they were keen to associate with other groups to see how they were organised and perhaps learn from their examples. However, the Neath and District Miners’ Support Group seems to be exceptional with around 100 active women, although this number was probably subdivided into smaller organisations that supported the local communities. Ynyswen is an example of a smaller group, where only five women were involved, helped by five men. The support group had one of the lowest number of miners families to be fed, with only 26 food parcels needed weekly. They were not linked to the lodge and did initially encounter some opposition from both men and women in the community for setting up a separate women’s group. Margaret Donovan thought that maybe people believed it would detract from the main work being completed by the men. But the group soon achieved support from the community, and even went on to become affiliated to the South Wales Women’s Support Group.

While some support groups were stand-alone organisations in that they raised funds and helped in their own way for their own community without being linked to other support groups or organisation such as the NUM, others had links with several other organisations. One example of this would be the support group at Seven Sisters, which was the central organisation for other support groups in the area. The other groups were Ystradgynlais, Ynyswen, Neath, Crynant, Colbren, Banwen, Abercrâf and Glynneath. Ystradgynlais and Neath were the most active of the nine centres, with theirs being permanently manned. Towards the end of the strike, over 1,000 food

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42 NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon & Ali Thomas (AUD/510), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
44 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
parcels were being regularly distributed by the nine centres. Christine Powell who was treasurer of the support group at Seven Sisters explains that the groups would all be in charge of their own fundraising and activities and would then bring what they had raised to a central meeting where the funds would be collected and redistributed. That way, the communities with less money available could survive with a share from the others. However, this socialist example did not always work and several groups felt that they were not being treated fairly. Christine discusses the fact that areas such as Glynneath would regularly receive £1,000 due to contacts in Birmingham, Swindon and Southampton, whereas Neath effectively survived on the contributions that were distributed to them at Seven Sisters. It is understandable that the people at Glynneath would feel resentment at handing their funds to an organisation that seemed unable to raise anything themselves.

Another example of this would be at Blaengwynfi in the Afan Valley where a bitterness could be found within the support group as it was being run separately from the Union. Donna Jones describes the fact that in her area, the money the NUM collected was used solely for picketing and not for food, nor would the lodge give any money to the support group to pay for food. The support group therefore had to raise all funds themselves and were not given any help. This caused friction between the union and the women’s support group as the women were angry to think that the men were paid to picket whereas their support and hard work was given voluntarily. However, many supporters were often keen to ensure that their financial contributions were given for the food funds and not the picketing miners. In some respects then, it was important to keep the two funds separate. More supporters would be willing to

45 Christine Powell (AUD/509).
46 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
47 Christine Powell (AUD/509).
donate to feed families. Blaengwynfi was also affiliated with other support groups such as that at Nant Ddu, where two members of the group often had to report back to the Nant Ddu group. These smaller groups again had to raise money and send it on to the main group to be redistributed fairly, often causing conflict. Jones again comments that they did not always receive as much back as they had contributed. The Blaengwynfi group began to feel disheartened, that they were working harder than the other groups and therefore losing their hard-earned money to those who were not as successful as themselves. She says that they eventually began to keep a significant amount of the money raised, and not donate it to the larger group. This is just one example of how there was often conflict within support groups, which were not the homogenous organisation that many accounts of the strike portray.

Another example can be found at the Glyncorrwg Support Group which was also linked to the main centre at Nant Ddu, which meant that the group had to send its contributions to the centre in order for it to be fairly redistributed. However, this was not necessarily always the case. One woman supporter describes how her group sent a lorry full of goods (such as onions, cabbages, tomatoes, and potatoes) to Nant Ddu and received absolutely none of it back. When she personally contacted the centre to see what had gone wrong with the distribution, they denied ever having received the

48 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
49 NUM Discussion Class, Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones (AUD/505).
50 Comparative work in other areas such as North England seem to convey an illusory impression of total unity, of a whole, unified, faction-free campaign. As this is not the case in South Wales, this phenomenon either shows how different women’s support groups in this area were compared to elsewhere, or shows the need for more research in the other areas. For example see, Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield & Guy Boanas (eds.), The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners’ Strike of 1984-85 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), Keith Gildart, North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), Geoffrey Goodman, The Miners’ Strike (London: Pluto Press, 1985), Triona Holden, Queen Coal: Women of the Miners’ Strike (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2005), Chrys Salt, & Jim Layzell (eds.), Here We Go! Women’s Memories of the 1984-85 Miners Strike (London: Co-Operative Retail Services Ltd., 1985), David Waddington, Maggie Wykes, Chas Critcher with Sandra Hebron, Split at the Seams? Community, Continuity and Change after the 1984-5 Coal Dispute (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), Mavis Watson, Janine Head & Teresa Web, Striking Figures: The Story of Normanton and Altofts Miners Support Group 1984-85 (Yorkshire: Artivan and Striking Figures, 1986), Joan Witham, Hearts and Minds: The Story
food. It was only when she arrived at the centre that they admitted they had sold the potatoes to make some money, had given the tomatoes away elsewhere, and thrown away the onions as they had gone bad. They eventually received a very small portion back at Glyncorrwg. With this evidence it is quite easy to understand why many support groups felt exploited and felt that they might well fare better by breaking away and relying on their own communities. It seems that this ideal of collection and fair redistribution would only benefit the areas that were not raising as much funds as they needed to survive.

However, faltering support groups could rely on other organisations as well as support groups for support and aid. For example, the support group at Onllwyn could collect approximately £500 weekly from two collections and two jumble sales. Tom (a member of the support group) explains that the £500 was all that could be gathered from the local community, and without help from other organisations, the support group would not have been able to survive,

well, if it wasn’t for the fact that we have made these connections with NALGO, NUPE in the big cities, London especially, we are dependant on them see … there’s no way we could live on our own.

In some instances then, support groups had to rely on other sources, in others they established political links for emotional as well as practical support. For example, the Neath and District Miners’ Support Group had links with organisations that were politically left wing such as the trade union movement and feminist groups, as well as the ‘Close a Pit, Kill a Community’ Campaign (‘Cau Pwll, Lladd Cymuned’) created

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51 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
by the Welsh Language Society (Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg). The umbrella organisation the South Wales Women’s Support Group (SWWSG) was set up due to an idea to co-ordinate all the women’s support groups, as they were working as individual units and none really knew what the others were achieving. It was decided that it would be organisationally easier to have delegates sent from each group to the SWWSG meetings who would then report back to their own support groups.

There seem to be many examples of the differences between the support groups. One instance would be their internal organisation of the food collection and distribution. The support group at Seven Sisters had a strict policy of no means-testing, as they believed it would be too difficult to distinguish between single men and families and numbers within households, so everyone had exactly the same food parcel. However, the opposite could be found at Cynheidre where they had to enforce a means testing system due to the late start of their support group. There was a similar situation in Ammanford where people would have to supply the support group with their earnings and household budget before they were given a food parcel. Hywel Francis confirms that the differences in the way the support groups were run could cause conflict. The Ammanford support centre was one of only a small number of groups which provided regular daily meals as well as food parcels, and they encountered problems because they had such a large distribution area. In some instances families needing help could live as far as fifteen miles from the distribution centre, which meant many were unable to benefit from the meals on offer. In these instances they would turn to other centres for support that were not technically

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54 Interview with Margaret Donovan, Ynyswen, 28 January 1985.
55 [Christine Powell (AUD/509).]
56 [NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon & Ali Thomas (AUD/510).]
supposed to provide help. Problems such as this would not be seen in smaller areas or in those places solely focusing on food parcels.

It seems that most support groups were more inclined to provide food parcels for their communities rather than organising a food centre that provided meals. There could be several reasons for this. The first would be linked to where many people would not be able to benefit from a centre and would therefore feel unfairly treated, as in the Ammanford district: providing everyone with a parcel would be less discriminatory. The second would be that many communities simply did not have the organisation required to provide such a service. They would need a suitable location, facilities and people willing to work at the centre for long periods of time, as well as large amounts of food to prepare meals. Parcels would be an easier way of helping those in need. Another reason would be that many communities actually did not want this sort of help. Many people were too proud to visit a centre daily to eat their meals and would prefer to keep themselves to themselves. However, places such as Blaengwynfi and Glyncorrwg in the Afan Valley did provide food centres where people could regularly eat meals, whereas the areas of the Neath and Dulais valleys concentrated on parcels.

For those groups providing food parcels, this would require significant fundraising (to be discussed later) and organisation to ensure that quality food was purchased at a reasonable price then distributed to those in need. Christine Powell from Seven Sisters explains that they tried to purchase their food locally, with the majority of their supplies coming from Banwen stores. She says that as the strike progressed, the shop even began to order in bulk directly from the supplier, who

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57 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
58 NUM Discussion Class, Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones (AUD/505).
59 Christine Powell (AUD/509).
would deliver it directly to the group.\textsuperscript{60} Some groups were run by the men from the lodge and the women could only help out with the packing and distribution and had no input into the financial side of the work or the food purchasing. One woman explained that in her group it was the men who bought the food, and they were purchasing cheap items (such as rice) in bulk rather than the goods people actually needed. When in response to complaints about the variety in the parcels, she asked if the women could take over the food purchasing, she was refused, and the women were ignored at every meeting when they tried to bring it up again.\textsuperscript{61}

However, the women did become involved in other activities and were not purely linked with the supply of food. For example, there are many instances where women picketed collieries, and other areas such as the steelworks in Port Talbot where over a hundred women from South Wales sat in the road to stop the lorries entering or leaving the plant.\textsuperscript{62} Although not all women would attend a picket line, those that did often had to gradually build up to it over time, in that they competed other tasks first, then moved up to picketing, rather than launching themselves straight into such a ‘militant’ task. For example, a female supporter from the Neath and Dulais Valley says, ‘now the women in our valley would go on any picket line anywhere they were needed. No, at the beginning of the strike - we wouldn’t. Now it’s all changed.’\textsuperscript{63} One woman describes her witness account of Port Talbot,

I was on the picket line in Port Talbot. At first the police didn’t know how to handle us. We’d kept it very quiet that we were going. I went around about 75 houses the night before, and a bus full of women went down. There were only a minority of pickets there and at first the police were flabbergasted. There were about twenty police there, but within half an

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
  \item \textsuperscript{62} See video such as Swansea Women’s History Group, Smiling and Splendid Women, for footage of women on the picket lines, also description in NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon & Ali Thomas (AUD/510).
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back p. 37.
\end{itemize}
hour there were twelve vans full. It was unbelievable. I’ve never experienced anything like it in my life. I’ve always had respect for the law. As it is today I’ve got no respect at all for them. My attitude towards the police has changed. I’ve got no respect for a uniform.  

Often, links between the police and local community were shattered by the formers’ handling of the dispute. In many cases the police did not give any preferential treatment to women on the picket lines. They were arrested alongside their men folk,

Six of us went up on a humpback bridge in Port Talbot, but a van full of police followed us, so we walked back and they followed us. We knew we were decoys for the men but we were good decoys. We ran circles around them. … When two policewomen arrived we knew what would happen, because policewomen have to come in the van with us. My friend was picked up, unfortunately. … We were jostled and hustled by the police. … We told the police that some of the lorries didn’t have tax discs and they ignored us. They weren’t concerned about the condition of the lorries, just us … pushing us, shoving us. One of my friends walked around the corner and twelve policemen followed her.

And,

The police were surprised because we were women. They didn’t know where to put their hands, because when they touched us we gave them abuse. … There were about 150 women. Some were nervous, as you can understand. But once the lorries came … the frustration inside you!  

The actions of the police often divided families as well as communities. For example, some families had members who were miners and police officers. This caused tensions as family loyalties were strained. Also, police officers that had lived in mining communities for years suddenly came under fire from those supporting the miners’ strike. There is an excellent example from Abercwmboi where the local police offered to provide Christmas presents for the children, but the support group refused their assistance. The Aberdare Leader stated that,

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64 Ibid. p. 31.
65 Ibid. p. 31.
66 Ibid. p. 31.
rival notices have been put up in a newsagent’s shop. One notice rejects the offer, but the other says many families would accept the police gifts. The refusal of the Abercwmboi Women’s Food Fund Committee to accept a cash donation from the police for the purchase of children’s Christmas gifts has prompted an angry backlash from some striking miners. … [Who believe] many strikers’ families in Abercwmboi would willingly accept financial help from the police.  

Those in the group who were affected by the strike felt that the Committee of the support group had made the decision without consulting with them first. Member eventually went on to carry out their own survey, and out of forty-nine families, thirty-two said they would accept the police offer, they then asked the women’s committee for a general meeting to put their case forward. However, the women’s committee’s response was, ‘there is nothing to stop anybody receiving gifts from the police, we can only speak for the committee and we want to make it clear that we will not be accepting any gifts from the police’. It is clear then that there was often controversy and fighting within the support groups as well as between the support groups and others.

Women from the area also regularly visited the women at Greenham Common and strong links were formed. As has already been mentioned, many groups were involved with the South Wales Women’s Support Group, who were thought by some to be ‘more militant’. They also joined the Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) movement. Women also attended marches such as the designated women’s march which took place in Barnsley on 12 May 1984, where 10,000 women from all over Britain attended. There are many more examples of women from South Wales support

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69 See video such as Swansea Women’s History Group, *Smiling and Splendid Women*, for footage of women on the picket lines, also description in *NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon & Ali Thomas* (AUD/510).
70 *NUM Discussion Class: Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones* (AUD/505).
groups attending meetings and rallies.\footnote{Francis, ‘Women and the Aftermath of the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike’, p. 5.} However, just as all the support groups were different, so were their activities. While some were highly involved in picketing and attending marches, others such as Donna Jones from Blaengwynfi were keen to state that in some communities picketing was a male preserve and the women from her support group tended to place all their efforts on the support aspect.\footnote{For more examples see \textit{NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon & Ali Thomas} (AUD/510).} Many support groups were keen to arrange links with other areas. They did this by inviting people to stay with mining families in their communities. Margaret Donovan explains that it was her husband David’s idea to bring people to the community to see where and how their financial contributions were being used. The first group of forty people visited in October and then others came regularly.\footnote{\textit{NUM Discussion Class: Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones} (AUD/505).}

Sian James from Swansea on the other hand shows that her support group was quite militant by recounting an incident where seventeen women locked themselves in the manager’s office at Cynheidre Colliery for several days to try and stop some of the men returning to work.\footnote{For examples see \textit{1984-5 Strike Discussion Group} (AUD/52).} Sian describes the event as quite radical, ‘people weren’t prepared to do that sort of action … they couldn’t see a point’.\footnote{See \textit{Sian James (& Margaret Donovan)} (AUD/503) for a description of the occupation.} Eventually most of the women had to come out due to outside pressure, including Sian, who says,

> I remember when Martin [her husband] came up I said ‘please please can I stay another day Martin?’ , ‘No, I’ve come to get you out now’, he said …I came out before the end came. Family pressures more than anything because Martin was getting most concerned … I would have stayed you know if I could have, if it hadn’t been for the family.\footnote{Ibid.}

This shows that the women did not necessarily receive much support. However, other women such as Hefina Headon who regularly visited picket lines, says that the men
where she visited were really supportive of the women. They would look after them, and tell them where to stand so that they would not be hurt. These differences of experiences again could be due to the background of both the men and women involved, and the locality. In fact, in both examples, it could be said that the men were ‘looking after’ the women to ensure their safety, a typical relationship despite the male-dominant culture of the Welsh Valleys community.

For many groups their priority was raising funds to support those in need. However, not all aspects of fundraising were enjoyable. Although it was often hard work, overall, the majority of supporters state that they did enjoy the activities and it gave them a sense of pleasure as well as purpose. However, not all members of the community were supportive of the miners’ cause, and collectors often bore the brunt of these differences. This was often the case at door-to-door or street collections. One woman from Ammanford stated, ‘I’ve been out collecting and I’ve taken the most terrible abuse that I’ve ever heard in my life, and I’m 58 years of age and I never thought I’d hear that.’78 There were many ways funds could be raised, the most popular being door-to-door collections, raffles and jumble sales,79 although there are instances of other activities such as the group at Blaengwynfi who sold logs which they collected and cut themselves to help raise funds.80 As has already been mentioned, the support groups were not always linked with the local Lodge or NUM, but they did still contribute to their funds, especially in times of need such as Christmas. One woman described how she took a cheque for a donation of £1,000 to her local Lodge Committee only two days before Christmas: ‘he opened the cheque and he said, ‘oh a thousand pounds, that’ll come in handy’, like that, and went in! And

77 Ibid.
78 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 35.
79 For examples see 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
80 NUM Discussion Class: Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones (AUD/505).
that was the last I heard of it!" With an example such as this, it is easy to see why some of the women became disheartened and felt that their work was not fully recognised. Support groups also had varying degrees of help from local councils, for example the Ogwr Council gave out £20 vouchers for miners’ children to buy shoes. However, the help provided obviously depended on the location of the communities. Virtually every support group ensured that Christmas would be a time to remember by providing food parcels with turkeys for every family, as well as Christmas parties with presents for the children. In order to further this investigation, it is necessary now to turn to the support groups of the ‘Eastern’ sector.

**Support Groups in the ‘Eastern’ Coalfield**

It is clear that although they were all working to support the miners and their families, every support group was slightly different and had different organisational structures. Some support groups were formed specifically as a way of helping the community through the strike, others were less formal and grew over a period of time. The support group at Maerdy in the Rhondda began when the officials from the colliery asked for a women’s support group to be formed to help out. The women attended a meeting and were told to sort into a committee and organise themselves. There were eventually approximately a dozen on the committee of the support group throughout the strike. They began by providing a packed lunch for the children who were on school holidays. Smaller groups were eventually set up in Pontygwaith, Tylorstown, Ferndale, Blaenllechau and Porth. As the strike continued, the main group at Maerdy went on to provide over 500 parcels a week. Yet by the tenth week of the strike, they had severely depleted food stocks and for a short period had to stop supplying parcels

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81 1984-5 Strike Discussion Group (AUD/52).
82 NUM Discussion Class: Blaengwynfi, Donna Jones (AUD/505).
to miners with families and instead concentrated on single miners, who could not claim any benefits. The group had to raise substantial funds to support themselves, which shows that, even those well-known groups who were particularly militant such as that at Maerdy encountered their own problems.

In Aberfan and Merthyr Vale there were approximately twenty women involved in the support group, whereas in Beddau there were sixteen who met on a daily basis at the Cwm and Llantwit Welfare Hall. Their group began in much the same was as the support group at Maerdy. Towards the end of the strike the support group was providing over 200 parcels a week. Similarly, the group at Bedlinog had around ten women members. Numbers varied from group to group, for example, the support group in Aberdare had only four women, but they also had men helping out. This was a standard support group as opposed to a women’s only support group. As they were such a small group, they were not given premises to use for their work so instead used one of the member’s houses. Luckily they had a garage so the food could be taken there for the parcels to be made-up. The support group at Rhymney started as a general support group where only three women were involved helping alongside the men with the collection of food. Then, the women went on to join with other women from the Phillipstown support group and became a larger group of around 25 to 30. They helped approximately 200 miners and their families. Ann Williams who was Chairwoman of the Rhymney Support Group states that they, ‘left the food collection to the men’, and went on to do other things such as attending picket lines, meetings and demonstrations as well as fundraising. She explains that as the strike continued,

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83 Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
84 *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1984.
85 Interview with Shirley Davies, Aberfan, 24 June 2005.
86 Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
87 Interview with Dianne Land, Bedlinog, 14 December 2007.
88 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
both the men’s and women’s support groups became intertwined, the women raised the money but the men were in charge of the food. The men would collect the food, take it to Penallta Colliery to be sorted, then take it back to the community centre to be distributed. Importantly, Ann stresses that the men did this alone, as many of the miners would not collect their food parcels if women were present, further confirming male sensitivities.90

The Maerdy support group collected food items such as tins as well as money on their door to door collections, and kept the food at the local Hall. Barbara Williams who was secretary of the group explains that it was not just ordinary people who gave contributions, but local businesses such as the greengrocers. The support group at Maerdy was particularly strong with both men and women involved. The group distributed over 700 food parcels a week to miners and their families.91 The group realised that their local community would not be able to support them in the long-term and so asked for help from the NUM by contacting their central offices at Pontypridd. They then became affiliated with them. However, Barbara says that this caused problems, rather than solving them as the group had hoped. As has already been seen in the ‘Western’ sector, affiliation with other groups did not always achieve the expected results. Barbara describes one occasion where the NUM discovered that the group had obtained supplies of food and threatened to visit and the take the food for central use,

The Pontypridd office telephoned us and told us to take all of our food that had been donated down there. I said there was no way because people had given that food for our community. They wouldn’t listen though and insisted on coming to have a look. We couldn’t stop it so we were panicking. The local pharmacist was in the building next door to ours, so one of the girls went round to ask and he let us move all the food into his

89 Interview with Ann Williams, 20 February 2008.
80 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 34.
upstairs! So there wasn’t anything left in the hall when the man came up from Pontypridd. He asked ‘where’s all the food?’ I explained to him that I had said we were distributing it and that it was all gone. Later Emlyn Williams from the NUM offices rang and I told him we were not going to bring our food down … and he said it was ok, that he would send some food up to go with ours.  

The Pontypridd office would send food to Maerdy every week. However, the support group also had to raise £600 every week to send to the NUM headquarters at Pontypridd. Then, after purchasing food at a local cash and carry store, £1400 worth of food was delivered to Maerdy which then had to be divided into food parcels. One volunteer from Maerdy said,

we can only afford to put in the basics: eight pounds of potatoes, a tin of corned beef, a tin of veg, rice pudding, fruit, sometimes sugar, tea bags, tins of beans or spaghetti and so on. We have to raise money ourselves through raffles and socials, and going away to speak at meetings. … If someone’s in real need, they can ask for more food - single men are the worst off. They’re never turned away if they come and ask.

While this group did not send food to central funds, other support groups did. For instance, the support group at Beddau sent money to central funds at Pontypridd and then would receive food every week that the women would have to pack into parcels. Any food that they collected door-to-door they were entitled to keep for their own community. Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas were keen to state that their support group did not deal with money at all, any funds were either given to the lodge men or to central funds. However, they must have found it unfair to think that their contributions were going to groups that were unwilling to share what they had. It seems that many groups were willing take the support that was offered but not as keen to return the favour by offering their goods to others who might need it, which must

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92 Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
93 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) *Striking Back*, p. 34.
94 Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
have been the source of a major conflict. In Aberfan and Merthyr Vale, the support group also had help from the local lodge, but only on a monthly basis. The group had to provide the rest themselves.95

Also, the degree of assistance received often depended on the support group’s location. For example, the local council in the Rhondda Valley provided vouchers to miners and their families that they could spend in local shops.96 However, there seems to be no evidence of similar things being provided by Merthyr Tydfil Council, for instance, although, it did provide meals for the children of miners at the schools throughout the borough on Saturdays.97 The council at Aberdare did provide free leisure activities to children and miners too, although they had been running a similar scheme for the unemployed already.98 At Beddau, the local council gave the women’s support group free access to two flats where they could store goods and sort the food parcels.99 Similar procedures could be seen in Gwent where the council at Islwyn let the Gwent Food Fund have a room equipped with freezers to store food, and both Islwyn and Blaenau Gwent councils loaned vans for the distribution operation to local collection points around the country.100 These differences must have added to the conflict. For instance, it must have been hard for some people to see other areas getting things that they were not. This must have seemed unfair and would have added to the pressure of the differences within the support groups. Outside groups also showed their support, especially Trade Unions, although not on the same scale that they had in previous strikes. For example, in June 1984, the print union SOGAT 82 sent a lorries full of food to the Cynon Valley. Supplies included essential items

95 Interview with Shirley Davies, Aberfan, 24 June 2005.
96 Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
98 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
99 Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
100 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 35.
and added up to five tonnes of food worth £3,500. Tyrone O’Sullivan (NUM lodge secretary of Tower Colliery in Hirwaun), Glyn Roberts (Tower lodge vice-chairman) and Howell Nott (Tower pitman) decided to directly appeal to SOGAT during talks in London. Some of the food was shared out to the Rhondda, Gwent and Swansea, but the majority of the supplies were specifically for the Cynon Valley.\footnote{South Wales Echo, 15\textsuperscript{th} June 1984.} Again, such varying support could cause conflict between communities.

Added to this were the varying degrees of support from local DHSS offices. For example, some DHSS workers were supportive of the cause and would therefore do their best to help miners’ families if they enquired about help. Others, however, stuck rigidly to the rules and would often be obstructive and offer no support,\footnote{Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) \textit{Striking Back}, p. 41} many of the DHSS staff have implied that the problems are self-induced. A woman in Ystrad Mynach was refused Maternity Benefit on the grounds that her husband could go back to work at any time, and a woman in Oakdale had to wait for three weeks with several costly bus trips to the DHSS offices before she was sent a Giro for a mere £10.50.\footnote{Ibid. p. 42}

Of course, the reduction in supplementary benefit only added to the hardship of striking miners and their families, and confused people about what benefits they were actually entitled to receive. For example, one support worker from the Maerdy group described an incident where the daughter of one of the committee members fell off her bike and broke her jaw. As all of her food had to be liquidised, she applied to the DHSS for help to purchase a liquidiser. She was refused, and eventually the group raised funds and purchased one for her. However on a later visit from the Social Services she was told that she had in fact been entitled to receive one, and they did provide one which was then raffled off by the support group to raise more funds.\footnote{Ibid. p. 42} However, this does show the conflict and confusion that could occur when strikers
and their families tried to receive support. In fact, it was the work of the support
groups themselves who eased this, by finding out information and passing it on to
those who needed it.

The strike obviously affected the way that strikers and their families could
afford to pay household bills. This included both mortgage or rent, general utilities,
and even loan or hire purchase payments. In Oakdale, the local county Councillor
Carol Dunn held a weekly surgery giving strikers advice assistance for any financial
difficulties. Overall, contrary to other coalfields, the people of South Wales
generally found the public utility boards to be quite understanding of their needs. The
South Wales Echo commented that,

striking South Wales miners in arrears with rent payments will not be
evicted from their NCB-owned homes. A spokesman for Wales Gas and
South Wales Electricity Board, British Telecom and the Welsh Water
Authority, which are owed payments said the striker’s case would be
heard sympathetically, providing they had a history of prompt payment
and could show their inability to pay was temporary.

In many instances, strikers were treated the same as hardship cases, in that debts could
be paid off weekly or pre-payment meters installed. However, these were normally set
on high rates in an effort to pay-off debts within a reasonable period. As an example,
one family from Beddau set aside £1 out of a £10 weekly budget during the summer
months. The Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties identified, ‘a couple of
instances where requests for pre-payment have been refused, but generally there have
been few problems to date, and no reports of cut-offs where the gas or electricity
boards have been made aware of the circumstances in advance.’

However, British Telecom was often not as helpful. For example, Mrs Barbara

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104 Oakdale: Interview with Members of the Women’s Support Committee (AUD/676. Transcript)
105 The South Wales Echo, 10 August 1984.
Williams who was secretary of the support group at Maerdy, and was disabled suffering from multiple sclerosis, had her telephone cut off after not paying her bill. As a miner’s wife, she could not pay the £66 bill, and was refused when she asked to pay half and the rest in instalments. It was only thanks to the intervention of a local MP that she was able to fight her case. British Telecom soon changed their position and issued a statement pledging assistance to miners’ families as long as they contacted them to explain their difficulties.107 Women interviewed from the Oakdale support group also knew of strikers who had been sued for non-payment of their water-rates.108

On the other hand, banks and building societies were grudging with their support, and often it depended on the views and support of the individual manager. For example, a woman in Oakdale received positive support from her local Barclays bank who offered her overdraft facilities, while another customer in Treherbert found her local Barclays very obstructive. She said, ‘we had a loan in Barclays and we had a letter the other day to say he wants it paid up in full. My husband went up to see about it, and he was told they didn’t want to know anything about his personal problems, it was up to him to make sure his debt was paid.’109 In the majority of cases, mortgage payments were either frozen or strikers had to only repay the interest payments for the duration of the strike. Of course, as soon as the miners returned to work, all companies wanted their payments, leaving the strikers and their families in just as bad a position with money coming in as they had been on strike. The same could be said of companies issuing hire purchase agreements, they too could be selective with their help and assistance. For example, in Oakdale, one woman had a debt of £570 with a

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107 Western Mail, 3 May 1984.
108 Oakdale: Interview with Members of the Women’s Support Committee.
109 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 43.
hire-purchase company, but after paying £500, the repayments lapsed when the strike began. After fighting the company’s debt department, it was only when the customer contacted the Citizen’s Advice Bureau that the company agreed to postpone the repayments until the strike had finished.\textsuperscript{110}

As has already been mentioned, the support groups did have different ways of organising their support. For example, the support group at Maerdy concentrated on food parcels rather than meals as they did not have the facilities for cooking. They were supplying approximately 300 food parcels per week. Although the group did not apply a means test to see who was worthy of a parcel, Barbara Williams explains that they did try to give single miners some extra help as they were not receiving any income from elsewhere.\textsuperscript{111} The support group at Aberfan also provided parcels,\textsuperscript{112} as did that at Beddau.\textsuperscript{113} Ann Williams from the Rhymney support group says that they provided food parcels rather than meals because that is what the men wanted.\textsuperscript{114} At the Bedlinog support group, the women were given one room at an old school while the men used another. The women would make up the food parcels and then the miners would come and collect them to take to the pit heads for distribution. Dianne Land who was a member of this group states that the women had no input into the organisational side of it: they were merely given numbers of how many parcels to make and that is what they did. They also did not have any involvement with the purchasing of the food.\textsuperscript{115} It is clear that the majority of support groups in the ‘Eastern’ sector tended to concentrate on parcels rather than providing meals, but the way the parcels were organised and the way the food was purchased and distributed,

\textsuperscript{110} Oakdale: Interview with Members of the Women’s Support Committee.
\textsuperscript{111} Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
\textsuperscript{112} Interview with Shirley Davies, Aberfan, 24 June 2005.
\textsuperscript{113} Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{114} Interview with Ann Williams, 20 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{115} Interview with Dianne Land, Bedlinog, 14 December 2007.
as well as the numbers involved, all varied between groups.

The women in the support groups of the ‘Eastern’ sector also learned to do other activities and were not simply working on the food aspect of the support work. For example, the group at Maerdy established links with Ruskin College in Oxford and women went there to speak. The group at Oxford also came to South Wales to help at Christmas time and helped raise money for the children’s party and presents. Some of the women even travelled to London to speak on the David Dimbleby television programme. The women there also attended the picket lines at their local colliery on a regular basis. However, men were sometimes not keen on this; for example, in Markham in the Sirhowy Valley the men refused to allow women onto the picket lines, so the women had to split into a separate group and focussed on fundraising and food collections. Hilary Rowlands said, ‘I never really got to find out why they resented us doing our own thing but they may have thought we were going to take their power away … I think they were afraid of our growing power and influence.’

Often, this would extend to areas outside the coalfield, for example, when women from all over South Wales picketed at Port Talbot. In fact, women began picketing quite early on in the strike, and by July they had organised themselves on an area basis, with regular meetings where groups from all over South Wales could meet, plan, and share experiences. For example, the women from Abertillery organised a large and successful rally in July. Shirley Davies sums up the work in the Aberfan support group when she says,

116 Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
117 Interview with Maureen Hughes, Aberfan, 26 July 2005.
119 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 36.
we would travel around South Wales in a minibus, visiting other lodges and attending meetings in places like the Workingmen’s Club in Rhymney, and we would try to raise money for the miners by organising jumble sales and that.120

Maerdy support group were similar to many others throughout South Wales with their fundraising ideas. They organised raffles, street collections and Barbara Williams says, ‘in the end we became so confident and organised that other groups would ask us to come to theirs to help set it up. A television crew even came and filmed us.’121

Many groups, such as that in Abertillery, organised concerts and shows to raise money.122 Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas from Beddau also talk about similar fundraising activities, such as door-to-door collections, street collections, making hampers for raffles and such. They also describe attendance at many meetings and demonstrations in other parts of the country such as London. They explain that their children went on trips abroad to places such as Ireland and Belgium, and day trips and picnics were also organised for them by groups such as Equity, a drama group from Swansea.123 Similarly, Dianne Land from Bedlinog says that children from her area went to Ireland and Norway for vacations.124 Miners’ children throughout South Wales were given some kind of summer holiday by the generosity of others. This could be day trips to local beaches such as Barry Island or a week abroad to Ireland or Europe.

The *Western Mail* described how trade unionists funded a late holiday for miners’ children, whereby families from the south coast of England and North and West Wales accepted miners’ children for a break. Lodge officials said that, ‘offers of holidays, ranging from a few days to a week, have poured in from many parts of the

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120 Interview with Shirley Davies, Aberfan, 24 June 2005.
121 Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
123 Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
country. Trade union movements in France and Southern Ireland have made a generous offer to the South Wales coalfield and each pit is sending two or three children on these ‘overseas trips’.125 For example, four adults and eleven children from St. John’s Colliery in Maesteg travelled to Plymouth for a week, as guests of lorry men from the West Country.126 Again, there was extra help at Christmas time, where many organisations sent food, turkeys and toys to the miners and their families. For instance, Ann Williams from Rhymney says that her support group received toys from France at Christmas time, and held a party to distribute them to the children.127

One unusual example would be Beryl Fury’s from Abergavenny who set up the first food centre that covered the Gwent area. She explains that she and Jim Watkins, a delegate for the NUM, started the support when the NUM gave them £500. She explains that they used the money to buy food and were given some rooms in the council offices to use as a base. She says that as the strike continued, more miners’ wives came to help, as did older miners who could not go picketing, until eventually they had around ten working at the centre which supplied fourteen pits and 540 miners. They made up food parcels at the centre on a daily basis, with each day organising a different colliery. The parcels would then be taken to the pit head for distribution, after being told exactly how many miners would require them. She says that they were completely separate from the NUM and were not given anything else after the initial £500. All of the money and food were raised and used within their communities and not transferred elsewhere.128 The Gwent Food Fund eventually went on to become a massive organisation. It covered fourteen NUM areas, including the Rhymney Valley, collected £10,000 per week, bought all the food from a wholesaler

124 Interview with Dianne Land, Bedlinog, 14 December 2007.
125 Western Mail, 24 July 1984.
126 Ibid.
127 Interview with Ann Williams, 20 February 2008.
and delivered 5,000 parcels to people in the area.\textsuperscript{129}

This group is therefore different to many of those previously mentioned in this chapter in that it was totally self-sufficient. They were not involved with other support groups or organisations. Beryl herself seems somewhat different from a lot of the other women who were involved in the support group in South Wales in that she herself spent a lot of time travelling alone through Europe to raise funds to sent back to the Abertillery group. She says,

I spent a lot of time travelling to raise money to buy food for the centre. I travelled to Amsterdam selling badges, stickers, posters, and meeting people to drum up funds. I would then channel the funds back, come home to see how the centre was doing then return to my travels. I travelled to Italy, Holland, France … on my own. When I landed in Amsterdam for the first time, I had 5p in my pocket and nowhere to stay. … We would take buckets to ask for donations and sell badges and that on street markets. Altogether I raised £660,000 for the Gwent food centre. All that money was sent back to the food centre. We even took 48 children to Holland for Christmas.\textsuperscript{130}

This is a striking achievement and proves that all kinds of women became involved in different activities during the strike.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion then, it is easy to see then, that the term ‘support group’ embraces a wide diversity of organisations and should not be perceived as a homogenous group. There were groups ranging from only a handful to up to twenty members, some consisted of women only whereas others were organised or helped out by men. In some such as that at Maerdy it seems that the women did the organisation, collection and distribution of food themselves. In others such as that at Rhymney, women were

\textsuperscript{128} Interview with Beryl Fury, Abergavenny, 27 January 2008.
\textsuperscript{129} Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) \textit{Striking Back}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
helpers alongside the men who were primarily in charge of the organisation and food. Some groups were affiliated to others such as in the Neath and Dulais Valleys where food was collected by a main group then fairly redistributed, or at Beddau where they sent money to central funds at Pontypridd and then received goods in return. Others such as that in Abertillery had no links with other groups or organisations. In some cases the links often caused conflicts, as had already been described with groups feeling they had their goods unfairly taken or not redistributed fairly enough.

In all instances, then, it is easy to see that any notion that the groups were overall very similar is simply not the case. Where we might imagine a cohesive group of women fighting alongside each other to support the miners, the evidence here shows that in some cases the groups were fighting amongst themselves as well as fighting the government. Women often walked a fine line within their own communities, for ‘when many of the women speak about this strike they may be treading a tightrope between their solidarity with their grievances against the men in their communities. Union officials who in public applaud these ‘heroines’ sometimes in private do their damnest to prevent them gaining any political ground.’

Women did not perform the same tasks, some took on the more traditional role of fundraising, whereas others travelled the country taking part in rallies, demonstrations and picketing and even speaking at conferences and on television. There is also the example of Beryl Fury who travelled Europe in the quest for funds. There is not even a similarity in the background of the women who became involved, for instance there is no typical ‘type’ of woman who would join a support group. Many were ordinary miners housewives, some had part-time jobs, others had previous experience in political groups and organisations, some did not even have relatives that were miners,

131 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 33.
they became involved simply because they believed in fighting for the cause. Bearing all of this in mind then, it is extremely difficult to describe a typical South Wales woman or a typical South Wales support group.

Many of the women who were involved believed that after the strike had ended, they would not go back to the way their lives had been before the strike. They felt that their lives had been significantly changed so that they wanted different things from life: ‘if a by-product of the strike is that many more women will now become active in local and national politics, then that is something to applaud.’ They aimed to continue this change by maintaining their local support groups:

when the strike is over the women’s support group will stay together. We’re preparing things now. There’s a conference being arranged which will be held every year for groups throughout the country, and we’re going to have monthly meetings. We will keep in contact and stay together as a women’s action support group, and whatever we can fight, we’ll fight; whoever’s in difficulty, we’ll help them. There’s no way we’ll ever go behind the kitchen sink again. No way.

Another woman from Treherbert said, ‘There’s no way I’m going to sit down in the house after this is over, after being so active. We’ve been so strong now that it would be pointless not to stay together.’ However, when the strike ended, many women found their normal lives taking precedence again and numbers in the support groups began to dwindle, though there were examples of individual women who were changed by the strike, such as Sian James, who did go on to do other things. Others may have changed in a less obvious way, for example, instances will be discussed later in the case of organisations such as DOVE, of women who did grow in confidence after their involvement in the strike. However, it is impossible to tell whether these women would have achieved these things if they had never been

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132 Western Mail, 20 July 1984.
133 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 32.
134 Ibid. p. 47.
involved in support work. Mrs Thomas from Abertillery said, ‘we’ve had great fun at
the food centre over the months. Lots of laughs and we’ve made lots of friends. I’m
determined to get a job for myself when the strike is over - I don’t want to go back to
being in the house full-time.’

However, what the women achieved, as well as their impact on their local
communities and further afield, was extremely significant:

what the women have done, in effect, is to set up an alternative welfare
system. In conjunction with the NUM strike committees at each lodge
they are supporting over 100,000 people in the South Wales valleys. They
provide both moral and practical help, and they are prepared to deal with
any situation that arises. … The history of their own communities
obviously has influenced the success of the support groups, but the
women have also travelled the length and breadth of Britain speaking at
meetings and rallies to win support.

In particular, not all of the activities women undertook to support their communities
during the 1984-85 miners’ strike were novel, as we have seen pre-echoes of similar
activity in the past. However, the scale and activities the women went on to become
involved in (such as picketing and public speaking) was original and new to the strike.
They set up a network of women’s support groups throughout the coalfield, raised
funds, ran food centres and travelled Britain attending demonstrations and addressing
meetings, as well as picketing.

Women found that they could both stay at home with the family and go out to
work or take part in community activities. For many, this was the start of a new life
where they found the courage to join further education and join the workforce.
Although some women did not see a massive change in their lives after the strike,
their involvement did impact on all of them, be it in a large or small way. One woman
from the Neath and Dulais Valley says, ‘my attitudes have changed through the strike.

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135 Western Mail, 18 December 1984.
136 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 35.
I thought I was a socialist before. Now I know what socialism is - it’s a whole way of life, and we’re living it in our valley right now.’\textsuperscript{138}

However, there is often the tendency to remember an event as dramatic as the strike with fond memories that are not always strictly accurate. It is common to hear women describing the year with quotes such as ‘the best time of their life’ and so on. Yet, there were hard times and these were just as significant as the good. For example, in early April 1984, the \textit{South Wales Echo} described how miners’ wives from South Wales had been writing to the NCB in a bid to get them to call a ballot over strike action. Letters were sent to both the NCB headquarters, Hobart House in London, and directly to South Wales Area director Philip Weekes. An NCB spokesperson said that the wives wanted the dispute to end so that their husbands would be paid as they were concerned about the mounting household bills.\textsuperscript{139} This type of opinion is not normally portrayed. Usually the women from mining communities are displayed as a homogenous group who always pulled together, fought, and ‘were there for each other’. This one example shows that this was not the case.

Similarly, the \textit{Daily Express} describes a group set up by local women called the Moderate Miners’ Wives Democratic Movement, which intended to raise a rebellion against Arthur Scargill. A miner’s wife (whose husband had worked at the National Smokeless Fuel Plant at Abercwmboi in Aberdare) and mother of three, Mrs Watson said,

\begin{quote}
It is time for us to speak out. … It is time for my husband and all the men to go back to work. We will make our stand for democracy. We must not be frightened any more. … We’ve been feeling so desperately low. They said the strike would go on until the autumn and I knew we could not go
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{138} Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) \textit{Striking Back}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{South Wales Echo}, 3 April 1984.
on any longer like this. It was scary for me but I decided there and then it was up to me to do something about it.\textsuperscript{140}

The group later went on to hold a meeting showing varied support from throughout the coalfield and to petition Labour leader Neil Kinnock, appealing to him to press the miners’ union to hold a ballot. The support meeting began by the women opening around fifty letters of support that had been delivered, as well as donations of £260.\textsuperscript{141} This is something not widely spoken about in the South Wales coalfield. Therefore, support for the miners’ strike was not always easily given, even by the wives of those involved.

Also, in early August 1984, another miner’s wife, this time Mrs Rita Carter from Glynneath, spoke out about the solidity of support behind the strike and helped start a movement aimed at securing a ballot for the miners. She said, ‘I could not stand by and listen to people saying the miners’ were 100 percent behind the strike when that is just not true.’\textsuperscript{142} She later joined with the Moderate Miners’ Militant Wives Democratic Movement, which claimed to have over 100 supporters in the South Wales Valleys, who were anonymous for fear of reprisal.\textsuperscript{143}

The strike not only had an effect on the women themselves, but obviously on their home lives and relationships with both family and friends. The strike itself put a strain on the relationships of the couples involved. In some instances, gender roles were reversed, in that the miners on strike stayed at home with the children and the women helped out in the support groups. Sometimes this worked well and men were proud to see their partners becoming so involved; in fact there have been examples of some women saying that they could not have become so involved in their groups had

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Daily Express}, 25 July 1984
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 27 July 1984.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Evening Post}, 1 August 1984.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Rhymney Valley Express}, 21 August 1984.
it not been for the support of their partners.

However, this was not always the case and sometimes men resented women’s involvement, especially on the more militant side such as picketing or public-speaking. For example, the support group from Abertillery said that the very first barrier they had to break down at the start of the strike was to gain access to the men-only miners’ institute, one woman said, ‘what a break through it was getting into that institute. People were amazed. They thought we were bloody wonderful just getting our feet through the door. … In many valleys the strike brought a new respect for women. In other places men felt threatened by this new demonstration of women’s power’144 A similar development could be seen at Oakdale where the men wouldn’t ‘let’ the women go picketing, but the women were not offended as they felt they did not really want to do it anyway (especially after the rumours heard about the problems on picket lines) and that they would not do it without the support of the Union as if there were any problems and they were arrested, they would not have been provided with assistance.145

Added to these tensions could be family members or even other women within the community who did not support the strike and therefore judged those who did. This could cause conflict within the community as well as within families. The Welsh Campaign for Civil Liberties states that the women who gladly fought for the cause and to save jobs and communities, have two regrets: ‘the first is that their children have had to go without. … the second regret is that they have had to depend on their relatives, often on retired parents living on state pension,’146 and,

the women have changed through giving up financial security and a normal family life in the present to fight for those very things in the

144 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, p. 165.
145 Oakdale: Interview with Members of the Women’s Support Committee.
146 Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties (eds.) Striking Back, p. 39.
future. They have changed not only as individuals, but their relationships with men in the mining communities have altered, and they have changed the communities in which they live. The strike has changed the whole nature of politics.\textsuperscript{147}

What the women seem to have gained most from the strike is a social life. Previous to the strike, many of the women may have found themselves isolated as they looked after their homes and families, whereas their support work enabled them to get out into the community and meet people with similar interests, hopes and beliefs. This is perhaps something that would not have been possible had the strike not taken place. It is epitomised by the woman from the Onllwyn support group who says,

I think a lot of women have gained a lot from this as well though, they’ve developed a social life, if you like, around the food parcels, I think a lot of women are actually enjoying it, I don’t say enjoying the strike, don’t get me wrong, but enjoying the social contact they have achieved through this. … And the communities are back together again. … We’ve made so many friends and contacts, it’s wonderful.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid. p. 47.
CHAPTER 5

Welsh Women After the Strike

‘I believe that the radical-ness and the militancy of the strike was because of the women’s involvement. … I think the strike did politicise women, it was one of the initial sparks that politicised me. I believe women were politicised but it’s been downplayed, by both themselves and others. Many women I’ve spoken to have said that the miners’ strike was the beginning for them too.’

Such a momentous and far-reaching event as the miners’ strike was bound to leave a lasting effect, though effects can vary so much from one individual to another that it may be difficult to measure. Some women who were interviewed were so relieved when the strike came to an end that they were keen to return quickly to their previous way of life (that is, how they and their families lived before the strike). However, there were women at the other end of the spectrum who still believe today that their lives were completely changed by their strike experiences, and that there was no way they could return to a previous existence. For example, Tyrone O’Sullivan stated that ‘it is likely that the actions of these women changed attitudes forever about the role of women.’

However, there are obviously many women who fall somewhere in between the two positions; women such as Lee Guest from Cwm for example, who was a member of the Marine Colliery Women’s Support Group, and only became involved to

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1 Interview with Leanne Wood, National Assembly Building, 21 February 2008.
2 http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2009/03/09 ‘Former NUM Secretary Tyrone
support her husband. She was a twenty-seven year old married mother of three during the strike. She says, ‘it was something that had to be done at the time, and it was good to get support from the group. … We had to fight to keep the mines because it meant jobs, I had two sons and although I didn’t exactly want them to work in the pit, the prospect of employment was there.’ There were other women who enjoyed the work and the experience it gave them, such as Yvonne West from the same support group. Like Lee Guest, Yvonne supported both her husband and son who were striking miners throughout the dispute, for

although she admits times were hard, she said it was a life-changing experience, during which she found new friends, “When I think back now, I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” said Mrs West. “You discovered that people who you thought were not your friends were, and everyone rallied around.”

These two women alone show that there were different reasons for getting involved, different activities once they had joined and different experiences thereafter.

This chapter therefore will investigate the impact that the year-long miners’ strike had on the women involved. Katy Shaw says, ‘as a result of their involvement in the strike, women moved from the private sphere to the public, from passive to active social, political, and economic roles. This symbolic shift from standing behind men to beside them, from silence to articulation, and from the home front to the front line, launched these women into a new world of conflict, communication, and cross-gender co-operation.’ The dramatic effect that the strike and later colliery closures had on the face of South Wales and its communities has already been examined. The valleys are now green, with hardly any reminders of the massive industrial workings that were omnipresent only a few decades ago. For example, at the end of the strike in

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3 Merthyr Express, 19 March 2004 (supplement), p. 11.

4 Ibid.
March 1985 there was still a total of 156 pits throughout the UK Coal Industry,\textsuperscript{6} thirty-one of these being in South Wales;\textsuperscript{7} the last colliery in the area (Tower Colliery in Hirwaun) closed in 2008.

Without doubt this massive disruption and upheaval to the economy and industry of South Wales has had a profound and lasting impact on its communities. Employment activities and statistics, as well as family and community life and even gender relations, have all been transformed by the colliery closure programme throughout South Wales. The communities of the South Wales valleys have high unemployment rates as well as high sickness rates. Those who are employed normally have to commute a significant distance each day to work. This in effect stems from the outcome of the 1984-85 miners’ strike, and, had the ending been different, then the South Wales valleys might today be a very different place. While women have been a part of this change, it is harder to consider the effect of the strike on them than on the communities themselves.

The general belief held by both the women involved and academics such as Katy Shaw is that, ‘women who had previously stayed at home and looked after the family had found a new confidence through their involvement in the strike. They had never done anything like it before but put in that position found that they could stand [up] and speak.’\textsuperscript{8} Dot Jones, a member of the support group at Celynen North and South (Newbridge), echoes this when she says, ‘it helped women to come forward and made them not really just housewives because, very much in our area and the communities we lived in, at that period of time, women stayed at home.’\textsuperscript{9} Shaw also

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{7} http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/news/0403mscwp.html (accessed 5th February 2009)
\textsuperscript{8} Shaw, ‘Striking Women’, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{9} http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/minersstrike/minersstrikecontent/2009/03/07 ‘Women’s role in the miners’ strike, 25 years on’, March 7 2009 by Catherine Jones, Western Mail (accessed 10 March
believes that women were changed by the strike, but that it did not happen easily or without problems. She believes that the women of mining communities, especially, faced a unique problem compared to women from other areas in that there was not a distinct divide between the home, workplace and community. In fact, a local colliery would normally completely take over its surrounding community in that many of the community’s social and economic functions were based on it. Shaw says, ‘in mining regions, the finances, health, transport, accommodation and gender perceptions of women were all dependent, to an extent, upon the pit. Consequently, many women experienced tensions between their new active roles in the strike and their familial responsibilities in the home.’

Mair Francis agrees that women were changed by the strike when she states, ‘the political activities experienced by the wives of miners during the miners’ strike provided them with new skills to think beyond the immediate struggle and to forge a future for themselves, their families and their community.’ This was not necessarily always the case though, and is often difficult to prove. For example, Carol Parry was a member of the Maerdy Support Group during the 1984-85 strike. She was a miner’s wife who worked part-time as a care worker, with a grown-up son. Her husband himself was particularly active during the strike. She says that, ‘before the strike of 1984 I hardly knew anything about the dispute but its arrival changed a lot of things for me and for many others like me.’ She goes on to describe how she became involved in the support group and her experiences travelling both across Britain and in Europe speaking to raise funds,

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10 Shaw, ‘Striking Women’, p. 627.
12 Merthyr Express, 19 March 2004 (supplement), p. 10.
soon after I was asked if I would join others up in Oxford, speaking publicly and collecting funds and food to send back home. … I also had the opportunity to take the struggle abroad, where we received astounding support from well-wishers. … But I recall one particular trip. A trip was organised … to go to Belgium to speak. … On the fifth night we were speaking on stage when the police appeared, and were suddenly ushered off into a corner where everyone was talking tensely. We didn’t know what was going on and had to wait two hours before we were taken by an unmarked car, not back to our hotel but to a safe place. We later learned that a bomb device had been discovered in the room of our hotel. The landlady had alerted police after two men, who said they were local police, arrived and asked to do a security check at our rooms. The landlady was suspicious and as there had been a lot of union bombings around that time, she contacted the station where they had no record of the visit.13

Although it is clear she is proud of her activities in the dispute, there is no real evidence whether the strike had a dramatic impact on her life afterwards. However, the fact that she was already employed part-time shows that she had the confidence and skill to go out into the workplace. This then led her to become more active in her strike work. The fact that her husband was also active probably helped her to become more aware and more involved too. In this respect then, there may be a pattern to the type of women who became involved and to what extent they became incorporated in strike activities. For instance, the fact that Carol Parry became so heavily involved in ‘radical’ strike activities (that is, that she went further than just the traditional activities of working in a food kitchen, for example speaking abroad) may be because she already had the confidence and those qualities required due to her life skills. Had she not been employed, her strike work may have been different and therefore not had so much of an impact on her. This shows the importance of women’s involvement in the workplace.

There is always a tendency to remember the past selectively, and this is particularly evident when using oral sources as many seem to remember ‘the good

13 Ibid. p. 10.
times’ and filter out memories of the bad.\textsuperscript{14} This is often the case during interviews about women involved in the strike, but also in the media. For example, it is often stated that the strike was, ‘one event (that) changed the lives of many women from Wales … (the) protest changed their lives forever’.\textsuperscript{15} Also, the \textit{Merthyr Express} newspaper in a 20\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Special supplement in 2004 expressed the view that, one of the most significant things about the strike was the way that women in the mining areas became politically active. No longer content to let men do the fighting, the wives of miners, supported by other women, formed themselves into Miners’ Support Groups throughout South Wales. … One woman who became a leading activist not only in Maesteg but further afield was Vi John of Garth.\textsuperscript{16}

The opening line of this quotation describes how women became more politically active during the strike and goes on to describe the achievements of Violet John. This gives the impression that John herself was politicised by her activities.\textsuperscript{17} It is only because she has previously been studied\textsuperscript{18} that we know that this is not actually the case, and that she was in fact involved in political disputes in her native Ireland. She grew up with a politically active family. Her mother was an activist during the 1920s and spent some time in Mountjoy Prison, and her sisters were involved in the Kilmainham hunger strike. She moved to Maesteg as a teenager, married an engineer and had several jobs at local factories. She became involved in the strike only due to feeling the need to help, rather than actually having any connection with the mining industry. After the strike she went on take part in other campaigns, such as the

\textsuperscript{15} http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/minersstrike/minersstrikecontent/2009/03/07 ‘Women’s role in the miners’ strike, 25 years on’, March 7 2009 by Catherine Jones, \textit{Western Mail} (accessed 10 March 2009)
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Merthyr Express}, 19 March 2004 (supplement), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 11.
\textsuperscript{18} See chapter 4.
opposition to opencast mining.\textsuperscript{19} Therefore she shows signs of political activity in events both before and after the strike that had no link to that event itself. In her case then, it would be incorrect to believe that her involvement in the strike had a significant impact on her or her life afterwards.

Obviously, no two women were the same nor were their family lives or experiences of the strike. The most productive way of examining the impact of the strike on the women involved, therefore, would be to examine the individual women’s stories. To enable a fairer judgement to be made, there needs to be a continuity of information sought from each individual. These will be, a look at the woman’s activity before the strike (that is to determine whether she was actually a housewife who had never been actively involved in anything previously or whether she had taken part in other groups or community activity), then move on to look at the woman’s activity within the support group: for instance, whether she preferred the more traditional roles such as support work, or to go out and speak at meetings and attend picket lines. This might help us to understand whether those who were more ‘untraditionally’ active were more likely to continue with other activities after the strike or not. It could also determine whether those women who were more active in the group had previous experience anyway, or whether the strike experience really did change them and give them the confidence to enter other spheres. Also, we can ask whether this level of activity during the strike, for them, reached a new level of intensity. All of this will then lead us on to examine what women did afterwards.

Therefore, a clearer view can be gained by examining the individual women who were discussed in chapter four. Their strike work, previous experience and work afterwards will be considered to gain an insight into whether or not their lives were

significantly changed by their involvement in the strike. As before, the discussion will be divided into ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ sectors. The ‘Western’ sector includes support groups located in areas such as the Swansea, Neath and Dulais Valleys, as well as Maesteg, as far as the tip of the Rhondda Valley, while the ‘Eastern’ sector will examine those from the Rhondda Valley across to the East, such as Maerdy, Aberdare, the Rhymney Valley and remarkably Abergavenny.

**Women from the ‘Western’ sector**

Firstly, the ‘Western’ sector will be examined. Christine Powell from Seven Sisters who was treasurer of her support group had been politically active, was well-educated and had been known for her activity within the community before her involvement in the strike. She had studied at university, was a comprehensive school teacher and was a member of both the community council and Labour Party. She even mentions herself that the strike did not have a big impact on her life as she had experience of working and helping with community initiatives before. 20 In her case then, her involvement in the strike could be seen as a continuity of activity rather than a change from what she was used to. After the strike had ended, she did not encounter a significant change in her life; it cannot be said that she was politicised or became more active in the community after the strike, as she was all of these things beforehand. Similarly, Violet John can also be placed in the same ‘category’ as Christine. She had no connection with the mining industry and joined the struggle because she wanted to help rather than assist those in the community she knew. She became extremely active, taking part in marches, rallies and demonstrations as well as setting up a soup kitchen at her local support group. She had previous experience of

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20 *Christine Powell (AUD/509)*, South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
political activity and it should be no surprise to learn that she went on to take part in other campaigns, such as the opposition to opencast mining.\textsuperscript{21} Again then, in her case the strike can be seen as a continuation of her political activity.

When examined more closely, it seems that many women who became involved in the support groups did in fact have some experience before they joined. Although many class themselves as a ‘miner’s wife’ this does not mean that they were in some way cut off from the outside world. Many either had part-time jobs, were educated or had taken part in community activities such as organising events or helping at their children’s school. Although they may not have been ‘politicised’ before in the sense that they had not previously taken part in events such as the strike, this did not mean that they had absolutely no experience. For the majority, the norm lay somewhere in between. For example, Hefina Headon from Seven Sisters was a miner’s wife and daughter, but before the strike she had substantial work experience running the Post Office at the village in Onllwyn. Although she became heavily involved in the ‘non-traditional’ activities of the strike such as picketing, attending marches, rallies and conferences, and she was secretary of the Neath and Swansea Valley Support Group,\textsuperscript{22} she says that she did not really see much point in the strike; it was too late as the valley was already devastated.\textsuperscript{23} However, she did go on to do other things in the strike, and we will see later that she became heavily involved with the DOVE Workshop. She also worked in the community, organising annual events after the strike had ended. Of course, with her record of previous work in the community, she might have done all of these things without her strike experience: she, again, could be another individual with ‘continuity’ rather than a change of commitment due to the

\textsuperscript{21} Alkema, \textit{Women With A Past}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Alkema, \textit{Women With A Past}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{23} NUM Discussion Class: Hefina Headon / Ali Thomas (AUD/510), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
Sian James from Morriston was a miner’s wife and daughter and had young children at the time of the strike, yet she also had a socialist family background which had led her to become interested in politics in 1982 with the outbreak on the Falklands War, when she joined the CND. She became heavily involved with the strike support group and took part in activities such as picketing, and attended marches, meetings and rallies. She was even one of the group of seventeen women who occupied the Manager’s Office at Cynheidre Colliery for several days during the strike. In her case therefore, although she was a ‘miner’s wife’ she did have some political background. This could have been what allowed her to become more involved in the ‘militant’ activities of the support group rather than the traditional side of practical help with the food side of support. Although she states that, ‘over twenty years ago, when as a young mother, I became involved in the 1984 Miners’ Strike [and] I and many other women had the opportunity for the first time to be much more active within our communities,’ this was not completely true of her own experience. Maybe she believes her activities in the CND to not be as important as her work in the miners’ strike but clearly she was involved in political activities before 1984-5.

She herself believes that the strike did have a massive impact on her and her life afterwards. She states, ‘When the strike ended I was afraid that I would be forced back into being an ordinary housewife, sentenced to a life of humdrum domesticity. Very quickly, I recognised that I had changed and that I really liked the person I had become.’ After the strike she went on to further her education and obtained a degree from Swansea University, entered the job market and eventually became Director of Welsh Women’s Aid. She then went on to become Labour MP for Swansea East in

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24 Sian James (& Margaret Donovan) (AUD/503), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
the General Election of 2005. 27 In her case, she would agree that the strike did have a significant impact on her life and maybe without her involvement she would not have gone on to achieve what she has today.

As has been seen, individual cases suggest that none really conform to the typical idea of commentators on the strike that women were completely revolutionised by taking part and their lives thereafter completely changed by its impact. One miner said just after the strike that in his communities (of Tredegar, Markham and Oakdale) the women had had no previous involvement with trade unions, ‘they were just ordinary housewives’. 28 However, another miner who did not state his community, believed that the supporters in his area were already working women anyway. 29 It was therefore because they already had some confidence to go out into the community that they became involved in strike support work in the first place. Of course, individuals saw their area as the norm. No two areas or individuals were alike.

A typical example of a woman who was dramatically changed by the strike is Margaret Donovan from Ynyswen. She explains that although she was a member of the Royal Air Force in a clerical position before she met her husband, before the strike she was unwilling to become involved in any political or community activities, ‘when I had the children my life centred around the children, I had them quite close together. Centred round playgroups, school, certainly didn’t go out at all.’ 30 But she became involved in her local support group which enabled her to become more active. She says,

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 NUM Discussion Class (AUD/497).
29 Ibid.
30 Interview with Margaret Donovan, Ynyswen, 28 January 1985, Interviewed by Ursula Masson (Transcript), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea, p. 56.
I didn’t really get to know anybody … I was not a good mixer … But since the strike I know a terrific amount, and we are all good friends now, that’s one good thing about it really. Got me out of the house. … David (her husband) has been the active one, always has been, and I was quite content to let them get on with it. … I am more active in a lot of things now. … Dave pushed me into going, I didn’t want to go. I’m not one for going out and mixing, I didn’t know anyone who was going, but Dave really forced me to go against my will, and I enjoyed it.31

Margaret then went on to become Chairperson of her local Women’s Support Group and was a delegate from her group to the umbrella organisation the South Wales Women Support Group.

In her case, then, she herself believes that she was changed by the strike. She is keen to stress that before her involvement in the dispute, she was unwilling to take part in activities outside her family home, but because of her support work, she achieved things she never thought possible. She says ‘it has made a difference to my way of life to start with, I never went out before, I would never have dreamt of talking in front of a meeting, or even chairing a meeting. … And it’s made me more aware of things, I haven’t been aware of before’.32 However it does seem that she took part in these activities because of her husband’s efforts and had he not been so involved then neither would she. From her interview that was completed just before the end of the strike, it seems that she would have been keen to return to her ‘normal’ home life after the support group had disbanded. There is no evidence that she went on to continue her community activities after the strike.

**Women from the ‘Eastern’ sector**

Importantly, when moving towards the ‘Eastern’ sector of the coalfield, it can be seen that not all women were typical miner’s wives, nor were they necessarily involved in

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid. p. 61.
the stereotypical community support group. For example, we have seen three women from Aberdare [Ann Wilson, Christine Thomas and Christine Harvey] who were members of their local CND group which had close links with the local colliery and miners, and often supported each other. This was the reason the CND group began door to door food collections for the miners and their families. In this case then, it was not a miner’s support group, nor was it all-female, yet it was still an official group affiliated to the local NUM. All three were politically active before the strike and remained so afterwards. So again, these women’s involvement can be seen as a continuation of their normal activities. Their involvement in strike support work did not dramatically change their lives or politicise them as they were just as active before the strike as during and remained so afterwards with their work with the CND.

Something similar could be said of Joyce Giblin from Newport. She had no links with the mining community but did have a socialist background and became involved in strike support only after witnessing the behaviour of police towards miners on picket lines. After the strike she went on to take part in other campaigns such as the rights of Travellers and Gypsies in her local area, and Greenpeace, and in April 2007 she stood for election to the Welsh Assembly to represent Blaenau Gwent under the Socialist Labour Party. Again though, it is more than likely that she would have gone on to do these things anyway since she was active before the strike, and it was not necessarily her involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike that politicised her.

As in the cases of women from the ‘Western’ sector, it was not uncommon for miners’ wives themselves to become involved in strike support because they had

33 Interview with Ann Wilson, Christine Thomas and Christine Harvey, Aberdare, 17 April 2008.
34 Alkema, Women With A Past, p. 7.
previous experience in political activities. For example, Ann Jones from Hirwaun was a miner’s wife but she herself had a substantial political background. Having grown up with her grandparents, she had become an active Labour Party member and trade unionist at the age of fifteen. So although she became involved in the strike to support her husband, she had a background in politics and she had always worked full-time. She became heavily involved with the strike, eventually chairing the South Wales Women’s Support Group, as well as picketing, speaking alongside politicians and NUM leaders and canvassing across Europe collecting funds. She is still politically active, having helped her husband who was a member of the TEBO Team (Tower Employment Buy Out) that succeeded in organizing the miners buy out of Tower Colliery, and even canvassing for Labour candidates at elections.36 Once again, her strike activity was not novel or new to her, but rather a continuation of her previous activities. It was not the impact of the strike which politicised her.

In some respects then, Steffan Morgan’s broad generalisation that ‘there was no doubt that in South Wales the majority of activists were miners’ wives,37 does have some factual basis. Yet, what many perceive as a typical ‘miner’s wife’ would not be someone like Ann Jones. The historic belief that miner’s wives were purely domestic housewives is very rarely true, as has already been seen with just these few examples. Many already had part-time jobs or had been involved within their community or local politics before their support work during the strike. In fact, it could have been because of their previous experience and skills that these women became involved in the strike to begin with.

So far there has only been a very small number of women who have concluded

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that their lives were dramatically changed by their involvement in the strike. For example, Ann Williams from New Tredegar became Chairwoman of the Rhymney Support Group and believes that the strike did have an impact on the women who became involved in her community. She describes a distinct divide within her group of around thirty women, whereby only half would regularly attend meetings that involved travelling from their local community, picketing or demonstrations. The other fifteen or so women were content to help fundraise and attend meetings within the community, which links with the idea of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ support. For example, half of the group were keen to stay within the confines of their community and therefore were involved in the more ‘traditional’ work of collecting money, fundraising, and packing food parcels, while the other women were more militant and therefore more confident to become involved in ‘non-traditional’ support such as speaking at rallies, attending demonstrations and picket lines and becoming speakers.

Ann herself was one of the women who was keen to travel outside South Wales, as well as become involved in picketing and ‘militant’ strike work, an independent-mindedness she had gained from being active within her community and owning the local shop, though she was still a miner’s wife. The shop eventually became a focus of strike support work where members of the community could gather and bring articles to donate, but also proves that she had the confidence to do other things before her involvement in the strike. However, she still states that,

we were more militant in this area because they had already taken our colliery, we knew it was the end of the line. … I think it definitely happened in New Tredegar that the strike brought the women out of their shell and allowed them to go and do other things. Before the strike I had been involved in the Labour Party and was a school governor. Me and

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another woman had both been involved in the Labour Party, but all the others were miners’ wives. I was a miner’s wife too but I had done other things. But after the strike, two of the other women got on to the local council. … We still had a group four or five years after the strike, with meetings to see what was happening. … We were a very active group. After the strike I went on the community council for about six years until my father became ill. Also, one of the ladies from the Penallta group went on to university and then on to be a teacher. I think her name was Sandra James. Kath Jones still attends as one of the friends of the museum in New Tredegar, she’s still involved.39

Ann Williams herself believes that the strike did have a significant impact on her life afterwards. She may well have gone on to join the community council even without her involvement in strike support, yet she does give examples of other women who were changed by their involvement. It is important that many of the women themselves perceived the strike as a significant part of their lives and therefore affected what came afterwards.

While many women who became involved in strike support did so because they truly believed in fighting for the cause, others conformed to the popularly received view of the ‘miner’s wife’ and became involved purely to support their husbands. For example, two such women would be Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price from Aberdare. Their small support group was not ‘women-only’ but instead included mainly miners and their wives. While Avril had worked part-time both before and during the strike, both women were keen to stress that they had not been involved in any community activities before they joined the support group. It seems that both became involved purely in a supportive sense, in fact, Avril even mentioned that she was gad to ‘return to normal’ after the strike had ended.40 Again then, for both of these women, their involvement in the strike can still be seen as a ‘continuation of passive activities’. Neither was politically or actively involved in the strike with activities such as

39 Ibid.
40 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
picketing or attending demonstrations, and they were both happy to return to their normal lives afterwards. There is no evidence that they felt the strike had a significant impact on their lives afterwards.41

Similarly Beryl Fury, who although not a miner’s wife came from a mining family, did not believe that she could ever become involved in such an event. She said, ‘before the strike I always said that I would never join a women’s group because you would be the first one to be talked about! But there was nothing before the strike that I had felt so strongly about. When the strike started I had to join and help.’42 Yet she went on to become heavily involved in support work and travelled alone in Europe raising funds to send back to the support group. She travelled in Western Europe especially, mainly Holland, Italy and France. She even helped arrange a trip for forty-eight children to be taken to Amsterdam for Christmas.43 There is no evidence that she was involved in these sort of activities before the strike, and even she states that it was only because she felt so strongly about the cause that she became involved in the miners’ strike itself. Yet afterwards she went on to run for election at her local council.

In her case then, the strike did have an impact, and gave her the experience and confidence she needed to go on and do things she may not have done without becoming involved in strike support. She says, ‘after the strike I don’t think anybody went back to the way they were before. People changed forever. It was a wake-up in awareness for people, I think it was a good thing. … My involvement in the strike made me have self-worth and gave me a lot of confidence in myself. I did things I never thought I would do.’44 Interestingly, Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru Assembly

41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Member for South Wales Central since 2003) who was only eleven at the time of the strike, sees it as the awakenings of her political career and says,

I believe that the radical-ness and the militancy of the strike was because of the women’s involvement. … I think the strike did politicise women, it was one of the initial sparks that politicised me. I believe women were politicised but it’s been downplayed, by both themselves and others. Many women I’ve spoken to have said that the miners’ strike was the beginning for them too.  

She makes an interesting point that perhaps the women themselves do not realise how much they were politicised by the strike.

Whilst some women see the strike as the spur that allowed them to go out into their communities and become more active, others were already doing this before they became involved in strike support. Anne England from Aberfan, for instance, joined with other members of the local churches and chapels during the strike to form a small group, after identifying that the people in her local community were no longer getting their coal supplies, and organised fundraising to provide this coal. However, before the strike Anne was a qualified teacher and had been previously politically active as the Chair of the Welsh Anti-Nuclear Alliance (WANA). This group also had strong links with the local colliery and she had addressed meetings there in early 1980 and during the strike. In her case then, her involvement in the strike was just a natural progression from her current activities, not a radical change for her.

**Continuity of activism**

In the previous chapter we noted that it was the women themselves who saw their involvement in the strike as significantly life-changing. Clearly, all the women had

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46 Interview with Anne England, Merthyr Tydfil, 22 June 2005. Interviewed by Rebecca Davies.
different backgrounds before they became involved in the strike. This in turn seems to have affected their involvement in the strike too, in that there is a correlation between women’s political activity before the strike and the nature of the activities they became involved in with the support groups, and then their work afterwards. For instance, it seems that those women who had experience of involvement in other activities prior to the strike were more likely to be at ease in the leadership of support groups or become involved in non-traditional support such as picketing and attending demonstrations and public speaking, and these were the women, such as Sian James, who went on to other activities after the strike such as work within the community, returning to education, employment or fighting for different causes. Those women with a typical ‘miner’s wife’ background (that is, women who did not have substantial experience in other activities prior to the strike) were more likely to prefer to take part in the more traditional support such as fundraising and helping with food parcels and were happy to return to their ‘normal lives’ after the strike had ended. In this respect then, the remark from a female support group member, ‘before we were content to lead normal lives. We will never go back to what we were,’ is not entirely accurate. As has already been seen by examining individual women, it seems that their involvement in the strike is more a ‘continuation of activism’ in that for the majority of women, the strike does not seem to have been a completely new experience for them. Their work and history before the strike seems to influence their involvements therein. There has been substantial evidence of this in the studies of individual women.

For the women involved in the strike it was a struggle for jobs, communities and a way of life. Katy Shaw believes that as the strike continued, it did in fact

proceed to address the wider need for gender solidarity. She also states that, ‘although women had supported men in past strikes, the extent of their participation in the 1984-85 dispute was revolutionary. Despite having relatively little previous experience of collective action, women materially sustained the miners’ strike, motivated by the right to work, the right to stand and the right to struggle’.48 However, this is not necessarily the case. It is true that the women who became involved did so on an unprecedented scale, yet there is evidence that many of the women who did join support groups had some sort of experience beforehand which gave them a new or sharpened gender awareness. Later there will be discussion about the impact that women’s involvement in the strike had on gender relations or their place within communities.49

Shaw believed that women’s involvement did in fact challenge their role within society. She says,

women both supported and challenged the strike movement, blurring boundaries between their formal and informal involvement in the dispute. I doing so they also blurred boundaries imposed on the nature of their support work, challenging the validity of singularly “community-” or “work-based” assistance while actively transgressing the male-dominated realm of direct action. … Significantly women’s strike writings challenge preconceptions of traditional gender roles.50

This in turn allowed women to exercise their power more constructively for political and social concerns as the strike allowed an absence of normal social restraints.51 Importantly, women’s own writing on their involvement in the strike seems to describe a sort of emancipation or transformation,

They talk about solidarity, about the price of coal
The cost is our community, is dying on the dole

49 For further discussion see pp, 34 onwards.
50 Shaw, ‘Striking Women’, p. 620.
51 Ibid. p. 621.
In fighting for our future, we’ve found ways to organise
Where women’s liberation failed to move, the strike has mobilised.
(Anon.) 52

In Shaw’s case then, she clearly believes that women were changed by the strike and uses the poetry and writings of strike women to prove her case. However, she also implies that the women who became involved in strike support were new to this challenge and were therefore significantly changed by their involvement. She says, ‘Women’s strike poetry charts this process of transformation, from isolated individuals tentatively finding their way in the world to a collective, imposing and united front’. 53 But the evidence in the case of the South Wales women suggests that this was not necessarily the case, although there are very rare examples of Welsh women’s strike poetry. Shaw adds, ‘sheer necessity forces these women to adopt previously male dominated roles of provider and organiser.’ 54 Of course there have been many examples of South Wales women who were already organisers themselves and could be also classed as ‘providers’ as they too were employed.

However, Shaw does describe an important shift in community life that has yet to be mentioned though it is traditionally associated with South Wales, and that is religion. She gives examples of female strikers who were disappointed by their own churches’ handling of the dispute. She claims that the women’s writings show that the churches response to the strike was ‘small-scale’ and ‘patchy’ and that, ‘several female strikers even asserted that the church showed an utter disregard for the strike and its victims’. 55 This is interesting in that if the women involved reacted so strongly then they would not have returned to their church, and this would therefore have impacted on the local society and community. Shaw describes the author of a poem

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52 Ibid. p. 622.
53 Ibid. p. 622.
54 Ibid. p. 624.
and her disappointment with the church when she states, ‘this frustration leads her to abandon the church, shifting her faith to new forms of community and solidarity offered by women’s support groups.’\textsuperscript{56} Although there are likely to be similar feelings in South Wales, we have not yet observed any. This could be due to the fact that organised religion could be seen to have lost its grip by the early 1980s. For many communities in South Wales, religion had long ceased to be an important part of daily life. According to the sociologist Paul Chambers, ‘the twentieth century saw the progressive loosening of the links between the general population and institutional religion’\textsuperscript{57}. By 1995, only 8.7 percent of the general population attended a place of Christian worship in Wales. In fact, Wales was the most secular of all the British nations, a trend that had been set by large-scale defections from ‘old-fashioned Nonconformity’ in the 1960s\textsuperscript{58}.

It has become clear that not all women who were involved in the support groups had to be ‘miners’ wives’: some women such as Beryl Fury, Violet John and the female members of the CND group of Aberdare became involved in support purely because they believed in fighting for the cause. Also, not all support groups were women-only; many had support from local miners or men within their communities. In most instances, the majority of the women interviewed here had been involved in other activities before they took part in strike support, whether community-involvement, part-time work or even membership of political parties. In many cases, their experience beforehand determined the type of strike support they would eventually become involved in. Therefore, it could be said that the majority of women showed a continuity of activism, in that their work afterwards often mirrored what had

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. p. 625.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. p. 625.  
gone before. For most, the strike was not a life-changing experience, but instead fitted in quite naturally, although of course it is hard to tell whether these women would still have gone on to do what they did after the strike had they not been involved at all. There are exceptions to this, such as Sian James, Margaret Donovan, Ann Williams and Beryl Fury who themselves believe that the strike was a catalyst for their later involvement in the community or politics, but these are a small number.

Changes within South Wales communities

However, as well as investigating the individual women, we also need to identify changes within the community such as gender relations and changes within the workforce. These may give indications as to any differences within South Wales after the end of the strike. Into this group falls a remarkable organisation called the DOVE (Dulais Opportunities for Voluntary Enterprise) Workshop. The group began in Banwen in the Dulais Valley during the 1984-85 miners’ strike:

The DOVE Workshop was set up by a group of women from the local miners’ support group and other women from the valley with a common purpose that strove to save their communities. They were young and older women who as teachers, factory workers, miners’ wives, mothers and homemakers, worked collectively to break the mould and establish a centre that would benefit all the community.59

Although the Workshop had its basis in the miners’ strike, it did not actually begin while the strike continued; possibly those involved did not wish to disrupt the strike effort. Instead, some of the women who had been involved in the support groups joined together and continued to meet after the strike had ended. Kay Bowen (wife of the Chairman of Blaenant Lodge, Phil Bowen) had been organising the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys Miners’ Support Group which was chaired by Hywel Francis.

59 Francis, Up the DOVE, back cover.
His wife Mair became involved as she was interested in setting up a co-operative in which a small business could be set up for women to make money to supplement their family income. When the strike ended, many women were keen to return to normality and put the past twelve months behind them, while some continued to meet in the form of the DOVE Workshop. However, it was not just those involved with strike support activities that later joined the DOVE Workshop. Other organisations showed support too. For example, Mair Francis comments that the Dulais Valley had its own branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and many of its members became supporters and committee members of DOVE.

Mair Francis believes that the work undertaken by women in the strike was the catalyst for a change in gender relations, in that women were now keen to become more involved in activities outside of their normal home and family, such as taking part in community activities or entering the workforce. This in turn left a void whereby changes needed to be made by these women to equip themselves effectively for the activities and skills to join the workforce. Women’s employment in the area had traditionally been low-paid, part-time and unskilled, women needed education and experience to enable change. This was the role of DOVE,

to become multi-skilled and to widen the cultural, economic and social horizons by developing a holistic approach to education and training. This would include the implementation of equal opportunity measures, including crucially improved child care provision, family friendly work practices, home-based working opportunities, career breaks and opportunities for women to take up (or return to) education and training courses.

The workshop was a female initiative and the group set up a crèche, a transport network, and part-time, flexible education and training. Whereas many support groups

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60 Ibid. p. 2.
61 Ibid. p. 4.
claimed that they would still continue to meet and fight for other causes when the miners’ strike had ended, for many this was simply not the case. Some did start out with good intentions, but after a few months of dwindling membership, most of them had disbanded within a few years. The DOVE workshop however, seems to be completely different and went from strength to strength and is still extremely popular within its local community today. Without its origins in the strike support and the awareness of changing gender roles that emerged from it, this organisation may never have come into being. In this respect then, the strike did have a major effect on this community and the women involved. DOVE has even grown and expanded to such an extent that new people with no links to the former colliery are using the facilities available.

The Workshop has developed from humble beginnings at the Banwen Community Centre, and managed to gain successful support and funding from local council and government. At the beginning, DOVE was linked to a similar organisation in Glynneath called the Glynneath Women’s Employment Project (GWEP). DOVE moved into Banwen Community Centre in January 1987 and officially opened its doors for activities in February. A minibus picked up those attending classes from villages in the surrounding area and took them to the centre.63 The centre grew in popularity and by 1989 the Workshop had established a community cooperative to complement the educational arm of DOVE. Sister organisations were also set up including DOVETALES Video Production, TURTLE DOVE Desktop Publishing, the OLIVE BRANCH Café and DOVECOTE Nursery. The Workshop also went on to work with other similar groups in the area such as Red

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62 Ibid. p. 3.
Flannel.64 Red Flannel was an all-women film workshop operating in Pontypridd. Its first major film production, ‘Mam’, was made by the group of six women film and video makers. The group obtained money from Channel 4, the Welsh Arts Council, South East Wales Arts Association and the Equal Opportunities Commission, which enabled the group to work part-time until full funding was received in April 1987.65

Mair Francis asserts that grass roots organisations such as DOVE were having such a significant impact on the adult education provision that it made local authorities and further and higher education institutions ‘sit up and take notice’. Other organisations were then set up in response, such as the Valleys’ Initiative for Adult Education (VIAE). This was established by Hywel Francis from the Department of Adult Education at Swansea University. Its membership included Local Education Authorities, universities and colleges throughout South Wales, the Open University and community-based organisations such as DOVE, and Amman Valley Enterprise (AME).66 It then branched out into the idea of ‘The Community University of the Valleys’ (CUV), where entire part-time degrees could be delivered in valleys communities. Eventually this expanded again to involve partnerships with the Open University and the University of Glamorgan. Today the CUV has eighteen partners, thirteen of which are community organisations across the valleys, including the University of Wales Newport.67 In this sense then, it can be said that the strike really did have a lasting impact on the communities of South Wales. Without women joining together to support their families and friends through the dispute, they would not have stayed together and encountered the gender and community changes needed for an organisation such as DOVE to flourish. DOVE itself has then gone on to

64 Ibid. pp. 15-16.
66 Francis, Up the DOVE, pp. 19-21.
67 Ibid. pp. 43-45.
impact the surrounding community. Francis comments that, “it had become part of the fabric of our valley’s community, in a very short time.”

The DOVE Workshop deliberately linked itself with other organisations to gain support as well as raise its profile. One such link was with the Valleys Women’s Roadshow which was a three-year project running from March 1993 to March 1996. Its aim was to raise awareness of training and education opportunities for women, highlight barriers they might face, and provide support and encouragement.

It was set up as a response to the many women’s groups that were promoting women’s potential and began to co-ordinate women’s groups throughout the South Wales valleys into a strong effective network.

Importantly, those women who began by learning skills at the DOVE Workshop later went on to be employed by them. For example, Susan Owen who started by taking computer courses, later went on to become a tutor for the Advanced Professional Training Unit following training at Swansea University. Another trainee, Michelle Howells, was appointed Nursery Nurse. Lesley Smith and Julie Bibby attended a training course in educational guidance and subsequently Lesley went on to study a BA Hons degree part-time and Julie enrolled on a postgraduate course in Further Education Training Certificate (FETC).

As these women became more confident in their skills and learning, they wanted to continue their education. This meant an increased demand for access courses to higher education, which began to appear more frequently in 1989. Possibly these women may not have had the opportunity to learn such skills and advance their careers without the support from DOVE, which in turn relates to the question, would DOVE or a similar organisation have ever come into being without

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68 Ibid. p. 24.
69 Ibid. p. 28.
70 Ibid. pp. 28-46.
women’s involvement in the miners’ strike? Gwenda Thomas, Labour Assembly Member for Neath and Deputy Health Minister wrote, ‘The miners’ strike served as a catalyst to encourage women to develop their roles within communities, and DOVE has helped women to return to the workforce and also enter public life.’\textsuperscript{72} Statistics show that in the year 1995/96 there were 201 people participating at DOVE, and within one year there had been an increase of fifty percent. Of the 201 members, 82 percent were women and eighteen percent were men. Thirty-three children used the crèche facilities.\textsuperscript{73} By the early 1990s DOVE had outgrown the Banwen Community Centre building which needed to be extensively extended to include study rooms, a new conference room, improved crèche facilities as well as new accommodation.\textsuperscript{74}

Mair Francis believes that although organisations such as DOVE did go a long way to help change the gender relations within mining communities, the change was slow.\textsuperscript{75} However, without the impact of the strike on South Wales communities, many of the women may not have become involved in supporting the struggle, and then gone further to initiate change in both gender relations and the workforce. Women’s involvement in organisations such as DOVE have been the catalyst for this change:

The DOVE Workshop’s role has been and continues to be that of an agent for change and DOVE has, as a result of its proactive presence in the community, brought many organisations and agencies together to provide community-based education and training facilities.\textsuperscript{76}

DOVE has continued to go from strength to strength and today is firmly established as an integral part of the local community. Currently, in 2009, the

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. pp. 27-8.  
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. p. 47.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. p. 31.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. p. 45.  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. p. 33.
Workshop has twelve female leading members of staff. When these women are examined more closely, it can be seen that six of them have been involved with the project right from the very beginning, and were part of the women’s support group during the strike. In this case then, it would be valid to assume that the strike did in fact have a significant impact on their lives afterwards. Had they not been involved in the strike support group then they would not have gone one to become part of DOVE. For example, Susan Owen supported her husband (a miner at Blaenant Colliery) throughout the strike, then enrolled at DOVE when he was made redundant. She later went on to train as an IT tutor at DOVE and currently is a Community Garden Project Worker.\textsuperscript{77} Glynis Howell, another striking miner’s wife who now serves as Chair of the DOVE Steering Group is studying for a part-time humanities degree and works for the Local Authority. She says, ‘this wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the staff at DOVE Workshop.’\textsuperscript{78} Also Hefina Headon was the daughter and wife of a miner and became heavily involved in the support group during the strike, becoming Secretary of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners’ Support Group. She was a founder member of DOVE and attended courses and represented the Workshop at National Conferences.\textsuperscript{79}

Moira Lewis had taken a slightly different path before the strike than other women. Although she was a daughter of a miner and supporter of the miners’ strike, she had represented the Onllwyn on Neath Borough Council from 1976 to 1996, becoming Deputy Mayor in 1988 and Mayor in 1989. She did become the Founder Chairperson of DOVE but had already had previous political experience. In her case, the strike and consecutive DOVE Workshop may not have had as much impact on her

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. pp. 47-8.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. p. 65.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. p. 66.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. p. 67.
personal life as the others since she already had the confidence and experience to take part in such activities within the community. Similarly, Mair Francis was already a qualified school teacher before the strike began. She was a supporter of the strike and became Manager of the DOVE Workshop but she may not have been affected in the same way as those women with no qualifications or work experience. She was already educated and part of the workforce. Also, Joy Howells was a supporter of the strike but had previously been involved in the Peace Movement as a member of the Dulais Valley Peace Movement and had visited Greenham Common Peace Camp. She became involved in strike support work and then went on to be part of DOVE, but again she had already been politically active, and the Workshop and after-effects of the strike may not have made such a significant impact on her. On the other hand, it may have done.80

David Adler researched the South Wales women’s support groups immediately after the strike and for five years afterwards to examine whether the remarkable change deemed by some had actually occurred. He mentions that even though there is evidence that men were appreciative of the support given by women during the strike, they were not so keen to let the change continue afterwards. He says, ‘the challenge of women, no less, to the male-centredness of Valley life and Valley politics, was itself met by indifference, antipathy and even open hostility from men within the same working-class culture.’81 Indeed, there has been evidence of some husbands being unwilling to allow their wives to become involved in certain strike activities and although many wives said they would have done so anyway, these constant arguments must have had an impact on whether they actually would, and even on couples’

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relationships. Steffan Morgan has also indicated that there may have been a shift in gender relations, in that the men sometimes believed themselves to be less ‘masculine’ as they had lost their jobs and saw the women as becoming more masculine themselves by being involved in normally ‘male’ activities.

However, Adler does mention that the South Wales Women’s Support Group (SWWSG) did actually continue after the strike had ended, and that the women involved did take part in other campaigns. For example, he mentions trips to the Wapping picket line in London’s Docklands during the SOGAT 82 and NGA dispute of 1985-6, participation in marches, demonstrations and meetings in support of the print workers, jailed and sacked miners, against Apartheid, nuclear weapons, nuclear power and the closure of individual collieries in South Wales. The women from the SWWSG also attended conferences for political and social issues such as Broadwater Farm and strip searches for women in Northern Ireland. They even liaised with other support groups such as the London Gay and Lesbian Miners’ Support Group (MSG). However, over time, fewer representatives from the smaller support groups were sent to the main SWWSG. This was due to many factors, the main one being that the smaller support groups themselves were finding it more difficult to continue in existence once their focus on the strike was removed. The geography of the South Wales Valleys, plus unhelpful transport links made it difficult for women to travel to meetings. Also their men folk were often keen for the women in mining communities to return to ‘normal’ once the strike had ended. All of these factors made the

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82 For example, Sian James from Swansea who took part in the occupation of Cynheidre states that she would have stayed with the group for longer had her husband been willing. Instead, he arrived at the colliery to take her home, stating that her family needed her, although she begged to stay. See, Sian James (& Margaret Donovan) (AUD/503), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.

continuation of the support groups and the SWWSG much more complicated. Adler says, ‘certainly the accommodation that was made for the new political and collective role of women was not as far-reaching, nor as long-lasting, as many thought or hoped.’

**Women in the workforce**

Another way to understand the changes that women could have undergone due to their involvement in the strike is to examine their role in the workforce. Had they undergone such a dramatic change, then one would expect to see more women entering the workforce or entering the workforce in a different way. For instance, we have already seen examples of women who worked part-time in their local communities, so we would therefore have to see a dramatic alteration in women’s lives to prove a significant change. Also, the DOVE Workshop achieved a great deal by training women to allow them to enter the workforce as much more skilled workers. Teresa Rees believes that it is difficult to chart the way Welsh women move around the workforce as there are many myths that first need dispelling to allow a clearer view. For example, she points out that although the collection of work-based statistics began in the nineteenth century, the actual concept of the term ‘work’ meant that women’s contribution to the economy has been constantly under-recorded. This is the case with older versions of the census too.

In collecting the data, census categories defined a married woman as being just that and did not record any other activities she may have completed within the economy. Rees says, ‘married women with full-time jobs, as well as those who

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85 Ibid. p. 50.
86 Teresa Rees, ‘Changing Patterns of Women’s Work in Wales: Some Myths Explored’ in *Contemporary Wales*, 2 (1988), p. 120.
engaged in home-based employment, such as selling food from their back kitchens, and taking in laundry or indeed lodgers, were simply excluded from the census figures on work’.\textsuperscript{87} Also, the gender segregation in jobs in Wales was much more pronounced than in other European countries, meaning that more effort needed to be made to break down sex-stereotyping in the labour market.\textsuperscript{88} She says,

\begin{quote}
this pattern is perpetuated in twentieth-century data collection constructs and procedures and leads to both a gross underestimation of women’s activity, and an undervaluing of any form of work pattern that does not square with male norms of participation. The myth of the ‘Welsh Mam’ … has also contributed to the image of the role of women in Welsh society.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

Thus, the 1986 \textit{Welsh Inter Censal Survey} states that only 1.6 percent of men aged 16-64 fall into the category of ‘looking after the family and home’ whereas the figure for women aged 16-59 is 68.6 percent,\textsuperscript{90} thereby confirming the stereotype.

It is organisations such as the DOVE Workshop that help women become educated and well-trained and thereby contribute to breaking down the gender separation. Previously it had been difficult for official statistics, as well as women themselves, to separate their home life from ‘work’ outside.\textsuperscript{91} These difficulties can even be seen during the strike where many women who supported their husbands and families with ‘traditional’ strike work did not identify its importance as they believed it was their duty. With this in mind Rees concludes that the rise in figures of women’s employment during the twentieth century is a myth since a comparative approach to the nineteenth and twentieth century census reveals that the economic activity rate of women was as high in 1861 as 1971 (43 percent) and that the rate for married women

\begin{footnotes}
\item[87] Ibid. p. 121.
\item[88] Ibid. p. 120.
\item[89] Ibid. p. 120.
\item[90] Ibid. p. 125.
\item[91] Ibid. p. 121.
\end{footnotes}
was as high in 1851 as 1951,\(^{92}\) which shows that women were more involved in the workforce and economy of South Wales than was once believed. Women have long been engaged in agricultural work and domestic service.

Of course, women had always had employment, whether part-time or full-time, and therefore to suggest that an event such as the strike made an impact on their employment levels is, to some extent, misleading. Women had been part of the Welsh workforce and therefore it was not the strike that caused these changes in employment. However, and importantly, women’s employment, particularly in South Wales, had suffered due to the fact that they were excluded from the industries that dominated the area. In their case they were not permitted to work as miners or steel workers. But when new industries (such as the Hoover development in Merthyr Tydfil as well as other factories) were brought to the area during the 1960s and 1970s, it became easier for them to access employment. For example, when the workforce of Tonypandy was examined in June 1977 it was discovered that the majority were women, with fifty-seven percent of the registered workers being female. Also in the same year, the largest single group of Welsh workers were the 118,000 women employed in educational and medical services.\(^{93}\) However, as has already been seen, the type of employment women could become involved in did change due to increased opportunities, training and confidence. It was on this that the strike did have an impact. Previously, women had mainly been involved in low-paid, low-qualified and part-time work, and we need to determine whether it was this area that saw more of a change after the strike.

Therefore, we need to examine whether the significant change enabled by increased training and educational opportunities after the strike, did have a

\(^{92}\) Ibid. p. 122.
\(^{93}\) Ibid. p. 126.
considerable impact on women’s jobs. Substantial research has taken place since the 1980s to determine women’s place in Welsh society and, therefore, the workforce, for example, work such as that completed by Victoria Winckler in 1987,\textsuperscript{94} by Teresa Rees and Sarah Fielder in 1992,\textsuperscript{95} and by Nickie Charles et al in 2000.\textsuperscript{96} There is further work by Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson,\textsuperscript{97} although their work is not specific to South Wales.

Winckler believes that the change in South Wales was significant and that women’s profile had been raised in contemporary society (of course this ‘contemporary’ claim refers to the late 1980s). Therefore, she would be one of the many commentators who could claim that women’s involvement in the strike did have an important impact on Welsh women and their place within society. However, she also comments that women’s changing position had been felt more keenly in Wales as Welsh women had traditionally been more marginalised in local society than elsewhere in Britain. This was due to the more masculine nature of Welsh coalfield communities and women’s place therein, as gender roles were much more clearly defined and harder to break. It has already been shown that this is not necessarily the case with all women, and that many had been involved in work long before they became involved in support work during the strike, although in many instances this was low-paid, low-skilled, part-time employment. Winckler states that although women had become more prominent in Welsh society more generally, this did not necessarily improve or change their position. Instead, although more people were aware of their work and position within society, ‘these do not amount to a

\textsuperscript{94} Victoria Winckler, ‘Women and Work in Contemporary Wales’, \textit{Contemporary Wales}, 1 (1987)
\textsuperscript{95} Teresa Rees & Sarah Fielder, ‘Smashing the Dark Glass Ceiling: Women at the top in Wales’, \textit{Contemporary Wales}, 5 (1992)
\textsuperscript{97} Spence, Jean & Carol Stephenson, ‘The Politics of the Doorstep: Female Survival Strategies and the
transformation of women’s position, rather they suggest an increasing heterogeneity and complexity in women’s roles, within the fundamental and enduring constraints of the sexual division of labour’. 98 Basic gender divisions obviously still applied in Wales.

However, the change in industrial South Wales subsequent to the strike and rapid pit closure programme, had a negative effect on the women’s workforce as well as men’s. For example, it is widely understood that women had entered the workforce during the 1960s and 1970s, and undertook work such as cleaning or catering, and these could often be associated with the local collieries, for instance working in the canteen. So, when the pits in South Wales were closed, women’s employment suffered alongside men’s.

For example, up until 1979 the number of women in the workforce was increasing by an average of two percent per year (approximately 94,000 Welsh women entered the workforce after 1965). However, due to the recession, between 1979 and 1986, almost four out of ten of these new female entrants were lost from the workforce as the number of women in part-time employment fell by 36,000. These figures are somewhat misleading in that they take into account only the part-time employment figures for women; if full-time figures are also examined, then 42,000 jobs were lost over the period, almost equivalent to the losses suffered by men. In particular, during the same period of time, the decline in the employment of South Wales women was actually well above any other area in Britain. Welsh women were less likely to be economically active than their counterparts elsewhere in Britain, their activity rate being 87.8 percent of the British average in 1986. 99 These figures make it hard to believe that women were making significant gains in employment as has been

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Legacy of the Miners’ Strike 1984-85’, Community, Work and Family, 10, 3 (August 2007)
claimed. Although figures for women in employment were held back similarly to men’s due to the recession. Winckler states that although more women were entering the workforce at this time, there was still a segregation into male and female ‘types’ of jobs, therefore reinforcing women’s recruitment into typically female occupations.  

Throughout the 1980s there were still stereotypes of men’s and women’s employment, and normally ‘women’s jobs’ were not paid as well as ‘men’s jobs’. She even states,

women’s position in the Welsh workforce in the 1980s is thus in almost every respect poorer than that of working men, and is also frequently worse than that of women elsewhere in Britain. … women’s employment has failed to continue to expand in the 1980s, with women occupying a distinctive, segregated, and disadvantaged position in the jobs which remain.

Another important point to consider when examining women’s entry into the workforce is their domestic role. Previous figures show that as well as entering typical ‘women’s jobs’, South Wales women were also more likely to enter part-time rather than full-time employment. This is mainly due to the fact that the same women still retained the responsibility of carrying out their domestics tasks without much increased aid from their male counterparts. It was easier for them to arrange childcare and family responsibilities whilst working part-time. While this shows women were entering the workforce in some numbers, it also proves that gender segregation was not, in fact, drastically changing. Men were not keen to change the social balance by tackling domestic responsibilities themselves, so that it was rare to see a wife as a breadwinner with house-husband who took care of the family. More commonly, the wife would work part-time outside the home to contribute to the family income. So,

99 Ibid. p. 54.
100 Ibid. pp. 56-7.
101 Ibid. pp. 60-63.
102 Ibid. p. 63.
women entering the workforce did not contribute significantly to a change in gender balance; instead it increased women’s responsibilities by adding outside work to their already hefty domestic tasks and family responsibilities.

Added to this is the complexity of women as single parents. Winckler states that during the 1980s, the number of households headed by women only rapidly increased due to marital breakdown and single parenthood: in fact, in south Glamorgan, one in five households with children was headed by a single parent, the highest rate of single parenthood outside the London boroughs. These women were less likely to enter highly-skilled, well-paid, full-time jobs as their domestic role was obviously primary. Again then, this reinforced women’s domestic position as homemaker.\textsuperscript{104} With all of these points in mind, one could agree with Winckler when she says, ‘women’s traditional role in Wales would thus appear to be little different in the 1980s from twenty years ago. Insofar as it has changed women’s domestic role has been added to, as women have taken part-time or full-time jobs, rather than being transformed.’\textsuperscript{105}

Having examined women’s entry into the workforce in the 1980s, we can now move on to examine the 1990s, and discover whether or not the institutions set up after the strike to help women gain entry into the workforce by training and providing qualifications (institutions such as the DOVE workshop), did have any impact on the numbers of women entering the workforce and the type of jobs they undertook. We will go on to discover whether this had an impact on gender relations and segregation. In January 1992, seven years after the end of the strike, a consortium of employers in Wales led by the Welsh Development Agency with business in the Community and the Equal Opportunities Commission launched ‘Chwarae Teg’, an initiative designed to focus attention on and encourage ‘fair play’ for women in the workforce in

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. p. 64.  
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. p. 65.
The need for such an association implies that the women of South Wales were not yet making significant headway into the labour force. Rees and Fielder comment that there are, as has already been seen, ‘well-established patterns of gender segregation at work, so marked in Wales in particular’.  

By 1991, women still only earned, on average, around seventy-two percent of men’s wages, similar to figures already seen for women in the 1980s. They still had relatively poor terms and conditions of employment, and received only restricted training and promotion prospects, while there was still segregation of the types of jobs women could enter. In 1989, the number of Welsh women in employment stood at 63.0 percent, lower than any English region, and than the figure for Britain as a whole. As in the 1980s, women were still concentrated in those specific occupations deemed fit to be ‘women’s work’ such as education, welfare and health, clerical work, selling, catering and other personal services. Very few women were entering ‘male’ jobs such as working in science, engineering or technology, or even highly paid professional posts. Rees and Fielder argue that there can be very few women found in the top positions in Wales: overall, the public sector has a rather better record than the private sector, and within the public sector, the Civil Service and some local authorities compare favourably with further and higher education, and with the NHS. Some employers, such as Cardiff City Council, South Glamorgan County Council and the Welsh Office, are making efforts to open more doors to women. Other employers do not recognize that there is a problem, or lack the commitment to tackle it effectively.

Therefore Welsh women still significantly lagged behind both their female British counterparts, and Welsh males.

With this in mind, we can go on to look at the different areas in which women

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105 Ibid. p. 66.
107 Ibid. p. 99
have been employed in Wales, to examine their advance, if any. In the Civil Service sector, in 1984, a Programme of Action for Equal Opportunities was introduced which enabled a series of initiatives on child-care, career break schemes and flexible working. This facilitated women’s move into employment, and due to efforts such as these, women comprised just under half of all civil servants in Wales in 1992. However, they are found in much fewer numbers at the higher grades, with only three percent of Welsh women making senior management.\textsuperscript{110}

Local Government, by comparison with the Civil Service, has offered fewer opportunities for women, with only 3.5 percent of principal officers in county councils being women in 1992. In the highest grades, four Welsh county councils have no women at all, and in district councils, women comprise only 1.3 percent of principal officers. Again, in the four Welsh police forces, there were no women in any of the top grades in 1992, only one in the sixth (superintendent), and none in the fifth (chief inspector), although 11.4 percent of the force were female officers.\textsuperscript{111} This shows that although women were beginning to enter some traditionally ‘male’ jobs, they were still unable to reach the upper echelons. Similarly, in 1987, women comprised fifty-four percent of students qualifying as solicitors in England and Wales, yet, in 1991, Welsh women comprised less than ten percent of solicitors who were partners or sole practitioners. Also female solicitors in Wales earned eighteen percent less than their male counterparts for doing the same job.\textsuperscript{112}

Women do not seem to have made any better improvements in the private sector. For example, in 1991 NEDO estimated that women working in middle and senior management were as little as four percent, with those in top industrial

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid. p. 101.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid. pp. 101-102.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. pp. 102-103.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. p. 104.
management positions nearing one or two percent. In Wales, only 2.3 percent of company directors were women, compared to the national average of 6.7 percent. A Welsh Development Agency survey of South Wales employers, completed in 1991, showed that over fifty percent had no women managers.\textsuperscript{113}

However, the number of female students entering further and higher education did increase throughout the 1980s, and by 1988 they comprised forty-three percent of all university graduates. Nonetheless, this was still not matched in women’s entry into the academic hierarchy. In the University Colleges of Wales, in 1991, only 1.3 percent of women were professors, 1.6 percent were readers, and 4.2 percent were senior lecturers. In other further and higher education institutions, only 2.3 percent of college principals were women, and 4.6 percent vice-principals. Comparable figures can be seen when examining school education. For example, only 6.9 percent of secondary school head teachers were women, a startling figure when women teachers well outnumbered their male counterparts. If 3.3 percent of all male teachers were heads, this would compare to 0.2 percent of all female teachers. Primary school numbers seem better on the outset, where forty-one percent of Welsh heads were women between 1989/1990. But examined another way, nearly forty percent of all male teachers in primary schools were heads, compared to only eight percent of women. Also, there were no female Directors or Deputy Directors of Education in Wales.\textsuperscript{114}

As well as general numbers of female students increasing in higher education overall, in 1991, half of all medical students were women. Importantly, seventy-five percent of all NHS employees in Wales were women in 1991, although, only 13.3 percent were consultants. Speaking of 1991, Rees and Fielder state, ‘health districts in

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. p. 105.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. pp. 105-106.
Wales are singled out for being noticeably inadequate by not having an equal opportunities policy in which managers are trained: only one district in Wales does this.'\textsuperscript{115}

Although women were becoming more educated, this still does not seem to have filtered through to their workplace positions. Rees and Fielder give an interesting and compelling argument as to why women, specifically in Wales, were being overlooked for promotion into the top positions. This does not always stem from a lack of experience or education, but instead the long-standing social order did seem to have some sway. For instance, for women to reach top management positions, employers still demanded a long-serving or continuous time at work, geographical mobility and a high workload. Many of these would not be possible for women with families as they were more likely to have taken a career break to raise their children and when they did return to employment it was often part-time. Higher ranking positions were very rarely available part-time or as a job share.

It also seems that employers were less likely to give women specific work-related training, possibly because they believed women would soon leave to start a family. Also, women were less likely to want to travel from home due to family commitments. Insufficient childcare provisions add to the burden of working-mothers. Other discriminatory barriers that were difficult to overcome were ageism, and even the ‘old boy network’, where men would discuss work over social activities, from which women were excluded.\textsuperscript{116}

This data seems to prove that women had not made significant changes to their working lives by the early 1990s. They had entered the workforce, but not in dramatically large numbers nor in positions previously unknown to women. Women

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. pp. 106-107.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid. pp. 105-110.
were more educated and qualified for higher positions thanks to initiatives set up after
the strike such as the DOVE workshop, as well as a variety of other factors, yet
according to the figures examined, which cover a broad scale of women’s numbers in
work in South Wales, they were still largely segregated into traditional ‘women’s’
jobs, with low-pay and low-status. Some women had entered the higher ranks within
organisations but these were normally rare. Therefore, their qualifications, training
and experience were not put to full use. In 1994 in was stated that, ‘although women
have made inroads into the professions in the last twenty years they have not been so
successful in entering the corporate world of management’.117

In a study of the gender distribution of senior management teams in the year
2000, the gender divide is clearly visible. In manufacturing, extractive and utilities
there were three female managers compared to twenty-six male. In financial, retail
and media there were five women compared to thirty four men, and in the public
sector there were five women compared to fifty-three men.118 Obviously women still
had a long way to go. Of course there were exceptions to the rule, such as Sian James
from Swansea who later became an MP, but these were not widely found. With this in
mind then, we can move through the 1990s to see whether their working positions
affected women’s status as well as gender relations.

Charles et al make an important point when they state that many assume that it
is more difficult for women in Wales to reach top positions than women in the rest of
Britain. This is of course, due to the legacy of the Welsh economy’s previous
dependence on the heavy extractive industries that only employed men. This in turn

117 Charles, Nickie, Charlotte Aull Davies, David Blackaby, Phil Murphy, Nigel O’Leary & Paul
116.
118 Ibid. p. 120.
has helped facilitate the gender divide in to domestic female and working male.\textsuperscript{119} In Wales, the gender divide and idea of roles within society is much more well-defined.\textsuperscript{120} Yet the nature of the Welsh economy disadvantages men and women alike in that the activity rates of both are lower in Wales than in Britain as a whole, as are rates of pay. This leads many to believe that as Welsh women are more disadvantaged than Welsh men, who in turn are more disadvantaged economically than the rest of Britain, Welsh women must suffer the greatest burden. However, Charles et al also believe that these negative overall figures mask the gender differences, where in fact women’s employment is increasing while men’s is decreasing. The gender gap is therefore narrowing. Examples of this can be seen with the opening of the Welsh National Assembly where there was (and still is today) a high proportion of women members in the year 2000. These women have been active in drawing attention to the disadvantages faced by Welsh women and have therefore commissioned research and help to alleviate the problem.\textsuperscript{121}

Yet, at this time, Welsh women were closing the gap between themselves and other women throughout Britain. Of all the senior managerial occupations, Welsh women made up 25.2 percent compared to the British average of 25.6 percent. The Welsh figure also beat the figures for six English regions, namely, Yorkshire/Humberside, East Midlands, East Anglia, the South East, the South West and the West Midlands.\textsuperscript{122} This is an improvement compared to the figures of 1991, where Welsh women often fell short of the British average. However, Charles et al still comment that,

the few women who held senior positions … tended to be in so-called

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p. 117.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. p. 126.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. p. 117.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. pp. 121-22.
‘soft’ areas such as human relations, quality control or marketing, and in family and child services within public service organisations. These observations suggest that not only is there a glass ceiling in most organisations, but there is also gender stereotyping in the senior jobs to which women are appointed.\(^\text{123}\)

This evidence is similar to that of the early 1990s and this proves that there has not yet been significant change.

Added to this, Charles et al give reasons very similar to those of Rees and Fielder as to why women were finding it difficult to change their working lives and gender relations. They believe that the organisational structure of companies adds to women’s burden in that, suitable candidates for senior positions are either promoted from within the ranks or head-hunted. These forms of selection normally take place through the ‘old boy networks’ discussed previously. Also, candidates are expected to be geographically mobile, with promotions often being linked to a change of locations. Added to this is the culture of long working hours, with employees possibly working ten to twelve hours a day as well as weekends. This is something women with families cannot achieve. All of these factors combined means that part-time work is easier and more practical for women. Unfortunately this normally means lower pay and less seniority.\(^\text{124}\)

**Conclusion**

By examining Welsh women’s entry into the workforce and the change in gender relations, it seems clear that there have not been dramatic changes until the year 2000. As has already been seen, women have entered the workforce in their thousands, yet it is normally low-paid, part-time work. Also, there is still a gender divide between women’s and men’s roles in the workplace. Of course there are exceptions, but on the

\(^{\text{123}}\) Ibid. p. 123.

\(^{\text{124}}\)
whole, it seems that in the late 1980s and 1990s Welsh women had not been able to considerably change their society. It would have been easy to believe that because Welsh women became so involved in the 1984-85 miners’ strike, then the next logical step would be for them to fight their way into the workforce and society outside the confines of their domestic sphere. For a time, with organisations such as DOVE helping women train and gain qualifications, it seemed as though this might be possible, as more women did go on to higher education and obtain jobs. However, this was not sustained as gender roles still stipulated that women were expected to care for their home and family, as well as work, once children arrived. If they did so, it was difficult for them to take senior, high profile positions. There was also still prejudice about so-called ‘women’s work’ and the positions which they were actually ‘suitable’ for, as females. In this respect then, it could be said that women’s involvement in the strike did not achieve the results that enabled them to change their position in society.

However, South Wales society was changing in many ways throughout the 1980s after the miners’ strike. For example, the colliery closure programme saw male unemployment rise dramatically, which then impacted on coalfield society. Gender relations were challenged due to men’s changing ideas of masculinity as they were no longer breadwinners. In many respects, it could be said that the masculine nature of the society was changing to allow women to become more involved in the public domain. However, this was not entirely because women themselves became involved in the miners’ strike, instead it was effected by the massive programme of colliery closures. After the miners’ had returned to work it was not long before the South Wales pits began to close, and by 1989, only Tower Colliery remained. This itself had a massive impact on society and gender relations. For example, while the collieries

remained, so did the masculine organisations associated with them such as Trade Unions, and even pubs, workingmen’s clubs, recreational facilities and local businesses. Spence and Stephenson state that,

these institutions, concerned with recreation, education, welfare and housing for miners and their families, were sponsored and organised primarily by men through organisations associated with the nationalised industry and the miners’ union. … ‘The Committee’ represented the local political control by men of the material resources in civil society which expressed the cohesion of ‘mining community’. This control has been seriously wounded by the collapse of mining-related facilities. Pit closures and related socio-economic decline have been accompanied by weakening and fragmentation of the masculine organisational framework. … As a place of residence and rhythms of life cease to revolve around the mine, the family and neighbourhood base of women’s traditional role in the community is also disturbed.125

When the collieries closed, so did many of the businesses and institutions linked to them, causing a dramatic change across the face of South Wales. New businesses moved to the area, such as factories which could employ both male and female workers (although female workers were normally part-time and low-paid), which also meant that many workers travelled outside their villages or local communities to commute to work every day. This effect had been seen before the pit closure programme, but the demise of the mines added to it. It was not uncommon for people living in the South Wales valleys to commute to Cardiff, Newport or Swansea on a daily basis. In many respects then, the gender boundaries have been shifted to allow women wider entry into the employment sphere. Yet, the majority of women still retain responsibility for domestic tasks, so their external work is merely added to their burden, rather than their male counterparts coming forward to take over or share the domestic role.126

126 Ibid. p. 312.
It would, therefore, not be incorrect to believe that the ‘community’ Welsh women were fighting to keep during the strike was becoming fractured during the 1980s and 1990s, with pit closures and the subsequent societal change. However, surveys conducted by Adamson and Jones in both 1995 and 2001 prove that those living in South Wales did not necessarily believe this was the case. Respondents to both surveys reported high levels of community association. In 2001, eighty-five percent claimed the level of ‘community’ in their area was either ‘excellent’, ‘good’ or ‘acceptable’ (this was compared to eighty-four percent in 1995). Also, thirty-two percent stated that ‘community’ was one of the three things they liked best about the area in which they lived, and fifty-nine percent believed that it was the ‘sense of community’ which made the valleys different from elsewhere in Wales. However, contrary to these results, twenty percent of the respondents to the 2001 survey claimed that a decline in traditional community structures, practices and values was one of the biggest changes occurring in the South Wales valleys. This appears to show a greater privatisation of social life.\footnote{David Adamson & Stuart Jones, ‘Continuity and Change in the Valleys: Residents’ Perceptions in 1995 and 2001’, Contemporary Wales: An Annual Review of Economic Political and Social Research, 16 (2003), pp. 12-13.} Therefore women’s position within Welsh society was changed by the outcome of the strike, socially, culturally and within the workforce as well as gender relations. These changes could be said to have been accelerated by the miners’ strike and its long-term impact, but not necessarily only by women’s involvement in it. Comparable changes could have happened had the strike not occurred, as in many cases, individual women often took part in strike activities similar to their experience before the strike, and were keen to continue their same way of life afterwards. Those women who went on to enter the workforce or higher education often had some such experience before their involvement in the strike.
CONCLUSION

There is an enduring idea that the women who were involved in supporting the miners’ strike of 1984-85 in South Wales were politicised by it and therefore could not go back to the lives they knew beforehand. This dissertation has examined individual women, their previous existence, their involvement in the strike, and their lives after it to establish if this was actually the case, and found that in many ways it was not. There are examples of women who were dramatically changed by their involvement in the strike (such as Sian James of Morriston, Swansea), but equally, there are women who were keen to return to the status quo when the strike had ended (such as Avril Carlyon of Aberdare). Overall, however, there is an overarching idea that women’s involvement in the strike should instead be seen as a continuity of action rather than a break from what had gone beforehand.

Chapter one comprised an overview of Welsh women in the past and how they were always present at events of protest and activism, from the suffragettes to the miners’ strikes of the 1970s. Many of the women who became involved in supporting the 1984-85 strike had some experience of community work, such as part-time employment or with groups within their community, or even further education, as well as work within the CND and women’s movement, and those with this previous experience often went on to become involved in the more ‘non-traditional’ activities such as picketing and attending demonstrations. They then went on to become involved in other forms of activism after the strike such as fighting for other causes, returning to education or finding employment. Those women who had less experience of activism within their communities tended to be more involved in ‘traditional’ support such as fundraising and working with food parcels or within the kitchens.
Then, after the strike, these were the women who were most content to return to their ‘normal’ lives.

We need to bear in mind that Wales had been undergoing significant social and industrial change since the 1960s and 1970s; until this time, the communities of the South Wales Valleys had remained relatively unchanged since the early years of the century. Many of the social changes that had occurred in the rest of Britain had reached Cardiff but had not penetrated as far as the Valleys themselves. The communities were therefore greatly impacted by the new industrial changes which began in the 1960s. Some of these have been touched upon, such as the changes within the Welsh workforce due to the beginning of colliery closures and the opening of new industries such as the Hoover works at Merthyr Tydfil. In fact, we already know that by the time the strike had begun, the majority of workers within South Wales actually did not work in the coal industry itself, although it had been the largest single employer. The opening of new industries provided jobs often more suitable for women to undertake, and they entered the workforce in their thousands, mostly on a part-time basis. In fact, the decline of heavy industry in Wales was directly linked to the growth of women’s employment so that in 1980, forty percent of Welsh women were employed compared to just 13.5 percent in 1939.¹ These examples of social change within the South Wales communities show that coal no longer had such a significant grip on the valleys and its people. Coal was not the only industry that people could choose to work in, and, for many writers on the strike, this is the reason why the NUM were not as powerful and successful in 1984-85 as they had been in previous disputes such as in the early 1970s.

Added to these industrial changes were technological advances which impacted

on society. For example, the introduction and new affordability of labour-saving
devices such as washing machines and central heating, were an extremely liberating
experience for the women of South Wales. They were no longer tied to the home nor
expected to spend all their time looking after the family. Household chores were made
much more manageable. Alongside this was the expansion of leisure activities in
which women could participate, as society had previously dictated that ‘tidy’ or
‘proper’ women could not become involved in the male leisure activities which
centred around the public house and workingmen’s clubs. Also at home, the television
became an alternative to external leisure activities. In 1960, sixty percent of Welsh
homes owned a television set, and by 1970 this had increased to ninety-two percent.²
Also, between 1960 and 1970 privately licensed car ownership had doubled from
266,000 to 576,000, providing greater opportunity to travel for leisure activities.³

These all added to the decline of the Nonconformist culture once so dominant
in South Wales valleys life. The churches and chapels had wielded a mighty power
over Welsh society until the 1960s when other activities such as the cinema and dance
hall took over as a form of entertainment. Before these, the church or chapel were the
only places a woman could publicly socialise with others. University of Glamorgan
student Hannah Williams recognises this when she says,

the local churches and chapels were faced with increased competition.
The growth of the cinema and the dance-hall had provided an acceptable
alternative entertainment to the activities of the chapel. Once recreation
choices were no longer limited to the chapel or the pub, attendances at the
local chapel declined with each decade. Women in particular benefited
from these social developments.⁴

Another important factor in women’s lives that began in the 1960s was the beginning of the sexual revolution. The introduction of the contraceptive pill gave women a new freedom over their bodies. Also, the 1969 Divorce Reform Act had an effect on women’s freedom. Between 1961 and 1971 the number of divorced women in Wales almost doubled from 7,481 to 14,365. The women of South Wales were liberated due to the culmination of all these events.

The fact that change was already underway is well brought out in the novel *Dark Edge* which is set in the South Wales Valleys during the 1984-85 miners’ strike and follows the lives of two brothers, one a striker and one a police officer during the dispute. At one point, Edwin, the striking brother, expresses his feelings about his community and his awareness of economic change:

> Even with the pit in production Edwin knew his village had run down. There still remained some of the qualities which had been so strong in his youth but they had been thinned by changing times. For years there had been an undercurrent of unrest, a sense of dissatisfaction that they were cut off from the mainstream of development. Youngsters still talked of ‘going down to Cardiff’ as if it was the Mecca of a land far away, not the de-nationalised provincial city it was. He loved and hated his community. A complex sense of inferiority balanced with aggressive pride. He was aware of this dichotomy and thought it might be the one unique quality of the Welsh.

Although those who fought to support the miners and their families during the 1984-85 strike did so with passion, it was not in defense of the same society that is often portrayed as typical of the Welsh Valleys, the world of *How Green Was My Valley* with its Welsh Mam waiting at the fireside for her choirs of menfolk to return from the colliery. If this type of society ever did exist in the South Wales Valleys, then only remnants of it existed by the time the 1984-85 strike began.

The main argument of this dissertation has been to shatter some of the myths

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5 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 140.
that have grown up around the women of South Wales and their involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike. For instance, there is often an idea that their involvement and activity was unprecedented, that the support groups were homogenous, and that women’s activity resulted in a revolution in gender roles within valleys communities and changed the lives of participants forever. Evidence has shown that none of these myths were actually the case. To understand whether or not the women of South Wales were changed by their involvement in the 1984-85 miners’ strike, firstly their position within the already changing South Wales society needed to be examined. For example, if it is to be believed that the South Wales of the early 1980s was similar to that portrayed by Richard Llewellyn then women’s involvement in support groups in the strike would be a massive shift from that image. Suddenly women were no longer content to sit at home solely responsible for their home and family, instead they wanted to go out and fight for their communities alongside their men folk, as Hywel Francis says, ‘the greatest solidarity of all was from the women of the coalfields, not just supporting, but leading the miners alongside us.’ However, South Wales society had already been changing by the time the strike began and there was already great evidence of women working in their communities and participating in both part-time and full-time employment. It was not such a shock, therefore, when women moved from this to strike support work. The idea that women ‘came out of the kitchens’ to support their menfolk and communities is therefore not strictly true. They had already been working in communities, and had a long history of support work in previous strikes. The only thing that did differ about their involvement in the 1984-85 strike however, was in scale. More women did become involved, and in activities hitherto frowned upon such as picketing.

7 Hywel Francis, *History on our Side: Wales and the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike* (Ferryside: Iconau, 2009),
The new industries moving into South Wales had already allowed women easier access to the workforce and therefore facilitated a shift in gender relations. Couples were already finding themselves on a different footing than those earlier in the century; it was not unheard of for women to go out to work to support the family income, nor for men to help out around the home, even if there had not yet been such a dramatic change in gender relations as to bring about a complete role reversal with women being the sole breadwinner and men staying at home as a ‘househusband’.

These scenarios were still extremely rare in the Valleys. Men were still sensitive about compromising what they saw as their masculine place in society as breadwinners and providers and so even during the strike when they were not working, they would often be found at the local pub or club or union meeting, rather than staying at home and tending to the household and family. This was still regarded as ‘women’s work’.

Even those women who became heavily involved in strike support and undertook particularly militant activities could only do so with the help of supportive male partners if they had a family, and they were still expected to complete all the regular tasks of household chores and caring for the family as well as engage in strike support. An example of this is Sian James during the women’s group’s occupation of the manager’s office at Cynheidre Colliery, saying that it was her husband who eventually made her leave early and she would have stayed longer had he let her. In many instances Welsh women preferred to work alongside their men to fight for communities. Many were keen to disassociate themselves from the more militant feminist groups who also became involved in strike support, and preferred to be seen as ordinary women from mining communities. They did not want to change their

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8 See Sian James (& Margaret Donovan) (AUD/503) South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea. for a
status within their communities; they were fighting for the stability of the world they knew. In this sense then, gender relations and women’s involvement in South Wales communities did not change dramatically due to their involvement in the strike. In fact, due to the small numbers of women who were involved in strike support compared to the actual numbers of women in the valleys communities, a dramatic change is not really to be expected. There may well have been a change in gender relations within the households of those involved, but this did not heavily influence the wider community. Due to the wider social changes which had been occurring before the strike began, women had already been reassessing gender roles within these communities. This thesis has therefore helped dispel the myth that there was a change in gender relations caused by the strike.

The changing economic state of the South Wales Valleys also entailed a change in its social pattern and culture. Younger members of the community were not as tied to the collieries as their predecessors had been and this meant a dilution of the former strength and cohesion of those communities, although these solidarities did resurface in times of struggle, such as the strike. However, although those who were involved in supporting the dispute did so with passion and commitment, the numbers of those involved were significantly less than those who participated in earlier disputes in the twentieth century. For example, whole communities did not become involved in the support groups; instead, numbers were normally around fifteen to twenty, sometimes less as in the case of Aberaman near Aberdare where there were only a handful.9

However, although it is statistically clear that this is the case, and that the numbers of miners and those working in related industries had dramatically fallen by the 1980s, there was still a deep-rooted passion for mining in Wales. The majority of

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9 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
people knew that it was not a safe environment in which to work, yet the nature of the work allowed tight bonds to be formed between workers and communities. The history of mining and of all that miners had contributed to the social capital of their communities such as the founding of miners’ halls remained, even where the pits did not. In many cases the communities who had lost their pits were often the most militant in fighting for those which remained open. There have been examples of this in both Maerdy¹⁰ and Beddau.¹¹ They were the ones who knew how other communities would be affected when the pits closed and they did not want the same thing happening to other villages as had to them. In many cases, especially in Maerdy with its history of militant activism,¹² it was those communities which had lost their collieries which showed the most dedication to the fight to keep other pits open.

This thesis has also helped to dispel the myth that women’s lives were dramatically changed because they had been involved in strike support. Instead of seeing the strike as a benchmark for change in the lives of the women of South Wales, it is more accurate to see a continuity of activism in that in the majority of cases, most women were involved in the type of strike support they were comfortable with and then continued with the same values after the strike as they had beforehand. For example, women such as Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price from Aberaman were either full-time housewives before the strike began, or worked part-time to supplement the family income. They then went on to become involved in the more ‘traditional’ strike support such as fundraising and food collection. After the strike had ended they were

¹⁰ Interview with Barbara Williams, Maerdy, 21 January 2008.
¹¹ Interview with Norma Taylor and Lynne Thomas, Beddau, 28 February 2008.
keen to ‘return to normal’. However, other women such as Christine Powell from Swansea were active before the strike began. Although she was a miner’s wife, she had a university education and was a comprehensive school teacher at the time of the strike. During the strike she therefore went on to become more heavily involved in ‘non-traditional support’ such as chairing and speaking at meetings. Her political activity then continued after the strike had ended.

Of course there are always exceptions, and some women were changed by their involvement in the strike, such as Sian James, who after her involvement in the strike returned to education and later went to become an MP at Westminster. But since these examples are quite rare, I would prefer to describe women’s involvement in the strike as a ‘continuity of action’. The myth that women’s lives were changed forever because of their support of the strike is not actually the case if individual women are examined, taking into account their lives beforehand. Although many of those involved do still see the strike as an important part of their lives, the way people remember significant events in their lives is often slightly different to the reality. However, it is important that the number of South Wales women involved in strike support was actually quite small compared to the overall numbers of women in South Wales. Just one example would be the adjoining villages of Aberfan and Merthyr Vale, where a small community - my own - of around 5,000 had less than ten women actively involved in strike support. Those women who were involved committed themselves with immense passion and many themselves believe that the strike did have an impact on their lives, even if it was only in a small way, such as the tendency to pay greater attention to political events than they had before their involvement. It did give the women involved a great experience and more confidence to allow them to

13 Interview with Avril Carlyon and Sandra Price, Aberdare, 2 April 2008.
14 Christine Powell (AUD/509), South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea.
go on and be active in other causes after the strike had ended. Assembly Member Leanne Wood says, ‘I think the strike did politicise women, it was one of the initial sparks that politicised me. I believe women were politicised but it’s been downplayed, by both themselves and others. Many women I’ve spoken to have said that the miners’ strike was the beginning for them too.’

The defeat of the miners in the 1984-85 strike saw the start of a massive pit closure programme in the South Wales Valleys, so that twenty years later there was only one deep mine still in operation. This accelerated the changes in the industrial life of the valleys. Thousands of men became unemployed and found it extremely difficult to find new employment. The new industries entering the valleys were much more suited to employing women, therefore increasing their numbers in the workforce, for ‘women in Wales not only wanted to go to work using the inflated confidence prompted by the Miners’ Strike, but they needed to. Despite the recession and high levels of general unemployment, women’s employment grew. Gender relations had changed forever.’ Speaking from hindsight in the 1990s, Hywel Francis echoes this when he says that, ‘added to this has been that sense of being in a new era with the demise of coal as a major employer, potentially sounding the death knell of a patriarchal society, and in its wake we welcome the emergence of “new” social movements - green, peace and women - in the 1980s particularly.’ However this was not necessarily such a liberating experience for women. Although more women were employed, they were normally in low-paid, unskilled positions; indeed the ‘glass-ceiling’ for women’s employment is still a highly contested topic today.

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15 Interview with Leanne Wood AM, National Assembly Building, 21 February 2008.
16 Williams, ‘The Life and Death of the Welsh Mam in Post 1950s Women’s Fiction from South Wales’, p. 25.
Also, while gender roles were more relaxed than they had previously been, women were still responsible for looking after the home and family as well as working. This therefore only added to their burden. This shows that women’s involvement in the strike did not impact on gender relations, instead changing society in general contributed.

In conclusion then, we have seen that women’s involvement in the miners’ strike did not have a great impact on social and gender relations in South Wales communities, and therefore on women’s lives themselves. While many women were keen to return to ‘normal’ after the strike had ended, some were keen to continue the support group, and it was only as normal daily lives and routine took over that numbers at meetings started to dwindle. However, women’s involvement in the strike did instill in them a new self-confidence that helped them to go on to achieve other things. These were shown in a variety of ways, from entering the workforce to returning to education. Gender relations were affected by the changes in society which occurred after the strike rather than women’s involvement in the strike, and organisations were set up for women by women, such as the DOVE Workshop. The communities of the South Wales Valleys are very different places today because of the miners’ strike and its aftermath. Yet throughout the turbulent history of the coalfield the women have remained heroic in their constancy; women had always been there to support their menfolk, and ‘it is predominantly to female experience that we must look to account for the continuity in adversity of the South Wales Valleys’ communities’.18

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