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Women in Rhondda Society, c.1870 – 1939

**A thesis submitted to the
University of Wales for the degree of
Philosophiae Doctor**

by

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13th September, 2002**

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Contents

Declaration

Acknowledgements

Summary

List of Abbreviations

Introduction	1
Chapter One: The provision of education for women and girls	13
Chapter Two: Work	71
Chapter Three: Home, Health and Family	127
Chapter Four: Leisure	183
Chapter Five: Politics	247
Chapter Six: Protest	300
Conclusion	344
Appendix 1	348
Appendix 2	349
Appendix 3	350
Appendix 4	351
Bibliography	536

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

The history of the women in the South Wales coalfield is a subject that has not received adequate attention by historians. Where women are included in novels and histories of the area, they appear as shadowy figures in their prescribed role as the wives and mothers of the working men, the miners. This thesis is a broad-based study of the lives of some of the women who lived in the Rhondda Valley area of the coalfield during the period from 1870 to the years immediately preceding the Second World War. The adequacy of representing women solely as working-class wives and mothers is questioned through an investigation of various activities in which some women were able to participate, including the sphere of politics and protest, leisure, work and education. In addition to analysing activity outside of the domestic sphere, the thesis also looks more closely at the women who formed the community, especially, although not exclusively, those who fall outside of the traditional perception of Rhondda Women, for example middle-class women and unmarried women. Furthermore, attention has been paid to them throughout their stages of the life cycle; from girlhood – thereby incorporating their experiences in schools and participation in leisure activities – through their adult years to old age. In essence, the thesis seeks to give a more rounded view of the lives of women in the Rhondda Valleys from the hey day of the mines in the late nineteenth century to the decline of the industry in the inter-war period.

Abbreviations

B of E (W.D)	Board of Education (Welsh Department)
CWB	Central Welsh Board
GCC	Glamorgan County Council
GRO	Glamorgan Record Office
MRC	Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick
NLW	National Library of Wales
NUT	National Union of Teachers
RUDC	Rhondda Urban District Council
SWCC	South Wales Coalfield Collection
TL	Treorchy Library
UWS	University of Wales, Swansea
YSB	Ystradyfodwg School Board

Introduction

The lives of women in the Rhondda Valleys, as in coalfield societies generally, is an area about which little is known. Despite the numerous books and articles written on the history of the area, only scant attention has been paid to the role that women played in the emerging society and the impact that the particular characteristics of the area had upon their lives. Well known works on the South Wales Coalfield, such as E.D. Lewis's *Rhondda Valleys*, K. S. Hopkins's *Rhondda Past and Future*, and *Rhondda: My Valley Brave* by Emrys Pride concentrate upon the industrial development of the district in the mid-nineteenth century, and the difficulties resulting from the ensuing decline of the coal industry in the 1930s. Discussions, in such works, of the communities of workers which grew up around the pits are limited, focussing upon the influence of religion in the lives of the workers, and, conversely, the impact of the public house, and certain features of life outside work, such as health, education and housing. Only one of the studies mentioned above pays any particular attention to the lives of women; Emrys Pride devotes five pages of his study to a highly romanticised image of Rhondda women.

The lack of information upon women in society generally has been blamed on a number of factors, including the lack of sources, the traditional image of Welsh society, and the way in which history has previously been written. In their study of women and ageing in England, Pat Thane and Lynn Botelho pointed out the assumptions that had to be overcome in order to include women in history. They noted that:

Until recently the historical profession claimed that little could be learned about the past lives of women. The world was male, the documents it generated were also 'male' in that they reflected male concerns and recorded

developments of importance to males. Furthermore, it was assumed that the life experience of women did not differ in any significant way from that of men.¹

Whilst this is certainly one of the problems with 'traditional' histories in Britain, it has additionally been argued that Welsh women's history has suffered from further factors, such as the 'macho' image of Wales, and in particular south Wales. The identity of the principality is very much based upon coalminers, rugby players and male voice choirs which has ensured that women have become 'culturally invisible' in Welsh history.² Additionally, the powerful labour tradition and the emphasis upon institutional and organised aspects of modern Welsh history, the strength of nonconformity and domestic values and the low female participation rates in the formal economy have all been considered as contributory factors.³ Beddoe, in fact, blames the 'three mighty factors' of: patriarchy, under which men have been held in much higher esteem than women; capitalism, as a result of the dependence upon coal and male labour; and history, which for a long time did not study women.⁴ Whilst recognising that the study of gender in the coalfield represents the biggest gap in the history of the district, Chris Williams has argued that this emphasis upon industrial and political history has led to the neglect of its social and community history. This has begun to be remedied, and he goes on to list a number of recent works which have made a valuable contribution to an understanding of community life, although few of them refer specifically to women. His *Capitalism, Community and Conflict* helps by integrating the experiences of

¹ L. Botelho and P. Thane (eds.), *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, (London: Longman, 2001), p. 12.

² D. Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women', in T. Curtis (ed.), *Wales, the Imagined Nation: Studies in Cultural and National Identity*, (Bridgend: Poetry Press, 1986), pp. 228-29.

³ Angela John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁴ Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women', pp. 228-29.

women into this study of the south Wales Community, but he notes that further research is needed.⁵

More modern studies of the Rhondda, and the South Wales Coalfield generally, have attempted to draw women in. Dai Smith and Hywel Francis's *The Fed*, for example, mentions many women actively involved in the protests of the inter-war period, and Chris Williams's *Democratic Rhondda*, as hinted, draws attention to a number of women politically active in the labour movement. Similarly, in his comparative study of communists in Mardy, Lumphinnans, in Fife, and the Vale of Leven, Dumbartonshire, Stuart MacIntyre offers numerous instances of women being involved in communist protests. Such women, however, are not studied in-depth, and often receive only minimal attention. The real extent of women's activities and involvement remain largely undocumented. This has been blamed, by these authors, upon a number of factors. In his study of the Labour Party in the Rhondda, for example, Chris Williams explains the virtual exclusion of women because of the:

very limited occupational opportunities available for women [which] is of major importance in understanding the uncelebrated and often marginal role played by women in the history recounted in this work.⁶

We shall see in a later chapter, however, that women were involved in politics and protest, but that they were often to be found participating in different types of activity to men.

Similar claims have been made in reference to the difficulty of locating women in contemporary sources. In his study of Senghenydd, in the Aber Valley, Michael Lieven notes

⁵ C. Williams, *Community, Capitalism and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield, 1989-1947*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 6-8.

⁶ C. Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1885-1951*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 16.

the constraints that exist for the study of women as active members of communities. His opening paragraph to the chapter on 'Women, Marriage and Patriarchy' begins:

The public world of the chapels, clubs, trade unions and political parties was dominated by men. It is almost impossible to reconstruct the experience of women in this period by examining the records of these organisations... in this chapter I explore the experience of women in Senghenydd, an exploration vastly constrained by the nature of the material which is available.⁷

This thesis, however, shows that the records of such organisations *can* be used in the study of women's lives. Additionally, he fails to note the wide variety of other materials which *are* available for the study of women's lives, including newspapers, which he himself makes extensive use of.

In spite of his claims about the difficulties of sources, Lieven's study is important as it seeks to include women in the broader history. Amongst chapters on the disasters of 1901 and 1913 and the covering of the development of the village itself, can be found certain ones focussing specifically on women, such as that on 'Women, Marriage and Patriarchy', mentioned above, and 'Children and the Home'. In the aforementioned chapters, too, that deal with mining disasters and the general social life of the community, discussion of women is commendably not neglected. Their inclusion serves to offer a far more rounded history of the village than simply its development and industrial relations. Similarly, a community project to reveal the history of the village of Blaenllechau, entitled *Green to Black & Back: The story of Blaenllechau*, also features women strongly, albeit in their traditional role of housewife and mother.⁸

⁷ M. Lieven, *Senghenydd, The Universal Pit Village 1890-1930*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994), p. 121.

⁸ D. Treanor, T. Thomas, M. Farrer and M. James (eds.), *Green to Black & Back: The story of Blaenllechau*, (Treorchy: Rhondda Community Arts, 1994).

It will be apparent that, increasingly, historians interested in the study of women in Wales have surmounted the many obstacles to such an undertaking, and that it has become a popular subject for study. Those who study the subject have sought to make women much more visible in the history of the principality and have questioned the existing stereotypes of women, typically that of the 'Welsh Mam', which Beddoe has summarised as follows:

the Mythological view of Welsh women's history in the inter-war period...would run along these lines: Welsh women were 'Welsh Mams' - the wives of miners; they had enormous power in what was predominantly a matriarchal society and, somewhat contradictorily, their horizons and interests did not expand beyond their own front door, or, at most, the end of the street.⁹

In recent years Dot Jones, for example, has produced a number of articles on women and work; Angela John has written on female involvement in coalfield protests in addition to gender-specific protests; and the participation of women in the Second World War has been analysed by Mari Jones. These studies have all concentrated upon the role of women outside the home, but they have been complemented by studies of women within the domestic sphere. In addition to the existing writings on women's domestic routine, both Alis Parker and Rosemary Crook have added a further dimension, demonstrating the power and influence that was held by women, as for example, in the education and socialisation of children to live according to the norms of the community. Further, Dot Jones has begun to uncover, using mortality rates, some of the health risks experienced by the women of the district at this time.¹⁰

⁹ D. Beddoe, 'Women Between the Wars', in T. Herbert and G. Elwyn Jones (eds.), *Wales Between the Wars*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 129.

¹⁰ See Dot Jones, 'Serfdom and Slavery: Women's Work in Wales, 1890-1930', in D. R. Hopkin and G. S. Kealey (eds.), *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada*, (Aberystwyth: Llafur/CCLH, 1989); A. V. John, 'A Miner Struggle? Women's Protests in Welsh Mining History', *Llafur*, 4, 1, (1984); Mari. A. Williams, '*Where Is Mrs Jones Going?*': *Women in the Second World War in South Wales*, (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 1995); Alis Parker, 'What Mam Said Went: A Study of Mining Families in South Wales before the Second World War and their access to

Such studies of women and communities in the Rhondda, as well as in other regions of the United Kingdom, have tended to focus upon married, working-class women and their experiences. They, after all, formed a very large group of women in the district. It should also be recognised, however, that other groups of women existed, including girls, younger women, single women, spinsters and older women, and their experiences and contribution to community life should not be ignored.¹¹ The census statistics for 1911 illustrate the diversity of circumstances amongst the female population of the Rhondda: five per cent of women over the age of 30, for example, were single, and a further 13 percent were widowed; their lives remain undocumented. Similarly, 40 per cent of females were under the age of 15, and an additional seven per cent were 55 and older. A further 17 per cent of females over the age of 10 were classified as being 'occupied'. Such diverse groups of women would have had very different experiences of life in the Rhondda at this time. Historians of English women have already recognised the need to demonstrate the diversity of women's lives. Alison Oram, for example, has studied spinsters, especially in the teaching profession, whilst Kath Holden has broken down many of the myths surrounding unmarried women, and Pat Thane and Lynn Botelho, for their part, have brought older women into the analysis. This emphasis upon diversity, however, does not really appear to have transferred to the history of Welsh women. The notable exception here is Deirdre Beddoe's recently published *Out of the Shadows*, a wide-ranging study of the key areas of women's lives - such as education, waged work, home, health, politics, protest and leisure - which seeks to encompass women in all parts of Wales, and of all social classes and ages.

power in the home', Unpublished M.Sc (Econ) (University of Wales), 1996; Rosemary Crook, 'Women of the Rhondda Valleys Between the Wars', Unpublished MA (University of Leeds), n.d; Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1911', in A. V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*.

¹¹ There has been some discussion on what constitutes 'old' or 'elderly' women., which is outside the scope of this thesis. It appears that a notion of 'elderly' has been fairly fluid throughout history, so no single point can be identified after which a person becomes 'elderly'. See Bothelo and Thane (eds.), *Women and Ageing*.

The emphasis on the study of miners and their wives in coalfield society has given the impression that the Rhondda was a fairly homogenous society, with the only distinction being that between the ordinary miner and the pit officials and owners. Chris Williams has drawn attention to further divisions based upon gender, ethnicity and poverty, but within these divisions, there were additional distinctions of age, marital status, class, and even geographical divisions.¹² In fact there was a great diversity depending upon age, class, marital status, and even the village in which the person lived. There was, for example, a proportion of middle-class inhabitants, as well as sections of the working class, who did not work down the mine, for example shopkeepers, teachers, council officers and clerks, and managers of the mines.¹³ Little is known about this section of the population, and even less is known about the activities of their wives and daughters, which were probably very different from that of their working-class counterparts. David Hawkins, for example, after graduating from London University as a Bachelor of Science in 1904, taught at Porth Pupil Teacher centre and later became headmaster of Tonypany Secondary School. He married Jessie Menzies, who was also a qualified teacher. Their daughters, Marjorie and Jessie, both progressed to attend college in Cardiff during the 1920s. Amongst their family papers are a large collection of family photographs, including those taken whilst on family holidays to the coast and rural areas, the family at charity garden parties and Marjorie and Jessie at private French classes.¹⁴ Clearly, this family lived a very different lifestyle to many others in the Rhondda at this time. Their different domestic circumstances, too, had great implications

¹² Chris Williams, *Community, Capitalism and Conflict*. See chapter 6 on 'Society'

¹³ It has been noted that the definitions of class are particularly difficult, and no single idea of what constitutes membership of a certain class exists. Past definitions have included those based upon occupation, income and status within the community. I have taken middle class to mean those not directly associated with underground work, and could include shopkeepers, teachers, the wives and daughters of managers and officials at the pit. My thanks to Julie Light for clarifying this.

¹⁴ Glamorgan Record Office (GRO): MS. D/DX 381, Hawkins family papers.

upon the lives of women in a middle-class household, as many could afford to take advantage of technological advances in household appliances which lessened the time spent on domestic chores. Or they might have employed servants to take care of the heavy chores, thus freeing a large amount of time for themselves and their daughters to spend, if they so wished, on certain leisure pursuits, or involvement in politics or charitable organisations. Class, marital status and age were not the only variations in women's lives, for differences could be related to where the person lived. For example, Tonypandy, Porth and Treorchy were the main entertainment and commercial centres for the Valleys. The lives of the women from these lively villages would have been very different to those living in Blaenrhondda, situated at the isolated northern tip of the Rhondda Fawr. Within these villages there were people with different religious backgrounds, and mixtures of groups who had migrated to the district from many different places, including rural Wales, the west of England, Forest of Dean, Ireland, Italy and Spain.¹⁵

Just as the Rhondda was not a homogenous society, so, too, were its women not a homogenous group. Many led active lives outside the home, and it is one of the aims of this thesis to explore and illustrate some of the diversity of women's experiences. In this way, it echoes Jaclyn Gier's argument that women should be acknowledged and re-integrated into 'their historical role *as workers* in the mining household, as participants in the mining family, and as active agents in the mining community'.¹⁶

¹⁵ For more information on migration into the Rhondda, and the South Wales Coalfield, see C. Hughes, *Lime, Lemon and Sarsaparilla: The Italian Community in South Wales, 1881-1945*, (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1991); E. D Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys: A Study in Industrial Development 1800-present day*, (London: Phoenix, 1959), Chapter 12 – 'Population, Immigration and the Welsh Language'; Phillip N. Jones, 'Population Migration into Glamorgan 1861-1911: A reassessment', in Prys Morgan (ed.), *Glamorgan County History*, vi, (Cardiff: Glamorgan History Trust Limited, 1988).

¹⁶ Jaclyn Gier, 'Miners' Wives: Gender, Culture and Society in the South Wales Coalfields, 1919-1939', Unpublished Ph.D. (Northwestern University), 1993, p. xi.

This exploration will be achieved through six themed chapters. The first concentrates upon the development of education for women and girls throughout the period, including the establishment of free and compulsory education, the introduction of secondary education into the district, and the opportunities available for a university education. The varying opportunities available to girls of different backgrounds will also be studied, including the many constraints facing working-class girls, which often halted their quest for education. Conversely, the advancements in education and the provision of post-elementary education succeeded in enhancing the prospects for middle-class girls, in addition to those of the less well-off groups who were able to take advantage of the newly introduced scholarships.

The second chapter looks at the experiences of women in the world of work, and the factors influencing the occupations that they were able to enter. It will become clear that some groups of women, namely young, single women, spinsters and widows, were better able to enter into the workforce than their married counterparts. There were a number of occupations available to them, including domestic service, teaching, and midwifery, depending upon factors such as educational training and background. When the concept of what constitutes 'work' is expanded, we shall see that the world of work was by no means closed to married women. If a very small minority of the latter entered the workforce on a formal basis, vast numbers of them provided an essential contribution to the family budget through informal means. The special circumstances of the First World War will also be studied, as the period brought many changes in the world of work for all classes and groups of women in the Rhondda.

Chapter three focuses upon women and their domestic situation. A study of women in the district would not be complete without mentioning domestic life, but in this chapter the idea of the household is re-evaluated to include members other than the immediate family,

comprising elderly parents, lodgers and spinster daughters. The main focus of the chapter remains, however, on the largest group of women in the Rhondda, that of married working-class women. Through information gleaned from a spread of contemporary health reports, reports into distressed areas, newspapers, oral histories, court records and the census returns, their experiences in the home environment are analysed, taking into account housing, health, relationships within the family and poverty, as well as issues relating specifically to women, such as childbirth and abortion.

Chapter four serves to emphasise the more positive aspects of home life, through an exploration of women and their experiences of leisure spent both within and outside the home. The discussion, using newspapers and oral histories as its main source, illustrates that a wide variety of leisure facilities were on offer in the Rhondda, including both religious and secular forms of entertainment, which some women were well placed to enjoy. Differences in women's experiences of leisure are also explored, which were very much dependent upon their domestic and financial circumstances, and their stage in the life cycle. The concept of leisure has been re-evaluated in order to discover the activities of married working-class women, which, using the traditional definition of the term, would fall outside what is usually believed to be 'leisure'.

Chapters five and six both continue with the theme of activities away from the home, concentrating firstly on women's role in politics, and then on their involvement in protest. From data revealed in the records of local political organisations, minute books, autobiographies, newspapers and oral histories, and by dint of shifting the emphasis away from industrial towards community politics, we can see that women were involved in politics to varying degrees. They can be found joining campaigns such as suffrage and temperance, serving on public and administrative bodies, and participating in political parties. Some very

prominent figures, such as Elizabeth Andrews and Gwen Ray Evans, emerge as political leaders amongst women, and it is similarly clear that others were prepared to devote a great deal of time and energy to their causes, but in very different ways, according to their circumstances and how much time they are able to dedicate to the cause.

Chapter six concentrates upon the more informal ways in which ordinary women became involved in coalfield politics, particularly in the form of community unrest, through active involvement in strikes and riots and hostility towards those threatening the protest by returning to work. In addition, the court action of married-women teachers, which was a prominent gender-motivated protest taking place in the early 1920s, is included. This provides an example of women standing against both their male colleagues and their union, and also much criticism and hostility from the community at large, for a cause of great importance to them.

By combining data uncovered from original sources with information from existing studies, it is hoped to present a more rounded view of women in the Rhondda during this period. The sources used include autobiographies, oral interviews and novels, with some chapters relying heavily on newspapers. However, some more 'traditional' historical documents have also been used, including those in which Lieven, we have seen, argued that it is almost impossible to locate women, including the minutes of the Rhondda Urban District Council, the records of the Labour and Communist Parties, Poor Law Records, and the records of the Petty and Quarter Sessions. Finding women in such documents is not difficult. The process of bringing women into the history of such a male-dominated area has also required the re-interpretation of some terms before they can be applied to women. The definition of work, for example, has been extended to cover informal work such as washing clothes for a neighbour during confinement, or cleaning once-a-week for the doctor's wife –

work which would not have been considered formal employment, but which was very important in the lives of the women concerned in terms of the money it brought into the household.

It is hoped that this thesis will provide a synopsis of women's lives in the Rhondda during a tumultuous period in its history, spanning the dramatic expansion of the valleys and the vast increase in population to the hey-day of mining and the catastrophic decline which followed.¹⁷ With such a wide overview there is, necessarily, a lack of detail, and there are many aspects of women's lives which have not been covered. It has lain outside the scope of the thesis, for example, to question whether women's conditions and opportunities improved during the period, although this is mentioned where it is deemed to be relevant.¹⁸ Nor are there direct comparisons with the conditions of women's lives in rural Wales or in Britain as a whole, apart from an acknowledgement that their lives were different because of the unique conditions of the South Wales Coalfield. Finally, the thesis is not meant to be a feminist history, but rather a general overview of experiences of life for some women in the Rhondda at a given time, demonstrating the diversity of experiences familiar to varying groups of women.¹⁹

¹⁷ Details studies of the economic conditions of the Rhondda Valleys can be found in works such as E. D. Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys*; and C. Williams, *Community, Class and Conflict*.

¹⁸ Debates such as this can be read in works such as Jane Lewis, 'In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between the Wars', in F. Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, (Harvester Press; Sussex, 1980), pp. 208-39.

¹⁹ An important distinction has been made between women's history, defined as a study of lives of women, and feminist history, which seeks to explain the deliberate oppression of women, by the London Feminist History Group in *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power, Women's Resistance*, (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 2.

Chapter One

The Provision of Education for women and girls

The standard of education that girls received during this period had an immense impact upon the life choices that they were able to make, and upon the lifestyle that they later led. The options available to a girl who had attended one of the secondary schools or the Intermediate School in the Rhondda, for example, were very different to those of a girl who had been educated to elementary school standard only. Whereas the domestic bias and basic education of the elementary schools served to encourage more of its girls into domestic posts, the wider curriculum of the secondary schools could lead to commercial and teaching posts, and even to a university course. Developments in education during the period meant that, in theory at least, elementary education was available for all children from the 1870s, from which some would be able to progress to the secondary schools, and even possibly to a university course. In practice, however, educational opportunity for many girls was limited. Insufficient accommodation in schools, financial restrictions and parental attitudes meant that education for the vast majority of girls ended at elementary level. Nevertheless, the provision for secondary education, and the introduction of scholarships and free school places by the end of the period offered the girls chances that their mothers and even older sisters were denied, and some, at least, were able to take advantage of the options available.

There can be no doubt that the educational opportunity available to both boys and girls expanded rapidly during the period under study. By the end of the period, the provision of education had been transformed from its *ad hoc* and informal origins into a comprehensive system of elementary, secondary and higher education. Contemporary reports into the

provision and condition of schools in Britain illustrate just how dramatic the expansion of school accommodation was in the Rhondda. In 1870 there were only seven schools there in receipt of a Government grant, as well as a number of small, privately run schools. A combination of Sunday Schools, colliery schools and privately run dame schools, established in the late nineteenth century, provided instruction for the children of the men flocking to the newly opened pits. But they only catered for a minority of children, and both the colliery and dame schools were confined to those who were able to pay for the benefit of an education. Accommodation was greatly expanded following the implementation of the 1870 Education Act, which stipulated that elementary education should be available to all children. Thus, a network of schools began to be steadily introduced in the district. By 1912 the Education Committee of the Rhondda Urban District Council was responsible for nine mixed schools, four mixed junior and infant departments, 22 boys' departments, 23 girls' departments and 33 infants' departments throughout the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr.¹ Also under the control of the Rhondda Education Committee at that time was a secondary school, a pupil teacher centre and three higher grade schools. A small number of pupils were also able to attend the Rhondda County School at Porth, which was established under the 1889 Intermediate Education Act and administered by the Glamorgan County Council.

Prior to this expansion, the most popular means of receiving an education was through the Sunday school. Many of the emerging towns did not have schoolrooms, either independent or attached to the colliery, but every town, as a matter of course, had at least one place of worship. This meant that there were both premises in which to hold lessons and the

¹ British Parliamentary Paper: *Annual Report of the Committee of Council on Education 1870*, vol xxii; GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/3, Rhondda Urban District Council (RUDC): General report of HMI on Education in Rhondda Urban District, July 1912.

presence of a minister of religion to teach the scholars. The schools were so popular, in fact, that often the size of the Sunday school was larger than that of the chapel itself; Noddfa chapel, Treorchy, for example, was a large chapel with 600 members in 1879, but its Sunday classes comprised 650 scholars.² The popularity of these weekly classes could be attributed to the convenience with which they fitted in to the lives of the busy population. Held on the one day of the week on which there was no paid work, education did not interfere with the responsibilities of those who wished to attend. This was important in an area in which boys would be sent to work in the mines at a very young age, and in which the female members of the families were engaged in an endless round of domestic chores. Schooling on a Sunday, however, ensured that an education could be gained in addition to, rather than at the expense of, other chores. And Sunday schools did not just confine their efforts to the teaching of children – adult scholars were also welcomed, thus providing an important forum for adult learning. Pupils of all ages were taught the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic, in addition to Bible stories and Christian morality.

The schools, in spite of their popularity in local communities, were criticised by some contemporary observers. Adverse comments were directed towards the alleged narrowness of the curriculum, the use of unqualified teachers, and the provision of an education that was strongly based upon the desire to teach children to be able to read the Bible and follow services, rather than education for education's sake. In addition, the organisation of the classes was questioned, in particular that mixed abilities and ages were taught together in the same room.³ But despite these criticisms, the schools remained popular: even as late as 1901,

² L. W. Evans, *Education in Industrial Wales 1700-1900: A study of the works schools during the Industrial Revolution*, (Cardiff: Avalon Books, 1971), p. 251.

³ T. Ridd, 'We want more Schools on Welsh Hills', in Stewart Williams (ed.), *Glamorgan Historian*, vi, (1967), pp. 70-80.

when there were alternative modes of weekday schooling available, the total number of Sunday scholars amounted to 38,252, out of a population of 113,735 in the Rhondda Urban District.⁴ The large number of attendees bears ample testimony to the regard with which the classes were held. Attendance at such classes, however, became more a symbol of religious observance and was both a key determinant in the respectability of families, and a means of providing religious and moral teaching that was not available in the newly created non-denominational or purely secular board schools.

Alongside the Sunday schools in the period before the expanding provision of formal schooling, day schools had also been attached to the local colliery. They were run either by the British or National charity societies, and were established and maintained either through the payment by colliers of poundage from their wages, as was the case in Treherbert, or by the school pence paid by the attending children, which was the system used for a time in Cwmparc. Much of their existence was also owed to the benevolence of some colliery owners, who would donate an annual grant and sometimes raise the building costs, and to Government grants. Under the old pre-1870 voluntary system, the colliery schools at Dinas, Dunraven, and Ferndale, as well as the elementary schools at Ton, Pentre, Treherbert, and Treorchy, were in receipt of Government grants in 1869, which helped in the purchase of facilities, such as furniture and books, and formed part of the salary of the teaching staff.⁵ It was in these schools that the children of the early migrants to the Rhondda were given basic instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic, with the addition of needlework for the girls

While the voluntary colliery schools were popular with parents who wished their children to receive an education that they themselves did not have, the schools have been

⁴ Evans, *Education in Industrial Wales, 1700–1900*, Appendix 2, p. 256.

⁵ British Parliamentary Paper: *Annual Report of the Committee of Council of Education, 1870*, vol. xxii, p. 541.

described as 'inadequate and ineffective'.⁶ Many of the problems that affected the earlier colliery schools also affected the post-1870 elementary schools, and will be discussed later, but, generally criticisms of the colliery schools included the standard of education received by the children. Regular inspections found that the schools were often over crowded, and many lacked even the most basic facilities and sanitation. It was not unusual, for example, for schools to consist of only one schoolroom, in which pupils ranging in age from five to twelve were taught in different groups. Sometimes wooden screens might have partitioned the room, but often it was left to the teacher to make themselves heard over the others. Obviously such problems had serious implications for the education that children received in the early schools.

The problems were in turn magnified by the rapid turnover of pupils, which was to some extent affected by the economic circumstances of the Valleys. It was common for schooling to be interrupted as a result of opportunities arising for employment in the local mines – children might attend school for a few weeks or months, and then leave to take up employment. This problem was one which affected many of the industrial areas, and was one which was recognised by school managers who, it was reported:

complain of difficulty on account of the parents taking their children away very young. Wages are high, even for boys, and this is a great temptation to abridge the time of schooling.⁷

Similarly, slumps or difficulties in the coalfield could also have an impact upon attendance figures in the district, as boys would often return to education in times of injury or strike. The attendance figures at Duffryn Colliery National School, for example, rose

⁶ L. W. Evans, 'Colliery Schools in South Wales in the Nineteenth Century', *National Library of Wales Journal*, X, (1957-58), p. 137.

⁷ Minutes of the committee of council on education 1850-1852, p. 493 quoted in H V Middleton 'Girls' Education in Glamorgan, 1870-1979: Attitudes and Practices' Unpublished M.Ed (University of Wales), 1989, p. 13.

dramatically during a strike in 1871 due to the number of 'colliery lads' who used the opportunity to learn. The number of boys alone attending the school reached a peak of 103 on one day, when usually the average number of normal day scholars attending the school was 178.⁸ Conversely, adverse conditions in the coalfield could also serve to reduce the number of scholars, for the dependence of the schools upon the fortunes of the pit to which they were attached could have a detrimental effect upon the continued education of the children. In 1878 strikes in the area meant that Pentre National School was closed due to want of funds, and the same thing happened at Dunraven and Treherbert schools.⁹ To some extent, also, industrial disputes and periods of low productivity affected the children's schooling on account of parents not being able to afford to pay the 'school pence' for their children to attend the school. In addition to being closely linked to the fortunes of the pits, the attendance of children could vary considerably even on a day-to-day basis. The log books of the early schools document inclement weather, visiting fairs, outings and teas organised by the various religious denominations in the area as reasons for the non-attendance of pupils.¹⁰

These factors greatly contributed to the sporadic nature of children's education, as, too, did parents' attitudes towards education. Given that parents themselves had been deprived of education, it was difficult for them to see the benefits, especially in respect of the opportunities for work. If boys were destined to follow their fathers into the pit, there seemed to be little point in struggling to educate them. This, along with fluctuations in income, 'made

⁸ Evans, 'Colliery Schools in South Wales', Appendix xxi, p. 161.

⁹ C. Hughes, 'A Study of the Relationship between Education and Industrial Society', Unpublished Ph.D (University of Wales), 1991, p. 258.

¹⁰ Ronald Cummings, 'The Log Books of a Rhondda School', in Stewart Williams (ed.), *Glamorgan Historian*, 11, (1975), p. 194.

the provision of schooling a child an unwelcome financial burden, especially in view of the requirement for large numbers of children to pay the school pence'.¹¹

In spite of the precariousness of the financial position of these voluntary schools, and the often-sporadic attendance of pupils, the schools were popular with those parents who could afford to send their children:

The generally good attendance figure for the Rhondda which has already been observed showed that the people might well have wanted something better for their children than that which they had experienced in this industrial phenomenon.¹²

For all the problems besetting them, they did offer a valuable service for the children of the Rhondda. Those attending regularly would be taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic, which was an opportunity which had almost invariably been denied their parents. The dramatic expansion which the Rhondda Valleys was experiencing at the time and the subsequent overcrowding of the colliery schools, however, meant that an alternative solution to the education question had to be sought, and it became increasingly clear that a more systematic arrangement was required. The issue of overcrowding continued to plague the education authority throughout the period under study, owing to the difficulties of providing sufficient school accommodation for a population that was rapidly growing. The migration of men, and men with families, into the area following the discovery and mining of coal resulted in a population explosion, with 'waves' of men, sometimes with their families, arriving from the west country, the Forest of Dean, the border counties as well as rural Wales, and from as far afield as Italy and Ireland. The number of young people in the Valleys also rose, as men's families came to join their wage earner, and as single men and women met,

¹¹ R. Smith 'Elementary Education and Welsh Society. 1870-1902', Ph.D (University of Wales, 1995) p. 239.

¹² W. J. M. Gilchrist, 'A Study of Elementary Education in Glamorgan in the Nineteenth Century', M.Ed (University of Wales), 1980, p. 353.

married and settled in the district. The amenities available in the Rhondda, including schools, simply could not keep pace. This was clearly a problem in Ystradyfodwg, where the population rose from 5,456 in 1871 to 14,318 in 1881 and more than doubled over the next decade to reach a massive 32,278 by 1891.¹³

The solution to this problem was to establish a school board, which would create new schools where voluntary accommodation was insufficient for the needs of the population, and to maintain them at public expense. The power to do this was conferred under the Education Act of 1870, which was designed to remedy the deficiencies in the existing system of elementary education and to bring into existence a more regulated and systematic educational structure. Districts that did have sufficient voluntary accommodation were not compelled to establish a board, and all existing schools could be retained under the act, providing they came up to an adequate standard. The parish of Ystradyfodwg, of which the Rhondda comprised a large part, decided against the establishment of a school board, preferring schools to be established on the same voluntary basis as hitherto. The speed of the population increase, however, meant that the school population was expanding at a far greater rate than the provision of schools. In the village of Ystrad alone in 1878, for example, there was a shortage of 280 school places.¹⁴ By that year continuing shortages in accommodation resulted in the decision that a school board had to be established, and a number of schools were instituted in the district. By 1894, there were 21 schools under the management of the Ystradyfodwg School Board, consisting of 55 departments, and catering for the educational needs of 14,568 children.¹⁵

¹³ Census statistics, 1871-1891. The figures include children aged five to 15, although they will be slightly inflated, as few children would have remained at school much longer than their twelfth birthday.

¹⁴ Cummings, 'Log Books of a Rhondda School', p. 191.

¹⁵ GRO: MS. E/SB /58/17a, Ystradyfodwg School Board (YSB): Annual Report 1893-4, p. 15

Although the increase in the number of schools was rapid for a number of years it failed to keep pace with the dramatic increase in population. Extra provision was hindered by the lack of available land in the narrow valleys on which to build new schools. The only available flat land was already occupied by the pits and the railway and there were difficulties in building on the steep sides of the valley. The influx of migrants attracted by the high wages and availability of work meant that the existing provisions soon became stretched to their limits, and HMI reports began to notice that the existing arrangements in the Rhondda were totally inadequate for the population they were meant to serve. The school board, and from 1902 the Rhondda Education Committee, had made drastic inroads into providing sufficient accommodation, but as the population continued to rise, still more were needed. As one inspector noted in 1897:

New schools or extensions have been built in Ystradyfodwg parish for nearly 4,000 children in the course of the last two years, and there is still much overcrowding at various points that a similar tale will probably have to be told in the next report.¹⁶

The problem created by the massive increase in the numbers of children of school age and insufficient accommodation is dramatically illustrated in the attendance figures of the local schools. Bodringallt colliery school, for example, provided accommodation for 472 children in 1880 and the average attendance was 439. Only three years later, the average attendance at the school was 544 scholars. A similar rise in attendance occurred at Llwynypia colliery school, which saw its numbers increase from 458 children to 724 within only ten years.¹⁷

The growing numbers of children seeking school places in the Rhondda, a problem compounded by physical obstacles in the way of building new schools, created difficult

¹⁶ Report of the Committee of Council on Education (England and Wales) 1897, House of Commons, Vol xxvi, p. 287.

¹⁷ Evans, 'Colliery Schools in South Wales', Appendix xxii, p. 163.

conditions within them for both children and teachers. The most obvious manifestation of this was overcrowding, which resulted in very large class sizes in most of the schools. In 1897 the School Inspector for the Merthyr area reported that, 'I have frequently to report that a classroom is overcrowded with twice the number of children that it is supposed to accommodate', and the same conditions existed in the schools of the Rhondda.¹⁸ Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary school, for example, opened in September 1906 with 304 pupils on the books, but with a teaching staff of only five. This inevitably meant that the teachers had to contend with very large classes. By 1914, Miss Collins, the Headmistress, had managed to secure more staff, including three certificated assistants, five uncertificated assistants and one supply teacher, but the number of scholars meanwhile had increased to 372. This meant that teachers were still contending with very large classes, as table 1 below illustrates:

Table 1: Class size in Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School, 1914

Standard	Number of children	Number of teachers
I	83	2
II	68	2
III	57	1
IV	66	1
V	51	1
VI	47	1 ¹⁹

Classes were large in ordinary times, but during the illness or absence of a teacher, which could be very frequent, special difficulties arose and classes were often merged, or in severe cases, the school would have to be closed. This last drastic course of action obtained in the instance of Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School, which had to close for at least one

¹⁸ Report of the Committee of Council on Education (England and Wales) 1897, House of Commons, vol xxvi, p. 287.

¹⁹ GRO: MS. E/R 3/3, Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School: Log book, September 1914.

day during the first month that it had been opened because four of the teachers employed there were absent, which left only one teacher and the Headmistress in charge of over 300 scholars.²⁰ Similarly, the Headmistress of Treorchy Girls' Elementary School noted in the school log book that she often found it 'difficult to manage without teachers. Some one has been absent all but one day for the past month.'²¹ Although the merging of classes was far less drastic than closing the school, it still made teaching conditions very difficult; the two classes were given different lessons, either under one teacher whilst sharing a room, or in separate rooms with inadequate supervision. Such conditions also created difficulties with the organisation of the school and could severely disrupt the education of the pupils: one Headmistress, Miss Collins, found that the frequent merging of classes and changing of teachers rendered it almost impossible to follow the arranged timetable.²²

The adverse effect that large classes and absences of teachers had upon the education of the school population was a recognised problem, and, in response, a Government report in 1912 into conditions of education in the Rhondda Urban District recommended that the council retain a few supply teachers for times when illness struck, as at that time only three were employed in the whole of the district.²³ The subsequent increase in supply teachers did little to alleviate the problem, however, and the practice of merging classes continued as the only practical solution to the absence of staff members. By 1919 Blaenclydach School had twelve teachers, who taught classes containing an average of as many as thirty-two pupils. Although the class sizes had actually decreased in this school, the log book illustrates that

²⁰ GRO: MS. E/R 3/3, Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 12 October 1906.

²¹ GRO: MS. E/R 44/3, Treorchy Elementary School: Log book, 13 December 1893.

²² GRO: MS. E/R 3/3, Blaenclydach Elementary School: Log book, 8 February 1915.

²³ GRO: MS. UD/RE/66/3, RUDC: General report of HMI on Education in the RUD, July 1912, p. 11.

absences of teachers remained frequent and classes continued to be merged, with dire consequences for the girls' education.

The fact that classes were large and frequently merged, although disliked, was accepted as unavoidable. Of real concern in this situation was the practice of frequently entrusting large classes to uncertificated teachers:

uncertificated teachers are often asked to take charge of classes of fifty to sixty which would be difficult even for some experienced teachers...very many teachers with the minor qualifications are necessarily very young and inexperienced and it is a matter of misgiving that so much of the teaching is given to them.²⁴

It is important to note that this report is concerned only about the effects of difficult teaching conditions upon young, inexperienced uncertificated teachers. However, not all the uncertificated teachers holding posts in the elementary schools were young; a number were more mature teachers with many years of teaching experience behind them. Of all teachers commencing duties in the Ystradyfodwg area in 1908, 17 per cent were over the age of 25, and it is reasonable to assume that there were a number of mature teachers already in positions in the area.²⁵ For these more mature teachers, too, conditions were difficult.

Elementary schools in the area all too frequently had no option but to rely on uncertificated staff. In Bodringallt Colliery School, for example, the master, Mr. John Rees, was described as possessing only 'very modest qualifications', and as the number of pupils grew larger he recruited the help of his wife, Mary, along with a first-year probationer, and a steady succession of pupil teachers. Mr Rees was nevertheless the only qualified teacher in a

²⁴ Education in the Administrative County of Glamorgan, ending July 31 1912. p. 11, quoted in Middleton, 'Girls' Education in Glamorgan', p. 43.

²⁵ Treorchy Library (TL): YSB: Register of Teachers, 1908.

school of 300 pupils.²⁶ There were many grades and types of teachers before the First World War, ranging from pupil teachers, who were in training, to uncertificated teachers, who had not received formal training, and then to certificated teachers, who had gained recognised teaching qualifications. In addition, as we have seen, there were also supply teachers who were able to teach under Article 68, which stipulated that they only had to be over eighteen years of age and vaccinated before they could teach. The lack of suitably qualified teachers presented problems for most elementary schools in the district, and was not only confined to girls' schools. Nonetheless, as table 2 illustrates, it was the less qualified teachers who were to be found especially in the girls' elementary schools:

Table 2: Grades of teachers employed in schools under the Ystradyfodwg School Board.

	1898-1899		1902-1903	
	Boys	Girls	Boys & mixed	Girls
Number of Schools	27	20	29	20
Certificated Assistant	44	8	100	21
Uncertificated Assistant	62	61	68	87
Article 49	0	0	1	1
Females Art 68	3	6	1	6
Pupil Teachers	64	63	81	74
Candidates	18	19	0	0
Total	191	157	251	189 ²⁷

Unqualified teachers were clearly far more prevalent in girls' than in boys' schools, accounting for 95 per cent and 77 per cent respectively of the teaching staff in 1898-9 and 89 per cent and 60 per cent respectively of the teaching staff in 1902-3. One of the reasons for this was that there were fewer qualified women teachers. Because of the tradition of women in the Rhondda giving up work on marriage, and the formalisation of this custom with the

²⁶ Cummings, 'Log Books of a Rhondda School', p. 188.

²⁷ GRO: MS. E/SB/58/17a, YSB: Annual Reports, 1899, 1903. These are for teaching staff in elementary schools only, and do not include Head Teachers.

implementation of a marriage bar, few parents saw the point in paying for their daughters to become qualified when they could easily find positions without the qualifications. On a more practical level, Widdowson has suggested that there were fewer places for women to train than there were for men.²⁸

The problem of securing enough properly qualified teachers was an issue during the early part of the period, and, as a result, much of the teaching was left to the pupil teachers, who were only just learning the skills needed. The minimum age for pupil teachers was only 14 in 1877, which was raised to 15 in 1900 and to 16 in 1903. Consequently, for much of the period, they were often only a year or two older than some of the pupils they taught. This reliance upon pupil teachers to assist in the teaching in elementary schools brought with it its own problems. From early in the twentieth century pupil teachers had to be in possession of a secondary education. If they had commenced teaching after leaving elementary school, they could gain secondary tuition at the Pupil Teacher Centre in Porth as part of their training, although they were required to be at the centre for five half days a week. This would not have made much difference to those schools which employed pupil teachers merely to assist other mistresses, but caused great disruption in those which, because of a lack of sufficient teaching staff, had to allocate more responsibilities to the pupil teachers. Mardy girls' school, for example, did not have a single certificated teacher on the staff in 1904. Apart from Miss C. E. Davies, the Head Teacher, the school was staffed by six ex-pupil teachers, one article 68, and three pupil teachers.²⁹ This was a common solution to the problem of teacher shortage in the early period. For instance, when the Headmistress of Tylorstown Girls' Elementary

²⁸ F. Widdowson, *Going up into the Next Class: Women and Elementary Teacher Training 1840-1914*, (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1983), p. 58.

²⁹ GRO: MS. E/R 23/5, Mardy Girls' Elementary School: Log book, September 1904.

School found that she had insufficient staff to allow a teacher each for the girls in standards I and II respectively, the classes were merged and charge was given to the only available members of staff, a pupil teacher who was assisted by a monitress.³⁰

Not only did the teachers experience difficulties in teaching large numbers of children, but the conditions of the schools also placed obstacles in their path. HMI reports of the period frequently refer to problems with the actual buildings, including cracks appearing in walls, water entering school buildings during bad weather, poor ventilation in the summer months and the like. It was also reported by one inspector that standards of 'cleanliness of different schools varies considerably, some being scrupulously free from dust and dirt, and others evidently not'.³¹ In addition, difficulties in obtaining supplies and basic facilities were experienced by both Mardy and Blaenclydach Girls' Schools. The scholars at Blaenclydach had to wait two weeks for the arrival of desks, and when they finally did arrive, they were the wrong size and many were damaged.³² Mardy school had not been supplied with desks in April 1895, and a month later, two sections of standard II were still obliged to stand during lessons.³³

Given the conditions of the schools, the overcrowded classrooms, and the need for children's earnings to supplement family incomes, it is somewhat surprising that attendance rates at the elementary schools were as good as they were. A steady rate of attendance was a stipulation of the grant that both voluntary and board schools received from the government, and it would appear that many parents took advantage of the opportunity that was available to their children, especially following the introduction of free education in 1891.

³⁰ GRO: MS. E/R 47/4, Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 24 April 1885.

³¹ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/3, RUDC: General report of HMI on Education in the Rhondda Urban District, July 1912, p. 9.

³² GRO: MS. E/R 3/3, Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 7 October 1914, 19 October 1914.

³³ GRO: MS. E/R 23/6, Mardy Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 18 May 1895.

If attendance rates were generally good, there were nevertheless absences on certain occasions as had been the case in the earlier colliery schools. Following the introduction of compulsory attendance at elementary schools in 1880, officers were employed to document those who did not comply, and to seek the reasons for non-attendance. They noted that the reasons for the sporadic absences of large numbers of children were varied, the most popular of which were chapel tea parties and outings in the summer. These were organised regularly by the various denominations, and disrupted the schools to the extent that calls were made for the 'synchronisation of various religious bodies, so that disturbances of school work, and of attendance may be largely reduced'.³⁴ Travelling fairs, *eisteddfodau*, poor weather and outbreaks of illness such as scarlet fever and measles continued to affect attendance figures in the elementary schools throughout the period. As late as 1929, the headmistress of Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School noted in the log book that, during the week of 11 February, attendance was especially low: on the Monday and Tuesday, attendance was only 71 per cent and 35 per cent respectively, as a result of a bad snowstorm which affected the area. The rest of the school week saw attendance on each day of only 54, 61 and 57 per cent respectively. Although the reasons were not stated in the log book, continued low attendance was possibly a consequence of the persistent bad weather.³⁵ Similarly, the attendance records of individual pupils varied immensely; at Tonypany Higher Grade School in 1906, the highest attendance by a pupil was 474 (half days) whilst the lowest was only 110. One girl was noted to have a particularly bad rate of attendance, achieving only 110 in the 1906-08

³⁴ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/3, RUDC: General report of H. M. Inspectors on Education in the Rhondda Urban District for the Period ending 31 July 1912, p. 13.

³⁵ GRO: MS. E/R 47/4, Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 11-15 February 1919.

session, before leaving the school. She was readmitted in October 1907, but only managed 107 days in the 1907-08 session. She left the school for good in 1908.³⁶

As in the earlier colliery schools, the attendance of the scholars also continued to be affected to a large degree by the situation at the local colliery. Accidents were not uncommon in the coalfield and disrupted the routines of the entire community. Thus, the headmistress at Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School (not surprisingly) found that there were a number of absences in the immediate aftermath of the explosion at the Wattstown colliery in 1887.³⁷ Similarly, periods of strike also affected the attendance even after free education had been introduced in 1891. Thus in 1898 it was reported by the headmistress of Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School, that owing to the strike, 'several girls have been sent away to their relations to various parts until work is again resumed, several others have not boots and some go daily begging from place to place'.³⁸ Reflecting the pride and striving for respectability on the part of families, parents were often embarrassed to send their children to school during periods of hardship and unemployment when they might be badly clothed and possibly even without boots.³⁹

Further investigation of the attendance figures of the Ystradyfodwg School Board reveals that the attendance of girls, although generally high, was lower than that of boys. The annual report of 1898-99 shows that whereas the average attendance for girls in the district was 85 per cent, for boys it was 90 per cent.⁴⁰ The same pattern is shown in the report for the 1902-03 session, the average attendance being 86 per cent and 89 per cent for girls and boys

³⁶ GRO: MS. E/SEC 55/1a, Tonypany Comprehensive School: Girls' Admission Register, 1906.

³⁷ GRO: MS. E/R 47/4, Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 21 February 1887.

³⁸ GRO: MS. E/R 47/4, Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 10 June 1898.

³⁹ Robert Smith, 'Elementary Education and Welsh Society', p. 227.

⁴⁰ GRO: MS. E/SB/58/17a, YSB: Annual Report, 1898-9.

respectively.⁴¹ It is clear, then, that whilst the factors outlined above would have affected the attendance of scholars of both sexes, girls were absent rather more often than were boys.

One explanation for this was the domestic responsibilities that girls had, and from which boys were largely exempt. Despite the introduction of attendance officers, and the threat of repercussions and punishment for frequent absences, girls would be kept at home if their parents thought that they were needed there. The heavy household responsibilities of the women in the Rhondda meant that they could often do with additional help, especially on washdays, which involved heavy work that often lasted all day. Also, it was fairly common practice for the oldest daughter to be kept home if her mother fell ill, or if a new baby had arrived. If this was the case, the burden of running the household would fall to her, and her education would take a lower priority. In 1934, for example, a 'Treherbert father' appeared at Ystrad Police Court, requesting permission to keep his eldest daughter home from school for two mornings a week. At the hearing, he pleaded that: 'I have five children and sign at the labour exchange twice a week. My wife is out working and I must have someone to look after the baby.'⁴² The magistrate denied the appeal in this case, but the records of the Rhondda Urban District Council (RUDC) attendance officer illustrate that parents often took matters into their own hands and simply did not send their children to school, for which they would be summonsed to explain their actions. The list of parents and guardians summonsed to attend the petty sessions at Ystrad or Porth in the period April 1922 to March 1923 for the non attendance of their in children at school illustrates that some girls were away for large portions of the school year. The father of Dorothy 'W' of Clydach Vale, for example, appeared because she had only attended 24 days out of a possible 61 in the last two months,

⁴¹ GRO: MS. E/SB/58/17b, YSB: Annual Report, 1902-3.

⁴² *Rhondda Gazette*, 10 January 1934.

and Bronwen 'J', from Ynyshir, had only managed to attend school for one day out of a possible 75. Both parents were fined 5s.⁴³

The domestic responsibility entrusted to some girls by their parents also affected the length of time that families were willing to allow their daughters to remain in school. Many girls left or were removed from school as soon as their compulsory education was over. However, some were able to remain in the school for an additional year or two, but only if their families were willing, and could afford, for them to do so. Certain girls were lucky, as their families recognised the need for education. The Headmistress of Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School noted a particular incident in the school log book when members of the family of one of her pupils were at odds as to whether the girl should continue her education at the end of her compulsory schooling:

One of the sixth standard girls named S. J. Hughes was marked left on the register on February 22nd the attendance officer having given instructions to do so. On the following Monday the girls' brother brought her back to school and was particularly anxious that she should be presented in the 6th standard at the next examination. It seems that the child's grandmother had told the attendance officer to have the girls' name marked off the books, without consulting the brother who desired that she should be kept on in school.⁴⁴

Whilst the numbers, facilities and material condition of the schools affected the standard of education that girls received, there were other forces at work which determined the *type* of education they were given. In the earlier years, the education given to children came under criticism for its narrowness, with its emphasis upon the proficiency of reading, writing and arithmetic. This was the outcome of Robert Lowe's Revised Code of 1862, whereby the grant given to schools by the Government was obtained through examination of

⁴³ GRO: MS. UD/RE 51/19, RUDC: Register of Summonses of parents for non-attendance of children, 1922-1923.

⁴⁴ GRO: MS. E/R 47/4, Tylorstown Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 26 February 1887.

pupils' performance in reading, writing and arithmetic. The 1904 Elementary School code, however, allowed for the broadening of the curriculum, which now included subjects such as English language and literature, history, geography, music, physical training and hygiene, drawing, observation and nature study, with the addition of cookery and housewifery for girls.⁴⁵

The emphasis upon cookery and housewifery for girls was not new: needlework was already included in the subjects needed for voluntary or board schools to qualify for government grants. Domestic economy became a compulsory subject in 1878, and cookery and laundry work attracted grants in 1882 and 1890 respectively. In an era where attempts were beginning to be made to improve social conditions, women were being blamed for the squalor of working districts, and for the poor health of military recruits during the Boer war. Women, it was believed, were ignorant of the way in which homes should be run and children brought up; therefore a strategy was to be established in which women and girls would be educated in housecraft and childcare.⁴⁶ Domestic training of young girls at school was a means of remedying the situation, with the dual intent of improving girls' competence as wife and mother and, in order to help alleviate the servant shortage in England, as domestic servants.⁴⁷ The idea of a differentiated curriculum became firmly entrenched in the early twentieth century, and was consolidated by Government interest and approval, as expressed through grants for the subjects and board of education circulars.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ J. Kamn, *Hope Deferred: Girl's Education in English History*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1965), p. 229.

⁴⁶ Gill Blunden, "'Our Women are expected to become...': Women and Girls in Further Education in England at the turn of the Century", in London Feminist History Group, *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power and Women's Resistance*, (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 88.

⁴⁷ W. Gareth Evans, 'The Gendering of the elementary and secondary school curriculum in Victorian and early twentieth-century Wales', in S. Betts (ed.), *Our Daughters' Land: Past and Present*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 86; C Dyhouse, 'Good wives and Little Mothers: Social Anxieties and the Schoolgirls Curriculum, 1890-1920', *Oxford Review of Education*, 3, 1, (1997), p. 22.

⁴⁸ D E St John, "'Educate or domesticate?': Early Twentieth Century Pressures on the Older Girls in the Elementary School", *Women's History Review*, 3, 2, (1994), p. 191.

As a result, specialist housecraft centres and classes were quickly established throughout the district in order to train elementary school girls in the domestic subjects; by 1894 there were nine specialist housecraft centres in the Rhondda to which 744 girls were sent for a total of 40 hours.⁴⁹ One such place was Ton Cookery centre, which was attended by classes from the girls' departments of Gelli, Pentre, Ton and Bronllwyn elementary schools. When the centre first opened, the classes would attend for one morning or afternoon session per week, but this was later extended to weekly courses, with each school taking its turn to attend. At these classes, the girls learnt aspects of home making such as vegetarian cookery, convalescent cooking, cake making, and cleanliness of larder, range and bedroom. 1927 saw the introduction of laundry work to the curriculum at the centre, and later sewing and personal hygiene were included.⁵⁰

The teaching of domestic subjects received a mixed response throughout the country. The classes were often thought to be 'extravagant for working people, especially...the pastries and cakes', which were taught at the expense of more practical and wholesome dishes.⁵¹ Although the preparation of some practical meals was taught at the Ton centre, such as liver and gravy and Cornish pasties, the girls were mostly taught to bake cakes, even during the strike months when households would have been limiting the 'luxury' foods in their diets, and when the preparation of cheap but nutritious meals would have been essential. But, for the examination in 1923, the girls were tested on their ability to make jam rolls, rock cakes and raspberry buns, foods that would have been regarded as rare treats in most

⁴⁹ GRO: MS. E/SB/58/17a, YSB: Annual Report, 1893-4, p. 14.

⁵⁰ GRO: MS. E/R37/1, Ton Cookery Centre: Log book, 1923-35.

⁵¹ 'The parental view of the school': report to the education officer of the London County Council of an investigation by a London branch of the Training Colleges Association. *Journal of Experimental Pedagogy*, 3 pp. 339-41, quoted in D E St John, 'Educate or domesticate?', p. 197.

Rhondda homes.⁵² Concerns about a subject which would be of little use to the girls in their own homes prompted a report in 1926, that:

It is a grave blunder in a cookery lesson to ignore the humbler and more ordinary forms of food, or to provide appliances of a kind necessarily unknown in cottage life.⁵³

Even the laundry classes could be perceived as 'extravagant' and perhaps unnecessary for many of the girls attending the class. The laundry work carried out by the girls in 1927 included the finishing of silk blouses, and the washing of bedlinen, coloured items and whites. The former would hardly have been a regular occurrence in many houses, and the latter may well have been deemed unnecessary as many girls helped their mothers with the family washing from a fairly early age. Similarly, those who could afford to do so would have a hired a 'girl' to help in the house, and perhaps carry out the weekly wash.

These were not the only reasons that the classes were criticised, however. The very *idea* of young girls learning domestic crafts in school was also criticised:

It seems to me monstrous than any one with any experience of the hard struggle which every married woman had to wage to keep house and children clean can suggest introducing domestic duties to the girl babies of our ordinary council schools. The few short years spent attending school is the only period that the majority of girls will ever have free to give full attention to the training and storing of their minds.⁵⁴

Such arguments were, however, heard from only a minority. There was inevitably much support for the work of the centres, and a domestic education was mostly deemed to be entirely appropriate for the daughters of the mainly working-class population that inhabited the Rhondda. The importance of such training was outlined in the 1912 report into education

⁵² GRO: MS. E/R 37/1, Ton Cookery Centre: Log book, 14 July 1933

⁵³ British Parliamentary Paper: Report of Committee of Council of Education 1896-7, p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Rhondda Socialist*, 26 October 1912.

in the Rhondda, in which the inspector considered it to be 'of exceptional importance in a district where early marriages are very prevalent'.⁵⁵

Those in favour of such schools saw the teaching of domestic subjects as a means of breaking the chain of mothers passing on bad habits and slovenly ways to their daughters, who, in turn, would pass them on to their own daughters. In Pentre, the mothers of those attending the centres were said to be 'keenly interested' in the work of the housecraft centre, which had received the support of groups such as the Ton Pentre and Tonypandy Women's Guilds. Any suggestion or hints of the opposition of Rhondda mothers regarding the teaching of domestic subjects were vigorously denied. In 1919, a 'Rhondda teacher' wrote to the *Western Mail* to dispute such claims, stating that:

Mothers who visit this school are delighted that such magnificent opportunities are given to their daughters to learn how to manage a home, and they often remark that they have no time to teach them themselves, though a few careless and shiftless mothers think themselves quite capable of doing so.⁵⁶

Others went even further. In a lecture given by Mrs Snowden at Libanus Chapel, Treherbert, it was even advocated that the teaching of domestic subjects should be started earlier than elementary level, with very young girls being 'taught such tasks as washing and dressing babies, dusting their own desks, and a little elementary cooking'.⁵⁷

Domestic training, however, was not the only means by which girls were taught to be 'good wives and little mothers'. Both Blaenclydach and Treorchy Elementary schools taught and examined girls on what the logbooks referred to as 'morality'. Such lessons included

⁵⁵ GRO: UD/RE 66/3, RUDC: General report of H. M. Inspectors on Education in the Rhondda Urban District 1912, p. 7.

⁵⁶ *Western Mail*, 7 May 1919.

⁵⁷ *Rhondda Socialist*, 26 October 1912.

what were perceived to be feminine traits, such as obedience, temperance, kindness, self denial, cleanliness of home, clothes and person, unselfishness, patience, government of temper, honesty and truthfulness. The curriculum for girls, therefore, contained a mixture of elementary subjects with a gender bias based on ideals of domesticity and perceptions of women's role and how they should behave. In addition to educational training, girls were encouraged to 'acquire habits of order and neatness, together with an improved tone and quiet demeanour', as well as learn the domestic skills of a housewife or servant.⁵⁸ The gendered curriculum, however, whilst perceived as invaluable for those working-class girls who would become wives and mothers, served to deny others the opportunity to be taught subjects which might help with their future in a profession, as we shall see in the next chapter.

In spite of its many difficulties, the provision of elementary education in the Rhondda had vastly improved since the implementation of the 1870 Act. The establishment of a school board for the district greatly increased the number of school places available for both sexes, and the introduction of compulsory attendance and free education did much to encourage the education of girls. Prior to this, the level of education that girls received depended upon whether school accommodation existed in their area, the ability of their parents to pay the school pence, and their attitude towards the need to educate their daughters. In spite of the beneficial changes, not all girls were able to take full advantage of the opportunities available. Factors such as overcrowding, large classes and lack of facilities served to influence the education of both sexes. Further, girls' education was disrupted by the fact that they tended to be absent more often than boys, even if it appears that their attendance rate overall was quite good; they were taught by teachers who were less qualified than the men

⁵⁸ British Parliamentary Paper: Report of the Committee of Council on Education, 1870, vol xxii, p. 85.

who taught the boys; and they followed a curriculum that was biased towards domestic training.

Given these factors, it is not surprising that few girls continued their education beyond elementary level. Most went straight into employment upon leaving school, or remained in the home to help with the family. Those leaving school were concentrated into relatively few occupations, the most popular of which was domestic service. In fact, of the 303 girls who left the elementary schools in the Pontypridd district in 1922, the overwhelming majority (237 or 78 per cent) left to take up positions in domestic service.⁵⁹ This was due in part to the type of education that they had received and because there were few other opportunities for employment open to girls in the valleys in this period. Another popular occupation was shop work, which was perceived as superior to domestic employment and therefore much sought after. But the opportunity for this type of work was not quite as easy to come by. The only option available to girls unable to find employment upon leaving school was to remain in the parental home and help with chores there, which a large number did until they found a position. Hilda, for example, who left Duffryn School, Ferndale, in 1927, occupied her time by helping her mother with domestic chores and looking after the family's garden and greenhouse while her father was in work, before moving to a domestic position in Surrey.⁶⁰ In other cases, the daughter's help was urgently needed in the household, and the family would anxiously await the end of her compulsory time at school so that she could help in the house.

⁵⁹ *Pontypridd Observer*, 2 August 1922.

⁶⁰ 'Hilda' Interviewed by Rosemary Scadden for her study "'Be Good Sweet Maid and Let Who Will Be Clever": A Study of Welsh Girls in Domestic Service during the Inter War Period', MSc Econ. (University of Wales), 1996, p. 157.

Those who left elementary school to work or who were unable to attend secondary school and still wished to progress further than elementary education could still find ways by which to do so. The most popular means was attendance at continuation schools, or adult evening classes, run by bodies such as the Workers' Education Association and the Local Authority. Evening classes were important throughout the period. In the early years of our period of study they served as a substitute for elementary education for children who were taken out of school early to be put to work. Following the introduction of a minimum school leaving age, they concentrated upon secondary or continuing education for those wishing to extend their education beyond elementary level.⁶¹ Evening classes established themselves quickly in the Rhondda and became popular with both older boys and girls, and adults. During the 1913-14 session there were 20 evening continuation schools for males, with 716 on the books, and 12 for females, catering for the 330 who were registered. By 1925 the provision of the classes and their popularity had grown, with 1,180 women attending classes specifically catering for them.

As with the elementary schools, the evening classes provided in the Rhondda were divided along strict gender lines, both in terms of those attending and the subjects taught, which for women were overwhelmingly domestic. Those thinking of attending evening classes in the 1913-14 session, for example, had the choice of 7 schools for cookery, 11 for dressmaking, 1 for plain needlework, 13 for art needlework and 8 for home nursing.⁶² Needlework proved to be especially popular, containing over half of the women attending classes in the district in the 1925 session.⁶³ The classes for men were far more wide-ranging,

⁶¹ M. Turner, 'The Miners' Search for Self Improvement: The History of Evening Classes in the Rhondda Valley from 1862-1914', MA (University of Wales), 1967, p. 1.

⁶² RUDC: Report of the Director of Education 1913-14, pp. 14, 45-6.

⁶³ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, Board of Education (Welsh Department) (B of E (W.D)): General Report of the HMI on the Evening schools in the Urban District of Rhondda, July 1926, p. 7.

and included subjects relating to mining which were useful in gaining promotion, commercial subjects and topics of general interest. In 1911, the Education Committee of the Glamorgan County Council produced a list of evening classes for the Rhondda in the 1911-12 session which, for men, included elementary science, mining, practical maths, geology, mine surveying and shorthand, and for women home making, home nursing, cookery, care of infants and dressmaking. Both sexes were able to take classes in English, Music, French, German, Welsh and Latin.⁶⁴ The different classes, it was argued, were indicative of the different reasons that women and men chose to continue or further their education:

Men attend and pass from the junior to the more advanced courses in order to prepare themselves definitely for posts in industry and to qualify for some of the higher and more responsible positions. The large majority of women's classes are not intended to be a preparation for posts in industry in that sense, but are attended because women wish to acquire greater skill and aptitude as homemakers, rather than to gain commercial advantage.⁶⁵

Whilst the initial enthusiasm shown for the classes by women resulted in high numbers being registered at the start of a session, the Glamorgan County Council expressed concern at one of its meetings that the numbers were not being sustained through the duration of the course. The dressmaking course held at Tonypandy, for example, had 16 students on its books when the course started in 1904, but by early 1905 concerns were being expressed about the low levels of attendance - the average attendance at the classes was only nine, just over half of those enrolled - and it was suggested that the course be discontinued in the next session.⁶⁶ In some cases, by the middle of the session some classes were attended by only half of those who had enrolled, and other classes, such as the dressmaking courses at

⁶⁴ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, Glamorgan County Council (GCC): Education Committee, List of proposed evening classes for session 1911-1912, Rhondda Group.

⁶⁵ *Educational Problems of the South Wales Coalfield*, (HMSO, 1931), p. 58.

⁶⁶ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC: Report of the Secondary Teacher's Work and Salaries sub-committee, 20 January 1905.

Ferndale and Tonypandy, had to be discontinued because numbers had dropped so significantly.⁶⁷ The low attendance could have been a culmination of the time and money required to successfully complete a course, and might have proved to be a constraint in particular for working-class married women. Course fees, for example, were usually around 2s, and the preparatory courses at Treherbert and Ynyswen met twice a week for two-hour sessions.⁶⁸ Four hours a week was a lot of time for a married woman to find, given the domestic responsibilities she had to carry out. As Blunden has noted:

Whilst married women were out at evening classes, albeit learning how to make children's clothes, someone had to stay in and look after the children.⁶⁹

Additionally, young single girls were prone to leave courses when employment opportunities presented themselves, many of which, especially in the inter-war period, lay outside the district. Little could be done when numbers fell. Attempts were made to amalgamate the women's classes with the men's, where appropriate, for example in language or preparatory classes where the subjects taught were often the same, but this proved to be unpopular with the female members. Traditionally, after infants school, education was provided in a single-sex environment in separate boys' and girls' departments, with few mixed junior schools. Merging classes, therefore, was greeted with shyness and suspicion by women, who found themselves daunted by the presence of men. When male and female preparatory classes suffered from a fall in numbers in 1912, the classes were amalgamated, but the women refused to attend the same class as the men and left the school.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC: Minutes of the Regulations sub committee, 3 July 1907.

⁶⁸ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC: Report of the Secondary Teachers' Work and Salaries sub committee, 20 January 1905.

⁶⁹ Blunden, 'Our women are expected to become', p. 101.

⁷⁰ RUDC: Minutes of the Education Committee, 20 April 1912, quoted in Turner, 'The Miners' Search for Self Improvement', p. 208.

For those girls who were unable to continue in the day schools but wished to continue or further their education, evening and continuation schools proved thus to be popular, until financial and time constraints, or family or employment responsibilities hindered their attendance. For girls who wished to continue with full-time education, however, there were facilities available for those who were able to take advantage of them. The idea of post-elementary education, as described in the Aberdare report of 1881, was welcomed in the Rhondda by the Ystradfydwg school board, which committed itself to establishing a network of Higher Grade schools for those who wished to remain in school. Thus mixed schools were opened in Ystrad in 1884, with accommodation for 350 pupils, at Ferndale in 1892 with places for 207 scholars and the school at Porth was opened in 1903. An additional school in Tonypany was opened later, in order to provide post-elementary education for children in the mid Rhondda area.⁷¹ These schools provided the opportunity for boys and girls to study a far wider range of subjects than those available in the elementary schools, and to study them at a higher level.⁷² In many areas, these higher grade schools were used as a stepping-stone for children to graduate to the intermediate (County) schools. The Rhondda valleys, however, only had one intermediate school and the demand for places far surpassed the number available. In order to overcome this deficiency, the Higher Grade schools were used in the district as an additional form of secondary education, rather than as a continuation of elementary education. They later formally became secondary schools under the control of Rhondda Local Education Authority under the Education Act of 1902, beginning with Ferndale in 1902, Pentre 1914, and Tonypany and Porth in 1922. Both the intermediate school (Rhondda County Girls' and Boys' Schools) and the secondary schools are included

⁷¹ Hughes, 'Education in Industrial society', p. 341.

⁷² Widdowson, *Going up into the Next Class*, pp. 41-2.

here under the umbrella term 'secondary education' as the schools were essentially similar in nature and aim. The most important distinction was that attendance at the secondary schools was free, whilst fees were charged in the intermediate school.

Predictably, the option of continuing to secondary education could only be taken advantage of by a small number of girls. Of the girls who started at Gelli Girls' elementary school in 1915, for instance, only 18 per cent continued to secondary or higher elementary school. Similarly, of the girls who started at the school in 1924 only 7 per cent left to continue their education at Tonypany Secondary and 2 per cent at Porth County.⁷³ The low number of girls who were able to continue their education can be attributed to a variety of factors, including a lack of school places, the inability of parents to finance them through another three or four years of schooling, and parental attitudes towards not just the education of girls but to the *continuing* education of girls. This was especially true for those who came from large families or had brothers whom it was considered more important to educate. Also blamed were those parents who did not realise that their children could receive the same education that was formerly only within the reach of the wealthy.⁷⁴

The opportunity to attend any form of secondary education in the Rhondda throughout the period was very limited. The schools only catered for a small number of the school population; Ferndale Secondary School, for example, only had 291 pupils registered in the 1906-7 session. Conditions did not improve during the period: the combined number of secondary school pupils in the four Rhondda secondary schools in the 1929-30 session was only 1, 629.⁷⁵ The same was true of the Intermediate school. The average intermediate

⁷³ TL: Gelli Girls' Elementary School: Admission Register, 1915-1929.

⁷⁴ RUDC: Report of the Director of Education, 1910 quoted in G. Roderick, 'Social class, Curriculum and the Concept of Relevance in Secondary Education: Industrial Glamorgan, 1889-1914', *Welsh History Review*, 19, 2, (December, 1988), p. 314.

⁷⁵ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D): Report of the Inspection of the Ferndale Secondary School, July 1912; Taken from the reports of the Rhondda secondary schools 1930 and 1931.

only 1, 629.⁷⁵ The same was true of the Intermediate school. The average intermediate school district in Wales served a school population of 8,000. The Rhondda County School at Porth, however, served 88, 350, resulting in intense competition for intermediate school places.⁷⁶ At the start of the 1897 session, for example, there were 117 pupils competing for only 30 vacant places.⁷⁷ Therefore, secondary school education was available only to a very small minority of scholars, as the available accommodation was extremely limited and entrance was highly competitive, based upon performance in a voluntary examination.

It was nevertheless the case that secondary education was available in the Rhondda, and there were a number of children who were able to take advantage of it. Peter Stead has argued the importance of these schools in offering:

To the sons of miners and other working men as well as to sons of businessmen, shopkeepers, clerks and professional men the delights of secondary education.⁷⁸

But it is clear that the benefits of a secondary education were also offered to the *daughters* of miners, businessmen, clerks and shopkeepers. Both the intermediate and the secondary schools attracted and accepted scholars from a wide range of backgrounds and were not only confined to the middle classes, which is what tended to be the case in intermediate schools elsewhere in the country. Pupils attending Ferndale (mixed) secondary school in 1910-1911 came from very diverse backgrounds: some 3 per cent of scholars had fathers in professional occupations; the largest group by far came from the artisan class which accounted for 62 per

⁷⁵ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D): Report of the Inspection of the Ferndale Secondary School, July 1912; taken from the reports of the Rhondda secondary schools 1930 and 1931.

⁷⁶ G. E. Jones, *The Education of a Nation*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 43.

⁷⁷ E.J. Davies, 'The Origin and Development of Secondary Education in the Rhondda Valleys', Unpublished MA (University of Wales), 1985, p. 61.

⁷⁸ P. Stead, 'Schools and Society in Glamorgan before 1914', *Morgannwg*, (1975) xix, p. 48.

cent and other significant occupational groups were retail traders and labourers at 12 per cent and 9 per cent respectively.⁷⁹ The occupational mix of the girls' department of the Rhondda County School also illustrates the opportunities for working-class girls who could afford the hidden costs of secondary education. The girls attending the school came from diverse backgrounds, with the daughters of miners forming the largest single occupational group, (see table 3):

Table 3: Occupational background of those attending Rhondda County Girls' School, 1916 & 1920

Fathers' Occupation	1916	%	1920
Miner	20		25
Work associated with pit	12		11
Colliery manager	3		4.5
Shopkeeper	6		4.5
Licensed victualler	5		-
Clerk	5		-
Teacher	-		4.5
Miscellaneous (including blacksmith, carpenters, postmen, railwaymen, chemist, clothier, mechanic and engineer	38		41
Not given	3		0 ⁸⁰

The girls at the Rhondda County School also differed from those at other intermediate schools in south Wales because of the previous education they had received. With only provision for elementary education in the valleys, the school necessarily had a high intake of elementary school pupils. Whereas only 4 per cent of girls attending Cardiff Girls' School had been to public elementary school in 1912, the corresponding average figure for 1926 to

⁷⁹ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/1, RUDC: Report of the inspection of Ferndale secondary school, May 1912, p. 4. The background of boys and girls admitted to Tonypany Secondary School in the period between January and December 1927 were similar. Fuller details are given in appendix 2.

⁸⁰ GRO: MS. E/R SEC 3/1, Rhondda County Girls' School: Admissions Register, 1916-1920.

1931 in Rhondda County was 94-95 per cent.⁸¹ The remaining pupils had transferred there from another secondary school, and a very small minority had received private tuition.⁸² Therefore, secondary education was available for girls from a working-class background, as well as middle-class girls, provided that parents could meet the additional costs.

If a place in one of the secondary schools was secured, attendance was free of charge, with the exception of the Rhondda County School. This precedent was set when Ferndale achieved secondary school status in 1902, and came long before the Board of Education initiated, in 1907, a system of free places for 25 per cent of those attending secondary schools. The other schools in the Rhondda followed suit when they opened, and the availability of free secondary education did much to encourage the working-class population to at least consider the option of continued education. This system was threatened when in 1933 the Board of Education decided that a fee of £6 should be charged in all secondary schools. But the Rhondda Education Committee fought against the decision, claiming that in a district where over 20,000 men were unemployed, a school fee would render secondary education for the children of workers impossible. The Committee won its battle, and all the secondary schools continued to offer free places to all scholars in the council-run schools. The Rhondda County School at Porth, however, operated on a different system, coming as it did under the jurisdiction of the Glamorgan County Council, which had responsibility for all intermediate Schools in the County. Places at the Rhondda County School were not free, but the fees charged were relatively low, compared with others in the County. Prior to the introduction of a standard charge, Porth charged its scholars only £3 per annum, whereas

⁸¹ Central Welsh Board (CWB): Triennial Inspection 1912, quoted in In H V Middleton 'Girls' Education in Glamorgan', p. 37; University of Wales, Swansea (UWS): Central Welsh Board (CWB): Reports: Inspection and Examination of County Schools, 1929

⁸² UWS: CWB: Report, 1929.

Pontypridd and Penarth charged £4 and £8 respectively.⁸³ Moreover, the Rhondda County school offered more free places than any of the other intermediate schools; before 1933 an average of 72 per cent of the pupils were attending free of charge, in comparison to the 25 per cent recommended by the Board of Education.⁸⁴ In addition, partial exemption from fees was also granted and this was taken advantage of by 5 per cent of boys and girls attending the schools in 1937.⁸⁵

The opportunity to attend one of the secondary schools was enhanced by the availability of a number of scholarships to help with the costs incurred other than fees. School governors, the Local Education Authorities, as well as other independent groups, all offered scholarships. For example, in 1908 two girls and two boys from each of the first, second and third forms of Ferndale Secondary were offered scholarships to the value of £5 by the Ferndale Co-operative society to help with the cost of attending the school, such as that of books and transport.⁸⁶ Of the 280 girls with places at Rhondda County Girls' school in 1929, 63 per cent were exempt from paying fees. Within this group, 68 had been awarded exemption by the school, 64 had been awarded bursaries from the school Governors, six received scholarships from the Local Education Authority, 35 were awarded scholarships by the RUDC and a further two received scholarships from private donation.⁸⁷ The aim of the exhibitions and scholarships to the schools was to allow the brightest elementary school pupils the opportunity to receive an education that their parents probably would not have

⁸³ C. Hughes 'Education and Industrial Society', p. 433.

⁸⁴ Hughes, 'Education and Industrial Society', p. 499.

⁸⁵ UWS: CWB Report, 1937.

⁸⁶ *The Dragon*: Ferndale Secondary School magazine, December 1908, p. 11.

⁸⁷ UWS: CWB Report, 1929.

been able to afford. In this light, the awarding of scholarships has been seen as 'as a ladder for upward social mobility'.⁸⁸

The provision of free secondary education and the introduction of financial assistance such as scholarships and bursaries ensured that post-elementary education was available to all with the ability to take advantage of it in addition to those whose parents were able to afford it. To girls it allegedly presented 'an even greater advance in educational opportunity and consequent social mobility'.⁸⁹ In practice, however, it was not the case that the brightest of the elementary school children could attend secondary or intermediate school, even if they were offered a scholarship. The advantage of secondary education, whilst open to those of a less affluent background, was still, for some, very much limited by financial and other considerations. In his study of south Wales children who had to refuse scholarships to secondary schools in the 1920s and 1930s, Graham Goode discovered that the main reasons that they were unable to take up the offer of a place were financial difficulties and parental attitudes.⁹⁰

Although attendance at the secondary schools was free, and there was the opportunity to enter schools on free places or scholarships, many girls who had aspirations of attending the schools were often unable to do so because of the hidden costs of such education. Although no fees were charged in Tonypany Secondary for places, textbooks and exercise books, a composition fee of 9d per term was optional, to cover the cost of participating in games and for the school magazine. Whilst parents were not necessarily required to pay, not to do so would mark out their child as different. Correspondingly, in addition to the fees paid

⁸⁸ C Hughes, 'Education and Industrial Society', p. 420.

⁸⁹ Roderick, 'Social Class, Curriculum and the Concept of Relevance in Secondary Education', p. 307.

⁹⁰ See G. Goode, 'Denied Opportunity: A sociological investigation into Secondary School place refusal 1918-1945', Unpublished M.Ed (University of Wales), 1980.

at Porth County, an additional 7s 6d was charged for the provision of stationary. Extras such as trips and concerts, although occurring only infrequently, meant that secondary education was still too expensive for many families. Even smaller costs, such as that of daily transport to and from the schools, proved to be expensive extras, especially for those who attended Rhondda County, which was situated in Porth at the bottom of the valley. Scholars from the top end of the valley could find themselves paying out a large amount on fares. This was not true to the same extent for the secondary schools as they took in pupils from a certain catchment area. For example, pupils attending Tonypandy Secondary School mostly lived in villages in the mid Rhondda, such as Gelli, Ystrad and Williamstown, so that while some costs would have been incurred, they were only minimal. These added extras, however small, greatly increased the cost of attending the schools.

It was the cost of providing the school uniform, however, that proved to be the greatest financial obstacle for poorer families. When Maggie Pryce Jones, who grew up in Trelewis, Merthyr Valley, in the inter-war period, won a scholarship to Hengoed County School in the nearby Rhymney Valley, her parents were delighted. But she soon realised that her success 'brought a lot of worry with it' and put her parents, especially her mother, under a lot of strain.⁹¹ As a result of his involvement in strike action at the local mine, her father was no longer being offered overtime, which meant that the family income had decreased significantly. Thus, finding money for the 'extras' needed for school was difficult. Their family and neighbours helped them financially, and provided her with equipment such as pencils, pens and a ruler, because to win a scholarship to the county school was a great honour, but the uniform proved to be the main expense. Her mother, however, was

⁹¹ M. Pryce Jones, *Kingfisher of Hope*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1983), p. 50.

determined that Maggie was not going to miss out on her chance of education. She took out a 'club' to pay for the uniform, and worked for months as a domestic to pay off what she owed. Maggie's summer uniform and a special green outfit that was required for Grecian dancing were later made for her by Marion, a sewing mistress at a local secondary school, for whom her mother cleaned. When her younger brother later passed the scholarship examination to the Boys' County School, it was easier to clothe him, as the uniform was similar to the one he had worn in his previous school.⁹² Maggie and her brother were lucky that they had a network of family and friends upon whom they could call, but the extras such as uniforms simply proved to be beyond the reach of most families. The widowed mother of one of Goode's respondents from Tylorstown, for example, tried her hardest to try and get some kind of help in providing a uniform for her daughter after she had won a scholarship to Ferndale Secondary School in 1926, but, with no help forthcoming, she was unable to attend.⁹³

Many parents could afford to pay out for the additional extras in the short term, especially if the family was lucky enough to have members in full-time employment. If the child was a member of a large family with few or no members in work, however, the chances of him or her being able to accept a place were slim. The position that a child occupied within the family was an important factor in the likelihood of being able to accept a place. First born children in large families were unlikely to continue to secondary education as they were encouraged to work in order to remove some of the burden from their parents. Youngest children, however, were more likely to be able to accept a place as the financial demands on

⁹² Jones, *Kingfisher of Hope*, p. 56.

⁹³ Goode 'Denied Opportunity', p.74 .

their parents would have lessened due to the older children either being in employment and therefore contributing to the family budget, or having left home.⁹⁴

Other families would find it difficult to manage without the help that their child could bring to the home by going out to work rather than remaining in education, or by contributing to the domestic situation, either in terms of housework or looking after younger siblings. Before children started their secondary school career, Graham Goode has pointed out, 'agreements' had to be signed which insisted that a child should be kept at the school for at least three years. If they left before that time, as a result perhaps of family illness or financial hardship, a cash penalty would be incurred.⁹⁵ The possibility of having to withdraw a child from school was very real, given the economic climate in the Rhondda during the 1920s and 1930s, and some parents felt that they simply could not commit themselves to keeping a child at school for the next three years.⁹⁶ Therefore some parents may have felt it was safer for their children not to go, 'just in case'.

These factors would probably have affected working-class boys and girls to the same extent, but girls also had an additional factor with which to contend, namely, the attitudes of some parents to the education of their daughters. These parents did not see the point of spending money on a secondary education for their daughters, espousing the typical notion that 'girls only grow up and get married, what's the point of keeping them in school till they're 16'.⁹⁷ Assumptions regarding the future role of girls effectively denied them the opportunity to expand and continue their education. Similarly, notions regarding their physical and mental capabilities, in addition to questions about the usefulness of the

⁹⁴ Goode 'Denied Opportunity', p. 62.

⁹⁵ Goode, 'Denied Opportunity', p. 92.

⁹⁶ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D.): Report of Inspection of Pentre Secondary School, February 1931, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Mrs L. in Goode, 'Denied Opportunity', p. 72.

curriculum of the secondary and intermediate schools, probably closed the door to many girls who may have been considering continuing their education. After all, unless they were planning to proceed to university or become a teacher, the subjects taught in secondary schools, such as French and Latin, were surplus to the requirements of those who would enter clerical or shop work. Technical or vocational study, such as training in a commercial school, would prove far more useful for this kind of employment. Such training was not usually offered in the secondary schools, and girls wishing to receive instruction in these subjects could attend any number of schools in the surrounding area. Bloggs's Commercial College in Cardiff, for example, was a popular destination for both boys and girls from the Rhondda, where they were taught shorthand, typing and book keeping. Mrs M of Porth attended a course at Bloggs's in the 1920s, as a compromise with her mother; she had no desire to attend a secondary school, but her mother was adamant that 'my Irene isn't going into service' in the way that most of her friends and classmates had.⁹⁸ The girls who attended did not feel inferior in any way to the secondary school girls who, they felt, were inadequately prepared for later employment. One of Goode's respondents noted that after all the money expended on secondary education, if they wanted a job 'they still had to learn shorthand and typing or learn something else so they were no further up the scale than me'.⁹⁹ The commercial school fulfilled the function of providing a continuing education, but taught far more subjects and skills which could be used in their working life.

In spite of the opportunity for vocational, rather than academic, education, the opportunity to attend one of the institutions for secondary education in the district was taken up by girls from a wide range of backgrounds. Surprisingly, given the particular constraints

⁹⁸ Interview with Mrs M, August 2000.

⁹⁹ Mrs E, in Goode, 'Denied Opportunity', p. 112.

facing young girls in their quest for continued education, the number of girls with places in secondary institutions actually exceeded that of boys. During investigations carried out by the Central Welsh Board into education in the coalfield, the investigators expressed surprise at the 'significant preponderance' of girls over boys in the industrial county of Glamorgan.¹⁰⁰ This was especially true of secondary schools in the Rhondda; of the four schools, only in Pentre did the number of female scholars fall below half of the total number of scholars, varying from 42 per cent to 49 per cent during the years 1925 to 1930.¹⁰¹ In the intermediate school at Porth, the numbers of male and female students were approximately equal, but in the other secondary schools the differences were quite marked. In Ferndale Secondary, for example, during the period 1906 to 1912 the percentage of female pupils did not fall below 61 per cent and was never more than 67 per cent. From 1925 to 1930, the figures were lower, but the percentage of girls still did not fall below 54 per cent. The numbers for the other secondary schools for the same years, 1925-1930, are similar, with female students accounting for 48-55 per cent of pupils in Tonypany, and 51-57 per cent in Porth.¹⁰²

The reasons for this are unclear, but it has been argued that the importance placed on work in the district had some impact. During the heyday of Rhondda coal, education was seen to be of minimal importance for boys, because their destiny lay elsewhere - in the mines - and work was relatively easy to obtain prior to the First World War. With the world of work so easy to enter, it has been argued that the schools found it difficult to compete with

¹⁰⁰ W Gareth Evans, 'Secondary and Higher Education for Girls and Women in Wales 1847-1920', Ph.D (University of Wales), 1987, p. 652.

¹⁰¹ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D.): Report of the Inspection of Pentre Secondary School 1930, p. 22.

¹⁰² GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D.): Report of the Inspection of Tonypany Secondary School 1931, p. 2.; UD/RE 66/8, Report of the Inspection of Porth Secondary School 1930, p. 20.

the excitement and drama of industrial Glamorgan.¹⁰³ In his history of his family's time in the Rhondda Valleys, Jim Williams writes of how, in the 1880s:

All the boys at school looked forward to the day when they would be allowed to begin work. My happiness was not so much leaving school as in the idea of actually going to work underground.¹⁰⁴

He also noted that the world that boys inhabited in this period was an extremely masculine one, in which work underground was associated with manhood and masculinity. Boys, he shows, were in a great rush to start work, to become 'men' and earn their own wages:

We saw the pit boys coming home...They adopted an air of superiority to mere schoolboys...They had experienced danger....They associated with big men....They earned four shillings and nine pence every week.¹⁰⁵

In this environment, Deirdre Beddoe has suggested that boys found secondary education 'sissy' compared to the work of the mines, resulting in a larger number of boys leaving education after the elementary stage.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, education was not necessarily perceived to be an important means of progression in everyday life in such communities at this time, as advancement was often a result of experience rather than learning. For example, a miner could become an official through experience and hard work, in the same way that an office boy could be promoted to a chief clerk.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the earlier that boys could leave school and enter the world of work, the better, and even boys who were not destined for the

¹⁰³ P Stead, 'Schools and society', p. 46.

¹⁰⁴ J Williams, *The Miner's Lamp*, (London: G.J.W. Publishing, 1999), p. 109. Throughout the book, the author takes on the 'voice' of the ancestors whose lives he is describing. In this quotation, and the next, he is using the voice of Walker Williams, who left school in the 1880s to work in the local mine in Dinas.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *The Miner's Lamp*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁶ D. Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Stead 'Schools and Society', p. 47.

mines could not wait to leave school and discover new experiences. The middle-class Rhys Davies, who attended Rhondda County Boys' school in the period immediately prior to the First World war, found that as he was growing older, he was became more and more excited about entering the real world whereas school began to lose its appeal for him.¹⁰⁸

During the economic difficulties of the 1920s and 1930s, however, jobs were rare and although the percentage of girls remained higher, the number of boys staying on at school rose in this period. In such a period of prolonged as distinct from short-term depression, parents saw education as a means of escape from heavy industry and the mines, as their offspring could be trained in the skills needed to become clerks or teachers which were far more stable occupations than that of miner. Investigators into the conditions in the coalfields in the inter-war period also recognised this as a solution to the spiralling unemployment, and noted the number of post compulsory school age children who stayed on at school until the opportunity for employment arose, rather than join the ranks of the unemployed.¹⁰⁹

For girls who wished to have the means to achieve a degree of financial independence, continuing their education was extremely important. It was far less easy for them to gain opportunities for advancement through their work. A female shop assistant was likely to remain an assistant rather than become a manager or even branch out on her own. Similarly, a secondary education was an essential pre-requisite, in the latter part of the period, for those with aspirations to enter the teaching profession. Education could, on the other hand, be perceived as a means of escape from the hardships suffered in the valleys, and this was understood by the more enlightened parents. It is likely that some of the girls' mothers had been in service before their marriage and that they saw education as a way of allowing

¹⁰⁸ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot: An Autobiographical Beginning*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1998), p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ G. Meara, *Juvenile Unemployment in South Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1936), p. 30.

their daughters more choice. Some mothers were adamant that their daughters should be able to support themselves in the event of not getting married, or, if they were widowed, that, they would not be condemned to a life of poverty and uncertainty.

It is also evident that if girls did enter secondary education, they tended to take greater advantage of the opportunities open to them and remained in the schools for a longer period. In Ferndale Secondary in 1912 there were only 9 male pupils aged 15 and over, while the corresponding figure for females was 27.¹¹⁰ The pattern is repeated, though to a lesser degree, in Porth County where 34.2 per cent of the boys in the school were aged 15 and over, compared to 39.6 per cent of girls.¹¹¹ The higher number of girls remaining longer at school was partly attributed to the fact that most girls in secondary education intended to train as teachers, for which it was required that applicants remain at school until at least the age of 17. Although a number of boys did take up teacher training following the end of their secondary schooling, they were able to find remunerative employment at a much earlier age, perhaps in the civil service, or as clerks in the council or local businesses.¹¹² Thus, they were not required to remain in school, but could leave when an attractive job offer arose.

For those girls who did take up places in secondary school, whether or not as a result of the scholarship system, they soon found that their experience there was entirely different to that of elementary school. They were taught by highly qualified teachers, a far cry from those experienced by many girls in the elementary schools. Of the 17 full-time staff employed in Porth Secondary School, for example, some 13 were graduates, and one female teacher was

¹¹⁰ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/1, B of E (W. D.): Report of the Inspection of Ferndale secondary School 1912, pp. 2-3.

¹¹¹ UWS: CWB Report, 1896.

¹¹² *The Schoolmaster*, 28 Feb 1920, quoted in W. Gareth Evans, 'Secondary Education for Girls and Women', p. 91-4.

in the process of presenting a thesis for her MA degree.¹¹³ Similarly, all the teachers in the Rhondda Girls' County School had degrees, usually from the University of Wales, and sometimes from London University. Many of the staff there had also gained MA's.

The curriculum in the secondary and County schools was also very different to that of the elementary schools. The domestic bias was not so stark, as vigorous campaigning when the intermediate schools were being established in Wales had ensured that equal opportunities for both sexes were embodied in the 1889 legislation, under which the schools were established, and only a minimum concession to technical education and gender differentiation existed.¹¹⁴ Secondary schools in the Rhondda followed along the same lines, with very little concession to contemporary ideas regarding what it was appropriate to teach girls. The curriculum in Intermediate schools remained undifferentiated by gender until the turn of the century, in spite of the attempts by the Association for the Promotion of Education for Girls in Wales to introduce domestic subjects. The academic nature of the schools was retained, however, as in addition to their arguments for the teaching of domestic subjects, the Association was also of the opinion that the manual training should not be given to the exclusion of a liberal academic education. As future mothers, they argued, these girls would be responsible for the early training and development of male and female children and should accordingly be educated in other subjects:

Granted that every woman should be acquainted with the domestic art of sewing, cooking and housekeeping, it does not therefore follow that her training should be limited to the attainment of these arts.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D.): Report of the Inspection of Porth Secondary School 1930, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ W. Gareth Evans, 'Secondary and Higher Education for Girls and Women in Wales', pp. 93-4.

¹¹⁵ Miss Anna Rowlands, 'Manual training for girls in Wales' *Association for the Promotion of Education for Girls in Wales*, pamphlet No 13, (1894), p. 8.

From the turn of the century onwards, however, fears concerning the deterioration of the health of the nation, and concepts of femininity and the family, encouraged the introduction of the teaching of domestic technical subjects. This, along with the impact of religion, social Darwinism, the law and medical concerns regarding academic study and the overpressure it brought to bear, have been deemed to be major impediments to the education of girls.¹¹⁶ The outcome of these anxieties was the introduction of a more gendered curriculum, although to a lesser extent than that which existed in the elementary schools, and from 1905 secondary schools were required to provide manual instruction, woodwork and ironwork for boys, and domestic work for girls. In December 1910, the Glamorgan County Council reiterated their commitment to the teaching of domestic subjects in their schools, which included Rhondda County Girls' School, but not the other secondary schools in the Rhondda which were under the control of the Rhondda Urban District Council. They suggested that in the past, the education received by girls in the County Schools:

has been too preponderantly of the nature of book learning, and that it would be desirable to devote more of the girls time to training in domestic craft, including the care of infants.¹¹⁷

This was to prove a contentious statement on the part of the council, and many headmistresses objected to it influencing what were meant to be academic schools whose aim was the training of girls for university. Objections to the teaching of domestic subjects in their schools were based on the opinion that such subjects were for girls with few academic aspirations or abilities, a sentiment that was often shared by the pupils themselves. Mary

¹¹⁶ Evans, 'Secondary and Higher Education for Girls and Women', p. 9.

¹¹⁷ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC:Report of the Girls' Education sub committee, 14 December 1910.

Davies Parnell was a pupil at the Rhondda County Girls' School during the early 1950s, but her view is illustrative of what pupils in such schools thought about the study of domestic subjects:

It seemed to have little credence as a proper subject in an academically minded school such as ours. After all, it was something you picked up at home, mainly out of necessity to quell hunger pangs when your mother was out shopping or talking.¹¹⁸

If a girl had a flair for languages or science, for example, why would she wish to waste time learning how to cook? Headmistresses argued that it was the role of the elementary schools and the housecraft centres to teach domestic subjects. The headmistress of Rhondda County Girls' School adopted the position that the girls should be able to make a choice as to whether they should follow a domestic curriculum; so, while some domestic subjects were compulsory,

The girls, at each stage of school life, are arranged in two classes, the one having academic and the other domestic pursuits in view, the domestic pursuits being emphasised at the expense of Latin and Mathematics.¹¹⁹

It has been argued, however, that despite the seemingly ungendered curriculum, secondary and intermediate schools were instrumental in teaching girls how to behave like 'young ladies'. This was the natural outcome of the schools emphasising the feminine traits of neatness, presentation and punctuality.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Mary Davies Parnell, *Snobs and sardines: Rhondda Schooldays*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), p. 58.

¹¹⁹ Davies, 'Origins and Development in Secondary Education in the Rhondda', Appendix 1.

¹²⁰ P. Summerfield, 'An Oral History of Schooling in Lancashire 1900-1950: Gender, Class and Education', *Oral History*, 15, 2, (1987)

In the end, the intermediate schools had to consent to teach domestic subjects, but they still maintained their academic status, and domestic training was very much peripheral to the curriculum. The Higher Grade, and later the secondary schools also resisted gendered education for a long time, preferring instead to adopt the more academic curriculum that the intermediate schools followed. By 1914 a limited degree of difference was evident, but overall the schools' curricula remained ungendered, and inter-war attempts to introduce a gender-differentiated curriculum were only partially successful.¹²¹

In spite of the fact that the Higher Grade schools had originally been established in order to provide the children of the working classes with a technical rather than academic education, by 1907 there was, in fact, very little difference between the Higher Grade/secondary schools and the intermediate school. Pupils in the Higher Grade and municipal secondary schools were able to prepare for the Central Welsh Board examinations, the Oxford Locals and the London University Matriculation in the same way that pupils in the intermediate schools were, which necessarily entailed studying the same types of subject. The secondary school curriculum included English language and literature, history, geography, French, German, Spanish, Welsh, Latin, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, commercial subjects and art, as well as housecraft for the girls and manual instruction, which included bookbinding and music. The curriculum of Rhondda County Girls' School was similar, but the absence of science subjects indicates that the girls in the secondary schools would not have studied all the science subjects, probably only biology. Languages would have been viewed as suitable replacements. This was the case in Ystrad Higher Grade school, where the curriculum for girls was very similar to that of the boys, with

¹²¹ W. Gareth Evans 'The Gendering of the Elementary School Curriculum in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century Wales', pp. 95-96.

the exception that in the fourth standard the girls were taught drawing, music, domestic economy and needlework instead of algebra, Euclid and mensuration, and, in standard 6, French instead of Latin and Chemistry.¹²²

The academic nature of the schools was further facilitated by the extra curricular activities that were offered, many of which emulated those available at the County school. Pupils at the Rhondda County School had a wide choice of societies that they could join, including the music, scientific, geographic, French and Welsh societies and a junior branch of the League of Nations. Secondary schools offered similar opportunities to join the literary, history, and arts and crafts societies. In Ferndale Secondary, for example, there was a very active debating society, whose reported debates included such topics as the equality of the sexes, and whether women should receive the vote.¹²³ Extra-curricular activities, however, were not only confined to academic societies. The school magazines gave much column space to details of sports matches, usually hockey, in which girls played either against local schools, or against staff or old pupils. In addition, a number of cultural trips were also planned, more so in the intermediate school, such as a trip to France for 14 pupils in 1938.¹²⁴

The culture of secondary education, then, was entirely different to that found in the elementary sector. The quality of the teaching staff was much higher, and the pupils followed a more academic curriculum that was based far less upon gender differentiation and the perceived roles of women. The pupils also had the opportunity to take examinations in both the secondary schools and the intermediate school in order to enable them to continue to higher education.

¹²² E. J. Davies, 'The Origin and Development of Secondary Education in the Rhondda Valleys', p. 41.

¹²³ *The Dragon*: Easter term 1921, pp. 3-6; April 1909.

¹²⁴ *Rhondda County Girls' School Magazine*, July 1938.

Such an experience should have opened up a variety of occupations to the young women who were lucky enough to receive it. It is difficult to ascertain what occupations, if any, the girls leaving secondary schools took up, as the figures in the Central Welsh Board reports do not differentiate between the sexes unless the work is specifically male or female. The report for Porth Secondary documents that only 8 out of 52 girls who left in 1929-30 entered into domestic service, and 5 became nurses, so we can see that a low number entered into service, but not what they chose to do instead.¹²⁵ The admissions register of Tonypandy Secondary School is more illuminating. Table 4 below illustrates the occupations that girls who were admitted to the school in the period January to December 1927 chose to enter upon leaving:

Table 4: Occupations, upon leaving, of girls admitted to Tonypandy Secondary School, 1927.

Occupation on leaving	Number of scholars
Waitress	2
Nursing	9
Barry Training College	1
Clerk	8
Student teacher	3
Home duties	14
Shop assistant	2
Private study	2
Unknown	2 ¹²⁶

Opportunities were clearly available for girls in a wide range of occupations, with nursing, and clerical work being the most popular, followed by teaching. Additionally, large numbers of girls remained at home assisting with household duties, evidence, perhaps, of the

¹²⁵ GRO: MS. UD/RE 66/8, B of E (W. D): Report of Inspection of Porth Secondary School December 1930, p. 2.

¹²⁶ GRO: MS. E/SEC 55/1a, Tonypandy Secondary School: Admissions Register, 1927.

economic situation at the time, or maybe having a break at home before taking up a post, possibly away from the district.

The Headmistress of the Rhondda County Girls' School also noted in the school admission register the occupations that girls entered upon leaving the school. In spite of the similarities between the secondary schools and the county school in the Rhondda, the occupations upon leaving appear to be slightly different. The same occupations were entered, but in varying numbers. The register clearly shows that of the girls who started at the school in 1916, teaching was the most popular choice of occupation: some 21.5 per cent went on to teacher training college and became student teachers, whilst 3 per cent became uncertificated teachers. The actual number of those eventually taking up teaching might have been higher than this as it does not include girls who might have become teachers after attending university. Shop work accounted for a low number of school leavers, with only 1.5 per cent entering into the occupation, and there were a few other occupations that girls took up, such as 'music'. Surprisingly, a large number of girls, 23 per cent, were documented as being 'at home', which could partly be attributed to the lack of suitable occupations available for young women to enter in the Rhondda, as, apart from teaching and clerical work, there were few other options open to educated girls. Circumstances of the girl's family also influenced the choices that a girl had when she left school. Often 'family circumstances, such as caring for elderly relatives as well as societal pressure and personal choice' combined to ensure that girls remained at home at the end of their secondary education.¹²⁷ Surprisingly, a significant number of the girls chose to continue their education further, this group accounting for 17 per cent of school leavers. Whilst most went on to Commercial school in Cardiff, some went to

¹²⁷ Roderick, 'Social Class, Curriculum and the Concept of Relevance in Secondary Education', p. 310.

University College in Aberystwyth, University College in Cardiff and Cardiff school of cookery.¹²⁸

Secondary education provided a small number of women with the opportunity for further instruction and qualifications and the possibility of a degree of financial independence in the future. Teaching, we have noted, was a popular means of using their education; for example, Miss Gladys Parry held a scholarship at Rhondda County for 4 years, and then continued in education to obtain honours in Mathematics, and became a teacher in Tonypany Higher Elementary School.¹²⁹ Some girls were able to use their education to enter male dominated occupations; thus Miss R M Jenkins, a former pupil of Ferndale Secondary School, passed the final examinations for FSMC and became a fully qualified ophthalmic optician. She was the youngest candidate to achieve this distinction.¹³⁰ Miss Olive Williams, formerly of Rhondda County Girls' School, became the first lady Master of Music in the University of Wales and subsequently took up a post as Lecturer in Music at Swansea Training College. Another high achiever emerging from the County school was Miss Madeleine John, who was appointed first female health visitor for Rhondda Urban District Council following a career in London as a sanitary inspector. These, however, were exceptional women and most of the girls would have taken and remained at posts in the Rhondda.¹³¹

It is clear that secondary education for those girls with the means or opportunity, could provide them with a chance to receive a similar education to boys in an academic context, and, it has been argued, played a 'positive and crucial' role in their social

¹²⁸ GRO: MS. E/SEC 3/1, Rhondda County Girls School: Admission Register, 1916.

¹²⁹ *Rhondda County School Magazine*, Easter 1921.

¹³⁰ *The Dragon*, May 1915.

¹³¹ *Rhondda County School Magazine*, July 1909; Christmas 1919.

emancipation.¹³² There were, however, difficulties affecting the presence of girls at a secondary or the intermediate school, including the lack of sufficient places for the large Rhondda population and the expense of attending such schools for a further four years. While scholarships and exhibitions were available, many girls could not accept them because they did not take into account the 'hidden' costs such as uniform, transport and stationery equipment. Acceptance of such scholarships and places at schools greatly depended upon the financial situation of the family, family size, whether the family could afford to go without wages for the next few years and general attitudes towards female scholars. Those who could attend, however, found that the experience of secondary education was vastly different to that of elementary school, and that the experience opened a number of doors to them.

One such opportunity that might arise from secondary education was the chance to attend a university course, although this had not always been the case. Carol Dyhouse has illustrated that women had been discouraged from entering universities either by regulations prohibiting them from doing so, or by contemporary ideas regarding women and education. A popular idea at the time was that women were neither physically nor mentally capable of withstanding rigorous academic work, and that university education should be the preserve of males only. From the late nineteenth century, however, women were being accepted in many of the universities in England and Wales. The University of Wales had a very positive view regarding female students, and from its inception accepted women to its institutions, with a charter specifically stating that women were in a position of complete equality with men. The colleges of the University of Wales became popular destinations for girls from the Rhondda.

¹³² Roderick, 'Social Class, Curriculum and the Concept of Relevance in Secondary Education', p. 309.

The expansion of universities and the inclusion of groups other than middle-class males opened the doors for women and men from a working-class background, and this was facilitated by the availability of scholarships as a means of assisting those who had previously been excluded because of the prohibitive cost, and by improved transport facilities. The opening of Halls of Residences for women, such as Aberdare Hall in Cardiff, was also an important development which encouraged the increase of women in universities, by alleviating parents' worries regarding the safety of their daughters while they were living away from home. These changes made a university education far more accessible to the local population, and it was claimed in 1930 that 'university training was now in the reach of nearly every capable welsh boy and girl'.¹³³

Whilst this was not necessarily the case, it is certainly true to say that the number of women who were able to take advantage of the opportunities now open to them grew, and the number of female students in universities, although still very small, was steadily increasing. In University College, Cardiff, for example, 363 female students were enrolled in 1935 compared to only 167 in 1901.¹³⁴ The number of women in universities, however, remained far behind the number of men attending. Of those who were able to enter higher education, their social background is believed to be much the same as that of the male students, that is, predominantly middle-class. It has been claimed, however that where costs were lower, for example in the University of Wales, there was a larger representation of working-class women.¹³⁵

¹³³ University Committee Minutes, 30 March 1930 quoted in Williams, *University of Wales*, p. 271.

¹³⁴ C. Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1939*, (London: UCL Press, 1995), Appendix II.

¹³⁵ Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?*, p. 25.

The University of Wales proved to be particularly popular with Rhondda scholars, with the college at Cardiff especially favoured by the young women, as the native university was cheaper to attend than many of the universities in England and it was close to home. Additionally, improved transport facilities from the industrial areas meant that the cost of maintenance for students was greatly reduced because more students could live at home, which helped to increase the number of working-class students attending.¹³⁶ The Rhondda Urban District Council offered scholarships, called the Rhondda Free scholarships, to help those wishing to attend university to do so, and the minutes of the Council illustrate that of those who were awarded such scholarships between 1919 and 1940, the most popular destination for women was the University College, Cardiff, followed by the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and a handful went to the University College, Swansea and King's College, London.¹³⁷ In contrast, the young men who left the Rhondda for university tended to travel slightly further afield. The majority of them remained in Wales, with Cardiff and Aberystwyth being the most popular destinations, but a larger percentage enrolled in English universities such as Cambridge and the London Universities. Not only did more men attend universities outside Wales, but they also studied different subjects; men were more evenly distributed across the faculties, whereas women tended to be concentrated in the arts subjects or they were 'normals', attending the normal or teacher training sector of the college.

The experiences of male and female students, when they did get to university, were very different. For women, residence in university halls was compulsory, and as such their

¹³⁶ J Gwynn Williams, *The University Movement in Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), Appendix II.

¹³⁷ GRO: MS. UD/RE 51/19, RUDC: List of Scholarship holders, 1919-1940.

lives were more strictly regulated than those of the men. This, however, could be viewed as a positive feature of university life, especially from the from the parents' point of view. The magazines of the secondary schools in the Rhondda provide some insights into university life as they regularly featured letters written by old pupils. In one letter to *The Dragon*, Phoebe Neate described the daily routine of a resident of Aberdare Hall, the women's residence at University College, Cardiff, in 1910. She wrote that almost every moment was accounted for, from the time the breakfast bell rang at 7.30 until the lights went out at 10.30. In between these times, the student's time was strictly regulated, with rigid study, eating and social hours.¹³⁸

Fifteen years later, 'E.H.C' described a similar lifestyle at her hostel in Dundee. Female students were still strictly supervised, to the extent of having to ask permission to leave the halls on the weekends, even if only for a few hours.¹³⁹ Far from being an opportunity to mix with members of the opposite sex, the contact between men and women was often restricted, firstly by the separate residences and largely distinct subjects that they chose to study, and, secondly, by strict supervision exercised by the principals of the residences.

The restrictions placed upon female students were designed to allay parents' fears regarding the moral and physical safety of the girls, and they would probably have faced similar restrictions had they lived at home. For the majority of the girls, attending university was the first time that they had left home, and principals of the colleges and hostels felt that they had a duty to provide some protection and guidance for their students. As the

¹³⁸ *The Dragon*, 1910.

¹³⁹ *The Dragon*, Christmas term 1927.

headmistress of Glamorgan (Barry) Training College explained in response to criticisms in the press regarding the close supervision of her students:

If all my students had been away from home before and had got some experience of the world, and had learnt to resist temptations, it would, of course, be the natural thing that there should be no restrictions placed on them here.¹⁴⁰

In the letters from former students, however, the girls all emphasise the amount of fun they were having in addition to studying. The women-only halls provided a social life that they would not have experienced at home, and a number mentioned such experiences as dancing in the common room, midnight feasts and the general camaraderie of girls living together. With regard to college life outside of the residences, the girls discussed the societies of which they were members; sporting, cultural and academic. There can be little doubt that the experience of attending university was on the whole an enjoyable one. As one student noted:

Despite the problems we have to put up with in hostel and college, hostel students enjoy their two years under rules and regulations. No single student has time to be bored with her own company when there are so many others around her.¹⁴¹

The experience of university life, however, was expensive, and although there were scholarships available, they were few and far between. During the years 1919-1940, for example, only 79 women and 201 men received Rhondda Free Scholarships, which paid for university fees and maintenance for the period of study, which was usually three years. There were a number of scholarships for which men and women could apply in the Rhondda, such as the Glamorgan county scholarship and some from private funds. The scholarships offered

¹⁴⁰ *Western Mail*, 28 October 1914.

¹⁴¹ *The Dragon*, 1927.

varying amounts in addition to paying the tuition fees, the most remunerative, and therefore the most desirable, being the state scholarships, which gave £100 a year for living costs and as such were highly competitive. The most common form of funding, however, was the Rhondda Free Scholarship which, after the state scholarship, offered the highest rate of maintenance at £40. Although this constituted one of the highest amounts of funding, there was still a big difference between the two scholarships in the standard of living they would provide. Attending university could be expensive, with lodgings being the largest expense after tuition fees and taking a large chunk out of the scholarship. Phoebe Sheavyn found that in the 1920s the smaller civic universities, under which category she included the University of Wales, were the cheapest in terms of lodgings, but costs were still between £40 and £50 per annum.¹⁴² In some cases, the maintenance offered would not even cover the necessary accommodation, and although men were able to find cheap private lodgings, this was not the case for women, for whom it was mandatory that they stayed in approved halls. Thus, the cost of the lodgings alone made attendance at university an impossibility for many women:

We find that it is quite impractical for the children of people such as miners, agricultural labourers and tin workers, and colliers, to pay that price for their daughters' education. In the cases where they have done it, they are normals, and people who have got scholarships.¹⁴³

Additional expenses such as books, library fines and general living expenses heightened the costs further. The cost of a university education, although prohibitive to the majority whether or not they had managed to gain scholarships was an attainable goal, however, for girls from both middle- and working-class backgrounds.

¹⁴² P Sheavyn, 'Higher Education for Women', p. 20, quoted in Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex*, p. 28.

¹⁴³ Williams, *University of Wales*, Appendix 3.

The period 1870-1938 was one in which standards, provision, and opportunity for education for women and girls in the Rhondda improved immeasurably. The implementation of the 1870 Act, and perhaps to a greater degree, the introduction of compulsory attendance and free schooling, offered girls far greater educational opportunity than could previously be obtained. Although the elementary schools continued to suffer from the same problems as the voluntary system they were meant to replace, that is overcrowding and inadequate facilities, they nonetheless provided the majority of children with a far higher level of basic education than their parents had received. Similarly, the opportunity for continued education for girls was greatly improved with the increased provision of secondary education. And whilst a number of girls, especially those from the working class, continued to be constrained by family circumstances, poverty and gender, the availability of scholarships and free places ensured that secondary education and university education were an attainable goal for the less affluent, as well as the middle classes. The levels and type of education received by girls, whatever their background, would have great implications in the employment available to them, should they wish to enter the world of work.

Chapter Two

Work

The occupations that were available to girls and young women following the end of their schooling was influenced by a wide variety of factors, including the level of education, as well as the type of education, received. In this chapter, the factors which combined to influence the occupations into which women went, if indeed they entered into the world of work at all, are studied. Census figures clearly illustrate that female rates of activity were very low, but preoccupation with this, and with explanations of the low levels, has meant that women who have been active in formal employment, for example as teachers, domestic servants, midwives and shopkeepers, have been neglected.¹ Additionally, far greater numbers of women worked on an informal basis, and about these women little is known. Census figures, in addition to other sources, are utilised in this chapter in order to highlight the experiences of these groups. Two of the most popular occupations for women, domestic service and teaching, are studied in greater detail, and the impact of the First World War will also receive attention, as it created highly unusual opportunities for women, albeit temporarily.

It should be remembered throughout this chapter that the women discussed as being actively involved in the labour market are atypical of Rhondda women in general, in that they were amongst only a very small minority who entered into the arena of paid employment. The census statistics for the South Wales Coalfield indicate that levels of female employment

¹ Of these occupations, only domestic service has received any detailed study. See Deirdre Beddoe, 'Munitionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales, 1914-1939', in Angela V. John (Ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*; Rosemary Scadden, 'Be Good Sweet Maid'.

were low, considerably lower than the commercial centres of Cardiff and Swansea.² During the period from 1881 to 1921 in Ystradyfodwg, and from 1901 in the Rhondda, the percentage of females over the age of ten categorised as being in formal employment varied only between 11 per cent and 14 per cent.³ One seeming exception to this otherwise consistent pattern of female employment occurs in the 1891 census returns, when it was noted that 24 per cent of women in Ystradyfodwg were in paid employment. This can be explained as arising from the difference in the system of categorisation in the census itself. In this year enumerators were instructed to classify under domestic service female relations described as assisting in household duties. The new instruction therefore led to a dramatic distortion of the figures relating to domestic service, as well as the general employment figures for that year.⁴

The census figures, it has been argued, are unrepresentative of the actual levels of female employment, resulting from the problems inherent in the collection and categorising of the census. Dot Jones has revealed the inadequacy of census statistics in analysing the work patterns of women in Wales, as a result of under-recording. For example, they did not include casual, temporary or seasonal work, which was popular with women.⁵ This has been corroborated by Andrew Walker who, in his study of women's economic activity in the South

² L. J. Williams and Dot Jones, 'Women at work in the nineteenth century', *Llafur* 3, 3, (1981-82), p. 25.

³ Census statistics, 1881-1921. Early census statistics were compiled in parishes. Most of the Rhondda was contained in the Ystradyfodwg parish, with parts of the Rhondda Fach, such as Blaenllechau, Ferndale, Ponygwaith, Tylorstown and Wattstown, as well as Trehafod and Porth at the entrance to the valley, were in the parish of Llanwonno. The villages of Cymmer, Dinas and Edmonstown were in the parish of Llantrisant. The reason for using the parish of Ystradyfodwg for statistics for the Rhondda, is that this is the parish that contained the largest part of the Rhondda, and because the parish consisted almost entirely of the Rhondda, with few other villages included.

⁴ Williams and Jones, 'Women at work', p. 22.

⁵ See D. Jones, 'Serfdom and Slavery: Women's work in Wales, 1890-1930', in Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey (Eds.), *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada 1850-1930*, (Wales: Llafur/CCLH, 1989), p. 88.

Yorkshire Coalfield, found that whilst the censuses showed very low levels of female employment, the marriage registers of the local Anglican Churches, in which the vicar would write the occupations of both parties, illustrated that women were more economically active than suggested by the census figures.⁶ Further, Dot Jones has pointed out, the inclusion of women has suffered from inconsistencies in the categorisation of female family labour, thus a wife, daughter, sister or mother who worked alongside her husband, father, brother or son in a shop, or in a public house or hotel, would be unlikely to be enumerated in that profession.

Misconceptions also arose as a result of differences in perceptions of the type of work that they did. Women, as well as the enumerators, did not always recognise work as 'employment' for the census, which led to a tendency to class certain types of work frequently carried out by women as domestic work rather than as formal means of employment. Dot Jones uses the example of the letting of rooms to lodgers, in order to illustrate how widespread this problem was.⁷ The renting of rooms to paying guests was a common occurrence in the mining valleys, but the miners giving the information to the enumerator would not necessarily have described their wives as 'lodging house keepers' for census purposes. This certainly appears to be true in the Rhondda: in 1881, for example, only 55 women appeared on the census for the whole of the parish of Ystradyfodwg as lodging or boarding house keepers.⁸ Closer study of the households in the Pentre area of the Rhondda, however, reveals that this was a gross underestimate. Some 53 houses out of a total 149 on Ystrad Road, Pentre, indicated that lodgers were resident on the night of the census, but only one described itself as a lodging house. A similar picture is given in the households of

⁶ Andrew Walker, "'Pleasurable Homes?': Victorian model miners' wives and the family wage in a South Yorkshire Colliery District", *Women's History Review* 6, 3, (1997).

⁷ Dot Jones. 'Serfdom and Slavery' p. 88.

⁸ Census statistics, 1881.

nearby Talbot Terrace and Scotch Row.⁹ In the cases described above, the lodgers were living with ordinary families in their homes as paying guests, as opposed to residing in established guesthouses. Moreover, the figures given above only count those defined as lodgers for census purposes, and do not include brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews who might be living in the houses as paying lodgers, but were not perceived as such by the families concerned, and were certainly not noted in the census as such. Again, this was a common occurrence in the Rhondda: throughout her childhood in Pentre, for example, Mair McLellan's uncle lived with her family, he worked in the local mine, and contributed to the household budget, whilst her mother provided his food and did his washing, but he was certainly not thought of as a lodger. Rather he was viewed as a member of the extended family.¹⁰ It was often the case that single members of the extended family might arrive from outside the area in search of work, and stay at the house of a relative already established in the district. Whether the lodgers had a formal landlord/lodger relationship, or were family members, however, the practicalities of the situation were nonetheless the same; they contributed to the household budget and received services such as meals and washing in return. Whilst it is clear that the women, especially those with family members lodging in their household, probably did not regard themselves as 'employed' in this way, they were performing the same functions as those who formally identified themselves as lodging house keepers.

Similar problems exist in the case of domestic service, which, the census illustrates, was the most common form of employment for women. Once again, there are problems with

⁹ Census returns, 1881.

¹⁰ Mair Eluned McLellan, 'Shadows on the Wall: A Remembrance of Things Past', Unpublished autobiography. 1994.

the categorisation of servants, arising from the distinction between formal and informal work. Those who were formally employed, working for the same employer for a period of time and receiving regular wages, would have declared themselves as servants, and many of these might have been live-in domestics who would have been enumerated with their employers on the night of the census. Those who did informal, or irregular work, however, such as aiding a friend or neighbour with household chores during and after a confinement, would probably not have classed themselves as 'employed'. Many women would not have regarded themselves as 'working', for example, because they perceived work as being formal, regular, paid employment, but it is clear that a number of women carried out work outside the home, for which they earned money. Mrs K, who was brought up in Tylorstown as the sixth of twelve children, provides a good example of the difficulties inherent in analysing women's work. Prior to our discussion, she stated her mother's occupation as 'housewife', but further probing led her to reveal that, in fact, her mother carried out a great deal of informal work in order to contribute to the family budget:

My mother was a very hard worker. She did washing and ironing for quite a few people, there was a grocer, with a grown up son, a doctor in Cardiff hospital and she had to do white aprons and white coats and that, and for the son if he was there. And it was very hard because there would be ironing as well. And she also did washing for another lady who had a shop, a general, a sweet shop and that sort of thing and my sister and I would take down the washing, carefully, on a Sunday morning.... How she did it I don't know.¹¹

Despite the problems of under-representation of women in employment in the census returns generally, it is nonetheless clear that a substantial number of women in the Rhondda district were not engaged in formal, paid employment.

¹¹ Interview with Mrs K, August 2000.

Whilst not wishing to dwell upon the reasons for low rates of female activity, it is nevertheless necessary to look briefly at the factors which served to deprive women in the Rhondda of the opportunity to enter into the labour market, should that be what they desired. Explanations of the low female economic activity have been linked to both the particular economic conditions of the coalfield which effectively denied the majority of women the opportunity for employment, and contemporary ideas regarding gender roles.¹² The Rhondda Valleys, because of their dependence upon a single industry, provided very little opportunity for employment outside the pits. Even if there were greater opportunities for women, the attitude prevalent in coalfield society at this time towards women, and especially married women who worked, was very much against the practice, and might have prevented many from taking advantage of them. This meant that very few married women in the locality were engaged in formal employment. Although it was not uncommon for some single women to enter employment there was a tendency for them to leave upon marriage, or if not marriage, then certainly upon the arrival of the first child. This practice, with the notable exception of those in some professions such as teaching, was a purely informal one and, while not necessarily voluntary, was not the result of any formal legislation. Generally, it was expected that women would leave employment upon marriage, regardless of whether the women themselves may actually have wanted to. Some women, in fact, went out of their way to conceal their marriage in order that they could keep their jobs for a while longer. But, as one Rhondda inhabitant noted, this ploy rarely succeeded for more than a few days because of the close nature of the community.¹³ One exception to this was Mrs Beatrice Davies, who

¹² See, for example, Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 63.

¹³ Mrs Bundy, who worked in the Co-Op in Pentre, in Rosemary Crook 'Women of the Rhondda Valley between the wars', Unpublished M.A (University of Leeds), n.d, p. 9.

accepted a post as Health Visitor in Aberdare, in the neighbouring Cynon Valley; she and her fiancée married quietly in order for her to keep her job. They managed to keep the secret until they moved to London six years later by dint of her living with her mother in the Rhondda whilst her husband visited only on weekends.¹⁴

Such notions of the 'correct' role for women, that is of wife, mother and homemaker, were based on the Victorian middle-class idea of 'separate spheres'. This encouraged women of all classes to remain in the home whilst their husbands went out to work, and was filtered through the classes by chapels, domestic education and contemporary newspapers and magazines. Deirdre Beddoe, however, has recently challenged the impact of the idea upon the employment pattern of women in Wales, suggesting that such ideals were possible for only a small section of the Welsh population. She persuasively argues that while not working and being 'ladies of leisure' might have been possible for the wives of affluent businessmen in Cardiff and Swansea, it was rather more difficult for farmers' wives in Cardigan or for those of busy valleys shop-keepers.¹⁵ Nonetheless, even though it was not attainable for some sections of society, the notion of the strict division of labour continued to be promoted throughout Britain as an ideal standard, based upon the idea that

The roles of husband and wife were to be complementary, the husband earning the wage and the wife acting as "chancellor of the family ex-chequer" and spending it wisely.¹⁶

The central belief of this policy was that a working man's wife was more valuable when her main concern was the home and the family than if she was employed. The press and

¹⁴ South Wales Coalfield Collection (SWCC): Interview with Mrs Beatrice Davies.

¹⁵ D. Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual divisions and social change*, (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984), p. 45.

contemporary observers perpetuated this idea, foretelling dire consequences for the family of the working mother, whilst simultaneously heaping praise upon women whose sole role was that of wife and mother. Comparisons between working mothers and those who remained at home were inevitable; in one study of unemployed districts, a male investigator espoused the opinion that 'where a woman can devote her whole time to the maintenance of the home, a more civilised standard is kept'. In order to illustrate his point, he made a direct contrast between the Rhondda, where the household management was deemed to be 'excellent', and the 'cultural level' of the family high, to Blackburn, where married women traditionally worked outside the home. Here, the household management was considered to be 'especially bad'.¹⁷ Similar messages can be found in the pages of the local press. When discussing the employment situation during the early 1920s, for example, the *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* claimed that:

The retention of married women assistants in the shops will tend to create a deterioration in the sanctity of home life and create a spirit of discontentment with the true functions of domestic life. The long hours worked in the business houses will mar the effects of a well-regulated household and tend to inaugurate a system which is far from being desirable.¹⁸

The deterioration of domestic and family life caused by the practice of women working was used in conjunction with the more practical argument that married women in the workforce were taking work away from single women, and possibly men, an argument which, we shall see, became especially important in relation to married-women teachers in the immediate post-war period. Working women who were married to men in receipt of good

¹⁷ *Men Without Work: A report made to the Pilgrim Trust*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 233.

¹⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 18 May 1923.

salaries were singled out for particular criticism, and in one letter to the local press, were urged by a member of the public to give up their work in favour of single women and widows. If they did not give up work voluntarily, then the correspondent believed that a marriage bar, similar to that imposed upon teachers, should be implemented across the board.¹⁹ Such was the feeling against the 'double-income households' created by married working women, that a means test was suggested for married women in employment in order to give a greater chance to unemployed men and boys.²⁰

On the surface, the notion of separate spheres appears to have had a great impact upon the Welsh mining valleys, being, as they were, home to the most obvious manifestation of these ideas, 'The Welsh Mam'. This had less to do with this ideal, however, than with the lack of economic opportunities available in the district.

The industrialisation of Wales, and the switch from agriculture to heavy industry in the south, meant that employment opportunities for women had declined dramatically. In rural societies, as Dot Jones has shown, women might carry out farm work on their farm, or the property of neighbours, but the bias towards coal in the Rhondda meant that there were very few opportunities, and this had a great impact upon all women, whether they were married, single or widowed. The domination of the mining industry in the Rhondda Valleys was not conducive for the employment of women, as they had been prohibited from underground work since 1842, and very few women were employed as surface workers. In 1881, only 98 women in Ystradyfodwg were returned as 'coal miners'. The census does not provide a break down of work within the mining industry in this year, but it almost certainly was the case that they would have been employed above ground engaged in work such as

¹⁹ *Western Mail*, 13 January 1928.

²⁰ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 8 May 1933.

helping to unload tubs of coal and screening. But this number declined throughout the period so that in 1901, only 6 women were employed in such work and few women were employed in industries associated with the pits, such as brick making. Such work in the coal industry for women, even on the surface, was frowned upon by contemporaries, who thought that the hard, physical nature of the work and the mixing with the male colliers would have a detrimental effect upon the morals of the women. A *Western Mail* article on the employment of women in the coal industry described the work as 'rough' and the conditions in which they worked as 'degrading', and not at all suitable for women.²¹ The absence of opportunities in the dominant industry in the district coupled with the lack of alternative industry in the area meant that, unlike in Lancashire and the West Midlands, there was no strong tradition of work for women.

As Chandler has illustrated in his study of migration to industry in the West Midlands by Welsh workers in the inter-war period, those who did wish to take on work, certainly before the introduction of light industry in the district in the late 1930s, usually had to leave the district in order to do so.²² This was a fairly common experience, as there was a general feeling that there was very little choice given the few opportunities that existed at home. As Mrs Lloyd of Treorchy recalls of her peers at school; 'Well, they had to [go away], there was no factories you see, there was nowhere else for them to go, so they had to go away.'²³ Most of the girls, she said, entered domestic service in London. A survey into unemployment amongst school-leavers in south Wales, carried out in 1936, serves as a useful quantitative example of the numbers of girls who had to leave the district in order to find employment. It

²¹ *Western Mail*, 27 March 1897.

²² See A. J. Chandler, 'The Remaking of a Working Class: Migration from the South Wales Coalfield to the New Industry Areas of the Midlands, c.1920-1940' Unpublished Ph.D (University of Wales) 1988.

²³ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Eddie Lloyd.

showed that only 7 per cent of female school leavers in the Rhondda were able to obtain work in the locality. Almost 14 per cent had moved away to take up employment in other districts.²⁴

The local economy clearly provided little opportunity for women to work in industry, but there were some opportunities in other fields. From around 1870, coal mining in the Rhondda Valleys was expanding rapidly, and new townships were being formed and developed. These new towns needed commercial and administrative services, as well as leisure and entertainment facilities. Census figures, however, illustrate that few women seemed to have been employed in these areas. There were very few female clerks, for example, until the inter-war period: only 11 in 1901 and 41 in 1911, accounting for 0.2 per cent and 0.5 per cent of working- women respectively, and only 4.4 per cent and 11.6 per cent of all clerks. Even in the inter-war period, when clerical work was thought to be more easily accessible for women, they were not always necessarily accepted into clerical posts. In 1926 there was a great discussion amongst Rhondda council members as to whether a post as junior clerk in the Health Department should be offered to girls as well as boys. The outcome of the debate was that the work was deemed unsuitable for girls, as it necessitated a great deal of running around, so applications were requested from males only.²⁵ Girls who did secure employment as clerks often faced resentment and hostility for taking jobs away from the men of the district, as well as on account of the wages that they received. As one Rhondda councillor noted, some men worked underground for less than half the amount that girl clerks

²⁴ G. Meara, *Juvenile unemployment in south Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1936), p. 31. The majority of the girls (48 per cent) were categorised as 'not seeking employment' and a further 28 per cent were unemployed. A negligible number had proceeded to secondary school, had left the district for reasons other than employment, or about whom nothing was known.

²⁵ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 22 January 1926.

at the council earned, and this was the cause of some anger.²⁶ By 1932, some of the female clerks were earning as much as £4 a week, although this was exceptionally high. The same was true of shop assistants, another form of work often associated with women; there were 35 female shop assistants in 1901 and, partly reflecting the growth in the number of shops in the district, 1,123 in 1921.

The newly created facilities for leisure in the period immediately prior to the First World War did create limited opportunities for employment for local women, and this continued to be the case throughout the period. The Central Cinema in Porth, for example, employed 11 women on its staff of 18 in January 1930, one of whom was married or widowed. Little information is given about the women in the salaries book, but it is clear that they performed such roles as pianists, pianotrope attendants, cashiers, attendants, chocolate servers and cleaners. Some, like Miss A. Coates for instance, worked only 4 hours per day, but others, like the attendants, worked 8 hours a day. Successive salaries books reveal that such work for women was generally short-lived, usually lasting only a year or two, but for some it was more long term: Miss P. Grouse worked as a chocolate seller from at least 1930 until 1939.²⁷ It is clear, however, that employment such as this would provide work for only a very small number of women.

The low numbers of women in clerical, shop and leisure work can partly be attributed to the competition with men for the same work. For boys from working-class mining families, it was accepted that from the time they were old enough they would follow their fathers and older brothers to the pit. But fewer opportunities existed in the area for middle-class and better-educated boys. Pit work, for example, was never considered to be an option

²⁶ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 15 September 1932.

²⁷ GRO: MS. D/D AB 42/2/1, Solomon Andrews Collection: Insurance Salaries Book, 1930-1939.

for Rhys Davies, the son of a Clydach Vale shopkeeper, when he was looking for work shortly after leaving Porth County Boys School at the tail end of the First World War. Instead, his parents considered a post in Barclays Bank, office work at the Penrhys Golf Club or a place as a journalist on the *Rhondda Leader* as suitable alternatives.²⁸ This was clearly the case for many educated boys, as a survey of the occupations entered into by boys upon leaving the Rhondda County School in the years 1903-1908 and 1918-1921 illustrates. A large number of school leavers entered into an occupation that could be performed by either sex, such as clerks and shop assistants.²⁹ Women were therefore competing with men for these posts, and employers who did give such work to women sometimes met with a hostile response from the press and public, especially in the inter-war period.

It is clear that the availability of paid work for women in the locality was extremely limited. The dependence upon heavy industry and hostility towards working women, together with the lack of alternative occupations for boys not destined for the mines, succeeded in ensuring that few women, whatever their background or situation, were employed in the district. But even if the opportunities were available for women to work, it would not necessarily have been practical for one particular group, namely, the wives of miners, of which there were many in the Rhondda, where the percentage of married women tended to be high; some 73 per cent of women aged 15-60 were married in 1911, the vast majority of whom, because of the nature of that particular society, would have been married to miners. Marriages in the Rhondda tended to take place at a fairly young age; tellingly 7 per cent of girls under the age of 20 were married in 1911, compared to only 3.8 per cent in nearby Merthyr. The young age of women upon marriage, coupled with the lack of

²⁸ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*, p.89.

²⁹ GRO: MS. E/SEC 3/1, Rhondda County School, Admission Registers, 1903-1908; 1918-1921.

knowledge of birth control and efficient means of contraception, meant that large families were not exceptional in the district. In 1911 some 39 per cent of households in the Rhondda could have been classified as 'large', consisting of six or more persons, which might include children, lodgers or elderly parents. Although the eldest girl in the family usually helped out with the care of the children, childcare remained the primary concern of the mother ensuring that there was very little time left for other things. One of Rosemary Scaddens' interviewees, when asked if her mother ever worked following her marriage, explained:

Oh, she didn't have the chance, with ten children. I think with my eldest brother and the second brother, she must have had two in eighteen months. I don't think there was much between them, between Arthur and Evan. She had enough to do in the house.³⁰

Women in other areas with a tradition of work, such as Lancashire, did manage to combine employment with family responsibilities, but the wives of miners were frequently constrained by the dirty nature of the men's work, and the effort which consequently had to be expended in order to keep the houses clean and free of the dust and dirt of the coal. In this, they were hindered by the inadequate sanitary facilities available both at the pits and within their own homes. The lack of pit-head baths in the mines of the Rhondda, until their piecemeal introduction in the 1930s, meant that the miners, at the end of every shift, brought the dust and the grime from the colliery home with them, on their clothes and on their bodies. The women's fight to keep this dirt out of the homes was compounded by the lack of bathrooms in the majority of houses, and in many cases lack of private water supply, which made the cleaning of the clothes and the provision of baths for the men difficult, and very

³⁰ Interview with May, in Scaddens, 'Be good sweet maid', pp. 116-125.

labour intensive. All water had to be carried from the outside tap, which could be shared by a number of households, into the houses and then heated in a 'copper' on the fire before the men could bath or before the washing could be done. Whilst those lucky enough to have a private supply of water did not have to fetch it from outside the home, nevertheless only cold water would have been available, so the routine of heating the water on the fire in large, heavy utensils would still have to be carried out. When the bath was over, or the washing completed, the tub then had to be carried outside for emptying. This arduous and physically demanding chore would have to be done at least once a day, at the end of the shift, and some would have to perform it more than once, if they were unlucky enough to have household members working on different shifts. One of Rosemary Crook's interviewees, Mrs Jenkins, detailed the work that her mother had to carry out every day, when her husband and seven sons returned from the mines, all on different shifts. Such work would entail providing meals and baths for two to three people at seven in the morning, later at three in the afternoon and again at eleven at night, whilst still caring for the other members of the family, and then getting up to start the same round again the following day.³¹ The constant dust and dirt which found its way everywhere from the pit made regular housework essential, especially as the cleanliness of a home was one of the most important standards by which women judged each other, and was an important factor determining whether a family were 'respectable' or not.³²

Given the many demands upon married women in the home, it is not surprising that few married women are identified as being formally employed in the census. This group accounted for only 17 per cent and 22 per cent of women in employment in 1901 and 1911

³¹ Mrs Jenkins, in Crook, 'Women of the Rhondda Valleys', p. 27.

³² R. Crook, "'Tidy Women': Women in the Rhondda Valleys between the Wars', *Oral History Journal*, 10, 2 (Autumn 1982).

respectively, the first years in which marital status is identified in the occupation tables of the census returns, and constituted only 1.8 and 1.7 per cent of the entire workforce. And it should be recognised that, although it is easy to blame the economic conditions and prevailing ideology, women might not necessarily have *wanted* to work. After all, girls had been trained in their homes, chapels and schools and encouraged in the press and magazines to be good housewives, and many looked forward to growing up, getting married and having a home and family of their own. For some, this was preferable to suffering long hours, low pay and dirty work, as Joanna Bourke has pointed out.³³ Nevertheless, those who are identified in the census can be located. Amongst others employed were teachers, although this group was not to continue for much longer. By 1911 a marriage bar had already been introduced by the RUDC, and married women teachers were being phased out of the teaching staff. The majority of employed married women, however, were to be found in the categories of domestic service, textiles and dress, and as shopkeepers. These occupations were rather easier to fit around their family responsibilities, especially if working from home, and required little training.

Another fairly popular occupation for married women was that of midwifery. Midwives, in the early period, were simply women from the neighbourhood who were called upon to attend and advise at confinement. Such work, it has been argued, was a continuation of the traditional role of older married women in rural society, who would be called upon to help with the delivery of babies and to lay out the dead.³⁴ Their continued demand and employment was based upon their reputation for cleanliness, cheapness and nature, rather than any formal training. Between 1901 and 1911, the number of trained midwives, as

³³ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 64.

³⁴ Jaclyn Gier, 'Miners' Wives', chapter 4.

distinct from those who continued to attend births, for a fee but on an informal basis, grew dramatically from only 17 to 115. This increase was a result both of the professionalisation of the service through Government legislation, and the scholarships at the University College, Cardiff, to train in midwifery, which were offered by the Glamorgan County Council. In order to further encourage women to take up the training opportunity and to make it easier for women of all financial situations to attend the course, third-class rail fare was to be paid for them in addition to the course fees.³⁵ This help made formal training for midwifery far more accessible, and a number of women from the Rhondda applied for, and received, such scholarships. They were especially popular with older and married women, rather than with girls who had recently finished their schooling; of the 8 Rhondda women given scholarships for the summer term of 1907, for example, 4 were married, 1 was a widow and 3 were single, and the average age was 32.³⁶ Similarly, of the 18 midwives recorded in the 1901 census statistics, some 17 were married, and they were older than other workers; 11 of them were over the age of 45, and 6 were over 65. Midwifery was a particularly popular occupation as experience and maturity were deemed to be essential attributes for this work.

Another popular occupation for married women, which, in contrast to midwifery, is not really illuminated by the census figures, was in the licensing trade. From the commencement of the development of the Rhondda, public houses and hotels had sprung up throughout the Valleys to provide for the workers a social life away from the religious institutions, and to accommodate visitors to the district. Many of these appear to have been run as family business, jointly between husbands and wives, or by widowed or married

³⁵ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC: Report of the Secondary Teachers Work and Salaries Committee, 14 February 1905.

³⁶ GRO: MS. G/C EDSE, GCC: Report of the Secondary Education Sub Committee, 5 march 1907.

women with the help of an adult daughter, as was the case in the Trehafod Hotel, which was run, in 1901, by Mary A. Jones, a 52-year-old widow, with her 21-year-old daughter Lena acting as barmaid. Hotels, which were seen to attract a 'better' clientele than the ordinary working men's pubs and clubs, appear to have been respectable places for women to work; and whilst bar work was fine for younger women, married women found a niche in this trade as landladies. In addition to the example of Mary A. Jones, it is clear that this has been a continuing trend in the Rhondda: of the five licensees of the Dunraven Inn, Treherbert, between 1861 and 1911, three were female, and all were either married or widowed.³⁷ Work in the busy public houses and hotels demanded a certain type of woman - strong, confident and able to deal with unruly customers - and older married women commanded more respect than young, single women. Bryn Lewis's parents managed the New Inn public house in Tonypany in the early decades of the twentieth century, and he recalls that his mother used to place herself between fighting colliers in their bar to split up the fight, something that his father would never do. On one occasion she cross-summoned a man who had taken her to court for hitting him across the head with a pint glass, her defence was that she had hit him because he had called her a name. The man was fined £5 and Mrs Lewis was congratulated for defending herself so well.³⁸ Whilst young women working in pubs may have gained the reputation of being 'rough', married women gained respectability through their marital status, and this regard was often consolidated through their involvement in the community. In 1934, an article appeared in the *Rhondda Gazette* to celebrate the retirement of Mrs Alice Ryan, Licensee of the Llewellyn Hotel, Pentre, after 44 years in the licensing trade. The impression

³⁷ N. B. Todd, *Taverns and Checks in the Rhondda Fawr*, (Llwynypia: The Rhondda Museum, 1983), Appendix.

³⁸ SWCC: Interview with Mr and Mrs Bryn Lewis.

given of Mrs Ryan was of an active woman, who was well known in the locality for her work for 'the sweet cause of charity'. Particular attention was paid to her role in pioneering the establishment of soup kitchens.³⁹ Her longevity in a trade that placed her at the heart of the community was therefore greatly enhanced by her good works.

Shopkeepers, of which there were many in the villages throughout the Valleys, occupied a similar standing in the community. For married or mature women, as well as single women, opening their own shop, either in business premises or in their own front room, or working in the family shop, was an entirely acceptable, and popular, occupation.⁴⁰ This is borne out by the number of women listed in local trade directories as the proprietors of shops. In Ferndale in 1895, for example, as many as 22 female business proprietors are recorded, including four shopkeepers and two butchers, accounting for 12 per cent of all business proprietors. By 1926 this figure had grown to 46, or 30 per cent of the proprietors in the town, and included 27 shopkeepers and two fried fish dealers.⁴¹ This development occurred whilst contemporaries were claiming that few women were involved in shop work, as so many of the retail trades, including tailoring, grocers, butchers and fishmongers, were reserved for men. In fact, according to one survey, only the 'practically new retail trades' of women's hairdressing and beauty, and shops associated with women's outfitting, were staffed by women.⁴² Census data, as well as the trade directories, however, illustrate that women were occupied in 'men's' retail trades; female butchers, for example, accounted for 18 per cent of the butchers in the Rhondda in 1911. Similarly, it was common for women, both married and unmarried, to take positions as post-mistresses in the district. The *Kelly's*

³⁹ *Rhondda Gazette*, 10 March 1934.

⁴⁰ Beddoe, *Out of the shadows*, p. 36.

⁴¹ *Kelly's Trade Directory for South Wales and Monmouthshire*, 1895 edition and 1926 edition.

⁴² *The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales*, (Cardiff: University Press Board, 1937), p. 191.

Directory for South Wales and Monmouthshire, for example, illustrates that seven women were serving as sub-postmistresses in 1920, alongside 24 sub postmasters. Some women, like Mrs E. Crouch of Stanleytown, devoted years of service to the Post Office, working as a sub-mistress for 11 years, and as a postwoman for a further 10.⁴³ The women noted in the trade directories were the proprietors of their own businesses, but evidence would also suggest that married women were actively involved in businesses in which their husband might have been the actual owner. Mary Davies Parnell's family owned a shop in Trehafod, which was known locally as 'Jacks', after her father, but it is clear that her mother was the driving force behind the counter, and that Mr Davies would only serve after his official work, or to cover his wife.⁴⁴

Shop work, as a trade, was perceived as high status and glamorous work, certainly in comparison with domestic service, and especially if work was found in the larger department stores in the commercial areas.⁴⁵ The reality of work in a small, local shop, however, was somewhat different. Both shop assistants and shop keepers worked long and often unsociable hours, and were on their feet for much of the day, often dealing with disgruntled and harassed customers. When G. M. Oliver helped out in her parents' grocery shop in Cwmparc, the shop was open from 9am to 7pm every weekday, and for an even longer period of time, 9am to 9pm, on a Saturday.⁴⁶ In spite of the long hours, for those who lived on or above the shop premises there was rarely a distinction between periods when the shop was open and when it was supposedly shut. Those patronising the shops were usually local women, who might run out of provisions at strange times, or need certain items immediately, and think nothing of

⁴³ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 13 June 1936.

⁴⁴ Mary Davies Parnell, *Blocksalt and Candles: A Rhondda Childhood*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1993).

⁴⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 33.

⁴⁶ NLW: G. M. Oliver, 'Born Before the Wars', an autobiographical manuscript submitted to the Welsh Arts Council Autobiographical competition.

knocking on the door – whatever the time of day. Mary Davies Parnell, reiterates throughout her autobiography that her family never really felt that the shop was closed. Outside the official opening hours, neighbours were often running in and out and her mother would feel obliged to serve them, with the effect that normal family activities, like having supper together, were often disturbed.⁴⁷

The running of a shop, although a sociable business, was very busy, and could be fraught with worry, especially in times of strike or economic hardship, as the fortunes of the shopkeepers were inextricably linked to that of the pits. Maria and Mary Samuel, for example, were dressmakers and costumiers in Ferndale. Their business thrived until 1921, when the strike of that year caused the business to suffer, and the successive disturbances in the Coalfield saw their fortunes change dramatically. The clothes all had to be sold at lower prices, because of the lack of money in the valley, and finally, in 1926, they had to close.⁴⁸ The luxury or non-essential businesses tended to suffer first in times of hardship, such as costumiers and milliners, as families simply did not have the finances to purchase items that were not absolutely essential for the families, but general shopkeepers were also affected by the lower incomes of its customers. Many shopkeepers then faced a difficult dilemma; their customers needed to purchase food and other items from them, but would not always have the means to pay, and credit would soon build up, which was then a cause of worry for the proprietor. Rhys Davies recalls the big ledger of unpaid accounts that his parents possessed in their Clydach Vale shop, and remembered his mother becoming increasingly more and more harassed during strikes when customers could not pay their bills, forcing her to cut their

⁴⁷ Mary Davies Parnell, *Blocksalt and Candles*.

⁴⁸ *Western Mail*, 10 February 1926.

orders in order to save the shop from bankruptcy.⁴⁹ To deny long-standing customers and neighbours items essential for the wellbeing of their family, however, was a very difficult decision to have to make.

It is clear, then, that married women were involved in paid employment to a limited degree. Although some were hindered by lack of opportunity and domestic constraints, they could be found in occupations such as running public houses, shopkeeping and midwifery, which were deemed acceptable for their kind. The vast majority, however, remained in the home sphere where 'informal' work, such as cleaning and washing for others, taking in lodgers and selling home-made items, could be carried out in order to raise money in times of hardship.

In contrast, single and widowed women, whilst still limited in their range of occupations, did not face the stigma of working that married women did. Indeed, there were positive encouragements for younger, single women to take paid employment, for both moral and economic reasons. The employment of young, single girls became increasingly more prevalent in the inter-war period when the Rhondda was experiencing distress as a result of the depression suffered by the coal industry. During the high point of the mining industry, daughters of mining households were kept busy with the day-to-day domestic chores, and it was a source of pride for the father that the women in his household did not have to work to supplement the family income. But high rates of unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s made it increasingly difficult for unemployed miners to provide for the family, and domestic chores such as washing the pit clothes decreased as miners were not working, and meant that

⁴⁹ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*, p. 55.

the girls were no longer as useful in the home as they had previously been.⁵⁰ Thus many of them had to seek employment, often for the first time.

The reasons for seeking work were not always economic, however. Some contemporaries had a moral agenda for encouraging girls into work. In the eyes of one prominent public official, gainful employment would help to prevent girls from falling into 'bad ways'. This was the opinion of Daniel Lleufer Thomas, the Stipendiary Magistrate for the Rhondda, who, at a paternity case brought by Miss Rachel Jones in the Porth Police Court in 1915, declared that:

If she had been given some definite work to do, instead of 'gadding about' it is probable that she would not have been brought to this disgrace. It is very often the position of girls in the Rhondda Valley, who are kept at home without being put to any occupation.⁵¹

Work for single women was not simply confined to the young; it was also the case that elderly women, spinsters and widows entered into employment, for economic reasons, as well as a means of maintaining some of their independence. A recent study by Lyn Botelho and Pat Thane on older women in England contains articles that strongly challenge the idea that all elderly women and widows were wholly dependent upon their children for accommodation and financial assistance.⁵² Many worked informally to bring money into the household in times of hardship. After the death of the breadwinner, it was not uncommon for widows to sell home-made items in order to raise a small income. Mrs Blow, the widow featured in Rhys Davies' autobiography, for example, survived following the death of her husband on compensation money from his accident and by selling home-made nettle beer at a

⁵⁰ *The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 81.

⁵¹ *Western Mail*, 4 June 1915.

⁵² See Botelho and Thane, *Women and Ageing in British Society*.

‘penny a bottle and the best in the place.’ Likewise Mrs Thomas, who lived a few streets away from Mair McLellan in Pentre in the 1930s, used to sell toffee apples to local children.⁵³ Widows and older women were also found in more formal means of employment, such as teaching, midwifery and shopkeeping, which helped to maintain their independence. Even if they were living in the household of their offspring or other relatives, such income helped to supplement the family income.

In theory, single women and girls had a variety of employment options available to them, as they were not bound by family ties in the way that married women were. In practice, however, they were also found in only a limited number of occupational groups throughout the period, usually in teaching, domestic service, textile and dress, food, drink and lodging, with some inroads being made into clerical work in the inter-war period. Of these occupational groupings, domestic service was by far the most popular for working-class girls, and regularly constituted 40 per cent or more of women formally recognised as employed. As high as this figure seems to be, it is likely that the actual number of girls in service was much higher as, once again, only those formally employed in service were enumerated as such, and not casual or temporary servants. Additionally, the census only took into account those who had remained in the locality, whereas countless girls left the district in the inter-war period to take up posts in London, Cardiff and the Home Counties. For middle-class girls, and those who had been able to take advantage of the increased opportunities for education, teaching was one of the only occupations deemed suitable for them. Domestic service was thought to be beneath them, and we have seen that there were few other occupations available. In contrast, the teaching profession, as an occupation for educated

⁵³ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*, p. 41; Mair Eluned McLellan, ‘Shadows on the Wall’, pp. 17-18.

girls, had grown increasingly more popular throughout the period, and the demand brought about by the increasing school population also made it a practical choice. So, while constituting only 4 per cent of employed women at the beginning of the period it increased to over 11 per cent by the turn of the century. The education system continued to be an important employer of women until the end of the period, and it was common for girls to return to teaching posts in the district following training. Those who were unable to obtain work in the district could easily find positions elsewhere. So many trained teachers moved out of the area that one writer has been moved to comment that 'coal and teachers ... were for many years the main exports of the Valleys'.⁵⁴

The limitations on employment opportunities open to single women and girls was a consequence of the type of work that was available in the area, the financial situation of their families, the level of schooling that they received, competition for the work from others, especially educated boys, and notions of what was perceived as 'respectable' work for girls of different backgrounds. Periodically, the local press and other bodies would offer career advice for girls, and this would be segregated strictly along class lines. In 1902 the *Rhondda Leader* suggested that rather than applying for teaching, the path of lady dispenser to a General Practitioner or hospital would be a suitable occupation for an educated girl. The advantages of such a path were the inexpensive training, a short apprenticeship and the availability of well-paid work after their training.⁵⁵ However inexpensive the course was judged to be it was nevertheless probably out of the reach of most working-class parents. More practical for most girls in the Rhondda were the suggestions of the report of the

⁵⁴ Gareth Alban Davies, 'The Fur Coat', in Meic Stephens (ed.), *A Rhondda Anthology*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), p. 152.

⁵⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, 10 May 1902.

Educational Problems of the South Wales Coalfield, which promoted traditional, domestic work such as nursery nursing, laundry, service, shop work and needle trades. It also claimed that the development of health services meant that there was plenty of opportunity for women in another traditionally female field, that of midwifery and general nursing.⁵⁶ Such occupations were deemed acceptable work for women as they were 'easily learned, widely available, and could take place within the woman's proper sphere - the home'.⁵⁷ There were a number of factors, however, that succeeded in discouraging girls from working within the health services and encouraging them instead into teaching and domestic service.

In many ways, girls' employment opportunities were limited to the narrow occupational groupings by their experience in the educational system. As we have seen, elementary schools formed the only basis of schooling for the large percentage of girls. They paid a great deal of attention to the girls' future domestic role and thus pursued courses in homecraft, cookery and needlework, to the exclusion of more scientific or academic study. Even secondary education, although certainly offering a less gender-specific curriculum, made subjects such as shorthand and book keeping available for boys, but not for girls. This meant that clerical work, which was high status work for educated girls, was often closed to girls who had not received specific training. Whilst there were many commercial schools advertising in the local press, the majority, we have seen, were in Cardiff. This added transport or possible lodging costs to the course fees and ensured that girls were unavailable for work for another couple of years, a circumstance which many parents could ill afford.

Further, Carol Dyhouse has suggested that the emphasis upon domestic subjects as suitable ones for girls served to hinder any aspirations they might have to enter nursing,

⁵⁶ *Educational problems of the South Wales Coalfield*, (HMSO: 1931), p. 65.

⁵⁷ Rosemary Crook, 'Women in the Rhondda Valleys', p. 42.

another occupation which is traditionally viewed as a 'female' one. Not having studied science at school, with the exception of botany girls did not feel sufficiently qualified to enter the field of medicine.⁵⁸ Although nursing has been viewed as an occupation which large numbers of Welsh girls entered,⁵⁹ it is difficult to ascertain the popularity of the profession for girls from the Rhondda. Evidence from the occupations of girls leaving the Rhondda County School suggests that nursing was not a particularly popular choice. Deborah James has attributed the low levels of county-school girls entering the profession to its association with heavy domestic work, which was deemed to be 'beneath' middle-class or educated girls.⁶⁰ Additionally, the wages received, both whilst in training and once qualified, were far lower than those of teachers. Although Margaret of South Street, Gelli, received 'good and sufficient board and lodging', in addition to her uniform whilst training, the wages she received were very low. For her first year as a probationer nurse at Llwynypia Hospital in 1918 she received £7 10s, which then rose to £10 for her second year and £15 for her third year.⁶¹ Mrs Davies, from Ystrad Rhondda, was one of the lucky ones who had the opportunity to train in London after a number of years spent in service and eventually become a midwife. She admitted, however, that the financial difficulties that she experienced while she was training could have been off-putting for some:

I was having £18 a year, the first year, and well you can imagine what that meant, after about a week, if you bought a bit of butter out of that, and just went out and had a coffee and a cream bun, you didn't have very much left...⁶²

⁵⁸ Carol Dyhouse, 'Driving Ambitions: Women in pursuit of a medical education, 1890-1939', *Women's History Review*, 7, 3, (1998), p. 326.

⁵⁹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Deborah James, 'Teaching Girls: Intermediate education and professional work, Pontypridd 1896-1913', Unpublished B.A Dissertation, (University of Glamorgan), 1999, pp. 24-25.

⁶¹ Pontypridd Board of Guardians: Probationer Nurse Agreements, 1918.

⁶² SWCC: Interview with Mrs Davies.

For this reason, as well as the gap which existed between the school leaving age and the minimum age for training, the lack of scientific training and the domestic nature of the work, nursing was certainly not a popular choice for girls who had been educated at the Rhondda County School, although the same was not necessarily true of those from other schools in the district. The admission registers of Tonypandy Secondary School, for example, show that of the 46 girls who left the school between January and December 1927, 9 of them, or 19.5 per cent, took up nursing, which accounted for more than those entering the teaching profession. Few women, however, were returned on the census as 'nurses', although the lack of hospitals in the Rhondda - only the fever hospital at Tyntyla and other local institutions such as Llwynypia Hospital - and the absence of training facilities could explain this. If girls did become nurses they had to train in Cardiff or the big hospitals in England, and as the likelihood was that they would remain there after qualifying they would not have been counted in the Rhondda census returns.

In contrast, teaching was a popular occupation for girls from the Rhondda County School, as well as those of other schools in the district. Recruitment into the profession was aided by greater facilities and financial incentives than were available for other occupations. Throughout the period, the number of women teachers among the ranks of the employed in the Rhondda grew considerably, a growth which was further assisted by the increased demand for teachers as a result of the growing school population and of legislation increasing the school-leaving age.⁶³ Although it never reached a size whereby it might challenge the popularity of domestic service or involvement in dress and textiles, teaching did come to

⁶³ Widdowson, *Going up into the next class*, pp. 29, 39.

represent a sizeable proportion of employed women in the Rhondda. The number of female teachers there consistently surpassed the number of male ones, accounting for 66-72 per cent of the teaching force. The majority of them taught in the girls' and mixed elementary schools, girls' secondary schools and exclusively staffed the infants schools in the district.

In the early period, bright students were encouraged to continue their education and prepare for entering the teaching profession through incentives such as pupil teacherships. These could be commenced as soon as formal schooling had ceased, and a small wage would be received throughout their 'apprenticeship'. Although the professionalisation of training in the later period meant that formal instruction started at a later age, work for those with a view to entering the occupation could be obtained as student teachers. Records indicate that student (pupil) teachers were fairly well paid in the Rhondda; the girls who attended Barry Training College for the 1919-1921 course had previously been paid on average £30 per annum for their previous appointments in schools, compared to £24 in Monmouthshire, and between £20 and £28 in Pembrokeshire.⁶⁴ This money, of course, was lost once the position ended and the course commenced, but in order to help young people in the district to train as teachers the RUDC offered studentships and bursaries to attend teacher training institutes and colleges throughout the country, including Avery Hill, Portsmouth, Swansea and the Glamorgan Training College (Barry). Additionally, as Alison Oram has pointed out, the provision of scholarships and bursaries for training courses at university, as opposed to specialist teacher training colleges, served to act as a magnet to the profession. A common way to enter teaching, and at the same time to have the opportunity to attend university, was through four-year scholarships. Three years were spent gaining a degree in a particular

⁶⁴ GRO: MS. E/COLL B 15, Barry Training College, Pupil Reports, 1919-1921.

subject or discipline, while the final year was spent taken up in being trained as a teacher. Students in receipt of such help were pledged to teach for their authority for a minimum period of four years.

Financial help was not the only incentive, however. The opportunity to train fairly locally held a great appeal. Of those who commenced their duties in Ystradyfodwg in 1900, for example, some 42 per cent had received their instruction in Cardiff, and the establishment of the training college in Barry proved to be very popular with girls from the Rhondda in the inter-war period.⁶⁵ The student records from the training college indicate the high levels of attendance of girls from the Rhondda who constituted, on average, one fifth of the number of scholars from Glamorgan. This figure sometimes rose to as much as one quarter, as in the 1929-1931 and the 1933-1935 sessions. Over the period, Rhondda girls accounted for 15 per cent of the scholars of the college, illustrating both the popularity of teaching as an occupation for girls in the Rhondda and the popularity of the college with them.⁶⁶

In addition to financial considerations and the availability of facilities, the very nature of the work, with its emphasis upon teaching a new generation, and its constituting 'an extension of the service orientation of the domestic and familial values of feminine ideology', ensured that the profession was promoted as one which was suitable for girls to enter, especially for girls from the middle class.⁶⁷ In fact, in an article written in 1901 entitled 'what shall we do with our girls?' which featured in the 'Our Woman's Page' of the *Western*

⁶⁵ TL: YSB: Register of Teachers, 1900-1916.

⁶⁶ Figures collated from the Students Roll and Address List of Glamorgan Training College (Barry) 1925 - 1940.

⁶⁷ E. Edwards, 'The culture of femininity in women's teacher training colleges 1914 - 1945', in S. Oldfield (Ed.), *This working day world: Women's lives and culture(s) in Britain, 1914-1945*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), p. 55.

Mail, teaching was advanced as the *only* suitable occupation for middle-class and educated girls.⁶⁸ Such aspects of the work, as the caring and nurturing role were also part of the appeal for the girls themselves. Additionally, Oram has argued that the more professional aspects of the work formed at least part of the attraction for academically-minded girls. This side of the work offered girls the opportunity for intellectual work, especially in the secondary schools, promotion and material rewards, all of which have been defined as 'masculine' traits. Thus, teaching was ideal for women; they could experience the masculine and professional benefits of teaching whilst at the same time undertake respectable and feminine work.⁶⁹

Despite the emphasis on its suitability for certain classes of women, the teaching profession was not exclusively staffed by middle-class women. This was certainly the case in the earlier period when entry by means of the pupil teacher scheme was common, thereby giving miners' children the opportunity to enter the profession. Even later, when training was professionalised and the number of uncertificated teachers was gradually being reduced, scholarships, bursaries and other funding were available to aid intelligent working-class girls in their ambitions. Nor was the profession only open to younger women. As with midwifery, teaching was a flexible profession that could be entered into at any time, or perhaps be returned to in widowhood, and the ages of those entering into teaching accordingly varied considerably. Whereas, for example, the majority of the 234 women commencing teaching duties in the Rhondda in 1908 were under the age of 25 - in fact 19 was the most popular age for starting - 40 of them were nevertheless over 25, the oldest being 37.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Western Mail*, 24 May 1901.

⁶⁹ Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics, 1900-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 14-27.

⁷⁰ TL: YSB: Register of Teachers, 1908.



The appeal of teaching to all classes and ages of women, was variously sustained by ideology, demand, and to a certain degree by financial incentives and lack of suitable alternatives. Teaching was also a secure, and relatively well-paid occupation, a factor which proved to be very important in times of economic hardship and distress in the Coalfield when employment prospects for both men and women were highly uncertain.⁷¹ The salaries that women received as teachers, although not equal to those of their male counterparts, were still fairly high; much higher than women could expect to achieve in any other local profession. And those already in employment were unaffected by the fortunes of the local pits, since their salaries were paid by the RUDC. This meant that the teacher had money at a time when few people in the Rhondda could be guaranteed a steady income, and as long as they did not have dependants their money was theirs to do with as they chose. This fact alone enhanced the status of the teacher in the community, and obvious displays of their fortunate financial circumstances allowed them to stand out from their contemporaries. Gareth Alban Davies, for example, recalled the teachers in his chapel congregation in the 1930s wearing fur coats as an indication of their relative wealth, financial security and independence which set them apart from the rest of the congregation, making them an 'élite within a group that was already an élite in society'.⁷²

These factors, and many others, proved attractive to a number of girls and women who opted to enter the teaching profession, many of whom opted for teaching in local schools. All the girls from the Rhondda who attended the Glamorgan Training College during the 1918-1920 session, for example, returned to take up posts in the Rhondda, and the same occurred in the following session. Not only did girls return to the locality to teach; it

⁷¹ D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty: Women between the wars, 1918-193*, (Pandora, 1989), p. 80.

⁷² Gareth Alban Davies, 'The Fur Coat', p. 152.

was also fairly common for them to return to their old schools. Miss M. J. James, for example, was educated at Pentre School, served her pupil teachership there and later returned as an assistant teacher following her college training in Cardiff. After brief Headships at Gelli and Stanleytown, she returned to become Headmistress at Pentre Infants, where she remained for 16 years.⁷³ Similarly, Miss Elizabeth Hudd, the Headmistress of Rhondda County Girls' School, had been a former pupil and teacher there. This phenomenon was not confined to the Rhondda, and has been attributed by Mavis Llewellyn, a former teacher from Nantymoel, to the policies of the Local Education Authorities. She believed that the return of the trained teachers was a result of councils allocating posts to those who had received grants and bursaries for their training, because they obviously wanted their investment to be paid back. Should the teachers be employed elsewhere, the council would not reap the benefit of paying to educate these teachers.⁷⁴ On a more positive note, however, it could also be argued that the teachers were encouraged back to the locality because of what they were able to offer to the pupils. Teachers from the locality were preferable to those from outside the district, as it was agreed that 'no one can know the needs of the Rhondda better than one who is of it.'⁷⁵ There was also a sense of pride on the part children of the locality who had been away to train; 'the highest achievement for a pupil from the mining valleys was to become a teacher' and then to return home as a teacher.⁷⁶

Once a post had been gained, regardless of the school or location, teachers could remain for long periods of time. And while some women teachers were inevitably lost each year as a result of illness, the marriage bar or movement from the area, it is clear that a

⁷³ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 8 February 1936.

⁷⁴ SWCC: Interview with Mavis Llewellyn.

⁷⁵ *Rhondda County School Magazine*, I, 5 (July 1936).

⁷⁶ G. E Jones, *The Education of a Nation*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 44.

number of women stayed in the service of the authority for a number of years and devoted much of their lives to teaching. Miss E. M. Harries, for example, served 23 years as headmistress of Rhondda County Girls' School, and likewise, Miss Elizabeth Lewis spent 44 years as a schoolteacher in the Rhondda.⁷⁷ Their work was not only confined to teaching children, however, for there is evidence to suggest that teachers could be highly active in the community, in cultural organisations and through social and charitable work, and gained respect from the public for their voluntary contributions. Log books have shown that, in times of distress, teachers were willing to devote Saturdays and parts of their holidays to feeding necessitous children, and handing out boots, clothes and other items that were sent to the schools from beneficiaries in England. In November 1920, for example, a meeting was held in Llwynypia for the women of the locality to meet women teachers to discuss the feeding of children. The teachers formed a committee and volunteered to serve the food, even on Saturdays.⁷⁸ They were also active in the community in other ways. Miss Mary Williams, who served Rhondda Education Authority for 44 years, busily sat on the committee of the nursing association, carried out work for the NSPCC and the Cardiff and Rhondda Blind, served as a secretary on the Ton and Pentre Women's Section of the British Legion and was for some years chairman of the Women's Unionist Organisation for the Division.⁷⁹ They were also prominent members of many cultural organisations, such as drama groups and the *Eisteddfod*, providing a positive example to future teachers that marriage was not necessarily a prerequisite for a full and happy life, an idea that was in direct contrast with the 'spinster' image that they received in the press.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 8 August 1936; 19 September 1936.

⁷⁸ GRO: MS. E/R 3/3, Blaenclydach Girls' Elementary School: Log book, 3 November 1920.

⁷⁹ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 23 May 1931.

⁸⁰ Alison Oram, "'Embittered, Sexless or Homosexual': Attacks on Spinster Teachers, 1918-1939", in Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840-1985*, (London: The Women's

The realities of teaching, however, were often at odds with the impression given of well-paid, secure, professional work. Indeed, the conditions in Rhondda schools often meant that teaching could be a very difficult job, especially in the early period of growth when overcrowding was rife. Such conditions could have detrimental effects upon the physical, and often the mental, health of the teachers. The difficulties of controlling large classes of children were illustrated in one instance in the local press, in which a parent had written to the *Western Mail* to complain of the long holidays given to teachers, during which the children 'got on their nerves' being at home all day. One teacher responded, in an exasperated tone: 'if two or three children upset their [parents] nerves during the holidays, surely that is sufficient testimony to the strain 30 will cause a teacher during the rest of the year', wholly justifying in that writer's mind the use of long holidays.⁸¹ As well as the children causing difficulties for the teachers, the latter also had to cope with sometimes angry reactions from parents who might object to their methods of teaching or disciplining their children. Teaching was also associated with other health issues; their close daily contact with children meant that teachers were particularly susceptible to the many infectious diseases that spread through the Rhondda at intervals. The adverse effect that teaching had upon some women is vividly evident in the teacher absence books and log books, which detail many instances of teachers' absence as a result of illness or as a result of 'nerves'.

If women were paid quite well for the stresses and strains of their work - indeed it was the most well-paid career for women at this time - they were not as well paid as their male counterparts. Although there were differentials according to qualifications and varying

Press, 1996), pp. 99-118, in which she claims that spinster teachers were, in the inter-war period, stereotyped as being embittered, thwarted, sexually frustrated or deviant women by the press and anti-feminist male teachers.

⁸¹ *Western Mail*, 22 November 1926.

increments depending upon the length of time served, the average headmaster's salary in 1893-94 stood at £163 7s 10d whilst the average salary for a head mistress was only £107 14s 4d.⁸² The unequal pay was a feature throughout the various scales of the profession, and is evident in the lower ranks also; Lewis Hughes and Martha Davies, for example, were both pupil teachers in Ynyshir Elementary school earning £5 14s 2d per week and £3 19s 2d respectively.⁸³ In addition to higher basic pay, men were also much more likely than women teachers to earn extra bonuses; in Rhondda County School, both Mr Airey and Mr Hodgson earned an additional £45 and £11 respectively for teaching science evening classes, whilst Mr George earned an additional £10 for acting as the school librarian.⁸⁴ None of the female teachers were in receipt of such extra responsibilities or extra remuneration. That salaries were a cause of concern for women can be seen in a meeting of the Rhondda Class Teachers association in 1913, at which women were present in large numbers, when they were discussed at length.⁸⁵ A further cause of contention amongst the women teachers, and something that was discussed by the National Union of Women Teachers, was the lack of promotional opportunities available for women. The preponderance of male headteachers in both mixed elementary schools and secondary schools meant that, although teaching could be a job for life, there was little chance for promotion. This has led one historian to conclude that teaching, certainly in the elementary schools, was something of a 'dead end job', with few women being able to rise through the ranks and become head mistresses.⁸⁶

⁸² GRO: MS. E/SB/58/17A, YSB: Annual Report. 1893-1894, table 6: teachers salaries.

⁸³ GRO: MS. E/SB/58/18, YSB: Teachers' salary account book, 1894-5.

⁸⁴ UWS: CWB: Reports, 1902.

⁸⁵ *Western Mail*, 8 December 1913.

⁸⁶ G. Sutherland, *Policy making in elementary education, 1870-1895*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 77.

Despite the sometimes difficult conditions, teaching remained a popular choice for middle-class girls in the Rhondda, and from those of the working-class who were able to afford the training, or who could take advantage of the financial assistance available. For those who were not able to do so, however, few options were available, other than entering into domestic service, either locally or outside the district.

A demand for servants was created as the country grew richer, and a new middle class became established. 'Girls' were required to take over the heavy household labour previously carried out by the women of the house and also to increase the status of the family. This demand was so great at certain times that it far exceeded the supply of girls willing to enter into such work. At such times, much discussion was devoted in the local press to what was termed 'the servant question'. The *Western Mail* in particular carried much correspondence outlining the difficulties that middle- and upper-class women in Cardiff and Penarth were experiencing in attracting staff. In one such letter in 1908, Lady Gordon complained that 'to find servants this season is almost as hopeless a task as to find a husband. In fact, the plainest of women would have more chance of success in choosing the latter.'⁸⁷ The difficulties experienced by such women in recruiting suitable staff resulted from the fact that domestic service, whilst an occupation to which many women and girls turned, was a highly unpopular one. This has been confirmed in a recent study of women from south Wales who were in service in the 1920s and 1930s, in which all of those former servants interviewed testified to the long hours, poor pay and heavy work involved.⁸⁸ Some, in addition, gave details of mistreatment by their employers, and the acute feelings of loneliness and homesickness that they experienced as a result of being separated from their family in

⁸⁷ *Western Mail*, 6 June 1908.

⁸⁸ See the transcripts of the interviews conducted by Scadden, 'Be good sweet maid'.

largely unfamiliar surroundings. Such stories filtered back to the Valleys through newspaper reports and from girls returning home for holidays. It is not surprising that service was unpopular.

Domestic service had traditionally been an important source of employment for women, but for girls from the mining valleys of south Wales it became particularly more so in the inter-war period. During this difficult time, they were encouraged by the labour exchanges, and often their families, to enter this occupation. The intervention of the First World War allowed many women a release from service and the opportunity to experience other forms of employment, as we shall see later in the chapter, but, at the end of the war, they were encouraged back into their traditional roles by a variety of forces. Deirdre Beddoe has pointed to a 'powerful array of forces' at work which ensured that women returned to their domestic roles, if not in their own home, then in the home of somebody else:

These included media 'hype' projecting the image of the housewife and mother as the only desirable role for women, a press outcry against women who took men's jobs, national insurance legislation which coerced women into domestic service by making it virtually impossible for them to claim unemployment benefit, and finally the introduction of marriage bars in the professions to eject women from well-paid employment.⁸⁹

These factors combined to ensure that the inter-war period saw many Rhondda girls enter this field. They did so also in order to help their family financially, some of whom were desperately in need of assistance in this time of mass unemployment. Mrs Lloyd of Treorchy, for example, recounted the circumstances of a friend of hers from the same village, who was one of a very large family; she was sent away to service in order to relieve the strain on

⁸⁹ D. Beddoe, 'Munitionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales, 1914-1939', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*, p. 190.

the household, and her contribution to the family budget was so important that: 'immediately she's come home for a holiday or if she didn't like a place, her father was finding her a place in less than a week'.⁹⁰ In addition to decreasing the number of family members in the household who had to be fed and clothed, sending girls into service served to ease the financial pressure experienced by the remaining family members by increasing the family budget. Most of the women who were interviewed by Rosemary Scadden, and those whose testimonies are housed in the oral history collection of the South Wales Coalfield Collection, claimed that a large percentage of their wages were sent home to their parents. They only kept enough for 'pocket money' and to ensure that they were able to afford train fare for their annual visit home. This money sent home could be used to make the conditions for the remaining family members more bearable, and could also allow younger siblings opportunities that had been denied to the older ones. Mrs Trevor Davies, in particular, expressed a sense of satisfaction that, as a result of her time in service, she managed to pay for her brother's dental treatment and glasses and to subsidise him through college when he was training to become a Salvation Army officer.⁹¹

In addition to relieving the strain on the budget of many working-class households, the middle-class demand for servants was used throughout Britain as a means of easing female unemployment. In the period immediately following the First World War, a number of factors combined to ensure that women were taken out of the ranks of the unemployed. The out-of-work donation to which women war workers were entitled, for example, could only be received on the assumption that they were available for work, and when the labour exchanges offered work it was most commonly in the form of low-paid domestic service.

⁹⁰ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lloyd.

⁹¹ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Davies.

Women could, however, receive more money though claiming unemployment benefit than if they took work in service.

In the Rhondda, emphasis was placed upon finding posts in service for girls and women as a means of alleviating hardship in a district where there were few alternative means of employment, and they were directed into this by labour exchanges and training centres which were becoming established throughout the coalfield under the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1930. A study of juvenile employment in south Wales between 1927 and 1933, for example, found that the vast majority of female school leavers in the Rhondda Education District were being directed into service; it accounted for 97.8 per cent of those girls who had postings found for them by the Rhondda Employment Committee.⁹² By 1934, the RUDC had established a formal training centre for girls in Pentre, and a home training Centre in Ystrad with the explicit intention of training girls for employment in service and, as a longer-term aim, for their role as wife and mother. The courses at the centre consisted entirely of domestic subjects. Private training centres, such as Jacobsdale in Pontypridd, also existed at which girls were trained in domestic subjects for three months, including classes in housework and sewing skills and laying dinner tables correctly. In order to ensure that as many girls as possible were able to attend such courses, the district council made grants for girls from the Rhondda to attend the course, and they also made such training accessible for working-class girls by paying their fares to the centre from their homes.

Once it was decided that a girl was to go into service, or she had completed her training, places then had to be found, and, although the majority of girls were sent to work away from the district, domestic work was available in the Valley. It was especially common

⁹² Meara, *Juvenile unemployment in south Wales*, p. 66.

for the younger girls to start service locally as they were deemed by some parents to be too young to go away to such places as London. Such girls might ease themselves into the rigours of work in service slowly, starting with a couple of days a week in a local hotel, or chemist or doctor's house. Eventually they would graduate to full-time, possibly live-in positions, or move away, where opportunities for work might be greater. Work within the district could be obtained in the hotels which were dotted throughout the valley, with women who owned shops, or with the families of doctors and teachers who might need a 'girl' to take care of chores in the house. It was more common, however, for older girls to move away as there was only very limited opportunity to enter service in the Rhondda and what work could be found was generally lower paid than positions in London and the south east of England. Some girls had more personal reasons for wanting to move away from the Rhondda. Some, for example, thought that they might have more freedom than they were allowed while living in the family home. This applied in the case of Nora, who desperately wished to leave Gelli in order to escape from her strict mother. When asked by her interviewer why she wanted to leave the Rhondda and go into service, she explained: 'Because I wanted to go to London, because my mother always, she'd be waiting on the door by 10, waiting for me to come home, and I felt penned in. I wanted to break away.'⁹³ Although her mother would not allow her to go to London, she did leave the Rhondda to take up a position in Llandaff. So many young girls were leaving the district at this time that those who were left behind may have felt that they were missing out. Certainly Maria Williams admitted that she was anxious to leave her work in Mardy because she was jealous of her friends who had gone into service in

⁹³ H. Thomas, 'Women's Experience of the Transition from Education to Paid Work Between the Wars: A comparative study', Unpublished M.Sc (Econ.) (University of Wales) 1992, p. 123.

London, Bristol and Cardiff, whereby they were experiencing different places and getting the chance to see 'how the other half live'.⁹⁴

For those who were planning to move away to service, positions had to be found in a respectable home or institution. Some had friends and relatives already in service, and who could inform them if positions became available in the house or village in which they worked, as was the case for Hilda, one of Rosemary Scadden's interviewees, who went to Surrey to be a house parlour maid in the house where her older cousin was a cook.⁹⁵ For those who were not lucky enough to have such connections, work could also be found through an agent or agencies, one of the training centres or from the myriad advertisements appearing in the local press. Girls were encouraged, however, to treat the latter with extreme caution. Those proffering this advice pointed out that whilst the prospective servants had to provide references, little or nothing was known about prospective employers nor the facilities provided for the maids, and, as such, applicants were placing themselves at great risk. Such advertisements, it was warned:

often emanate from most unsuitable places in the East End, and generally from foreigners. The girls are lured away with the prospect of a higher wage than is given locally, and railway fare is sent in advance. To my recent knowledge, girls under 18 have been stranded in London, and but for the intervention of the police (who have taken the girls to a shelter for the night and communicated with friends) dire results would have followed.⁹⁶

Newspapers fuelled anxiety about the fate of Welsh girls travelling to London with reports of their being mistreated. One such case cited was that of Helen Davies of Cymmer, Porth, who was taken to court by her mistress in London on the charge that she had stolen

⁹⁴ SWCC: Interview with Maria Williams.

⁹⁵ Hilda, Scadden, 'Be good sweet maid', p. 159.

⁹⁶ *Western Mail*, 22 March 1926.

from her. It transpired that the prosecutrix had locked all Helen's possessions, including her trunk and shoes, in a room in order to prevent her from leaving, after Helen had given a week's notice to terminate her position. As a last resort, and in desperation to escape from a situation in which she felt she was being mistreated, the girl had stolen from her employer and had plans to return to Wales. The sympathetic magistrate in this case warned young Welsh girls against employers who felt that they could exploit them because they knew that they did not have the train fare home and therefore no means of escape.⁹⁷ Other, equally disturbing, reports told stories of girls who had been held against their will, or had simply disappeared without trace after having accepted positions in London. It was even suggested that Welsh girls innocently accepting work in service were being duped and sold to the white slave traffic.

In order to prevent such situations occurring, the press and magistrates urged girls who were planning to take up employment outside the district, and especially in London, to carry out as much research as they could into the situations they were about to enter by contacting the local labour exchange to ensure that the position was a favourable one. If they did happen to find themselves in difficulty upon arrival, however, it was suggested that they contact organisations such as the National Vigilance Association and the London Welsh Friendly Aid Society.⁹⁸ In spite of such dangers, many women had little choice other than to move to unfamiliar cities and take the chance that their position would be a good one. This was to be the case until the development of light industry in the valleys, although a temporary release occurred during the First World War when opportunities other than service became available for local women.

⁹⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 18 June 1926.

⁹⁸ *Western Mail*, 22 March 1926.

The increased opportunities for women brought about by the unusual situation of the war, however were not apparent at the start of hostilities. Women were eased into the workforce gradually, often reluctantly, and, at least at the start, continued to work in their traditional gender roles. Immediately upon the outbreak of fighting, women were encouraged to undertake charity work as their contribution to the war effort, and one in which they worked consistently until the end of the hostilities. Local branches of national charities, such as the Queen Mary Needlework Guild, were established by patriotic women very soon after the announcement of war; the Tonypandy branch of the Guild, for example, was founded in August 1914. This particular charity had the dual function of making garments to supply the troops and distressed families in the locality and providing women with the opportunity for employment, albeit at such a low rate of pay that the work undertaken has been compared to the ‘sweated’ trades.⁹⁹ For its part, the Penygraig Local Ladies Distress Committee, established October 1914 sewed garments for troops, collected food parcels and blankets and held concerts and dinners in order to raise funds.¹⁰⁰ Charities such as these organised collections of money, food and clothes, as well as putting on events in order to raise both funds and awareness. This type of work was deemed to be acceptable work for women as it did not depart from their natural nurturing role and was considered to be within their ‘traditional’ sphere, and would not compromise their femininity. It was to this type of work that women were directed, or encouraged, when they began to express a desire to contribute to the war effort in some way. As Braybon and Summerfield noted:

Indeed, at this time, most Government and military men thought that women should simply “stay out of the way” while men fought; the limit of women’s

⁹⁹ S. Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 39.

¹⁰⁰ *Rhondda Leader*, 10 October 1914.

support was supposed to be knitting for the troops, or possibly nursing them.¹⁰¹

Nursing, in fact, was a popular means by which women could get actively involved in the war without compromising their femininity, with posts available at the hospital at Llywnypia, as part of the Red Cross Nursing detachments, and at the isolation hospital. In a similar vein, another suggestion in the local press for women who wished to take an active part in the war effort was to introduce female cooks into the army at home in order to elevate the standard of food for the troops and prevent waste. This idea emanated from the correspondent's belief that women had a 'natural sex instinct to manage and economise in matters relating to food [and] the ladies would, I make no doubt, more than justify their employment'.¹⁰²

The channelling of women into 'feminine' areas, however, was soon to change. By September 1914, according to local reports, 4,000 men had left the Rhondda for the front, creating openings for workers. At the same time, women in the district were suffering from unemployment in their main areas of employment, service and dress, brought about by a patriotic economy and financial hardship due to the loss of the main breadwinner of the household. The introduction of women into the workforce to fulfil the demand and alleviate the hardship, however, was by no means a natural progression. Many debates surrounded the question as to whether women should, and indeed could, replace male workers from the locality. When a suggestion was made that women be used to replace surface workers at the mines as an emergency measure in order to continue the level of productivity, both miners

¹⁰¹ G. Braybon and P. Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in the Two World Wars*, (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰² *Rhondda Leader*, 21 August 1915.

and mine owners alike raised objections. The work was considered to be totally unsuitable for females.¹⁰³

The transport industry was particularly hard hit by the loss of men, and tram conductresses had been employed in nearby Pontypridd as early as 1915, following an urging by Councillor Arnott that 'there is a splendid lot of women to be got at at a tidy wage if we would be strong minded and nor afraid of a little criticism from a lot of old fogies'.¹⁰⁴ Rhondda tramways, by comparison, were much later in introducing women into their labour force. Because of the difficulty in finding men for the work, the possibility of curtailing the services was discussed, which would have severely inconvenienced the colliers and the movement of coal out of the district. The Managing Director of the Tramways Company had applied to the Ministry of Munitions for certification under the Munitions of War Act 1916 to make employees unavailable for the front, and the possibility of employing women was not even discussed.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, when women were finally given the opportunity to work on the tramways, they did such a good job that the men who replaced them after the war were considered to be unsatisfactory and the women were reinstated.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, a shortage of porters led to the closure of Dinas Station, one of the chief stations in the Rhondda, resulting in disruption to colliers, the public and the postal service. Councillor Morgan Davies had suggested that women be employed as a solution, as they had been on other railways - including the one at Pontypridd - but a decision was not taken. Instead, the idea was sent to the Board of Trade and to the miners' leader, William Abraham, ('Mabon') for consideration.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *Western Mail*, 16 May, 1916.

¹⁰⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 1 April 1915.

¹⁰⁵ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 14 April 1916.

¹⁰⁶ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 27 October 1922.

¹⁰⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 22 January 1916.

Following the introduction of conscription in early 1916, however, the labour shortage became so acute that there was little choice other than to assimilate women into the workforce, thereby offering women the opportunity to experience completely different types of employment than they had previously been used to. Recruiters arrived in the valleys for the Land Army, for munitions and for the Auxiliary Armed Services, and they received a positive response from the women in the district. Months later, reports filtered back through the press of local girls who had joined the forces, such as Misses Rachel and Joan Edwards of Treorchy, who were with the WAACs and were stationed in France. Their role, whilst abroad, was to engage in work such as driving, typing, cooking and the like in order to release men for the front. Additionally, women and girls were carrying out work at home that had not previously been open to them. One of the first areas in which women became visible was in transport, wherein they became bus and tram conductresses and railway porters, and they also entered into clerical, bank and shop work in larger numbers. Thus, 'lady clerks' were appointed to the RUDC in 1916, following encouragement from the Home Office to train female clerical workers to take the place of men.¹⁰⁸ The shortage of male teachers by 1916 meant that women teachers were recruited to teach in boys' schools, something they had been campaigning for over a number of years. The move was met with hostility, however, as constituting a direct threat to the employment of male teachers after the war.¹⁰⁹

Thus women were drawn into the workforce during this short period, many of whom were entering it for the first time. Others, however, took the opportunity to transfer from low paid work as dressmakers or domestic servants into work that offered better monetary rewards and higher status. Even those who remained in traditional low-paid work were able

¹⁰⁸ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, minutes, 12 November 1915.

¹⁰⁹ Correspondence to *Western Mail*, 12 April 1916.

to command higher wages than they had previously.¹¹⁰ In 1918, for example, nurses and domestics at the isolation hospital received bonuses of £8 and £4 respectively.¹¹¹ Similarly, council workers and permanent teachers with dependants could also receive bonuses. Much of the additional pay received by workers, however, was the result and acknowledgement of greatly increased food prices and a higher cost of living generally, rather than a reward for work provided.

Despite the traditional image of wartime workers as young, single women, the opportunities arising as a result of the war were not just confined to this group. Married women also entered into various types of paid employment, returned to previous occupations, or simply took over their husbands' businesses while they were away. There was no longer any stigma attached to their working, especially if their husbands were at the front. In fact, one article in a local newspaper actively encouraged women to do this, exclaiming that: 'It is never too late to learn something about one's husband's business,' even though for many women this would not have been a new departure.¹¹² The presence of women in the workforce became more noticeable as the hostilities continued, a phenomenon which received a great deal of comment in the local press. By 1918, the *Glamorgan County Times* was announcing, somewhat belatedly, that 'at last women can do something other than knit socks and garments for the troops'.¹¹³ Women received a great deal of praise for their role in the continuation of the home economy and services, and many newspapers expressed surprise at the way in which they had adjusted to their new role. As one commented:

¹¹⁰ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, (2nd Edition, Macmillan, 1991), p. 134.

¹¹¹ *Glamorgan County Times*, 18 January 1918.

¹¹² *Glamorgan County Times*, War Supplement week ending 4 May 1918.

¹¹³ *Glamorgan County Times*, War Supplement, 4 May 1918.

One of the important discoveries for which the war is responsible is the large field of labour open to women and the surprising adaptability of the women for work that had previously been regarded as exclusively men's.¹¹⁴

In contrast, however, conditions for other women were not quite as good, some of whom were exploited during the war, working long and unsociable hours in unsanitary conditions and being obliged to do more work than their male, pre-war counterparts. Prior to the war, for example, the posts of typist and book-keeper were very distinct, and were usually advertised separately, but during the hostilities it was not uncommon for businesses to seek a female typist who was also proficient in book-keeping.¹¹⁵ Munitions workers and shop assistants especially were expected to work long hours, but to complain was adjudged 'unpatriotic' and any women daring to object were quickly reminded of the conditions that their men were working under at the front.¹¹⁶ Likewise, employers often found ways to avoid paying women the same amount as men. Clerks recruited to the Council offices, for example, were taken on temporary contracts, and the proviso was introduced that if they had become employed after October 1915, which was the case for most of the female clerks, they were not eligible for the war bonus.¹¹⁷ Bonuses for teachers were also the cause of much debate and ill feeling, as, unlike the bonuses of other council employees, their bonuses had to be applied for, and certain criteria had to be fulfilled. Only heads of families and those with dependent relatives were eligible, although the definition of dependent relatives was entirely left up to the authority and was a source of much conflict.¹¹⁸ The army of married women

¹¹⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 29 March 1917.

¹¹⁵ *Western Mail*, 14 July 1915.

¹¹⁶ Gareth Griffiths, *Factory Work in World War One*, (Alan Sutton, 1991), p. 11.

¹¹⁷ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, minutes, 5 October 1915.

¹¹⁸ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, minutes, 24 September 1915.

teachers, for example, drafted in to replace men who had left for the front, were not eligible because they were regarded as temporary, whether they had dependants or not.

Whatever women's experience of the work was the case remains that they were highly visible in the workforce, and women were still regarded as a threat to Trade Unions and skilled labour on the grounds that they were cheap substitutes. A great deal of discussion and debate had taken place before their introduction into the workplace, with one of the greatest concerns being that once the women had entered into the sphere of formal employment they would not want to leave once the war was over. Thus, ex-soldiers would return to unemployment and the existing gender divisions in the community would be dramatically altered. Once it was clear that women would take up positions formerly held by men, onlookers set to work on limiting the damage that could be caused. Employers made it clear that the introduction of women into men's work was a temporary situation, as was the employment of groups it was previously unacceptable to employ, for example, married women. In 1914, the RUDC made the decision to enable married women to return to teaching if their husbands were away fighting, but this was decided on the explicit 'understanding that any such appointment should terminate upon the return of their husbands,'¹¹⁹ although this was later extended to the termination of contracts on the expiration of five years from the date of commencement.¹²⁰ The press also took pains to reiterate that the employment of women was permissible 'during the period of the war only', and drew attention to their gender as a method of reinforcing the femininity of women workers, thereby reducing the threat that they appeared to be.¹²¹ Thus, whilst congratulating Mrs Jones, a tram conductress in Pentre, for

¹¹⁹ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, minutes 18 September 1914.

¹²⁰ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, minutes of the Education Committee, 6 November 1914.

¹²¹ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 8 April 1915.

her 'pluck', bravery and presence of mind in preventing what could have been a fatal accident when a tram full of colliers slid backwards down Pentre Hill, the message was given that women, in ordinary times, were really not suitable for that kind of work. For, stated the newspaper, rather than taking the event in her stride, it was reported that 'the conductress swooned when the car stopped, and has been ill ever since'.¹²² Similarly, journalists also attempted to belittle the important work that women were doing by drawing attention to their looks rather than their work. When a reporter saw one woman walking down the street carrying a pick and shovel 'like a navvy', he noted that:

The lady in question carried her unusual burden with a very bewitching and contagious smile. If the coming of the women into the realms of manual labour means the coming of such smiles, I should say most emphatically, "let 'em come!"¹²³

The question of what would happen after the war, however, had to be raised, and it was clear that women were expected to return to their former roles. In 1917, Phyllis Moore, in an article for the *Glamorgan Free Press*, warned women against 'hysterical outbursts' after the war had ended and advised against attempting to claim their right to work. She emphasised her belief that 'our boys' had been through enough on the front, and did not need to come home and fight for their jobs: 'We do not want the howls and outcries, and petty jealousies of ambitious women.'¹²⁴ Despite the fears, in actual fact the war made little difference to the long-term employment opportunities for women. As Gail Braybon noted:

¹²² *Rhondda Leader*, 14 October, 1916.

¹²³ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 3 June, 1915.

¹²⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 7 June 1917.

The women who were employed on 'men's work' during the war did these jobs well or adequately, yet they were recruited reluctantly, and most of them were made redundant as soon as possible.¹²⁵

The introduction of women to work of this type was clearly seen as a temporary response to an emergency situation.

Following the cessation of hostilities, women were encouraged back into their former roles by a number of methods; through the implementation of the 1919 Restoration of Pre-war practices Act, the voiding of temporary contracts and by press and public hostility to those wishing to remain in their positions. The women who had previously been praised for their contribution to the war effort soon found that public opinion was firmly behind the ex-servicemen who had fought for their country and who were now entitled to return to employment. One correspondent to the local press noticed that, as late as 1922, there were ten or more conductresses working on his local tram route between the Rhondda and Pontypridd. Given that most of the girls were single, and had brothers or fathers who should be able to support them, he commented, they should be sacked in order to provide employment for unemployed men.¹²⁶ The response of some women that they too had worked for their country was met with far less sympathy.¹²⁷ The author of the above letter touches upon two concerns of the day, firstly that women should not be working at the expense of men, and, secondly, that independence for a woman was an unnecessary, and selfish, desire, especially for those who could be supported by other members of the family.

Emphasis in the press was also placed on women's role as wives and mothers, a role that had taken on increased importance in the light of the losses suffered by the war. The real sphere for female ambition was portrayed as being the home and family, and questions such

¹²⁵ G. Braybon, *Women Workers and the First World War*, (2nd Edition, London: Croom Helm, 1989), p. 229.

¹²⁶ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 27 October 1922.

¹²⁷ Sarah Boston, *Women workers and trade unions*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p. 132.

as 'who are going to mother our babies if all our women are going to push the men out of work' were frequently asked and debated.¹²⁸ The campaign to restore women to their former roles, whether to acceptable employment for women or, preferably, back to the private sphere, succeeded. Few women continued to work in their wartime roles.

War had offered women the opportunity to enter fields of work that they had previously been denied. On the other hand, little had changed in the way that women were perceived, which prompted a later historian to comment upon the 'remarkable consistency of male attitudes towards women's work, even in the exceptional time of the war'.¹²⁹ The perception of women, and what work was acceptable for their gender, and what indeed they were deemed capable of doing, had not altered significantly. At the outset, they continued to be directed into work that was considered 'suitable' for their sex, and were only really drafted into the labour market after the introduction of conscription had dramatically reduced the number of men available for work. Nonetheless, the war did give women the opportunity to enter work, some for the first time, and to experience different types of work than were previously available to them. At the end of the war, however, regardless of how competently they had performed their work, women were dismissed *en masse*. As mentioned earlier, it was not until light industry was introduced into the valleys and the surrounding area that employment prospects began to improve.

The development of such ventures as clothing factories, chemical and metal trades in the Rhondda and the surrounding area was viewed in the 1930s as a solution to the question of how to regenerate the valleys. Such a project, however, was difficult for the Rhondda,

¹²⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 7 June 1917.

¹²⁹ Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 72; also see Braybon, *Women Workers and the First World War*, p. 11.

given that there was already limited building space available. The valley floors were already filled with buildings associated with the pits, the railway and the river, whilst the steep valley sides were taken up with houses. The only areas suitable for building factories, according to the 1937 Industrial survey, were Porth and land to the north of Ton Pentre.¹³⁰ Following much discussion, an area to the south of Pontypridd was decided upon for the building of a site for light industry, known as the Treforest Industrial Estate. Although it did provide a number of jobs for the immediate area, the situation of the estate was not as beneficial for Rhondda women as it was previously hoped. Because of its geographical location, sitting at the congruence of the Valleys, it attracted workers from the Cynon valley as well as from Pontypridd, Llantwit Fardre and Cardiff in addition to those from Rhondda. The distance from the Rhondda meant that it was very time consuming and costly for workers to travel to the estate, especially for those residing at the top end, in villages such as Blaenrhondda and Treorchy. The opening of the Polikoff clothing factory in Treorchy in 1938, however, presented the opportunity of work for 1,000 people in the Rhondda, many of whom were the wives of miners. Such low numbers of workers made very little impact upon the unemployment in the district, however, and only a limited number of companies expressed an interest in relocating or opening factories in the area. The effect of this was that it was not until the Second World War that women in the Rhondda entered employment in large numbers. As in the Great War, they were employed in many areas that they had not been previously, but, unlike the First World War, the changes were more long lasting. A distinct culture of working women, including the wives of miners, emerged in the valleys during a period when work for men was becoming increasingly difficult to find. This was aided by the

¹³⁰ *The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 226.

introduction of increased transportation out of the valleys, enabling women to take posts in Cardiff and other areas without necessarily having to move out of the Rhondda. In addition, the opening of school and college canteens and the like offered some employment opportunities for women within the locality.

Such opportunities marked a distinct change from the previous culture, in which there was a very specific pattern to female economic activity in the Rhondda. If women were to be found in formal employment at all, they were confined to occupations that were deemed suitable for their gender, class and level of education, their marital status and stage in the life cycle. Employment for women seems to have 'waved' during the lifetime; there were opportunities for single women to work, commonly in occupations such as dress and service for working-class girls, and teaching and some clerical work for the middle classes. But upon marriage, women were encouraged or compelled to give up work, and thereby few married women were categorised as being 'formally' employed. Those who were became concentrated into a few occupations, including shop and domestic work and midwifery. Such women, whether single, married or widowed, middle-class or working-class, were in the minority in the Rhondda; only 23 per cent of single women of working age were engaged in formal employment in 1911 and only five per cent of married women. Even allowing for under-representation and other inconsistencies associated with the collection of statistics, this is a very low number. Women were constrained by the peculiarities of the coalfield economy and the accompanying domestic work, together with a limited education and perceived notions of what was deemed to be respectable work for women. Similarly, individual women might have found their ambitions thwarted by their class and the poverty of their families.¹³¹

¹³¹ Scadden, 'Be good sweet maid', p. 2.

Informally, however, they were far more active; taking in washing, sewing, providing lodgers and selling home-made drinks or food in order to contribute to the family budget. In widowhood, it once again became acceptable for women to work, either in an informal or formal capacity, in order to alleviate the strain on the household. Unmarried older women and widows could be found in the same occupational categories as both married and single women, commonly in shop work and service, and as midwives, postmistresses and teachers. Thus there were many factors in operation which governed whether women could or should work, and to what occupations they should be directed, such as levels of schooling, class and marital status, and these continued throughout the period.

Chapter Three

Home, Health and Family

Although the emphasis in this thesis is to look beyond women's role within the home, a study of women in the Rhondda would not be complete without touching upon their domestic responsibilities and the effect that living conditions and relationships within the family had upon their lives. The home environment has often been portrayed in novels as a 'safe haven' or an escape from the hardships of the outside world, with families creating a body of warmth and strength to which the miners returned after a hard day's work. This view of the home and family was most famously depicted in Richard Llewellyn's *How Green is My Valley*, and is repeated, to some degree, in the altogether grittier *Cwmardy* by Lewis Jones and *Times Like These* by Gwyn Jones. Even the contemporary press, which should have known better than most of the conditions in many Rhondda homes, published sentimental, romantic accounts of family life.¹ What becomes clear from further research is that previous images of family life in the Rhondda, of households consisting of a miner, his wife and children, of long marriages and the home as a place of shelter, offer a very narrow picture of home and family life.

Autobiographies and oral testimonies tend to reiterate the notion that although families often had their troubles, they were overcome and the home was usually a happy place to be. This was, no doubt, the case for many of the inhabitants of the Rhondda, but it was also the case that domestic life could be fraught with difficulties, which were compounded by the poor conditions of housing for the working classes throughout the period.

¹ See, for example, *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 12 September 1936.

Many houses were dark and unsanitary, which had grave consequences for the health of the inhabitants, and for the women in particular, who spent a great deal of time in these conditions. Additionally, lack of adequate facilities in the house ensured that domestic work was labour intensive, and wearing on the mother, and also on those older daughters who were often called upon to help. Thus, spending time in the home and with the family could have quite serious health implications for a woman. Moreover, the image of the happy family was certainly not a universal one, for many were characterised by negative experiences such as death and separation, violence, drink and cruelty.

When looking at women in the home, it is useful to ascertain what constituted the household in which she spent much of her time. Studies of the Valleys, and famous literature based around life in the Coalfield, tend to focus upon an image of the family which could be at odds with the actual reality. Works such as this offer a model of the nuclear family, which is widely assumed to have been the most popular type of arrangement in the industrial period. The authors of *The Family Story*, however, argue that the concept of family and household has shifted over time and, rather than being confined to close, blood relatives, has often been extended to include lodgers, servants and more distant family members.² Similarly, the returns from the 1881 census illustrate that although households consisting of a man, his wife and their children were the 'norm', a great diversity existed in the living arrangements to be found in the community and a variety of relationships, not necessarily familial, existed within houses. For example, the household of Thomas Thomas of Ton Row, Ystrad, included three lodgers in addition to his wife and four children, and that of Evan Abraham of Caroline Street, Blaenclydach, contained two servants. It was also the case that children in addition to

² Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960*, (London: Longman, 1999).

those of the immediate family might be included. It was not unknown for orphans from the workhouse to be sent out to the homes of local families to be looked after, like the three children from Pontypridd workhouse who were cared for in the home of Mrs Ann Date of Blaenrhondda.³

Households did not necessarily have to consist of strangers, but the image of the family is not a straightforward one either, and could be made up of a variety of members, not necessarily only a set of parents and their children. Many homes included nieces and nephews who had perhaps travelled to the district looking for work, or who had lost their own parents. In a society in which death was commonplace, women would care for the children of their siblings, rather than allow them to be removed to the workhouse, and great emphasis was placed upon offering family members help and support, and often a place to stay. Therefore, it was common to find a newly married couple living 'in rooms' with one set of parents, due to the difficulties of obtaining a house of their own in the overcrowded valleys.

The most common way in which the family was extended, however, was to include the elderly parents of the husband or his wife. Although Rhondda society, certainly until the inter-war period, was perceived as one which contained many young people, as the community matured, the number of older people increased, with those over the age of 65 accounting for seven per cent of the adult population in 1931.⁴ If Booth's 1894 study of the aged poor is to be believed, the condition of those elderly residents of the Pontypridd district, in which the Rhondda was included, was extremely harsh. He noted that older women had no choice other than to live on out-relief or go to the workhouse, as there was no available

³ GRO: MS. U/PP, Pontypridd Board Of Guardians: Minute book, 8 January 1913.

⁴ Census statistics, 1931. The age of 65 was chosen because as of 1926 this was the age at which a pension could be received. The adult population includes all those over the age of 15.

employment for them and no thrift or insurance agencies. The condition of the elderly in the district, he concluded, was both 'cheerless and hard'.⁵ Little official financial assistance was available, until the introduction of Old Age Pensions in 1908, so men were forced to work in the mines for as long as their health would allow. Even when pensions were introduced, they were only available to those over the age of 70, although it was clear that many people were incapable of supporting themselves long before this age, especially those in heavy manual trades such as mining. The pensionable age was reduced to 65 in 1925, but even after this date they were only payable to those who had been regularly contributing to the National Insurance Scheme, which excluded domestic service. Married women could receive pensions as long as their husbands had paid contributions and both partners were over the age of 70.

There were ways in which older women and widows could maintain themselves, however, and lead a fairly independent life. We have already seen that some were economically active, either being formally employed in occupations such as teaching and midwifery, or by engaging themselves in some form of informal work. Indeed, both Theresa Deane and Pat Thane have challenged the stereotype of older, dependent women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Both have drawn attention to the immense variety in the lives of some women, who might be involved in charitable organisations and political or public bodies, such as the Board of Guardians, and how they generally became more active in the community.⁶ Evidence from obituaries published in the local newspapers would certainly appear to confirm this, as women were often described as being active and

⁵ C. Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1894), p. 248.

⁶ T. Deane, 'Old and Incapable? Louisa Twinning and elderly women in Victorian Britain', and P. Thane 'Old women in twentieth century Britain', in Botelho and Thane, (eds.), *Women and Ageing*.

well-known in the vicinity for their work for charity, as members of religious, social and political organisations.

Those who were unable to carry out such work could find themselves joining the household of another family member; this was fairly commonplace in the Rhondda, and is illustrated in the census returns. One of the De Winton Cottages in Tonypandy, for example, contained Evan Evans, his wife, their three children, and the elderly parents of his wife, and many other households included widowed elderly parents. The decision to combine households arose, no doubt, from a sense of duty as well as from affection, but it could also serve a very practical purpose. It ensured greater financial stability for the older party, and it provided practical help and support around the home for the younger family. Booth, in his study, argued that whilst men's usefulness appeared to decrease with age, as they could no longer work, women appeared to become more useful and could help younger family members by babysitting and carrying out household chores.⁷ This idea was by no means confined to contemporary observers, mirrored as it was in the contemporary press. An article published in the *Western Mail* in 1894 suggested a number of occupations suitable for 'old people', and admitted that: 'it is more difficult to find occupation for old men than old women. There are so few things about a home that they can do.' Its only suggestion was that they assume responsibility for the family correspondence and take up gardening. Insofar as women were concerned, suitable activities proposed by the newspaper included sewing and darning, making fruits and pies and generally providing help around the home.⁸ Moreover, it has been suggested that older women could make quite an impact on the household, whether they lived there or not. Alys Parker's respondents in a study of female power within the

⁷ Booth, *The Aged Poor*, p. 326.

⁸ *Western Mail*, 22 September 1894.

domestic sphere showed a great respect for these women, who were deemed to be wise and reliable, but strong-willed and strict. In fact, they came very close to fitting the stereotype of the 'Welsh Mam'.⁹

Apart from work or living with family members, there were few alternatives for women who had lost their husbands. And those who did not have such options would find themselves turning to the Board of Guardians for support. Widows, in fact, formed the single largest group of able-bodied women claiming poor relief.¹⁰ In a district where mine accidents were not unusual, and in a period in which a war was experienced, widows were fairly commonplace, and because of the (if limited) options available to them, their situation did not generally prompt much comment.

In contrast, unmarried women generated a great deal of discussion and much column space was devoted to what Michael Anderson refers as 'the spinster problem'.¹¹ Although the vast majority of females over the age of 20 in the Rhondda were married, there remained a sizeable percentage choosing to remain unmarried, in addition to those who had separated from their husbands. In 1901 and 1931 respectively, 35 per cent and 26 per cent of women over the age of 15 were single or widowed. It was assumed that some women did not marry because of a shortage of men, especially in the aftermath of the First World War. Although this might have been the case for some women, in her study of single women in inter-war England, Kath Holden has shown that many others remained single out of choice rather than

⁹ Alys Parker, 'What Mam Said Went: A Study of mining families in South Wales before the Second World War and their access to power in the home', Unpublished M.Sc. (Econ) (University of Wales), 1978, p. 48.

¹⁰ Ellen Ross, 'Women and Poor Law Administration 1857-1909', Unpublished M.A. (University of London), 1956, p. 35, shows that widowed women accounted for 68 per cent of able-bodied women claiming relief in England and Wales in 1896.

¹¹ Michael Anderson, 'The social position of spinsters in Mid-Victorian Britain', in *Journal of Family History*, (1984). For further discussions on spinsters, see also Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the new works? The spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses', *Women's History Review*, 1, 3, (1992).

because they had missed out on the chance of marriage. She further illustrates how important these unmarried women were to the family structure as housekeepers to elderly parents, generous benefactors and babysitters to nieces and nephews. In purely practical terms, moreover, they brought extra income into the household or were available to help with household chores.¹² In the Rhondda Valleys it is likely that women *chose* to remain single as there were always far more young men there than young women, so there was little chance of being 'left on the shelf'. Just because there were more men available for marriage, however, did not mean that they were all suitable material for husbands. Many women would have preferred to remain single than to attach themselves to a man with a reputation for drink or gambling. Single women similarly chose to remain unmarried in some instances because their employment demanded it. We have seen that strict marriage bars were in force in the professions, including teaching and nursing, and an informal expectation that girls would leave employment upon marriage obliged many girls to chose between marriage and a career. Far from the rather negative image of spinsters, single women often led very full lives, and, as we will see, were frequently involved in drama groups, choirs and the chapels, as well as charitable organisations and political bodies.¹³

Households, therefore, took a variety of forms throughout the period, and it cannot be assumed that all consisted of a nuclear family, although this was the most common arrangement. In addition to this model there were also single parents, widowed heads of households, and those that extended to include lodgers and servants, elderly parents and the children of both relatives and strangers. Nor can it be assumed that all women working within

¹² K. Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Single women in England 1919-1939*, Unpublished Ph.D.(University of Essex), 1996.

¹³ For examples, see Holden, 'The Shadow of Marriage'.

the home were married women with children. To do so would present a very one-dimensional image of family life and ignore the valuable contributions made by single and elderly women and widow, all of whom were instrumental to the smooth running of the household.

Whatever the form the household took it is clear that the lives of women, in contrast to those of men, were often inextricably bound to the home. Whilst some were able to participate in activities such as chapel and political groups, the majority of those with family and domestic responsibilities, whether as mothers, wives, aunts or grandmothers, rarely had an opportunity to spend vast amounts of time away from the home. Thus, the domestic sphere became a place of both work and leisure for them. Whilst autobiographies and oral testimonies have extolled the virtues of family life, for the women who acted out their lives within the confines of the home there could be a very real sense of isolation. Lieven has suggested that following a period of courting, in which the partners enjoyed relatively equal standing, marriage resulted in a position of isolation and dependence for women, which could be difficult to come to terms with.¹⁴ This was as true for the women in the Rhondda as it was for those in his study of Senghenydd. The lack of employment opportunities for married women, in addition to their domestic and childcare roles, served to keep them within the home sphere, and much of their day was spent with the children and carrying out arduous tasks.

The sense of isolation might have been further enhanced by the narrowness and overcrowding of the south Wales mining valleys. Inhabitants, particularly women, rarely travelled out of the valleys, and until an adequate system of public transport was developed within the valley even travel to other parts of the Rhondda could be difficult. The movement

¹⁴ Lieven, *Senghenydd*, p. 130.

of coal from the works in the locality to Pontypridd and then to the docks in Cardiff or Barry ensured that the railways were extremely busy with freight trains, which took precedence over passenger ones. Few cheap alternatives to the trains were available, until the establishment of the Porth to Ferndale and Porth to Llwynypia tramlines, opened for public use in 1908, allowed access to both valleys from one central point. The network expanded quickly after this, and by 1910 travel from Porth to the furthest points of the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr was relatively straightforward. This tramway system was replaced in 1936 with omnibuses, from which - for a price - all of the Rhondda as well as Cardiff, Pontypridd and Ogmore Vale were accessible.¹⁵

This isolation that could be experienced by some women was alleviated by a very strong sense of neighbourhood and community. A common theme in both oral interviews and autobiographies is the claim that times in the past were altogether friendlier than they are today, and the phrase 'we helped each other out' crops up regularly. Certainly the interaction with neighbours and relatives, or 'gossip' that respondents mentioned, did perform an important function in reducing feelings of isolation, and was an important means of integration and socialisation which reinforced a sense of belonging within an intimate group of friends and neighbours.¹⁶ Much of this contact took place informally, and in the street and backyards, rather than in the homes of the women, as there were very firm ideas of where and when such interaction could take place. It was important to the women that they should not be perceived by their contemporaries - by whose standards, after all, they were being judged - as being lazy or slovenly. Thus, it was acceptable for working-class women to chat whilst

¹⁵ David Rees, 'Rhondda' (Unpublished manuscript, no date)

¹⁶ Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk: A social history of 'Gossip' in working-class neighbourhoods, 1880-1960*, (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1997.), p. 1; p. 38.

cleaning the windows or putting the washing on the line as the communication was taking place in addition to their chores. To go into a house and sit down, drink and chat for any length of time, however, would have given the impression that they were not busy. It was permissible to do this with family and old friends, but rarely with neighbours. Similarly, the location where the groups gathered to gossip was also an important indication of the status of the women, and could be used to create part of the definition of whether a certain street or neighbourhood was a respectable one. Women from the 'posh' parts simply did not stand in the street talking. In *Green to Black and Back*, 'Olwen' describes how, in the village of Blaenllechau, the women of Long Row used to gather and talk in the street, whereas her street, she contended;

Was elite, Aberdare Road was because people weren't outside in the front talking like, weren't gossiping in the front – but we were gossiping like the devil in the back!¹⁷

What could be perceived as idle chat amongst women, it has been argued, was in fact an essential aspect of survival for women. It helped to forge strong links between neighbours and friends, which then formed the basis for help in other ways.¹⁸ Female neighbours often provided assistance in the form of borrowing and generally helping one another out in times of poverty or ill health, by offering both advice and practical support. Ellen Ross's study of the poor and very poor in London in the 1880s illuminated such means of support, and unearthed powerful relationships between women and neighbours.¹⁹ A strong sense emerged from the study of the importance of these networks in the exchange of services and money at

¹⁷ Treanor et al, *Green to black and back*, p. 44.

¹⁸ This has been illustrated in studies such as Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*; Roberts, *A Woman's Place*.

¹⁹ Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's neighbourhood sharing in London before World War One', *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (Spring 1983), p. 5.

a time when there were few official means of help and support available for the poor, with the exception of the dreaded workhouse. It would be a mistake, however, to overestimate the degree to which women relied upon their friends and neighbours, and although there were many instances where women might ask for help and advice, it is clear that certain subjects might have been taboo. It is debatable, for example, to what extent some personal and financial problems were shared, especially in the Rhondda where notions of respectability and privacy might have prevented women from discussing their difficulties to too great an extent, which possibly served to enhance their sense of isolation. Nor were the neighbourhoods necessarily always harmonious. The local press frequently carried stories of fights and disturbances between neighbours, which often involved women. In 1920, the *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* reported an incident involving neighbours, Florence Meek and Florence Walters, which culminated in Mrs Walters hitting Mrs Meek with a wet flannel and pouring a bowl of cold water over her. The argument occurred whilst Mrs Walters was cleaning the passage that they shared, the maintenance of shared spaces being a regular cause of bickering.

Although interaction between neighbours could help to reduce the sense of isolation that could be experienced by some, the encounters with peers were often short and infrequent owing to the household responsibilities that shaped the lives of women with dependants to look after.²⁰ As has been repeatedly emphasised, the demands of the pit and the ensuing domestic work served to ensure that a large percentage of a housewife's time, as well as that of sisters, daughters and mothers of miners, was spent in the home. Many studies have been

²⁰ Although it has been recognised that this group could include spinster aunts, unmarried daughters and elderly parents, by far the largest group of women with such domestic responsibilities were the wives of miners, and it is upon them that the rest of this chapter will concentrate. This does not mean, however, that the circumstances and issues discussed did not also affect other groups of women.

undertaken into the gruelling work that women performed in mining households, and the routine and demands of the miner's wife are well known.²¹

The biggest problem that the women had to surmount, as already indicated, was the dust brought home from the pits in the absence of pithead baths. This ensured that cleaning and preparations for bathing took up much of the woman's time in mining households. The cleaning routine of one miners' wife, Mrs F. H. Smith, is described in an account she wrote for a study by the Women's Co-operative Guild:

By the time we had done our daily clean, it [the living room] was looking all right, until Hubby came home. Then after he had bathed and his clothes put to dry and turned from time to time, there is a nice film of coal dust all over the room, and it means you want the duster in your hand continually.²²

In addition to this constant round of cleaning, women were also responsible for the shopping, cooking, family mending, and care of the children. It is no surprise that they found that the various chores took up most of their time. Their quest to keep their homes free of dust and coal were compounded by conditions in the coalfield villages, which were not really conducive to clean homes or their relatively easy management, and the work was made particularly difficult by the lack of facilities available to both keep their houses clean and their families fed. Few houses had gas or electricity to cook on, and no adequate food storage, so that shopping had to be done most days, and, whilst this provided an opportunity for interaction with other local women, it was a time-consuming task. Washing, however, was probably one of the most hated chores, entailing hard physical work and the knowledge that

²¹ For examples of domestic routine in Wales see Rosemary Crook, 'Women of the Rhondda Valleys'; D. Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal', in A. V. John, (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*; and C. White and S. R. Williams, (eds.), *Struggle and Starve: Women's lives in the South Wales Valleys between the two world wars*, (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998).

²² Mrs F H Smith, 'In a Mining Village', in Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life as we have Known it: By Co-operative working women*, (London: Virago, 1977), p. 67.

the women would be busy for the entire day. A strict routine was followed by most of the women, from which they rarely deviated. First the water had to be carried from its source and heated on the coal fire, after which it was emptied into a washtub or copper into which the clothes were placed and pounded with a 'dolly' until clean. The white clothes would be done first, then dipped into 'blue' and rinsed, other items would follow, and the culmination of the day's work would be the washing of the heavy, dirty pit clothes. Once the clothes had been washed, the heavy washtubs then had to be carried again and emptied outside.

In her evidence to the Coal Commission in 1919 Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour Woman's Organiser for Wales, drew attention to the conditions under which women continued to labour in their homes in the South Wales Valleys. 'Imagine a home', she told the commissioners,

with one living room which serves as a kitchen for cooking and as dining room. A family from two to six sons, along with the father came home from work. After they have had their meal, they take off their pit clothes and wash. There are no facilities such as hot water laid on. The usual procedure is a small pan heated on the fire...²³

Life for the women who had to cope with such circumstances and conditions, she argued, was little better than that of a slave. Nor did the situation improve for women during the period in the way of domestic routine, and there was little change or betterment in the facilities and equipment used to carry out the chores. Cooking, for example, continued to be done on the fireplace, with ovens and hobs on the side, and the 'dolly and tub' method continued to be the most common means of washing clothes until the advent of the Second World War. Breakthroughs in domestic technology in Britain in the inter-war period did little to ease the

²³ Report of the Inquiry into the Coal industry, 1919, cmd 360, xii, p. 1016.

burden of working-class Rhondda women. Household items such as vacuum cleaners, cookers, electric irons and washing machines had been advertised in the local press since the 1930s, but few, if any, would have found their way into working-class homes, although some middle-class Rhonddaïtes may have been able to take advantage of them. The new items were far too expensive for miners' families, and many houses lacked the prerequisite power source, gas or electricity, to enable them to function. Even if they did have the means, it has been argued that many housewives, who were suspicious of the new machines, did not trust the new devices and their ability to clean properly as they were often temperamental, they rusted and they leaked.²⁴ Modern machines such as these did not find their way into the district, certainly into working-class homes, until after the Second World War.

Although the work was hard and often dirty, housework remained primarily the responsibility of the woman, and she received little, if any, help in these heavy tasks from men. From her study of post-war Lancashire, Elizabeth Roberts concluded that women continued to take on the responsibility of household chores because they were conditioned from a very early age to believe that such work was 'women's work'.²⁵ Girls were taught in school from a young age about domestic work and were often called to help in the home, whilst their brothers were not. In most cases, it was felt that men who were seen to be helping with household chores were 'unmanly', unless there was a very good reason for them to be doing so. Few men, for example, would peg out washing or do the shopping simply to help their wife out. It has nevertheless been argued by both Bourke and Roberts that, to a

²⁴ Christine Zmroczet, 'Dirty Linen: Women, Class and Washing Machines, 1920s – 1960s', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15, 2, (1992).

²⁵ Elizabeth Roberts. *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women, 1890-1940*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp.35-40.

degree, control over the housework allowed women a special and important role within the household:

Lastly, and this point is rarely made in womens' history, some women appear to have felt that it was important to have areas of work over which they had complete control, for which they were responsible, and in which, compared to the rest of the family, they were expert. Their dignity, self-respect and self-confidence demanded it.²⁶

Some men did carry out tasks within the household, but it was not necessarily 'women's work'; they might be responsible for the garden or allotment, for the family boot and shoe repairs, or for bringing in coal from the outside store. Oral evidence has, however, also illustrated that *some* men helped out a great deal in the house, although it was mostly work which was carried out inside the home, and away from public view. Mair Eluned McLellan, who grew up in Pentre in the 1930s, remembered that both her father and her grandfather had certain jobs in the house that they would undertake:

My personal experience of men in the home is very different. I think that those who shared my father's ideals (a life-long member of the Labour Party, a socialist to his fingertips) helped my mother around the house to a degree that would put the 'new man' to shame. No blackleading the grate for my mother, and hardly any potatoes to clean until I was old enough to take over. My much loved uncle also helped, and from what my mother told me about her father,...[he] helped my Grandmother out as well, cleaning the flagstone floor after coming home from a day down the mine....²⁷

She did admit, though, that most men shied away from housework, and the responsibility generally fell to the women.

²⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, class and ethnicity*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 70; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's place*, p. 40.

²⁷ Correspondence with Mair McLellan, 14 April 1999.

The constancy of these household tasks had grave implications for the lives of working-class women. In addition to limiting their opportunity for leisure and other activities, it also had very serious effects upon their own health and upon that of other family and household members. Activities such as lifting heavy household utensils did untold damage to women's health, as did bending over the washtub, scrubbing the floors and the like. The heavy and often repetitive work culminated in many minor and often non-specific aches and pains in women, which were a source of perpetual discomfort.²⁸ In addition, there were more specific injuries that could occur, many of which were the result of inadequate facilities in the houses. Bath-times proved to be particularly hazardous, especially for young children. Although it was the usual practice to fill the baths with cold water and only then to add the hot water, such a precaution did not invariably ward off injury or worse. Contemporary newspapers feature countless examples of children scalding themselves in bath water, or even drowning in an unattended bathtub after falling in. Similarly, the necessity of having constantly burning fires in houses could also be a peril; away from the Rhondda, a three-year-old Newport girl died in 1914 after she fell into the fire. Although the law required fireguards in homes where there were open fires, her parents pleaded that they could not afford one. And in Ton Pentre, a young domestic servant died, in spite of dramatic attempts to save her, when her dress touched the fire and caught light. The voluminous clothing that women wore, in the form of long, full skirts, was often the cause of accidents, either through fire or simply by them getting in the way. The case of a Cardiff woman who fell down the stairs to her death after treading on her skirts was reported in the *Western Mail* in 1926.²⁹

²⁸ See Margaret Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives: Their health and conditions*, (2nd Edition., London: Virago, 1981).

²⁹ *Western Mail*, 3 January 1914; *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 26 January 1923; *Western Mail* 17 April 1926.

Column space was probably devoted to the reporting of these accidents because they were unusual in that they were fatal. It is likely, however, that burnings, scalding and other accidents took place in districts such as the Rhondda on a regular basis. Accidents, which occurred simply as the result of carrying out mundane chores, were also reported in the press, such as that of Mrs Ann Morris of Senghenydd Street, Treorchy. Mrs Morris died as a result of injuries that she sustained following a fall from an upstairs window as she was leaning out to clean it.³⁰

Incidents such as the ones outlined above, although fairly frequent, accounted for only a very small percentage of deaths or illnesses that can be attributed to time spent in the environment of the home. A study by Dot Jones has recently shown that the home could be a dangerous and sometimes unhealthy environment for women. Using mortality rates for the Pontypridd registration district, of which the Rhondda was part, she challenges the traditional perception of mining districts in which the men were the ones engaged in the dirty, heavy work, whilst women performed a supporting or background role. In doing this, she focuses upon the labour intensive nature of domestic work, frequent childbearing and the conditions which miners' wives experienced, in terms of health and housing. In her study, she reveals that as a result of these conditions the mortality rates for females, aged 20- 44, in both the census years 1891 and 1901, were significantly higher than that of men of the same age.³¹

Whilst it can be assumed that male mortality rates were enhanced by accidents and illnesses associated with their work in the pit, it is clear from the health reports that there were certain ailments from which women suffered to a greater extent than men. In 1924, for example, the incidence of death caused by diabetes was consistently higher amongst women than men, as

³⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 10 February 1922.

³¹ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal', p.126.

was that of tuberculosis. In addition, deaths resulting from digestive problems and diseases such as diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever and influenza were also often higher among women, indicating that women were more susceptible to such ailments.³²

The conditions in the Rhondda, and the mining districts as a whole, were recognised by contemporaries, and the annual health reports for the Rhondda serve to illustrate that the district was far from being a healthy place in which to live. The death rates, for example, were higher than that of the average for England and Wales, being 19.1 per 1,000 births and 16.2 respectively in 1904. Conditions in the district were, however, better than a number of other large towns: in 1924, the Rhondda was placed 47th in the table of 97 great towns, but its position was lower than other areas of south Wales, including Newport, Cardiff and the nearby mining valley of Aberdare, which took 30th position. In the early period, this was to be explained by the rapid development of the Rhondda, with which the sanitary arrangements could not keep pace. In his reports, Dr Jenkins, the Officer of Health for the district, consistently drew attention to the desperate need for better sanitary facilities, and in particular an efficient means of removing waste. The river Rhondda especially, he noted, was polluted with all kinds of rubbish and sewerage and was a danger to the health of the inhabitants. In 1895 the *Sanitary survey of Glamorganshire* reiterated the need for an adequate water supply and system of excrement and refuse disposal.³³ The existing system was clearly not able to cope with the increasing demands of the rapidly developing area, and was the primary reason for the outbreaks of typhoid and other zymotic diseases from which the occupants of the Rhondda suffered at regular intervals. Ailments associated with the inadequate sanitation and housing were common, and the overcrowded homes helped to facilitate the spread of

³² SWCC: RUDC: Report of the Medical Officer of Health and School Medical Officer, 1924.

³³ M. Williams, *A Sanitary Survey of Glamorganshire*, (1895), pp. 80-1.

infectious diseases. Diseases such as measles and scarlet fever could spread from one household member to another.

The problem of housing conditions in the Rhondda and its correlation to the state of health was another factor which was recognised and discussed by contemporary observers. Daniel Lleufer Thomas made this link in his 1913 report into housing conditions in Wales, noting that 'there is something wrong with the health conditions in our large towns in Wales, and in my opinion the root of the evil is the bad housing conditions'.³⁴ But there was little that could be done to alter the situation. In the early part of the period, the population was expanding at such a rate that housing could not keep up, condemning some families to live in houses that were unsuitable for human habitation.³⁵ Although Councillor W. E. Thomas claimed in 1912 that there was no housing problem in the Rhondda, the *Rhondda Socialist* reported that in 1911 alone 705 homes had been condemned as unfit to live in, and only 377 were being built in their place, thus creating a severe shortage.³⁶

The result of this lack of housing was overcrowding. Dwellings were deemed, by the 1935 Housing Act, to be overcrowded 'if persons over the age of 10 and not living together as husband and wife must sleep in the same room'. Such a situation was perceived to be a danger to both the health and the morality of the working classes. By this definition, though, the majority of houses in the Rhondda would have been 'overcrowded'. The standard house for the area was a terraced cottage with a kitchen, and parlour, three bedrooms, together with a pantry, scullery, coalhouse and necessary offices.³⁷ Very large households could be

³⁴ D. Lleufer Thomas, 'Housing conditions in Wales', in Dr. D. L. Thomas and Rev. Herbert Morgan (Eds.), *Housing Conditions in Wales*, (Cardiff: The Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion 1913), p. 6.

³⁵ For further information on working class housing in this period see Allen Hutt, *The condition of the Working Class in Britain*, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933).

³⁶ *Rhondda Socialist*, 30 March 1912.

³⁷ NLW: Edgar Chappell Papers, Urban Investigation: Rhondda Urban District, (n.d), p. 32.

contained within such homes, sometimes as many as nine or ten people sharing a five-roomed house, and it was by no means unusual for brothers and sisters to share bedrooms, and even beds. In addition to sometimes containing large numbers of people, there were complaints that some houses were damp, dark and badly ventilated. These poor conditions facilitated ill health and help to explain why more women than men were affected by tuberculosis.³⁸ Damp dwellings could lead to rheumatic fever, a bad water supply to typhoid, and bad ventilation and foul air to tuberculosis, and, as women spent more time in the home than men, they were more likely to be affected by the conditions. The housing problem continued into the inter-war period, when migration out of the district went some way to ease the problem. A letter from the Clerk of the Council to the Minister of Health in London in 1939 claimed that of the houses surveyed in autumn 1938 in ward 7 (Dinas and Penygraig) only 1.06 per cent were classed as overcrowded. This was a great improvement on a survey of the same ward in 1936, in which 5 per cent were placed in the overcrowded category.³⁹ But for those who remained in the district, reduced income meant that there was less money available to carry out repairs and purchase enough fuel and food to ensure adequate standards of health, and conditions for some declined rather than improved.

The type of food and the quantity of sustenance available similarly had a great effect upon the health of the inhabitants of the Rhondda, and their ability to fight disease and ill health. Certainly, the limitation of foodstuffs during the period of the First World War and the diets of the inter-war period, which were far more restrictive than in the pre-war days, served to curb the diet of the working class. Although it has been indicated that there was an increase in the variety of foods available in the 1920s and 1930s, such as canned and pre-

³⁸ D. Lleufer Thomas, 'Housing conditions in Wales', p. 12.

³⁹ GRO: MS. UD/R C/65 245, Letter to the Minister of Health, from the Clerk to the RUDC, 11 January 1939.

packaged food, financial difficulties prevented working-class families, although not necessarily the middle classes, from taking advantage of such advances.⁴⁰ In a study of household spending amongst the unemployed, E. J. Harry and J. R. E. Phillips found that much of the income of families in the Rhondda was spent on bulkier, cheaper foodstuffs. Food such as cereals, butter, cheese, margarine and bread continued to be popular, as they had been in earlier decades, at the expense of what experts believed to be more desirable food.⁴¹ The diet of working-class families was the subject of scrutiny in the inter-war period, and was a source of much comment:

The diet in the households of the unemployed men comprised little beyond white bread, butter or margarine, potatoes, sugar, jam, tea and bacon in limited quantity. Meat was seldom eaten except in very small amounts on Sundays, very often not more than a shilling's worth for the whole family. Fresh milk was not seen by us except when supplied from a welfare clinic, the usual milk being skimmed condensed. Fresh vegetables other than potatoes were seldom eaten.⁴²

This type of food was given to families in the Rhondda because it was cheap, filling and full of energy. The fruit and vegetables recommended by the experts might have given them the nutrition that they needed, but they were expensive, not readily available and not as filling as their usual high carbohydrate diets. The working-class diet, and the resulting nutritional deficiency, became a cause of concern in the 1930s and, in order to improve the health of the nation, the British Medical Association (BMA) produced recommended 'minimum diets'. The BMA diet, which was published in 1933 at the height of the

⁴⁰ N. J. Lieper, 'Health and Unemployment in Glamorgan, 1923-1938', Unpublished M.Sc (Econ) (University of Wales), 1987, p. 81.

⁴¹ E. J. Harry and JRE Phillips, 'Household Budgets in the Rhondda Valley', *Welsh Journal of Agriculture*, xiii, (1937).

⁴² Report on Investigation in the Coalfield of South Wales and Monmouth, (By Minister of Health), 1928-28, vol viii, cmd 3272, p. 6.

difficulties in the coalfield, was based upon scientific principles of calories and nutrition, and suggested the minimum amounts of essential nutrients that should be consumed. It advised, for example, that for children aged five to ten half-a-pint of milk was a daily requirement, whilst infants between the ages of one and five and youngsters over the age of ten should drink a whole pint. In addition, it was recommended that each person eat 1d-worth of fresh fruit and vegetables per day.⁴³

But suggestions such as these were not very practical for families in distressed areas, since they could not afford to buy the items recommended, the prices of which were usually based upon wholesale prices rather than shop prices. In a report on maternal mortality in Wales, the example was given of a Mrs K, of Wattstown, who had on average 15s 2d left from her husband's weekly wages, after money had been extracted for fuel and rent, to spend upon food and clothing for the family. Calculated per head, this amounted to 2s 2d per week for herself, her husband and five children. The BMA diet, however, suggested that this amount of money would only be enough to sufficiently feed a man, his wife and one child.⁴⁴ Other advice given by the Association was simply impractical for those living in houses with insufficient storage and cooking facilities. It was recommended, for example, that giving the family porridge for breakfast was more nutritious than the traditional working-class breakfast of bread and tea, notwithstanding the fact that most Rhondda families would not have been able to afford the quantities of milk required, often did not have the necessary utensils nor the time to cook porridge every morning. The result was that, in spite of advice from many

⁴³ Nutrition committee report of BMA, published in *British Medical Journal*, 25 November 1933.

⁴⁴ Lady Williams, 'Malnutrition as a Cause of Maternal Mortality', *Public Health*, (October, 1936), p. 15; Report of the BMA, p. 13.

quarters, the practicalities of life in a distressed area ensured that very little difference was made in eating habits.

In the mid-1930s a series of studies were published in the *Welsh Journal of Agriculture* regarding food consumption in the Rhondda, with a view to aiding agricultural areas in planning the production and distribution of their crops and products. The evidence collected from Tonypany, Trealaw and Penygraig showed that, in spite of the encouragement and advice given regarding the importance of fresh milk in the diet, the actual consumption of fresh milk per person was very low. In fact, on average consumption of fresh milk in pints per person per day in the Rhondda Urban District was 0.178 in 1924, rising to 0.245 by the mid-1930s, although this increase could have been the result of free milk given in schools and maternity and child welfare clinics. The study showed that there was a greater reliance in the Rhondda upon condensed milk, which was cheaper, easier to store and generated little waste. Fresh milk, the study found, was only used in houses with a high income, or where there was sickness.⁴⁵

The drive to increase nutritional standards was an important topic of the day. Some commentators, such as Hannington, blamed the prevailing conditions for low standards. In his 1937 study of distressed areas, he laid the blame squarely at the feet of the Government:

Coming on top of the already impoverished condition of the unemployed and low paid employed workers, the application of the means test and the 10 per cent benefit cut soon began to express itself in alarming reports from medical officers of health, social workers, and other authorities concerned with the rampant ill health conditions of the people which the policy of the Government had produced.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ E. L. Harry, 'Consumption of Milk in a distressed area of South Wales', *Welsh Journal of Agriculture*, xi, 1935, pp 23-49. Harry conducted one further investigation into diet in distressed areas, 'Meat Consumption in the Rhondda Valleys' which was again published in the *Welsh Journal of Agriculture*, xii, (1936).

⁴⁶ W. Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1937), p. 41.

Others, however, returned to the traditional scapegoat, by blaming working-class mothers for the deficiencies, and measures were suggested to remedy the situation. An article in the *Rhondda Fach Gazette* in 1934 supported calls by other newspapers to educate poor women in basic cookery skill, claiming that their fears were entirely justified. In fact, the author went one step further and claimed that nine out of ten women of all classes were in need of the lessons, not just the wives of the poor and unemployed:

There is scarcely anyone who takes a job on who is quite so incompetent to do it as an ordinary girl who gets married. It is appalling to think how utterly ignorant most girls are of everything they are called upon to do.⁴⁷

This was by no means a new topic for the press. In 1918, a correspondent to the *Western Mail* had argued that the real trouble behind miners' food was not shortages brought about by the war, but that the reason lay in the home, where women did not know how to cook and would place a plate of tinned meat before their men, or something else from the shop. The correspondent believed that lack of cookery skills was 'rampant in our industrial circles'.⁴⁸ Women reminiscing about their early life, however, often comment that they and their mothers were adept at providing filling meals from the ingredients available, often using cheap cuts of meat and ensuring that there was very little waste. Mrs Jones, in an interview in the 1970s, was still able to describe the meals that she used to prepare for her family at their home in Mardy in the Thirties. On a Friday night, she recalled, she would go down to the butchers in Ferndale and buy streaky bacon, the cheapest cut, at 2½ pence a pound. She would buy four pounds and fry the two leanest pieces for dinner, which was then served with

⁴⁷ *Rhondda Fach Gazette*, 24 February 1934.

⁴⁸ *Western Mail*, 29 October 1918.

boiled potatoes and cabbage. The rest would be boiled for pea soup the following evening, and any meat left over would be eaten cold with chips or bread. When all the bacon had been used, she would send for three-penny-worth of meat cuttings and use them to make broth, mixing into it vegetables from their allotment. The meat was taken out of the broth - the latter nevertheless retaining the nutrients from the meat - and was used the next day in order to make a big pie. In this way, a family of seven people were fed for four or five days out of that four pounds of bacon⁴⁹

Even using all the imagination and skills of the housewife, financial difficulties in many Rhondda homes in the inter-war period often meant that there was little food to go round, and women suffered this more than any other family member. Jane Lewis has pointed out that social investigators assumed that equality existed amongst families, and that they tended to ignore the possibility that resources within the family might not be shared uniformly.⁵⁰ But it was common for mothers to ensure that their husbands and children received the food that they needed, at the expense of their own health. This, as the health reports indicate, meant that women were more susceptible to malnutrition, tuberculosis and other health problems, and probably did not recover as quickly from ailments as their bodies were already weakened as a result of their poor diet.

According to Charles Webster, although health reports are useful in determining the incidence of disease and general statistics, infant and maternal mortality statistics are the most sensitive indicators of the health of the nation.⁵¹ Both sets of indices were fairly high for most of the period in the Rhondda. The average rate of infant mortality for the ten years

⁴⁹ SWCC: Interview with Mrs W. R. Jones..

⁵⁰ J. Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, (Susses: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p. 45.

⁵¹ Charles Webster, 'Healthy or Hungry Thirties?', *History Workshop Journal*, 13, (1982), p. 111.

1894-1903 for the Rhondda was 203 per 1,000, which was well above the average of 146 for England and Wales as a whole. Such statistics, however, fail to convey the real poignancy of infant deaths. The burial registers of the Church of St John the Baptist in Ystradyfodwg provides a more human view of the deaths of infants in the immediate locality. A one-year sample of burials at the church gives a stark impression of the problems of infant deaths: some 91 burials took place in 1869, 37 of which were those of children under the age of one, some of whom were as young as a week or two old.⁵² The obituaries in the newspapers show the emotional impact of the problem in an even more distressing way. For example, Mr and Mrs Griffith Thomas of Cwmparc lost their eldest child Cyril, aged 4, in 1910; he was the third child they had lost in the last couple of years.⁵³

The reasons for the high rate of infant mortality were probably very similar to those affecting the rest of the population. But frequently, mothers were directly blamed for the ill health and deaths of their children. In 1904, the Medical officer of Health for the Rhondda commented that:

It is safe to assert that a very large proportion of deaths of infants from diarrhoea are avoidable, and are due to errors in dieting committed by young and inexperienced although well meaning mothers...food utterly unsuited to the digestive organs of children of tender age may be given with the best intentions, but very frequently with disastrous results.⁵⁴

They were accused of sleeping with the baby, of neglecting them and wrongful feeding. This last criticism usually referred to the reliance of some mothers upon using cow's milk, or even condensed milk, rather than breast. Breast milk was promoted as the best form of feeding, as cow's milk could contain germs and the bacteria that caused tuberculosis, and un-sterilised

⁵² Burial Register of St. John the Baptist, parish of Ystradyfodwg, 1869. Those listed in the register were inhabitants of the villages of Treherbert, Pentre, Treorchy, Cwmparc, Trealaw and Blaencwm.

⁵³ *Rhondda Leader*, 1 January 1910.

⁵⁴ TL: RUDC: Report of the Medical Officer of Health, 1904, p. 16.

bottles could be a source of danger and disease. Many of the deaths, however, were due to circumstances beyond the control of mothers. For example, babies died as a result of illnesses linked to bad housing; a major killer, diarrhoea, was rampant in the summer and was exacerbated by a lack of food storage facilities in homes. It was also the case that the babies were born weak, as a result of women being undernourished during their pregnancy. Lack of adequate food and rest during pregnancy also meant that some experienced difficulty in breast-feeding and were forced to rely on other means of nutrition.

Concern regarding the high rates of infant mortality in Britain as a whole resulted in campaigns and schemes designed to instruct women in 'mothercraft'. On a national level, domestic subjects increasingly dominated girls' schooling, and women were bombarded with magazine and newspaper articles offering advice on child rearing. Further, a more scientific approach was considered which reached the public through child-care manuals. The inter-war period saw the growing influence of methods of childcare, such as that of Dr Truby King, who encouraged women to breastfeed and follow a strict regime of childcare based upon following a routine of sleep, feeding and toilet training like clockwork.⁵⁵ These methods were also disseminated on a local level; in 1914, the *Western Mail* advertised a 'practical and helpful booklet' for mothers entitled 'how to bring up baby', which contained advice regarding the feeding and management of children and the prevention and treatment of childhood diseases.⁵⁶

In addition to this, more practical schemes were suggested, such as the appointment of a trained woman inspector to give simple instructions and practical demonstrations for the

⁵⁵ See Steve Humphries and Pamela Gordon, *A Labour of Love: The Experience of Parenthood in Britain 1900-1950*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1993), Chapter 2.

⁵⁶ *Western Mail*, 28 April 1914.

guidance of mothers.⁵⁷ The RUDC responded by establishing care and advice facilities for expectant and nursing mothers, and by 1924 there were two maternity and child welfare centres established in Ystrad and Ynyshir. Although the clinics were not run by the Poor Law Guardians, but by the RUDC, and so were free from the stigma of the poor law, difficulties were experienced in encouraging women to attend. Such clinics were never really popular,⁵⁸ and Grenfell Hill suggests two reasons for this. The first relates to the poverty that women experienced, which possibly meant that they were not in possession of a suitable outfit to wear in public, and the second to respectability. It was not respectable, he argues, for women to be seen in public whilst obviously pregnant, and there was a certain embarrassment attached to being seen to be 'in a certain condition'. Sex was not a subject to be talked about, and pregnancy was the very visible indication that intercourse had taken place.⁵⁹ Thus, schemes such as the introduction of health visitors and maternity centres did not have the desired effect, especially upon working-class mothers who resented the encouragement to disregard their traditional methods of infant care. Even for those who did attend, the advice they received was ineffectual if they did not always have the time or financial means to put it into practice.⁶⁰ As a result, the infant mortality rate in the Rhondda remained high, a prominent indication of the poor health of the members of the community.

The low standards of health in the Rhondda had serious implications for all members of society, and women suffered in addition to men because of the amount of time they spent in sometimes damp, dangerous and insanitary dwellings, and the lack of adequate nutrition

⁵⁷ *Western Mail*, 16 June 1903.

⁵⁸ J. Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900-1930*, (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p.13.

⁵⁹ J. Grenfell Hill, 'Mothers and Infants in South Wales, 1900-1930', Unpublished Ph.D (University of Wales), 1993, p. 371, chapter 3.

⁶⁰ Grenfell Hill, 'Mothers and Infants', p. 14

they received. These conditions had serious implications for their own health and, if of childbearing age, the health of their children. It must not be forgotten, however, that one of the greatest dangers to the health of a woman was childbirth itself, and this is reflected in the high maternal mortality rates throughout Wales. Although it was widely believed that rural districts suffered the most from high rates of maternal mortality, owing to inefficient facilities and the difficulty in summoning doctors to difficult cases, in reality it was the industrial districts which suffered the most. It is hardly surprising that figures were especially high in the 'special areas'.⁶¹ The high rates have been attributed to the cost of adequate medical care, as many women could not afford to have a qualified midwife at the confinement. It has been estimated that maternity expenses, if properly met, should amount to £5, a price which was beyond the means of most working-class families. Most had no option but to have an untrained midwife to assist them.⁶² At most births, this would have been sufficient, but in some cases complications could arise that these untrained midwives were ill-equipped to deal with, which sometimes resulted in the death of the mother or the child. Further, as the vast majority of births took place at home, the condition of the dwellings, in addition to the training, standards of cleanliness and the experience of the midwife, allegedly played a part in accounting for the high number of deaths.

The problem of high rates of maternal mortality became especially prominent during the 1930s when a number of reports were commissioned. Most of them promoted the expansion of maternity services as the answer.⁶³ This was to be combined with increased training for midwives, many of whom were perceived to be ignorant and who were allegedly

⁶¹ *Western Mail and South Wales Daily News*, 31 February 1929, taken from an interview with Dr Ralph Picken, Medical Officer of Health for Cardiff.

⁶² E. M. Hughes, 'Mother Love: Maternity as the Cinderella of Social Policy in the twentieth century', Unpublished M.Sc (Econ) (University of Wales), 1990, p. 26.

⁶³ Williams, 'Malnutrition as a cause of Maternal Mortality', p. 11.

carrying out unhygienic and outdated practices. Prior to the training and registration of midwives there were no restrictions concerning who could aid confinements, and some distressing cases of disease being spread through midwives not trained in the importance of hygiene were reported. In 1900 the Medical Officer of Health for the Rhondda noted that:

It is extremely difficult to get the class of women who usually act as monthly nurses to realise the need for cleanliness in their work. In one instance a woman was attending cases while she was living in a house where there was a virulent case of diphtheria; it is little wonder, therefore, that her patients were attacked with puerperal fever. At first she obstinately refused to go to the hospital, but when I saw her and saw the condition of her surroundings, and of her clothing, and the little attention she had given to personal cleanliness, I felt justified in taking the most extreme steps to prevent her attending any more patients as she then was.⁶⁴

The 1902 Midwives Act emphasised the importance of a minimum period of specialist training in midwifery, and was designed to ensure that cases such as that mentioned above no longer occurred. But in 1909, 83 per cent of those working formally as midwives in the Rhondda, although not professionally trained, were able to continue in practice as they had been working prior to the introduction of the 1902 Act.⁶⁵ This period of grace for untrained midwives was only supposed to last until 1910, after which every working midwife should have been professionally trained. This was not the case, however, and even as late as 1924 there were still 26 untrained midwives out of the 129 on the Rhondda roll, who were nevertheless able to practice because they worked as 'bona fide' (untrained) midwives prior to the implementation of the Act.⁶⁶ As late as 1937 attention was still being drawn to the inadequacy of some midwives when the Ministry of Health Report on Maternal Mortality in

⁶⁴ TL: RUDC: Report of the Medical Officer of Health, 1900, p. 73.

⁶⁵ GRO: MS. D/D Xgc 133, GCC: Register of Midwives, 1909.

⁶⁶ SWCC: RUDC: Report of the Medical Officer of Health, 1924, p. 29.

Wales emphasised their role, especially those working part time, whom they found to be lacking the necessary equipment and frequently not clean when they attended women.⁶⁷

Thus, attempts to decrease maternal mortality rates in the district focussed upon the practices of midwives, and sought to introduce a more coherent policy towards prenatal care and childbirth in the district. The Quarterly Report of the Glamorgan Medical Officer suggested a series of recommendations to decrease the maternal mortality rate, including the provision in every case of the services of a midwife, of consultation by doctor when required and the availability of hospital beds for those needing institutional care.⁶⁸ Further discussions continued along these lines, and funding bids were discussed for the establishment of a maternity hospital in the surrounding area to take in cases from Pontypridd, Rhondda, Aberdare, Mountain Ash and Llantrisant, but the project did not commence. In 1933, the National Birthday Trust and the RUDC commenced a collaborative project with the intention of creating better maternity facilities and decreasing rates of maternal mortality. The scheme included an increase in facilities for antenatal examination, the provision of obstetrical specialists for clinics and who were to attend at the home of the patient, the provision of refresher courses for midwives, inspectors of midwives, and the introduction of free supply of disinfectant to all midwives.⁶⁹

Despite the attempts to improve maternity services in the district, little difference was made to the mortality rates. It was not until the National Birthday Trust began an investigation in the area that the connection was made between high rates of maternal mortality and malnutrition suffered by women in districts where there was high

⁶⁷ Report on Maternal Mortality, 1937, p. 32.

⁶⁸ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 6 September 1930.

⁶⁹ Williams, 'Malnutrition as a cause of Maternal Mortality', p. 11.

unemployment.⁷⁰ The Report on Maternal Mortality in Wales, published in 1937, hinted at a correlation between the health of the mother and mortality, but while it mentioned that anaemia and debility caused by bad diet might be a factor, it concluded that the influence of nutritional deficiency could not be accurately assessed.⁷¹ However, the report of the National Birthday Trust written by Lady Williams explicitly linked malnutrition and high maternal mortality rates.⁷² It was found that whilst the expansion of maternity services no doubt benefited a number of women, the expected drop in maternal mortality rates did not become evident. It was not until expectant mothers were provided with additional food, such as Ovaltine egg and milk extract, Marmite vegetable extract, extract of beef and a pint of fresh milk a day for the last three months of pregnancy, that the rate appeared to drop.⁷³ By 1935, the *Western Mail and South Wales News* was already heralding a dramatic decrease in the rates of maternal mortality in the Rhondda, and the report of the National Birthday Trust confirmed this.⁷⁴

The maternal mortality statistics, however, only indicate the number of fatalities that were believed to result from childbirth and no indication is given of other effects that the strain of childbirth, and especially of frequent pregnancies, had upon women's lives. As part of their campaign for an improvement of existing health care facilities for women, the Women's Co-operative Guild appealed to its members in 1914 for examples of their experiences of childbirth. The responses that they received were later published in a collection called *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, and revealed shocking experiences of still births, miscarriages and experiences with doctors or midwives which

⁷⁰ Williams, 'Malnutrition as a cause of Maternal Mortality', p. 11

⁷¹ Report on Maternal Mortality in Wales, pp. 93-4.

⁷² Williams, 'Malnutrition as a Cause of Maternal Mortality', p. 17.

⁷³ Williams, 'Malnutrition as a Cause of Maternal Mortality', p. 13.

⁷⁴ See *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 17 April 1935.

sometimes resulted in injuries from tearing or the use of medical instruments. The report drew attention to the fact that poor women were already in a generally weakened state from earlier pregnancies and through having to continue with their heavy domestic tasks until the very last moment for the purpose of 'getting everything ready' for the confinement.⁷⁵ Their responsibility for the home and their family meant that many women did not receive the rest that they needed, and often succumbed to the pressure to get out of bed following the birth much sooner than the ten days recommended. A further report, by Margery Spring Rice, in the 1930s drew attention to both the long-term gynaecological problems suffered by working-class women resulting from frequent childbirth - which included prolapsed uterus and other, unspecified, problems - and the tiredness associated with the demands of looking after large families.⁷⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that women did not always want to increase their families, and that many wished to limit their pregnancies, but unfortunately they had only scant knowledge of methods of contraception. Historians such as Jane Lewis have commented that birth control became increasingly more respectable in the period immediately prior to the First World War, but this made very little difference to women in the mining valleys of south Wales.⁷⁷ The impact of their chapel upbringing and the want of information about the facts of life before marriage ensured that girls were ignorant of the functions of their bodies, and this inhibited discussion about, and understanding of, them.⁷⁸ As a result, they would not always have known how to prevent pregnancy. Because women were embarrassed to talk about such matters, the only other avenue open to them was

⁷⁵ Margaret Llewellyn Davies, *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, (Virago, 1978).

⁷⁶ Margery Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives: Their health and conditions*, (London: Virago, 1977).

⁷⁷ J. Lewis, 'The ideology and politics of birth control in inter-war England', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2, (1982), p. 33.

⁷⁸ Grenfell Hill, 'Mothers and Infants', pp. 70 - 73.

attendance at one of the birth control clinics which had opened in the area, such as the one in nearby Pontypridd. The Rhondda did not have a birth control clinic until fairly late in the period, only maternity centres, which had been instructed not to give contraceptive advice. The idea of opening a centre which would offer advice for married women, however, had been explored; and the Rhondda section of the Labour party wholly endorsed instruction regarding birth control. Following meeting a given by prominent birth control campaigner Stella Browne and Gwen Evans of the Rhondda Borough Labour Party Women's Section, they wrote to Marie Stopes in July 1927 asking her to talk to the women in the locality.⁷⁹ The members of the RUDC were divided on the matter of establishing such a scheme. In 1926, councillors minuted their disapproval of Edmonton Council's proposal to enable medical officers of health in charge of maternity to divulge information about birth control in cases which warranted such information. Dr W. K. Thomas based his objection upon the financial expenditure which would be required on a matter about which the public were greatly divided. A similar proposal for the Rhondda, he claimed, would be immoral and irreligious, as it would mean that no Roman Catholic doctor would be able to hold a medical post within the authority. Conversely, Mr Tom Owen took a more practical and humanitarian view, noting that:

Many children were brought into the world who would have been better left unborn. Many mothers in the Rhondda were too heavily burdened, and a little advice in the direction suggested would avert much suffering and misery.⁸⁰

But this was not a view shared by the majority of the council, and 16 of the 25 councillors present voted to express their disapproval of Edmonton's actions.

⁷⁹ K Fisher, 'Clearing up misconceptions: The campaign to set up birth control clinics in south Wales between the wars', *Welsh History Review*, 19, 1, (June 1998), p. 107.

⁸⁰ *Western Mail*, 11 March 1926; *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 19 March 1926.

Finally, after a number of setbacks, a birth control clinic was established in the Rhondda in 1935, which met at the Carnegie Welfare Centre. As consultation with the doctors, and any appliances recommended to the women, were free, the clinic should have been fairly popular. Like other birth control clinics in the area, however, the facility in the Rhondda was underused.⁸¹ This was partly the result of restrictions regarding who could attend the clinic, which was limited to women who had been specially recommended as being in severe danger if they were to fall pregnant again. In addition there was an unwillingness on the part of some women to attend.⁸²

The advice, however well meaning would have been difficult for many couples to put into practice. Artificial means of contraception, such as condoms and diaphragms, were not widely accessible to the public outside of the clinics, and even where they were available, they would have been too expensive for working-class couples to purchase regularly. There was also a certain amount of stigma and embarrassment attached to buying such articles, even for married couples, and a general feeling prevailed that attempts to regulate family size were not wholly acceptable. The only methods remaining, therefore, were abstinence and coitus interruptus, both of which depended upon the co-operation of men and were highly unreliable. It appears that there was little that could be done by women to prevent conception.

Although means of prevention were in short supply, there was plenty of advice available for women to bring on the menses, or to use the contemporary term 'remove obstructions'. It has been mentioned in other studies that advertisements appeared regularly in the local press offering women advice or aid in preventing a pregnancy from progressing.⁸³

⁸¹ Joanna Bourke, *Working class cultures in Britain*, p. 56 - Pontypridd clinic saw on average 5 women per week.

⁸² SWCC: RUDC: Report of the Medical Officer of Health, 1935, p. 44.

⁸³ See Michael Lieven, *Senghenydd*, p. 128; Russell Davies, *Secret Sins: Sex, violence and society in Carmarthenshire 1870-1920*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 128.

One such advert, which appeared frequently, was for 'Dr White's Pink Pills' which guaranteed to 'restore regularity', and women were invited to send off for information regarding methods of 'removal'. In one edition of the *Rhondda Leader*, in 1902, a notice placed by Mr P. Blanchard of London recommended that:

Every woman should send two stamps for our 32 page illustrated book, containing valuable information how all irregularities and obstructions may be entirely avoided or removed by simple means, recommended by eminent physicians as the only safe, sure and genuine remedy. Never fails.⁸⁴

For women who could not afford such information, there were always 'traditional' methods that they could use in order to induce a miscarriage. These were often passed down from their mothers, or gained from neighbours or friends, and included such advice as jumping up and down, taking a hot bath, using slippery elm bark, lead shots or a number of other noxious mixtures. Women could be prosecuted under the Offences against the Person Act of 1868 for bringing on a miscarriage, but most women believed that they were simply bringing on their late period, especially if they were only using the methods outlined above. These activities were unlikely to produce the desired results, however, and although some women then resigned themselves to the prospect of another child, others were prepared to use the more drastic means of instrumental abortion. The complications arising from such an endeavour provide clear evidence of the result that women sought to achieve, and newspapers were full of information regarding attempted abortions that required medical attention. These reports were quite graphic in their descriptions of abortions using toothbrushes, crochet hooks and knitting needles.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *Rhondda Leader*, 15 March 1902.

⁸⁵ GRO: D/D CON 298/1/1, Cases detailed in Return of Prisoners in the Ton Pentre Area for trial at the Quarter Sessions 1912-1924; in the records of the local Petty Sessions and contemporary newspaper reports.

Women seeking abortion were forced to turn to back street abortionists and others who were known in the area to perform such a service, as under the Infant Life (Preservation) Act of 1929 doctors were permitted to perform a termination only in order to save the life of the mother. Some of those performing abortions had been qualified nurses, but others had only experience to recommend them, and hygiene standards and success rates varied widely from one practitioner to another. The operation was a dangerous one and some women died as a result, usually of infection, haemorrhaging or septic peritonitis (blood poisoning) through the use of unsterilised equipment, and many more were forced to seek medical attention as a result of internal injuries which could lead to prolonged health problems and even infertility. Although doctors could not help women who sought an abortion by performing the operation, they could attend injuries that might be inflicted during the process, of which there were many. According to one report, the admissions of women to Llwynypia Hospital with injuries associated with an attempt to procure a miscarriage increased in the 1920s, prompting concern regarding the amount of abortions and attempted abortions that were taking place.⁸⁶ The number of deaths reported to be a result of the procedure certainly gave the impression that abortion was a fairly widespread means of controlling family size: figures estimated by the Ministry of Health suggested that 13 per cent of the maternal deaths in the Rhondda between 1923 and 1929 were the result of an abortion.⁸⁷

Although the risks of undergoing such an operation were well documented, women were willing to chance an abortion rather than continue with the pregnancy. The reasons for this were manifest. A report written by birth control advocate Alice Jenkins in 1938 simultaneously blamed social conditions which did not allow women to consider continuing

⁸⁶ Report on Maternal Mortality in Wales, p. 71.

⁸⁷ Report on Maternal Mortality in Wales, 1932, table D, p. 74.

an unplanned pregnancy, and inadequate forms of birth control which were often too expensive for working-class couples to use, for the large numbers of women seeking abortion.⁸⁸ The combination of these resulted in pregnancies that women simply did not feel that they could continue with, especially during turbulent times. Thus, the desperation felt by Mrs. Anne Watkins, a 35-year-old mother of nine from Cymmer, when she discovered that she was once again pregnant was something that many working-class women could sympathise with.⁸⁹ Other times, women were willing to endanger their lives in this way in order to remove evidence of misconduct. Mrs Mary Roberts sought an illegal operation in 1922 because the baby she was expecting was not her husband's, and perhaps more common was the termination of a child which would have been born outside of marriage. This was the situation that 23-year-old Agnes Bennett, of Blaenclydach, found herself in before she died as the result of an abortion in 1919.⁹⁰

The cases that received attention from the press were usually those in which something had gone wrong; either the woman had been injured and forced to seek medical attention, or the operation had resulted in the death of the pregnant woman. It is important to recognise that such cases represented only a small percentage of abortions, and that many attempts were successful and thus never came to the attention of the authorities. The courts dealt with women who had been caught attempting to bring about a miscarriage fairly harshly, but the fate of the woman who conducted the abortion was worse. Those causing death through an 'illegal operation' were charged with wilful murder, and could be made to serve a prison sentence as punishment. In 1922 Thomas John Francis was charged alongside

⁸⁸ Alice Jenkins, *Conscript Parenthood? The Problem of Secret Abortion*, (London, 1938), Chapter III.

⁸⁹ *Western Mail*, 11 December 1923.

⁹⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 29 September 1922; *Western Mail*, 1 June 1919.

an abortionist for inciting his late girlfriend to abort their child; he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment, while Alice Maud Evans, the 32-year-old mother of four from Treorchy who carried out the abortion, was sentenced to 3 months' imprisonment.⁹¹ Although the penalties were harsh, and abortion was a dangerous thing to do, women were often faced with little choice, and for them it represented the only way in which they could take charge of their fertility.⁹² It was infinitely better than continuing with a pregnancy that would put increased strain upon bodies already weakened by poor health and nutrition and add another member to already overcrowded households.

Women, therefore, undoubtedly suffered as a result of their living conditions; childbirth and domestic labour killed and debilitated women as much as the work in the mines affected their men.⁹³ They were weakened, perhaps to a greater extent than other family members, by their poor diet and the standard of housing, and the situation was compounded by the fact that there were few health care facilities available. There was an isolation hospital at Tyntyla, but when it opened in 1902 it had accommodation for only 32 patients. Other health services in existence were those attached to collieries, such as the Pentwyn Hospital which was built for the workmen and officials of the Ocean Company collieries in Treorchy and Ton Pentre, but it is unclear whether their resources were extended to the dependants of the miners. In 1927, a hospital was established in Treberbert with grants from the Miners' Welfare Fund and subscriptions from the local miners. There was a gynaecological ward, but only a limited number of women could be treated there, and despite consistent campaigning by the Medical officer of Health for the Rhondda the facilities in the

⁹¹ *Western Mail*, 24 November 1922.

⁹² Patricia Knight, 'Women and abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop Journal*, 4, (1997), p. 59.

⁹³ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal', p. 124.

district were never sufficient for its population. Women's health, especially that of those who were married, also suffered from their exclusion from the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHI) of 1911. Whereas the scheme allowed working men to consult a doctor free of charge, it did not cover dependants, and married women could only join the scheme if they were workers in their own right. To call a doctor out otherwise was very expensive, and something that was only resorted to in an emergency. Usually, minor ailments were treated with traditional remedies, such as using goose grease on the chest to cure a cold.

In addition to the physical difficulties caused by the conditions of housing and health, working-class families also had to contend with dramatic fluctuations in the household income, which were the cause of much worry and stress. In the years leading up to the First World War, at the peak of the coal industry in the Rhondda, wages were high, but could often be unstable as a result of erratic employment and the uncertain nature of work in the pits. Colliery work was hazardous, and the volatile nature of pits in south Wales meant that they were susceptible to explosion and flooding as well as accidents resulting from roof falls and other incidents. Mishaps such as these often resulted in injuries which led to absences from work, and could even mark the end of a miner's working life; in the worst case, they could result in the loss of life. Occurrences such as explosion or flooding had an even greater impact on the families of the south Wales miners because of the ways in which they worked. It was common for fathers and sons to work on the same shift, following the 'buttie' system where the son worked alongside his father in order to learn the trade. This system had the advantage of easing the housework for the wife, but in the event of an accident it meant that a number of men from the same household could be lost at the same time.

One such disaster took place in the 'Little Pit' of Wattstown colliery in the Rhondda Fach in 1905. Between 120 and 130 men were working there at the time of the disaster and, in spite of rescue attempts, the majority of the men were lost. Women arrived at the scene with their children and other relatives almost immediately upon hearing the news:

The most pitiful of all were the women who came flocking to the scene, bringing their little ones with them. Theirs were faces shrouded in veils of hopeless tears. They stood there trembling with grief, and woman-like wanting to help.⁹⁴

The women were brought face to face with the extent of the tragedy as the recovery of bodies, and frequently only body parts, began. If those volunteering to exhume the bodies of the men were unable to recognise one of their fellow workmates, or a piece of his clothing or equipment, women were often called in for the purpose of identification.

The disaster at Wattstown was one of the worst in the history of the district, and received much attention in the south Wales press. The story of the explosion, subsequent rescue attempts and the description of the scene in the aftermath made for grisly, though compelling, reading. The most poignant aspect of the report, however, was the human side of the tragedy. This was brought home to the readers by the personal stories of countless women who had lost members of their households and families, such as that of Mrs Gibson of Ynyshir who lost her husband, son, brother and father in the disaster. The emphasis upon the presence of the women at the pithead reminds later generations that miners involved in such disasters often left behind a number of dependents, upon whom the loss of a wage earner would have had a catastrophic effect, possibly resulting in the break up of the family.

⁹⁴ *Western Mail*, 12 July 1905.

Although incidents such as this provide the greatest illustration of the dangers of colliery work, it has been pointed out that more men were killed or injured carrying out daily work, and injuries as a result of mishaps with tools and trams were common. It must have been a source of constant worry for the housewife, when her husband and sons left for their shifts each day, that they would not return. The grief that this caused is eloquently captured in the novel *Cwmardy* when Len was dispatched, following the death of fellow collier Billy Bristol, to inform his widow. As he walked down the street:

Neighbours were already flocking to the doorways as though drawn by some invisible magnet. All of them knew intuitively, as soon as they saw Len, that an accident had occurred, and though Len tried to walk casually up the street, every woman went white as he approached. Only when he had passed did the colour come back to their cheeks.⁹⁵

Upon hearing the news, the widow's thoughts immediately turned to her children, realising the effect that the loss of the breadwinner would have upon the family, both emotionally and financially. Compensation for widows was not always an automatic right, and the amount payable, and the means by which it was paid, was at the discretion of the employers. Nor was the issue always straightforward. The monies awarded to the widows of the victims of the disaster at the Universal Pit, Senghenydd, in 1913, for example, had certain provisos attached. They were expected to provide a marriage certificate alongside their request, thus ensuring that women who had cohabited with, or who had borne illegitimate children to the miners prior to the explosion, found it difficult to make claims.⁹⁶ It was not just the death of the breadwinner that was the cause of financial difficulty. An injury sustained in the pits could also have serious implications upon the family income. Minor accidents which took

⁹⁵ Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy: The story of a Welsh mining valley*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), p. 141.

⁹⁶ Catherine Welsby, "'Warning Her as to Her Future Behaviour': The Lives of the Widows of the Senghenydd Mining Disaster of 1913", *Llafur* 6, 4, (1995), p. 97.

place on a daily basis meant that a miner might be unable to work until recovered, and even then, might not be able to generate as much coal, and therefore wages, as he used to.

Accidents and deaths resulting from the dangerous work in the mines were hard to avoid, and extremely difficult to plan for. In 1915, the *Welsh Outlook* published a number of examples of 'typical' colliers' budgets, which illustrated the expenditure of a miner's household during a period of steady employment. The examples demonstrated that even in fairly prosperous times, there was little scope for saving for the possibility of unemployment or injury. The largest percentage of the budget was spent on food and rent but, in addition, there were various clubs and bills that also had to be paid, for example, insurance, gas, coal, and payments to the sick club.⁹⁷ These expenses came within their budget during prosperous times, even though there was little left for items such as clothing and amusements and none left to save. The same bills, however, had to be paid during times of strike, death and financial hardship when income was much lower.

Short interruptions to the family income were difficult to sustain, but the prolonged difficulties of the inter-war period saw the majority of Rhondda inhabitants in a precarious financial situation. Following a brief boom immediately after the cessation of hostilities in 1918, the coal industry experienced a slump and unemployment was rife. The reliance of the Rhondda upon coal ensured that in times of economic crisis a large percentage of found themselves out of work, and that those who were employed often worked fewer hours or received less pay. In addition, the 1920s and 1930s were characterised by industrial disputes, with many strikes and lockouts taking place. Financial assistance, both in times of dispute and unemployment, was in short supply in the troubled coalfield; relief given by the Poor

⁹⁷ 'Colliers' Family Budgets', *Welsh Outlook*, 2 August 1915.

Law Guardians was in the form of a loan only and would have to be paid back when the men resumed work. Further, assistance given by the Poor Law was for women and dependants only, and the men were forced to either live off their wives' assistance, be fed at soup kitchens or leave the district in search of work elsewhere. During times of strike, union members received help from the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF), but the number of disputes taking place and fewer members meant that funds were low and soon dried up. The whole of the community, not just the miners and their families, became affected by the problems of the coalfield; we have seen that the fortunes of the shopkeepers were closely linked to those of the colliery, as were those of men in other trades and occupations. Mrs M grew up in Porth, and was the daughter of a builder; their family saw a reduction in their income during strikes, as miners simply could not afford to pay for his work. Often, her father would receive 'swaps' in payment rather than cash.⁹⁸

These problems lasted throughout the inter-war period, and in the 1930s were exacerbated by the introduction of means tests and cuts to unemployment benefits. Unemployment and the resulting financial difficulties were a cause of much concern to some observers in the 1930s, fuelling the publication of a number of reports into the distressed or 'special' areas. In all these studies, however, the experiences of the women were bypassed, and the emphasis was exclusively placed upon the way in which men were affected. Presumably, women were not part of the study because they themselves were not classed as 'unemployed'. This was not just the case with contemporary observers, however. While documenting 'Life on Circular 703', Jeremy writes entirely from the point of view of the men and the hardships that they suffered, without paying any attention to the women and how they

⁹⁸ Interview with Mrs M, August 2000.

fought to maintain their families.⁹⁹ In contrast, the authors of the study *Men Without Work* noted that women 'bore the burden of want' to the greater extent during prolonged periods of male unemployment, and Hannington also paid a great deal of attention to the effects upon women.¹⁰⁰ The latter wrote of the difficulty women experienced in having to provide meals under pressure, and repudiated the claim that ill health and undernourishment was the fault of ignorant mothers, a claim which was widely circulated in the press.

In reality, the housewife and mother played a very important role in the survival of the family during periods of strike and unemployment. Her skills were tested to the utmost, and her family depended upon her to provide the necessary provisions. The biggest problem for the housewife to overcome was that of how to stretch resources to feed the family and pay the rent when in receipt of a small income.¹⁰¹ Ellen Ross notes that while the practice of men handing over their wages to women gave them incredible power within the home, it also made them responsible for sustaining their family under extremely trying circumstances, a responsibility that their husband knew very little about.¹⁰² Men tended to leave the management of the budget to the women, and were largely ignorant of the ways in which the money was spent and the difficulties that women experienced in trying to make the budget stretch and ensure that the family was sufficiently fed and clothed. This division of labour within the household meant that in times of unemployment the housewife was put under great strain, and the situation could be exacerbated if husbands chose to withhold or spend some of the money. Many examples can be found in the pages of the local press, like that of Sarah

⁹⁹ P. Jeremy, 'Life on Circular 703: the Crisis of Destitution in the South Wales Coalfield during the Lockout of 1926', *Llafur*, 2, 2, (Spring, 1977).

¹⁰⁰ *Men Without Work: A Report Made to the Pilgrim Trust*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), pp. 112, 126-28, 231; Hannington, *The problem of distressed areas*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Hannington, *The problem of distressed areas*, p. 73.

¹⁰² Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks', p. 7.

Davies, of Mardy, who was only married for ten months when she decided to leave her husband because of his refusal to give her money for housekeeping expenses. On one occasion, according to her evidence at the separation hearing, he kept her without money for six weeks, during which time she kept herself by dressmaking, but this was not always possible due to her bad health.¹⁰³ For women in such a position, there were few options available. Separated husbands were ordered to pay for the maintenance of their wife and children, although they were often unable to because of their own lack of finances, and many men appeared in court charged with the non-payment of maintenance. If the man did not have the money, there was little that the courts could do. For married women, the situation was even more hopeless; they either had to persuade their husband to give them more money or try and manage the best they could on what they did receive, which is what the majority did.

There was some help available for families, although assistance was generally low, and became lower as a result of the cuts to unemployment benefits in the 1930s. Prior to this, financial assistance from the Board of Guardians took the form of a relief note to be spent at local stores, and applied only to the dependants of the unemployed. In 1926 a married woman could receive 12s and 4s per child from the Guardians, but later the scale dropped to 10s for the wife, and 3s per child, or 2s if the child was receiving meals at school. This amount did not last long.¹⁰⁴ Far from being passive or dependent when faced with these difficulties, women proved themselves extremely pro-active in gathering resources, and could rely upon a number of strategies which they had developed in order to try and make ends meet. Such strategies included making use of various forms of credit, work, poor relief, using produce

¹⁰³ *Rhondda Leader*, 10 February 1910.

¹⁰⁴ Jeremy, 'Life on circular 703', p. 68.

from the allotment and the rigid balance of the family budget.¹⁰⁵ As already noted in a previous chapter, women were able to contribute to the household income in times of necessity by entering informal employment, and were also able to manipulate assistance in the form of medicine and food, and money from Guardians. They were also extremely knowledgeable about charity assistance which, alongside good management, could increase resources.¹⁰⁶ Tactics such as these were employed in addition to using shop credit, borrowing from friends and neighbours and using the local pawnbroker. Traditional methods that women had of keeping afloat, however, became more difficult as neighbours found themselves in the same position and did not have extra money to lend, and credit could not be obtained from the shops as the women were probably still in debt from the 1921 dispute.

In particularly difficult times, and not necessarily in the troubled twenties and thirties, some women turned to more drastic measures in order to provide the basic necessities for their children and husbands, such as stealing coal or food.¹⁰⁷ In the early part of the century, the belief existed that there existed a 'criminal class' who were 'born to crime' and could not be rehabilitated. In the inter-war period, however, it was believed that ordinary people could be drawn into crime as a result of their social and economic circumstances.¹⁰⁸ Both the press reports from the 1920s and 1930s and police notebooks from earlier in the period indicate that one of the most popular charges against women was theft, which ran ahead of the other common charges of drunkenness and assault.¹⁰⁹ Most crimes perpetrated by women

¹⁰⁵ E. M. Roberts, 'Women's Strategies 1890-1940', in J Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love*, p. 223.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Digby, 'Poverty, health and the politics of gender in Britain 1870-1948', in Anne Digby and John Stewart (eds.), *Gender, Health and Welfare*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ This is clearly illustrated in the Notebook of PC James Row, Penygraig and Naval collieries, Ynyshir, 1882.

¹⁰⁸ D.J.V. Jones, *Crime and policing in the twentieth century: The south Wales experience*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 74-75.

¹⁰⁹ Examples can be found in local newspaper reports of proceedings taking place in the local Police Courts and the Glamorgan Assizes, and are documented in GRO: MS. D/D COM 166, Journal of Treorchy Police, 1974-5; GRO: MS. D/D CON 189, Notebook of PC Thomas Thomas, Tonypany, 1900-1902, and GRO: MS. D/D

throughout the period, however, seem consistently to have been a result of hardship rather than personal gain. For example, in 1875 Gwenllian Owen was charged with stealing two flannel shirts, for which her punishment was 12 months' hard labour.¹¹⁰ Similarly, in 1899 Florence McKay and Celia Elliot, charged with stealing coal from Pentre Colliery siding, were fined 10s and 2s 6d respectively.¹¹¹ It appears that women generally stole what they needed, such as coal, food, money, or items they could pawn rather than luxury items, indicating that crime was a necessity brought about by their economic situation rather than simply a lifestyle. When Sarah Prior, a 56-year-old widow, appeared in court for stealing articles from the local Woolworths store, she was reported to have pleaded for the magistrate to be lenient with her as:

she had not stolen in her life and had not been to a police court before. Throughout her life she has followed a Christian cause. Recently she had buried her husband and was only in receipt of 16s weekly.¹¹²

It was not only adults who stole in order to supplement their income. Young girls and boys appeared at the juvenile sessions of the Quarter sessions charged with stealing items such as coal, clothing and food, and were mostly ordered to pay a fine as punishment.¹¹³ If caught gaining money or goods through dubious means, high penalties were imposed in order to act as a deterrent for others. But ignorance of the way in which women managed the household provided an ideal defence for men like William Phillips who, alongside his wife

CON 179, Notebook of PC James Row of Penygraig and Ynyshir Colliers, 1882. For more information on women and criminal activity, see D.J.V. Jones, *Crime and policing*.

¹¹⁰ Journal of Treorchy Police Station, 1875.

¹¹¹ *Rhondda Leader*, 16 December 1899.

¹¹² *Rhondda Gazette*, 3 February 1934.

¹¹³ GRO: MS. Q/S/J, Juvenile Convictions at Glamorgan Assizes; Miskin Petty Sessions: Registers of the Juvenile Court, 1933-1940. (The Miskin Petty Sessional Division included the Rhondda Valleys and Pontypridd.)

Margaret, appeared before the police court charged with aiding and abetting his wife in her fraudulent claim for poor law relief. The couple had obtained £59. Whilst Mrs Phillips pleaded guilty, Mr Phillips pleaded not guilty, claiming ignorance due to the fact that his wife was responsible for financial matters.¹¹⁴

It is apparent that throughout the period financial difficulties put an increasing strain upon the household unit. Contemporary observers drew attention to the impact that government policy, such as cuts in unemployment assistance and the introduction of the means test, had upon the families of the unemployed; it drove women to despair, men to depression, families to steal and led to the break up of families.¹¹⁵ Financial difficulties placed a great strain upon family life and were manifested in reports of neglect, separation and inability to cope.

Economic difficulties, in fact, were explicitly used as an explanation for a number of male suicides reported in the district. From 1918, the level of recorded suicides is available for both men and women in the Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health. The figures given illustrate that female suicide levels were lower overall than those of men and remained more or less static throughout the period. Conversely, male levels illustrate a number of peaks and troughs. High figures were recorded for men in 1924, 1930, 1933 and 1937, in a period when there was considerable economic pressure, prompting Mr R. J. Rhys, the Rhondda Coroner, to comment upon the 'regular epidemic' of suicides in the Rhondda.¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding the difficulties inherent with using suicide statistics, these figures provide a useful guide. They probably only represent a small number of actual suicides, because of

¹¹⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 10 January 1931.

¹¹⁵ Hannington, *The problem of distressed areas*, pp. 70-71.

¹¹⁶ Figures taken from the RUDC Reports of the Medical Officer of Health; *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 4 July 1936.

discrepancies in the methods of reporting them, concealment and ambiguity regarding whether a death was suspicious or not. This is particularly important for the suicides of women, as concealment was more common in the case of attempts by females, either on purpose or because suicide was not recognised as such because of the method used.¹¹⁷ Hanging and knife wounds were hard to deny, but drowning was notoriously difficult and was often confused with accidental death. This made the categorisation of women's death particularly difficult, as the methods most popular for women were the ones most easily confused, for example, drowning, and the one least likely to succeed, poisoning.¹¹⁸

Statistics, however, do not give any indication of why a suicide was attempted, although speculation was abundant in the press. Economic reasons were believed to have an affect upon male suicide rates; indeed, the link was made in some reports, which offered long-term unemployment and the resulting depression as the cause for the majority of male suicides.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, although we have seen that male unemployment also affected women to a great degree, economic difficulty was seldom, if ever, mentioned as a possible cause of a female suicide. The most common explanations given by the press were shame brought about by pregnancy, mental health problems and emotional issues. The extremely sympathetic press report following the death of Mrs Catherine Waite, aged 56 of Tylorstown, suggested that she had been depressed for some time, and was unable to cope with the death of her sons at the Front.¹²⁰ Mrs Evans of Tonypany, an active member of church and drama groups, hanged herself in 1936; this time long term health problems were given as the reason.¹²¹ Similarly, after Mrs Hetty Goodfellow, a 57-year-old widow of Treherbert, gassed

¹¹⁷ A. Alvarez, *The savage God: A study of suicide*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1972), p. 44.

¹¹⁸ O. Anderson *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1987), pp. 18-22.

¹¹⁹ Lieper, 'Health and Unemployment in Glamorgan', p. 65.

¹²⁰ *Rhondda Leader*, 13 May 1916.

¹²¹ *Rhondda Leader*, 14 March 1936.

herself, she was diagnosed by the press as being depressed following an operation earlier in the year.¹²² Finally, in 1936, at the height of the economic difficulties, Mrs Rachel Ann Morgan of Blaenrhondda died following consumption of carbolic acid, leaving her husband and eight children. In this case, the coroner settled upon a verdict of suicide in a fit of depression due to ill health.¹²³ More recently, historians have argued along the same lines, and the explanations given are closely aligned to the ones which Alvarez identifies in English literature; a cry for help or the result of unrequited love.¹²⁴ From her research of London and Southwark in the mid-Victorian period, Anderson adds loneliness, bereavement and emotional disappointments to this list.¹²⁵ In fact, only Russell Davies has suggested economic pressures as a possible reason for women to commit, or attempt to commit, suicide.¹²⁶

The link between poverty and instances of child neglect, domestic violence and separation was also made in the press in the inter-war period, although the problems were not just ones of the 1920s and 1930s. Previously, the intemperate nature of some groups of society was blamed, but this idea altered with the unique conditions of the inter-war period. In 1936, a case was reported in the *Free Press and Rhondda Leader* of a Penygraig couple living in 'extreme poverty', their only income being benefit from the unemployment exchange. The couple had two young sons, whom the NSPCC were extremely concerned about. It was reported that although the boys were fairly well clothed, the clothes were always dirty, that they had to sleep on the kitchen table and chairs and that they often suffered from sores on their body. It was also reported that the house was never clean, and contained a

¹²² *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 20 June 1931.

¹²³ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 20 June 1936; 4 July 1936.

¹²⁴ Alvarez, *The savage God*, pp. 70-72.

¹²⁵ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 121-2.

¹²⁶ Russell Davies, ' "Do Not Go Gentle into the Good Night?": Women and Suicide in Carmarthenshire, c.1860-1920', in A.V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*, p. 101.

foul smell. The laziness and lack of intelligence of the parents, as well as their poverty, was hinted at more than once.¹²⁷ Some cases, however, were the result of intentional neglect, as women became increasingly worn down by their circumstances, and frustrations became more difficult to bear. In 1894, Margaret Jenkins killed her child; the court was informed that the family was in such poverty a few weeks before the event that they had nothing but bread to eat.¹²⁸ More commonly, the incidents were the result of increasing frustration that the inhabitants felt as a result of their situations, which would often be taken out on other family members. In 1923, William Williams appeared in Porth Police Court charged with unlawfully wounding his 16-year-old daughter Gwen by striking her with a poker. In summing up, the magistrate said: 'you are a type of man very rare in the Rhondda, thank goodness. We have men who drink, but they don't assault their daughters with pokers. A more brutal thing we can't think of.'¹²⁹ Evidence from the Petty and Quarter Sessions records and from the newspapers, however, suggests that this situation was far more common than the magistrate maintained. Since the Rhondda Branch of NSPCC was formed in 1932, it had been increasingly called upon to intervene in cases of neglect. In the first four years of its existence it dealt with 1,018 cases, involving 2,698 children.¹³⁰

Such difficult circumstances could lead to quarrelling between couples, and it has also been suggested that long-term financial pressures sometimes resulted in violence and cruelty. In their study of working-class districts of Liverpool in the inter-war period, Pat Ayers and Jan Lambertz analysed the impact of financial difficulties on marriages and violence within

¹²⁷ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 10 October 1936.

¹²⁸ *Western Mail*, 11 June 1894.

¹²⁹ *South Wales News*, 20 July 1923.

¹³⁰ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 4 April 1936.

households, and concluded that it was one of the main causes of domestic disputes.¹³¹

Similarly, Ginzberg has recognised:

Of course poverty took its toll; even the best-natured wife and the most devoted mother – and many were neither good-natured nor devoted – would snap under the strain. Conflict could not be avoided when her husband wanted a shilling to have a blow with, while she wanted it for the clothing fund so that one of the youngsters might have a pair of shoes when school opened. And it was not always easy to avoid quarrelling, especially during spells of bad weather when the men were continually under foot.¹³²

The cases of domestic violence reported in the local press would certainly confirm that view.

Of those cases appearing in the police courts, overwhelmingly the violence was accounted for on the grounds of poverty or of drunkenness in addition to wives being accused of ‘nagging’ or not providing for their husbands as a wife should. When Elizabeth Mullins appeared before Ystrad police court to charge her husband with desertion, details of the couple’s violent relationship emerged. Mr Mullins was accused of consistently assaulting his wife by using a variety of implements, including a poker and a hammer, and the police had been called to the house on a number of occasions to intervene. In his statement, he asserted that his wife was drunk and violent, a statement which was denied by an attending policeman who claimed that he had never seen Elizabeth drunk when he was called to their home.

Nonetheless, the marriage was clearly a violent one, in which Elizabeth often retaliated.¹³³

Although most of the cases reported were those of violence against women by men, it was not unusual for fights and arguments between female household members to be reported, and also acts of violence upon men by women. In 1882 William Thomas Hanover summonsed

¹³¹ P. Ayers and J. Lambertz, ‘Marriage Relations, Money, and Domestic Violence in Working Class Liverpool, 1919-1939’, in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love*.

¹³² E. Ginzberg, *A World without Work*, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. 161.

¹³³ *Glamorgan Free press and Rhondda Leader*, 14 November 1931.

Emma Horrington on account of her assault against him.¹³⁴ In most of the cases appearing before the police court, the couple were advised to separate and pay costs.

The experience of persistent cruelty or violence, whether a result of poverty, drink or otherwise, was the main reason given by women seeking separation orders from their husbands. A number of women appeared in court following an act passed in 1878 which allowed working-class married women the opportunity to sue their husbands for separation and maintenance allowance. Although couples were sometimes advised to attempt reconciliation, separation orders were granted where it was clear that they would not be able to resume their marriage and the husband was ordered to pay maintenance. Some of the court appearances heralded the end of very short marriages, in which violence was endured from the outset, like that of Diana Long whose husband had started beating her after only two weeks of marriage. Other marriages which experienced violence from husbands lasted much longer, however, like that of Sarah Morris of Tonypandy, which kept going for 35 years, before the couple separated on the grounds of persistent cruelty.¹³⁵ Legal separation was the only option available to most working-class women in this situation, as although women had been able to seek divorce since the 1857 Divorce Act, instigating proceedings was difficult and expensive. Bourke estimates that the cost of an uncontested divorce was around £60-80, and although help could be provided for those earning under £4 a week, the waiting list was very long.¹³⁶ Financially it was more difficult for working-class women to commence divorce proceedings as they seldom had income of their own with which they could pay legal fees. Only those with salaries of their own could afford the luxury of divorce, such as Mrs

¹³⁴ GRO: MS. D/D COM 179, Notebook of PC James Row, 1882.

¹³⁵ *Rhondda Gazette*, 27 January 1934; 10 February 1934.

¹³⁶ Bourke, *Working class cultures in Britain*, p. 48.

Edith Maud Jones, a Tonypany schoolteacher who was granted a decree nisi from her collier husband on the grounds of his cruelty, desertion and misconduct.¹³⁷ Divorce was such an unusual occurrence that cases were reported in the local press as juicy stories of adultery and deception, and most of those reported were of men divorcing their wives, usually on the basis of adultery, rather than vice versa. This was mostly due to the fact that it was easier for men to divorce their wives. Under the 1857 Act a man could be granted a divorce as a result of his wife's adultery, but a woman had to prove adultery in addition to other grounds. This changed in the 1930s when legislation was altered so that women could divorce husbands because of adultery alone, which enabled women such as Violet Owen of Tylorstown and Evelyn Mary Davies of Treherbert to divorce their husbands for 'misconduct' with other women.¹³⁸ Divorce was never really an option for most women, however, and only a small number took place; only 16 women were categorised as divorced in the 1931 census, and legal separations remained the most popular way in which to end a marriage in practical terms.

Separation and divorce, by no means uncommon, affected only a small minority of families in the Rhondda. It was certainly the case that many long marriages existed and many families experienced a happy family life. Nevertheless, a number of households experienced death and separation, cruelty and neglect, which could lead to a break down of the family. In addition, the hard, and sometimes dangerous work and the sanitary condition of both the houses and the district as a whole ensured that, for working-class women, the domestic sphere was not always a place of comfort or safety. The financial difficulties experienced by these women at various points in the period, and especially in the inter-war years, placed

¹³⁷ *Western Mail*, 16 October 1915.

¹³⁸ *Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 18 July 1936.

additional strain upon women. They were faced with the worry of how to provide for their families and underwent a deterioration in their health brought on by malnutrition. But life within the domestic sphere was not always so bleak. Middle-class women had far greater access to labour-saving devices, servants, and finances which could be used to escape the confines of valley life, and home life was easier for those with fewer or no domestic responsibilities. But even for those running working-class households, the home could also provide opportunities for leisure and relaxation, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Leisure

The home, in addition to being a place of work for women, could also provide a private space for leisure, although we shall see that a re-evaluation of what constitutes 'leisure' is required in order to uncover the pursuits of some groups of women. As well as considering home-based leisure, the chapter will also illustrate that a wide variety of forms of leisure and entertainment were available for those women well placed to take advantage of it, namely, single women, spinsters and middle-class women.

The question of how women spent their leisure time is one which has attracted but scant attention, and this has been recognised by feminists and historians of popular culture alike.¹ Historians, both male and female, who engage in studies of working-class leisure, have in the past focussed upon leisure as a whole without recognising that women might have other pursuits and forms of leisure distinct from the activities of men.² In fact women's leisure developed differently, and continues to differ in the way in which it is shaped.³ This focus on leisure as a whole has meant that, as Deem and other feminists have pointed out, greater emphasis has been placed upon male leisure activities, thus rendering women invisible in the field of leisure studies. A commendable exception to this is Andrew Davies's

¹ Much of the work carried out in the sphere of women's leisure has been undertaken by feminist sociologists, such as M. Abendstern, 'Expression and Control: A study of working-class leisure and gender 1918-1939: A case study of Rochdale using oral history methods', Unpublished Ph.D (University of Essex), 1986, p. 1; E. Wimbush and M. Talbot (eds.), *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure*, (Open University Press, 1988), p. xiv; E. Green, S. Hebron, & D. Woodward, *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 39. But historians of leisure have also made this point, see for example J. K. Walton and J. Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 4.

² Rosemary Deem, *All work and no play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p. 8.

³ Wimbush & Talbot, *Relative Freedoms*, p. xiv.

study of leisure, gender and poverty in working-class communities in Salford and Manchester, in which he draws attention to both the well-known and 'hidden' leisure pursuits of married working-class women, and also seeks to include the experiences of younger, single women. In so doing, he presents a fairly rounded picture of working-class women's leisure in these communities.⁴

The invisibility of women in the sphere of recreation and leisure is particularly noticeable in the histories of the South Wales Coalfield wherein much attention has been paid to the activities of miners outside their work hours. Accordingly, studies discussing leisure and social life will often include public houses, rugby, choirs and workmen's institutes as forms of recreation, without recognising that these were attended by only a percentage of the population. Further, women have even been left out of discussions of activities which were clearly shared and enjoyed by both sexes. In his study of choirs and music in the south Wales Valleys, for example, Gareth Williams readily admits that his work suffers from a heavy male bias.⁵ This is so in spite of the many sources such as newspaper reports, chapel histories and the reminiscences of inhabitants, which illustrate that music was a popular and respectable form of leisure activity for women. The same criticism can also be made of studies of cinemas and dancing, both of which enjoyed wide female participation. This lack of attention to female involvement can be explained in part by a tendency to make generalisations about women's leisure activities and assumptions about their role in the community. A further criticism that can be made of studies on leisure is that it is commonly assumed that activities outside the home always took place under the auspices of the local religious institution. B.

⁴ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992).

⁵ Gareth Williams, *Valley of Song: Music and Society in Wales, 1840-1914*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 4.

Naylor, for example, comments that 'women's social life was catered for through chapel guilds, choirs and prayer meetings' without considering additional forms of entertainment.⁶ Similarly, when Cunningham discusses women's social life, he refers mostly, although not exclusively, to those activities which took place in the space of the home and the street.⁷ Whilst it was true that for many women these would have been the main locations of social activity, the exclusion of other forms results in an extremely narrow picture of the types of leisure that were available to women. This is especially true of the latter part of the period when, with the onset of the secularisation of leisure, the introduction of more 'modern' forms of entertainment, such as the cinema and the proliferation of both spectator sports and sporting activity, allowed women greater choice than was previously available.

The assumption that women's leisure was limited to the home and the chapel can partly be blamed upon the presentation of women in coalfield histories in the role of wives and mothers who had little time or money to enjoy leisure pursuits. Miners' wives, however, represented only one group of women in society, and concentration upon them causes the neglect of other females in Rhondda society, such as middle-class and single women of all ages, who often enjoyed vigorous social lives. This chapter will illustrate that women's activities could be more wide ranging than simply home and family, and that there was in fact a considerable diversity of women's experiences of leisure which can be attributed to a variety of factors which influenced women's lives. That is not to say, however, that women were not limited in their experiences of leisure. Feminists have argued that women's activities have been constrained to varying degrees by issues such as safety, in addition to

⁶ B. Naylor, *Quakers in the Rhondda 1926 – 1986*, (Chepstow: Maes-Yr-Haf Educational Trust, 1986), p. 16.

⁷ H. Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2, p. 305.

other people's perceptions regarding how women should behave and what was expected of them.⁸ Also important were the practical constraints faced by women. These were often directly a result of factors such as their domestic situation, whether, for example they were married and had dependent children. Other practical constraints they faced were the availability and location of leisure facilities.

The most important factor, however, was whether they had an opportunity to take advantage of the many leisure outlets available to them. Whilst it is clear that a young girl with a disposable income would have ample opportunity to sample the dance halls and to attend the cinema regularly, working-class mothers have been identified as the group least likely to be able to participate in the new leisure age.⁹ As we have already seen, the demands placed upon the wives and mothers of large families, such as washing, cleaning and childcare, were such that little time was left over for leisure. Even if there might have been time to enjoy leisure pursuits outside the home, the financial situation of many of the families, particularly in the poverty stricken decades between the wars, prohibited many working-class women, whether married or single, from taking advantage of them. It was the time factor above all others, however, that constrained the leisure opportunity of working-class wives and mothers. The difficulties facing the mothers of poor, large families in finding time for activities outside the home, and the adverse effect that this had upon their health, was described by one woman in *Working Class Wives*, a study of the conditions facing women in working class districts:

⁸ This point is articulated by Vivienne Griffiths in her contemporary analysis of young women and leisure in West Yorkshire in 'From "Playing Out" to "Dossing Out": Young Women and Leisure', in Wimbush and Talbot (eds.), *Relative Freedoms*, p. 49.

⁹ S. Jones, *Workers at play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-1939*, (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1986), Chpt. 2; Deem, *All Work and No Play?*, p. 6.

I believe myself that one of the biggest difficulties our mothers have is our husbands do not realise we ever need any leisure time. My life for many years consisted of being penned in a kitchen 9 feet square, every fourteen months a baby... until what with the struggle to live and no leisure I used to feel I was just a machine, until I had my first breakdown, and as dark as it was and as hard as it was it gave me the freedom and privilege of having an hour's fresh air.¹⁰

In contrast, a relatively wealthy married woman would have had more options. Greater disposable income, the possibility of employing domestic help and the facilities that the family might have been able to afford all served to increase the recreation time and opportunities available to her. A middle-class family in the 1920s, for example, might have owned a car, which could be driven by the wife, giving her greater freedom and independence to visit friends and family.¹¹

It is clear that working-class married women would have had very different experiences of leisure activity to that of men, and also to that of other groups of women who might be in better financial circumstances. Therefore, in order to gain a fuller understanding of these women's experience of leisure, and to be aware of the many different types of leisure that they were able to take advantage of, it is important that the notion of what constitutes leisure is defined more broadly. Rosemary Deem has suggested that the way in which leisure has previously been defined as activities that take place out of the home and outside of work hours automatically excludes women who were not in paid employment and who spent their time within the home environment.¹² Traditionally, historians seeking to assess how 'spare' time was spent employed a definition of 'spare time' which, feminists have now argued, bore no relation to the experiences of women, especially those of married working-class women.

¹⁰ M. Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives; Their Health and Conditions*, (London: Virago, 1981), 2nd Edition, p. 94.

¹¹ L. Oliver, 'Liberation or Limitation? A Study of Women's Leisure in Bolton, c. 1919-1939', Unpublished Ph. D (University of Lancaster), 1996, p. 8.

¹² Deem, *All work and no play?*, p. 1.

The definition used by Cunningham is a useful example: 'the most obvious way', he proclaims, 'of providing some parameters for the history of leisure is to regard leisure as 'time', it is the time which is left over after work and other obligations have been completed.'¹³ Many women, feminists have argued, did not experience leisure in this form, and Cunningham himself admits that the definition is inadequate for those 'for whom the separation of work and leisure was often meaningless, and whose hours of work defy calculation', and this is especially true of women in the Rhondda, the majority of whom were not engaged in paid employment. Further, some feminists have disputed the rigid distinction which has been made between work and leisure. For many women, both work and leisure took place in the home, and the one was often indistinguishable from the other, leading Abendstern to argue that the terms 'work' and 'leisure' should be broadened and defined before women's experiences can be adequately described.¹⁴ Liz Oliver has similarly pointed out that the nature of domestic work within the home meant that there was no clearly demarcated beginning and end to a woman's working day, and that much of her work took place in the evenings and weekends when her children and husband were home enjoying leisure time.¹⁵ Thus, their leisure did not always take place during the evenings and weekends, and work was not always confined to specific hours during the day in the way that men's work was. This has led feminists to attempt to employ their own definition of leisure, which seeks to include those whose primary role is in the domestic arena. In her contemporary study of Edinburgh mothers with pre-school children, Erica Wimbush claims that the most important aspect of 'leisure' for this group was 'having time and space for

¹³ Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture', p. 289.

¹⁴ Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 2.

¹⁵ Oliver, 'Liberation or Limitation?', p. 93.

themselves to relax away from the pressures of children and the home.’¹⁶ Thus, any form of activity which allowed them the opportunity to do this could be regarded as a leisure activity.

In addition, it has been argued that a fuller notion of what constitutes ‘leisure’ has to be used if the term is taken to encompass the range of activities pursued by women as well as those enjoyed by men. Whereas for men, leisure was generally understood to mean time outside of work hours, and activities taking place outside the home, in pubs, clubs, on sports fields and in music halls, for some women it might be more informal. When Langhammer interviewed women in Manchester about their leisure pursuits between the 1920s and the 1960s, she received wide-ranging notions of what the women themselves perceived to be leisure activities.¹⁷ This study, and others, employed wide-ranging concepts of ‘leisure’, concluding that women’s experiences of, and what they perceived to be, leisure varied immensely, and included those activities held in association with local chapels and churches, commercial forms of leisure such as sports, cinema and theatre, and the more informal, home-based activities, often with a domestic slant, such as shopping, sewing and cooking.

In thus allowing for a broader definition of leisure, this chapter will include, in addition to activities such as sport, cinema and theatre attendance, other pursuits which are not traditionally recognised as ‘leisure’, for example, shopping, participation in educational groups and religious attendance. It has been argued that religious attendance can not be perceived as leisure or free time because, for many people, attendance arose from a sense of obligation and the knowledge that it was expected.¹⁸ But such activities allowed married women time away from the home, and provided for all groups of women an opportunity for

¹⁶ Wimbush, ‘Mothers Meeting’, in Wimbush and Talbot, *Relative Freedoms*, p. 60.

¹⁷ Claire Langhammer, ‘Women’s ‘Leisure’ in the Lifecycle: an oral history study of Manchester women, 1920-1960’, *Women’s History Notebooks*, 2, 2, (1995), pp. 3-11.

¹⁸ Cunningham, ‘Leisure and Culture’, p. 280.

social interaction with others in the locality. As such, the non-traditional forms of leisure mentioned above could legitimately be perceived as 'leisure' for women.

Activities associated with churches and chapels are widely assumed to be the most popular, and sometimes the only, form of acceptable social activity for women, and this was especially true of the early part of the period. When the early migrants began to flood into the Rhondda in the 1870s and 1880s they brought with them cultures and traditions from their rural areas, the majority of which were focussed upon the religious institutions of the various denominations. As the new industrial villages developed, places of worship were erected, or in the case of the Anglican Church, more parish churches were created. Often, they constituted the first public or community buildings in the blossoming villages, and, as the population of the Rhondda continued to expand, so too did the number of places of worship. The entry for the Rhondda in the 1875 *Worrall's Directory for South Wales and Newport* described the religious buildings in the district as being 'very numerous, and being nearly all large ones and of recent erection, have a clean and handsome appearance'. It listed 47 places of worship, even at this early stage in the area's development, representing a variety of denominations, including the Anglican Church, Welsh and English Baptists, Calvinistic Methodists, Primitive Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists, and the Independents.¹⁹ The lack of other community buildings and activities necessarily meant that the churches and chapels served the social, as well as the devotional, aspect of community life. The religious groups therefore held a prominent position within the community, providing a venue for the religious, social and educational demands of the new communities. By the turn of the century, it has been commented, places of worship had become the community school,

¹⁹ *Worrall's Directory for South Wales and Newport*, 1875.

lyceum, church and club all in one.²⁰ This phenomenon was by no means exclusive to the South Wales Coalfield, but was also true of the mining communities in the north of England, where the particular role of religion in the lives of women has also been noted:

The chapels were cultural centres in the village; at least, they were non-drinking, non-gambling social centres, and almost the only legitimate source of entertainment for the women.²¹

The religious centres of south Wales were, too, clearly popular with women, and this is reflected in the membership figures of the local churches and chapels, where women constituted a large percentage of the congregations. Some 62 per cent of members recorded in the 1913 contribution list for Horeb English Baptist Church in Treorchy, for example, were female.²² Even in the inter-war period, the percentage of female members remained fairly stable, accounting for 65 per cent of the membership of The Tabernacle, Porth, and 62 per cent of those attending communion at Penuel English Baptist Church, Trehafod, in 1937.²³ Similar figures exist for other chapels. It should, however, be emphasised that this was not exclusive to the Rhondda, for women formed the majority of congregations elsewhere in the country.²⁴ Their involvement in the churches and chapels was attractive for a wide variety of reasons; as Malmgreen noted in her study of English women and religion, 'religion was many things for women, a shelter, an escape, a consolation, a justification, a discipline, an inspiration'.²⁵

²⁰ W.R. Lambert, 'Some working class attitudes to organised religion in nineteenth century Wales', *Llafur*, 2, 1, (1976), p. 5.

²¹ R. Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics: The effect of Methodism in a Durham mining community*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 130.

²² GRO: MS. D/D Bap 6/6, Horeb English Baptist Church, Treorchy; Contributors' List, 1913.

²³ NLW: W. R. Jones Collection, The Tabernacle, Porth; Membership List, 1926; GRO: MS. D/D Bap 12. Penuel English Baptist Church, Trehafod: Communion Attendance list, 1937.

²⁴ See H. McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 66.

²⁵ Gail Malmgreen, (ed.), *Religion in the lives of English Women, 1760-1930*, (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 8-9.

For many women, attendance at the local church or chapel services arose partly as a result of the respect placed by society upon families who attended services regularly. The chapels or churches then became a forum for the display of a family's respectability, with its members being dressed up in their Sunday best and children put on their best behaviour. In his reminiscences of his childhood in pre-First-World-War Clydach Vale, one of Rhys Davies's strongest memories was the uncomfortable feeling that he experienced every Sunday when he was made to wear crisp, itchy Welsh flannel shirts to chapel, with a 'neck contraption of cold, rigidly starched linen, five inches deep and called an Eton collar' along with suit, stockings and boots.²⁶ Regular attendance at Church also gave women the opportunity to wear their best outfits and don their hats. As Mary Davies notes of services at St Barnabas in Trehafod:

The church services, especially Evensong, were an excuse for the Tump's [The part of Trehafod in which she lived] own fashion parades...The women, normally in pinnies, flat lace-up shoes, thick brown lisle stockings and hair tortured in curlers, appeared as chic models in colour-coordinated outfits, fitting coats with full skirts and fur collars, matching hats with pretty feathers jauntily piercing the air and shoes with heels high enough to prettily arch the instep.²⁷

There was obviously a clear distinction between what were considered to be 'everyday clothes' and what was suitable to wear as Sunday best. Mrs Jenkins, one of Rosemary Crook's respondents, vividly remembers her mother's shame when she forgot to remove her special Sunday black apron before attending a service at their chapel in Treorchy.²⁸ Even though it was her 'best' apron, it was not considered respectable to wear clothes associated

²⁶ Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*, pp. 16-17.

²⁷ Mary Davies Parnell, *Block Salt and Candles*, pp. 94-95.

²⁸ Mrs Jenkins, in Rosemary Crook, 'Women of the Rhondda Valleys', p. 54.

with work to chapel, particularly because of the association of rest on the Sabbath. But it was not just the women and children who wore their 'Sunday best'; men, too, were almost unrecognisable, wearing a suit and scrubbed clean of the coal dust which covered them for the rest of the week.

Expected appearance at chapel in some circles also proved to be an important stimulus for many women and their families to attend, even if they were not especially religious. So although the parents of Beatrice Davies, who grew up in Ystrad Rhondda in the inter-war period, did not attend chapel owing to her father being an ILP member, all seven of their children were sent to a Wesleyan Chapel because, she thinks, it was 'fashionable' to do so in those days.²⁹

In addition to making an appearance at the services, some women became far more active within the churches and chapels, taking prominent roles in the organisation by attending meetings of parishioners and members, which were organised regularly in order to plan and make decisions regarding social groups and activities, fundraising, and participating in various other matters. This had not always been the case insofar as places of worship were concerned, however, as the decision made by Zion English Baptist Church, Pentre, in 1880 illustrates. In that year the drastic decision was made to allow 'the ladies of the church to remain in all church meetings', a resolution which encouraged the writers of the history of the church to proudly claim that 'women's suffrage came early to Zion'.³⁰ It is clear from the later records of other churches and chapels that women could be welcomed to the meetings.

²⁹ SWCC: Interview with Beatrice Davies (Née Phippen).

³⁰ D. C. Hughes and E. Sandiford, *Zion 100: A Hundred years of Christian witness in a New Town: History of Zion English Baptist Church, Ton Pentre 1865-1965* (Treforest: Vanguard Press, n.d).

Undoubtedly they performed an important function for the women who chose to become involved. As Luscombe has noted:

The meetings were also probably a major social function at which it was acceptable for women to be seen, not only as part of the congregation, but also as participants of the meeting.³¹

Thus the chapel or church provided women with a role in the decision-making process that they would not have had a chance to realise in other aspects of community life, and a feeling of importance that they might not have been able to garner elsewhere. Some women, in fact, had been very prominent in the history of some chapels in the district from the very start of the life of the chapel. Five of the nine founder members of Bethania Welsh Congregationalist Chapel in Treorchy, for example, were women. And although they were not always to the fore in the lists of officers in various chapels, there is evidence of some who were visibly active; Miss Emma Williams of Blaenrhondda was a founder member of the English Methodist Chapel, and was one of its officers from 1923-1926. Women were also found in prominent positions in the organisation of the Anglican Churches, in spite of their more formal nature and less democratic image. After a Miss Howells became Parochial Church Secretary of St Illtyd in Williamstown, such was the esteem in her competence in discharging her duties that she became one of the longest serving officers of the church, remaining in her post from 1919-1928. The introduction of a female as an officer was clearly thought to be a success by the parishioners, as Miss Howells was followed by Mrs A. Hunt and later by Miss Booth.³² This lends credence to B.B. Thomas's assertion that women began

³¹ S. Luscombe, 'Conformists in a Nonconformist world: A Study of women in the chapels of the south Wales valleys', Unpublished Msc (Econ) (University of Wales), 1994, p. 20.

³² Miss M Howells, *History of the Church of St Illtyd, Williamstown 1894 – 1944*, (Cardiff: Western Mail & Echo Ltd, 1944), pp. 34 35.

to take more prominent roles in religion in the latter part of the period, which D. Ben Rees, for his part, saw as a continuing and long-term trend.³³

The role that women should be allowed to take within religious bodies, especially in relation to women preachers, was a topic of great discussion throughout the period. Although the Salvation Army had a policy of treating its female officers equally with men, with 'women officers receiving full ministerial office to bury the dead, to marry young lovers, to preach, admonish and exhort the men as well as the women', the same cannot be said of other denominations.³⁴ There were some notable exceptions, such as Sister Ellis, the lone female deacon at Tabernacle Baptist Chapel, Porth, who worked alongside 24 male deacons, and Miss M. A. Williams of Blaenllechau and Miss Myfanwy Jones of Hebron, Ton, both of whom preached in their respective chapels during the 1880s in spite of much contention regarding their right to do so.³⁵ The advent of women preachers was one which generated some hostility in the Rhondda as well as elsewhere, and those who did try to preach, such as Rosina Davies and other women involved in the Religious Revival of 1904-05, found themselves the object of jeers from the crowd, as well as the targets of stone throwers.³⁶ In general, then, women were given little opportunity to take a formal role within the church, despite the fact that they made up the greater percentage of the members. Periodically, there were calls for women to be allocated greater responsibility within the Anglican Church, for example from the *Western Mail*, which recognised the good work which could be performed

³³ B.B, Thomas, Yesterday and Today in a Mining Village, in *Welsh Outlook*, 1933 p. 238; D. Ben Rees, *Chapels in the Valley: A Study of the Sociology of Welsh Non-conformity*, (Upton: The Ffynon Press, 1975), p. 154.

³⁴ B. Watson, *A Hundred Years' War: The Salvation Army 1865-1965*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), p. 28.

³⁵ T. M Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists*, (Swansea: Ilston House, 1977), p. 279.

³⁶ Stones were thrown at Rosina Davies when she tried to preach at a meeting in Porthcawl. See R. Davies, *The Story of My Life*, (Llandysul: Gomerian Press, 1942), p. 39.

by women, but to little avail.³⁷ In spite of claims by some historians that nonconformist groups were far more democratic than the Anglican Church in allowing for lay participation at every level, that democracy clearly did not often extend to women, who were allocated very specific roles within the organisation.³⁸

Most commonly, women were found to be performing roles which were deemed to be respectable for them; those which were thought to be suited to their nature, and those which did not pose a threat to the hierarchy of the men. Thus, women could be found as caretakers, such as Mrs Legge and Mrs Miles Morgan of Bethlehem, Mount Pleasant, and Penuel, Trehafod, respectively, who were responsible for the arranging of the flowers for services, the cleaning of the church, and for its general appearance.³⁹ Further, chapel and church histories show that when women did take a highly visible role in the services, it was as organists and choristers rather than officiators. One aspect of chapel life in which women did predominate, however, was in the Sunday schools.⁴⁰ Here the teachers, especially those in charge of the younger children, tended to be female, as it was a role entirely in keeping with their 'feminine' mothering instincts. Similarly, they were active as leaders of Band of Hope groups and in Young People's Guilds as educators of the young.

In addition to these more formal roles, women also acted as hostesses for visitors, often opening up their homes for the comfort of their guests; were active in the organisation of concerts; and played a part in raising memorials to members of its congregation, for example to those who had died in the First World War. But probably the role most readily

³⁷ *Western Mail*, 30 March 1910.

³⁸ J. Obelkevich, 'Religion', in FML Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, 3, p. 344.

³⁹ NLW: W. R. Jones Collection, The Tabernacle, Porth: Church Manual and Record, 1926.

⁴⁰ This point is illustrated in the histories of churches and chapels in the Rhondda, which often pay particular attention to women in this role, and in the records of the individual churches and chapels. See, for example, Nebo, Ystrad Rhondda: List of Sunday school teachers, 1895.

associated with women was that of fundraising, and their work was recognised by both the press, which often commented upon their 'splendid' work, and by the religious leaders. D.A. Lewis, the Vicar of Treherbert, in his history of the parish, paid testimony to the important work carried out by the female members: 'reference must be made', he writes, 'to the Ladies' Sewing Guilds of our churches. Every year they are responsible for the success of our sales of work, and without that financial help, the working of our parish would be severely impaired.'⁴¹

The appeal for most female attendees at the various places of worship was not, however, to take advantage of an opportunity to take part in fundraising activities or the administrative structure. For most of the devotees, attendance was a tradition that they continued without considering the reasons for so doing. As already noted, many of the migrants into the district, especially in the early period, would have come from the rural communities of the surrounding area and from further afield. In such communities, social life and interaction were predominantly catered for by the Church and chapels; the services provided meeting places for all of the community; holidays and festivals were based around religious celebrations and the chapel or church buildings; and entertainment, in the form of singing competitions and *eisteddfodau*, were also held under their auspices. Naturally, when the migrants arrived in the Rhondda, they transferred their allegiances to the local church or chapel of their denomination and looked to religion to provide the same function as it had in their old society, a practice which helped to ease the transition from rural to urban life.

Thus, those flooding into the area attended services and activities for the simple reason that this was what they had always done; and the links with religious bodies formed a

⁴¹ GRO: MS. D/ D CWL 1/111; D. A. Lewis, 'An outline of the History of the Parish of Treherbert', (Unpublished manuscript, 1959), p. 15.

continuation of their way of life prior to arriving in the Rhondda. Religious attendance, then, became a tradition, or a habit, which was passed to their children and, for many families, continued to be a way of life. Luscombe's study of female chapel-goers in the South Wales Valleys illustrates that attendance, for some women, continued all their lives, commencing with Sunday school as children, then joining young people's associations before becoming actively involved as adult members.⁴²

The most obvious reason for the importance of religion should have been a strict sense of religious devotion, and there were a few women in the Rhondda who became known for their religious dedication and recognized for their hard work. One of these was Rosina Davies, who was encouraged by the Salvation Army on one of their many visits to her native Treherbert when she was a very young girl to join them and spread the word. She responded to this, and devoted the rest of her life to engaging in evangelical missions throughout Wales and England, even journeying to America. She frequently returned to the Rhondda to preach and to offer practical as well as spiritual support, most famously with the establishment of *Lletty Cranogwen*, a rescue home for women in the Rhondda in which she was a prominent force.⁴³

Women also ventured further afield in their quest to encourage others to religious devotion, and a number of women left Britain for the missionary fields during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Christopher Isherwood's study of the (Anglican) Christian Missionary Society (CMS) has illustrated, the attitude of the Church towards female missionaries underwent a number of changes during the period under study, allowing different groups of women to experience work in the missionary fields. During the early

⁴² Luscombe, 'Conformists in a Non Conformist World', Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴³ For more information on Rosina Davies see her autobiography, *The Story of my Life*.

nineteenth century it was not deemed respectable for single women to depart from Britain with the intention of becoming missionaries, for reasons resting upon notions of respectability, dangers to health and safety and the lack of an established tradition of women taking an active role in religious activities within the Church of England. The CMS believed it 'foolhardy' to send single women out to the field for these reasons, with the exception of those who could be looked after by a brother or other male relative.⁴⁴ Conversely, it was acceptable to many for a married woman to join her husband in the missionary fields, as she was perceived to be of great use to the male missionary in the homes and in the schools, and in helping forge good relations with the women and children of the villages in which they were staying. She was not, however, regarded as a missionary in her own right, rather as a helper to her husband. Later, however, married women came to be regarded as liabilities in some areas, as they could succumb to ill health, were often too weak to travel and the prospect of frequent pregnancy was always present.⁴⁵ The availability of single women as missionaries was seen as an advantage as 'the ability of single women to survive the African climate better than childbearing wives obviously made them more suitable as missionaries'.⁴⁶

The CMS was not the only religious body to send women to the missionary fields, and it is likely that other societies experienced the same debates regarding the suitability of women for overseas work. In the Rhondda, devoted young women and men were trained and sent abroad by institutions such as the South Wales Bible Training Institute in Porth which, in 1926, reported that three men and two women had left the institute bound for the missionary fields in India and Japan, three men and five women had entered into missionary work at

⁴⁴ J Isherwood, 'An Analysis of the Role of Single Women in the Work of the Church Missionary Society 1804-1904 in West Africa, India and China', Unpublished MA (University of Manchester), 1999, pp. 238-39.

⁴⁵ Isherwood, 'An analysis of the role of single women in the work of the Church Missionary Society', p. 1.

⁴⁶ Isherwood, 'An analysis of the role of single women in the work of the Church Missionary Society', p. 47.

home and a further six men and one woman were currently in training for missionary work.⁴⁷

The departure of individual missionaries was also often commented upon in the local press. In 1907 the *Rhondda Leader* announced with pride the departure of Miss Gertrude Davies, a member of Calfaria Methodist Chapel in Porth, for missionary work in the Khasia Hills, India.⁴⁸ Whilst there, it is likely that Miss Davies would have been met with extremely difficult conditions: a study of missionary work in that region has drawn attention to the challenging environment awaiting the missionaries, including illness and disease, the hostility towards Europeans felt by the natives, and the incredibly temperamental weather conditions, which could vary from intense heat to freezing cold and torrential rain.⁴⁹ Similarly, Miss Arianwen Jones, who was the first female Missionary from the Rhondda to accept a post to Russia, wrote a letter to her vicar, which was noted in the local press, describing the terrible conditions that she experienced whilst she was in Poland. Although the details in the letter were not expanded upon, the news was apparently received with 'shocked sympathy' by the female members of the Tabernacle Baptist Chapel in Porth, who immediately began to organise the collection of clothing parcels to be sent there for distribution.⁵⁰ Despite such harsh conditions, women were prepared to travel to distant lands in order to perform their work.

These circumstances, however, were only experienced by the relatively very few women who devoted part of their life to the missionary fields of Africa, India and Japan. For most women, religious devotion meant regular attendance at Sunday and weekday services,

⁴⁷ NLW: W. R. Jones Collection, The South Wales Bible Training Institute, Porth: Manual and Record, p. 12.

⁴⁸ *Rhondda Leader*, 26 February 1907.

⁴⁹ For information on conditions, see M Weitbrecht, *Female Missionaries in India; Letters from a Missionary*, (2nd Edition, 1843), and Nigel Jenkins, *Gwalia in Khasia: A visit to the site, in India, of the biggest overseas venture sustained by the Welsh*, (Llandysul: Gomer press, 1995).

⁵⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press & Rhondda Leader*, 24 February 1924.

and participation in the activities held under the auspices of the churches and chapels, of which there were many. Questionnaires sent to the Anglican Churches in the Rhondda in the 1950s revealed that within the majority of them there existed a number of established women's groups, including Mothers' Unions and Young Wives' Groups, sewing guilds and Ladies' Guilds as well as mixed sex groups, such as choirs, flourishing Sunday schools, *eisteddfodau*, prayer meetings and penny readings.⁵¹ Further, parish histories and oral evidence indicate that such activities were extremely popular with members and that many of the groups had been in existence for a number of years. This was certainly the case with regard to St. George's Church in Cwmparc, whose Mothers' Union and Girls' Friendly Society dated from the time the church opened in 1895.⁵² Again, membership of such groups could offer women the opportunity to meet others from outside of the district. Some of the Mothers' Union branches in the Rhondda were amalgamated to that of the Diocese of Llandaff and could send representatives to the meetings, at which important issues affecting the church were discussed like, for example, the increasing popularity of Registry Office weddings.⁵³

The local press was keen to report on meetings and events taking place, and would often draw attention to the activities of the local sisterhoods some of which, especially Stanleytown Sisterhood, were extremely active. According to D. Ben Rees, the groups had two main functions, fellowship and fundraising, but he also notes that membership of sisterhoods included those who did not attend the church, while this questions the religious devotion of the women, it nevertheless confirms the sisterhood's function as a respectable

⁵¹ The completed questionnaires are held amongst the church records at the Glamorgan Record Office.

⁵² GRO: MS. D/D CWL 1, St. George's Church, Cwmparc: Jubilee booklet, 1896-1946.

⁵³ GRO: MS. D/D MU/L 1/1, Mothers' Union: Minutes of the Llandaff Diocese, 1903-1930.

means of leisure for women.⁵⁴ Members of the sisterhoods attended meetings where they sang hymns and organised fundraising, they held social teas and informal debates and discussions, and were active fundraisers and avid listeners to lectures.⁵⁵

Both Anglican churches and the more numerous nonconformist chapels strove to provide entertainment for as many members of their congregations as possible, furnishing them with a centre which they could attend any day of the week. Many women who grew up in the Rhondda in the inter-war period have confirmed that the chapels succeeded in this and supplied the main source of their social interaction. Ann Merriman, who regularly attended chapel in Treorchy, commented that activities were not only confined to Sundays, but that 'the chapel was a meeting place or community centre open all week'.⁵⁶ The reminiscence of Mrs Lewis further illustrates this point in her recalling of the various activities that she attended at her chapel in Tonypany:

We used to have a *morgannwy-ganny* [*Cymanfa Ganu*] every year, every Whitsun or Easter and we used to go to the singing classes every Sunday night. And on a Monday night we would go to Prayer meeting, and Tuesday we would go to Band of Hope, I don't know what was on Wednesday, and then on Friday night there was Young People's Society.⁵⁷

The range of activities available at the chapels and Anglican churches has led one historian to rightly comment that: 'it is almost impossible to separate the contribution of the chapels to the religious life of the community from their contribution to its social life in

⁵⁴ D. Ben Rees, *Chapels in the Valley*, p. 105.

⁵⁵ The topics of lectures were varied, and were widely advertised in the press. In March 1931, for example, the Stanleytown sisterhood listened to a lecture on Chinese customs: *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 7 March 1931.

⁵⁶ NLW: Ann Merriman 'My Childhood': unpublished essay from a collection of works entered for a Welsh Arts Council competition, p. 6.

⁵⁷ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lewis.

general'.⁵⁸ The wide range of activities available, musical, educational, intellectual and purely social, meant that almost all age groups were catered for within the chapels and churches. It was felt by some, however, that the popularity of church and chapel-based activities amongst women was purely a result of the lack of alternative facilities that were deemed suitable and acceptable. As Luscombe noted of the Band of Hope groups which were popular amongst young women:

Often this organisation for the young people would be the main source of entertainment at that time and more than once the women said that there was nothing else for them to do, there was no alternatives if they want to meet other young people. Not only that, but these gatherings were acceptable places for them to go from their parents' point of view.⁵⁹

Respondents from the Rhondda seemed to agree with this assertion, as Maria Williams of Mardy revealed to Hywel Francis:

All our interests were in the Vestry, I mean there was nothing else but in the Vestry, we were living in the Vestry nearly. We had circles around the chapel only there wasn't anything outside then in the social way of life like.⁶⁰

In spite of the perceived lack of alternative facilities for leisure, chapels and churches were popular destinations for women in their pursuit of leisure activities. According to Oliver, they provided meeting places, they were easily accessible, activities were 'safe and respectable', and they provided women with the opportunity to fulfil roles which they would not usually have access to.⁶¹

⁵⁸ M. Lieven, *Senghennydd*, p. 89.

⁵⁹ Luscombe, 'Conformists in a Non Conformist World', p. 53.

⁶⁰ SWCC: Interview with Maria Williams.

⁶¹ Oliver, 'Liberation or Limitation', p. 148. In this argument, she is referring specifically to the role women could take in Sunday School.

Therefore, the social life attached to the chapel, for those females who wished to partake, could be vigorous, and attracted participants from a wide variety of social groups and backgrounds; middle- and working-class women, young and old, married and single. Whilst the many activities attracted a large number of single women it was, however, probably one of the most important forms of leisure activity for married women. Here it is important to note that religious life, whether devotional or social, was not necessarily shared by couples. Although most of the female members tended to be married, for example 64 per cent of the female members of Libanus Chapel, Blaenclydach, in 1920 were married, not all of these women attended chapel with their husbands. In fact, only 53 per cent were members alongside their husbands.⁶² Some of those not attending with their spouses could have been accounted for by virtue of their being widows, but, for others, a conscious decision was made not to attend the same chapels. Maria Williams of Mardy, for example, testifies to the fact that husbands and wives often attended separate chapels:

I used to go to the Siloah and he went to Carmel English Baptists. Then he went to Zion, and I was still going to Siloah, but I always said that if we left the place we would go together, but while we were in Mardy, because we had been brought up in these places of worship, when we got married we decided we should both stay in our own places because they were going down then, and you felt you couldn't, there was that sense of duty which you felt you had to stay with your own, but if there was anything special on we went of course to each other's together.⁶³

Even if husbands and wives did attend the same chapel or church, the fact that classes and groups were often segregated by sex meant that little time was actually spent together.

Thus, particularly in the early part of the period, the activities held under the auspices of the local chapels and churches were popular and attractive to diverse groups of women.

⁶² NLW: MS. E118, Libanus, Blaenclydach: List of members and contributions, 1920.

⁶³ SWCC: Interview with Maria Williams.

The respectability bestowed by such attendance at services or other events encouraged women to participate as a form of leisure, and this, combined with the lack of alternative respectable activities available to women, ensured the popularity of chapel and church among this gender group.

By the inter-war period, however, various social changes associated with the further development of the district, coupled with technological advances, meant that in the Rhondda, as well as the rest of Britain:

Churches were competing for attention in a world which offered an increasing variety of leisure attractions, sport, the music hall, commercial leisure of all kinds, homes which offered a little more comfort to many and the labour movement itself were all alternatives.⁶⁴

G. Evans noted this change in leisure patterns in his study of the mining village of Onllwyn in the Dulais Valley. He observed that during the early development of the village the population were greatly influenced by their rural background and naturally gravitated to the pubs, the chapel and the home as centres of social life, just as they had done in their rural communities. This, he argued, was particularly noticeable amongst the women and children who had few other options available to them. The women of the village, he found, entertained themselves by visiting friends and relatives, and inviting friends and relatives into their homes for informal meetings, in addition to holding musical evenings at home. Moreover, the chapel repeated these activities on a larger scale, with *eisteddfodau*, dramas and singing festivals being held at regular intervals. In the period following the First World War, however, the influences of the labour movement, technological advances and increased

⁶⁴ R. J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *Cambridge Social History of Britain*, 3, p. 421.

literacy altered leisure pursuits and it became increasingly popular for the men of the village to attend evening classes and the welfare hall instead. For the women, the cinema became a popular form of entertainment.⁶⁵ Contemporaries were quick to notice the movement of leisure pursuits out of the home and the churches and chapels towards the more modern forms of activity, for some sections of the population at least. A Mrs Coombe Tennant, writing in the *Welsh Outlook* in 1928, suggested that the movement from home-based leisure pursuits, certainly for adolescents, was the result of both the changes in technology, such as the arrival of certain forms of facilities like cinemas and dance halls, and the increased provision of rapid transport, which interacted with the desire to escape from the overcrowded houses and unemployment.⁶⁶

Whilst it is true that some might have been motivated by the desire to escape the conditions they faced at home, it is clear that the emergence of new and exciting types of leisure activity had an immense impact upon patterns of leisure in the Rhondda Valleys. During the inter-war period there was a much wider choice of leisure activity and venue available, with all forms of leisure, commercial, voluntary and public sector, expanding.⁶⁷ Commercial leisure facilities, such as theatres, music halls, dance halls and cinemas, sprang up in many of the villages and were cheap enough for the working-class population to attend, if infrequently. Community leisure facilities, in the form of public parks, swimming baths and libraries, also became increasingly popular. In addition, the voluntary means of leisure, which included societies and clubs based on a wide range of activities such as sport, debating, and other interests, remained popular, although the emphasis sometimes shifted in order to

⁶⁵ G. Evans, 'Onllwyn: A Sociological Study of a South Wales Mining Community', Unpublished MA (University of Wales), 1960-61, pp. 109-10.

⁶⁶ Mrs Coombe Tennant, JP 'The Adolescent and the Home', *Welsh Outlook*, (1928) pp. 278-79.

⁶⁷ S. Jones, *Workers at Play*, p. 9.

encompass new technology. The Rhondda Valley, for example, had a very popular and successful wireless society from the mid 1920s.

Although these new forms of activities presented a threat to those focused upon the local chapels and churches, it certainly was not the case that a strict division existed between 'chapel-folk' and those who enjoyed secular entertainment, although the distinction has often been assumed. Andy Croll and others have argued that this rough/respectable dichotomy did not necessarily exist.⁶⁸ Croll, in particular, has argued that some secular activities were thought of as respectable forms of leisure, and presents, on the other hand, examples of religious activities where audiences were not well behaved and events closed in a raucous fashion. He draws attention to *eisteddfodau* and choir competitions held in chapels, or under the auspices of chapels, where crowds were drunk and rowdy and generally disruptive of the competitions.⁶⁹ The idea that this dichotomy existed between respectable chapelgoers and parts of the community which enjoyed altogether rougher forms of entertainment and leisure, the pub in particular, nevertheless remains. Mildred Evans of Penygraig makes the distinction between the two types of culture when recalling her mother's activities outside of the home:

Mam never went drinking, she had seen enough of what booze did. She was a churchgoer, and anyway, a woman could get a bad name in the neighbourhood if she went out to the jug and bottle of an evening.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870-1914*, (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2000); A. Croll, 'From Bar Stool to Choir Stall: Music and Morality in Late Victorian Merthyr', *Llafur* 6, 2, (1992); and Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*.

⁶⁹ Andy Croll, 'From Bar Stool to Choir Stall', pp. 23 – 25.

⁷⁰ J. Grenfell Hill (ed.), *Growing up in Wales: Collected Memory of Childhood in Wales, 1895-1939*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1996), p. 167.

In this statement Mrs Evans is both drawing attention to the sharp division that is thought to have existed between church or chapelgoers and those who frequented pubs, and reinforcing the notion that some pursuits were unacceptable for women. In reality, the dichotomy was often far less rigid, and many enjoyed both secular and religious activities. Mrs Morris reinforces this when she describes what she and her friends did for entertainment in Blaenllechau in the 1930s. After going to chapel one Sunday, they would miss it in order to go to the pictures in Ferndale the next, walking there from Mardy. The next week, however, they would be back in chapel, and this pattern would continue.⁷¹

Although it is evident that many people took advantage of the new facilities in addition to continued attendance at church or chapel, there was concern amongst contemporaries regarding the move away from the chapel and the influence of certain activities upon vulnerable sections of the community. Dancing, in particular, came under much criticism at various times, as did boxing, cinema and theatre-going.⁷² But in spite of disapproval from some, these new forms of leisure activities became increasingly popular and the sprawling townships and population of the Rhondda provided fertile ground for cinemas, theatres and dance halls, the result of which was that there was very little need to leave the Rhondda in search of entertainment.

The new facilities attracted a wealth of variety, including the talents of local amateur and professional actors and singers as well as those from further afield. In a single week in the early 1930s the *Rhondda Leader and Glamorgan Free Press* announced, alongside the 'professional' performances held in the Tonypandy Empire and Tonypandy Hippodrome, performances by the Hermon Cadwgan Dramatic Society and Bethania Chapel Dramatic

⁷¹ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Morris.

⁷² See, for example, *Western Mail*, 5 April 1916.

Society in Treochy, a performance of 'The Little Gypsy' at Cwmparc, and the songsters in the Bethany Calvinistic Methodist Church Choir performing the operetta 'The Magic Key' in the Judges Hall, Trealaw. These took place on top of the numerous religious meetings and fundraising dances and sporting activities held in the district that week.⁷³ A perusal of the advertisements in the *Porth Gazette* in 1902 serves to illustrate the variety of entertainment available to Rhonddaite in Porth Town Hall; between 10 May and 19 May, 'The Fatal Hour', 'The Pleasures of London', and 'Our Sailor Lad' were all shown. In addition, on Saturday 11 May, Long Skeng, 'the greatest burglar of modern times', arrived in Porth with a Johnny Grey to deliver lectures entitled 'Waiting trial for murder' and 'Stepping stones to a life of crime at nine years of age and my first imprisonment'.⁷⁴

Clearly, the variety of entertainment available in the Rhondda was considerable. Porth and Tonypany emerged early on as the entertainment centres of the district, housing facilities such as cinemas, theatres, music halls, and a skating rink. They continued to grow throughout the inter-war period, but, in addition, most of the smaller towns in the valleys catered for leisure in some form, often having small cinemas or screens in the local workmen's halls and small dance halls. Mrs Morris, who was brought up in Blaenllechau in the Rhondda Fach, always used to look to local events for her entertainment, either remaining in Blaenllechau, or walking to nearby Mardy. She seldom went to Pontypridd, not even for the market, and did not venture as far as Cardiff until she was courting. Her husband, in contrast, would regularly walk over to the other valley, to Tonypany or Penygraig, because 'that was where the best stuff was'.⁷⁵ In addition to these facilities, there were also shops,

⁷³ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 24 May 1930.

⁷⁴ *Porth Gazette*, 10 May 1902.

⁷⁵ SWCC: Interview with Mr and Mrs Morris.

clubs and institutes, parks, libraries and public houses. The new forms of commercial entertainment were not the only forms of leisure available, however. We have shown that religious bodies remained popular, albeit to a lesser degree, and voluntary bodies, clubs and associations also attracted participants. Thus within the valleys themselves, there was a large variety of forms of entertainment suited to all age groups and material circumstances.

Further, the narrow streets and alleyways, and the mountains above the valley, continued to provide a fertile playground for many, and this is especially true of the young. Although much of the previously rural land had been claimed and developed by the mines, some of it for housing for the miners and their families, the streets provided space in which the young could play away from the adults. Reminiscences of Rhondda childhoods recall much time being spent playing in the streets and alleyways, indulging in games such as catty-dog, hopscotch, and some ball games, often with improvised equipment. In addition, the mountains surrounding the Rhondda were also popular for play, and provided space away from the narrow confines of the Rhondda streets. The road leading from Mrs. M's street in Porth emerged on the Penrhiwgynt Mountain, the summit of which overlooked the Rhondda in one direction and nearby Pontypridd and the Taff Valley to the south. In the summer months she would regularly take her brothers and other children from the street up to the mountain for a picnic and games.⁷⁶ The mountains above Trehafod were also a source of recreation for Mary Davies Parnell and her friends, who used to bathe in the ponds, play rowdy games and generally explore.⁷⁷

The importance of the surrounding area is outlined by Mrs F. H. Smith in a letter she wrote to the Women's Co-Operative Guild, describing her life as a miner's wife in the

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs M., August 2000.

⁷⁷ See Mary Davies Parnell, *Block Salt and Candles*, chpt. 2, 'The Mountain'

Rhondda Valley. She noted that although she believed that leisure facilities in the district were scant, there were:

Two lovely parks, with paddling pools, swings and the usual things for children, within walking distance of us, namely Porth Park and Wattstown Park. Also, there are lovely mountain walks where we send the children when it is nice weather, and in the summer we picnic en family, as we never go away only to the Sunday school outing, which is to Barry Island or Porthcawl.⁷⁸

She emphasises the worth of the parks and the mountain walks for inhabitants who could not afford to leave the district on holiday, but who wanted to escape the narrow streets and experience wide open spaces, trees and greenery.

The alternative for children, apart from playing in the streets, was playing in the house. For large families, this could cause problems, with children getting under the feet of women who were washing, cleaning or cooking. Often also, there were men returning from shifts preparing for their baths. In wet weather, however, this was the only alternative, and children played with homemade toys, or they might read, and girls might sew or help mother with household chores.

As the children grew older, however, they moved away from these informal means of leisure and towards group-orientated organised activities.⁷⁹ In addition to the church- and chapel-based activities mentioned above, a number of secular groups were established which attracted the youth of the Rhondda. Brownie and Girl Guide groups, for example, were popular with those whose parents could afford the uniforms, activities and the weekly 'subs'. Such groups were established in the district quickly, and by the mid 1920s there were 'packs'

⁷⁸ Mrs F. H. Smith, 'In a mining village', in Margaret Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life as we have known it: By Co-operative working women*, (2nd Edition, London: Virago, 1977), pp. 71 – 72.

⁷⁹ Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 203.

in many of the villages, including, for example, the 2nd Porth St Pauls Company Girl Guides. For those to whom the costs were not prohibitive, they offered girls an opportunity in which they could explore the surrounding area and take part in outdoor activities such as hiking and camping, all underneath the 'respectable' umbrella of the Girl Guide Movement. In addition, girls worked towards badges and awards in first aid, home-making, sewing, and nursing, and the movement provided a forum for playing games, producing plays, taking part in *eisteddfodau* and dancing.⁸⁰ Thus, the Girl Guide movement provided some girls with the chance to experience a wide range of activities, some of which were not usually available to girls, as well as a training in 'traditional' female or domestic skills such as cooking and nursing. This domestic aspect, alongside the religious and moral outlook of the movement, also provided respectability.

Educational groups were also popular in the inter-war period; the Treorchy Girls Mutual Improvement Society was a popular association in the Upper Rhondda, attracting girls and young women to its educational classes, as well as its other activities. It was reported that 200 girls attended regularly for musical evenings and the like.⁸¹ Espousing the same aim of education and a degree of social work, Girls' Clubs were established throughout the valley, including well-attended ones at Wattstown, Penygraig and Maes-Yr-Haf in addition to the largest and most active Girls' Club in the Valley, that of the Ton and Pentre District. These clubs were immensely popular, and provided girls in the Rhondda with a meeting and social place where they could receive the benefits of education and social work in addition to partaking in informal activities such as sport and sewing groups. These, as, too, were other educational and social groups, were also very strictly divided by gender, with the

⁸⁰ GRO: MS. D/D Gui/L/5/1, 2nd Porth Guides: Log Book, 1928-32.

⁸¹ *Rhondda Leader*, 7 June 1902.

emphasis in girls' groups upon domestic education which would provide them with the essential skills they would need in their future roles as domestic servants or wives and mothers.

Although these organised groups attended by girls in their early teens tended to be single-sex groups, as the girls became older the emphasis changed from group-orientated activities to those partaken with friends.⁸² It was at this stage that the dance halls, cinemas, music halls and other forms of entertainment available in the Rhondda proved to be an attraction. For, understandably, it was those in their late teens who were best able to take advantage of these new developments in leisure. Scholars who have studied the patterns of working-class districts have noted that for the working classes, the period between starting work and getting married was one of the most prosperous in the life cycle.⁸³ Young, single girls, we have seen, accounted for the greatest percentage of females in employment, and these girls had the advantage of earning a wage without the responsibility of running a home. It was common practice to give their wages to their parents to form part of the family income, and receive pocket money in return, and this arrangement had the added benefit for these young people of their only having limited domestic chores to perform, while receiving food as part of the arrangement. Pocket money, therefore, was theirs to spend as they wished, and, for the majority of youths, it was spent on entertainment. The negative aspect of the arrangement was that girls were still answerable to their parents and had to abide by the rules established by them regarding where they could go, what they could wear, who they could see and at what time they should return. Some parents were quite strict in this regard. Mrs Jenkins, for example, recalled her shame and embarrassment when at the age of fifteen she

⁸² Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 207.

⁸³ See, for example, Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place*; Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, p. 22.

returned to Treorchy for a break from service in London, and her mother spoilt her first meeting with her boyfriend:

I went out and I was – half past nine – and down by the Square (in Treorchy) they had a little island in the Square with big, old fashioned gas lamp... and my friend and I were coming down now, and she said to me, 'May, I think', she said, 'your mothers down by – underneath the lamp.' I said 'Don't be so silly.' There she was, flannelette nightie, with a big coat right over her, shouting '*Dewch mewn y ty!*' ('Get in the house!'). Duwww. You should've seen her. I had the finest clip across the ear, boyfriend or no boyfriend by the side o'me.⁸⁴

Parental control was without doubt the cause of a great number of arguments in many homes. Nevertheless, girls who did have a disposable income as a result of living in the family home were able to make use of some of the many leisure facilities available in the Rhondda.

One such facility that provided a very popular form of entertainment for young women were the dance halls, despite the fact that they constituted a cause of concern for many parents as well as for others in authority. As early as 1897, a petition was presented to the RUDC by local nonconformist ministers, which urged them to adopt the part of the Public Health Act, 1890, which restricted music and dancing in public houses. Rev. Charles of Treorchy, it was recorded, believed that such activities as enjoying music and dance encouraged young persons to drink and give in to immorality.⁸⁵ This particular aspect of the Act was not introduced at that juncture, and concerns regarding dance halls and immorality amongst the young were raised frequently throughout the period. In 1926, when dance halls had become even more popular amongst youths, they once again came under attack. At the local licensing sessions, Daniel Lleufer Thomas, the Stipendary Magistrate for the Rhondda, voiced his concerns over the welfare and morality of girls who regularly attended the dance

⁸⁴ Mrs Jenkins, quoted in Rosemary Crook, 'Women of the Rhondda', p. 58. (Brackets in the original)

⁸⁵ *Western Mail*, 10 April 1897.

halls. 'The reputation of the Women of Wales', he said, 'should not be thrown away lightly for the sake of the glamour and sensuous enjoyment of dancing, and of the sweet seductive dalliances of that dangerous walk home.' Dancing, he continued, was 'a peril to chastity', as

The excitement which was inseparable from the act of young people of opposite sexes dancing together for long hours in the heated atmosphere and free from the restraining influence exercised by the parents, whose standard of decorum should provide a useful safeguard, was all too prone to lead to a slackness of self control on the part of the young, and particularly to a weakening of the power of self defence on the part of the young women when their virtue was threatened. It was the responsibility of the parents in the Rhondda and elsewhere in the division to ensure the moral well being of their daughters and to consider the ensuring their daughters were adequately chaperoned.⁸⁶

The emphasis on the dance halls as places of immorality proved fruitless, however, and Stephen Humphries' study of sex in Britain has shown that intercourse could take place in a variety of places, mostly out of doors, and did not necessarily have any link with the entertainment venues.⁸⁷ The paternity cases featured in the petty sessions reports, and in the columns of the local newspapers, would appear to support this claim, as the most common places for intercourse to take place appear to have been in doorways, alleyways and in the mountains surrounding the district. In fact, the phrase 'going up the mountain' was synonymous in the Rhondda with sexual activity.

Action was, periodically, taken to ensure the safety and welfare of impressionable young people, and various methods of ensuring the security and chastity of girls were discussed. In the aftermath of a widely publicised incident at a dance held at the Ambulance hall in Treorchy, when a man punched a girl, it was advised that a 'staid, middle-aged

⁸⁶ *Western Mail*, 4, 6 February 1926.

⁸⁷ S. Humphries *A Secret World of Sex: Forbidden Fruit: The British Experience 1900-1950*, (London: Sigwick and Jackson, 1988), p. 29.

matron' should be engaged to look after the young girls in attendance.⁸⁸ Although such chaperones were not present at all dances, evidence suggests that the behaviour of those in attendance was very closely monitored; strict rules of conduct were enforced and dance hall managers were conscientious in ensuring adherence to them. As Mrs Lloyd recalls of her days dancing in Treorchy:

Of course, during that time, there was no ladies allowed out in the interval, everything was so much stricter. Once you were in you stayed in...we weren't allowed near the door until we were going home.⁸⁹

Mrs Lloyd often used to arrange to meet her boyfriend in the dance on a Saturday night; although he often returned from playing football late, if he arrived later than 9:30 he and others would be refused entry because it was thought that they might have spent too long in the pub prior to their arrival. And rules such as this were generally adhered to, in order to ensure the safety of those attending.

In addition to regulations affecting admittance to the dances, there were also rules of conduct which had to be observed when inside the hall. Acceptable conduct was based upon a mixture of strict controls, such as those regarding alcohol, and norms which were understood by all, including the forbiddance of 'improper' touching whilst dancing. Foster Lewis, who regularly attended dances in nearby Tonyrefail, remembers that a strict procedure had to be followed regarding conduct:

The sexes were kept separate with ladies sitting on one side of the hall and gentlemen on the other and when a dance was announced the gentleman would walk slowly across the hall to a lady of his choice and say "may I have the pleasure of this dance".⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 5 April 1931.

⁸⁹ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lloyd.

⁹⁰ SWCC: Interview with Foster Lewis.

In spite of the measures taken by the dance halls to ensure respectable behaviour, parents were often sceptical about allowing their daughters to attend. Many girls, however, found ways to sneak out and join their friends at dances. Mrs M., for example, was allowed to attend Church dances in Porth, as her parents were active members of the local church and therefore knew that there would be strict rules governing the conduct of those attending, and that the dancers would be closely monitored. She made use of this leniency, attending dances at St Pauls one week, and St Lukes the following week, the only restriction being that her brother had to meet her and escort her home. Dances held at the commercial dance halls, however, were strictly forbidden, so, in order to meet her friends there, she used to hide her clothes in the garden and sneak out. This plan worked until she won a beauty competition at one dance and her father saw her photograph, which was published in the *Rhondda Leader*!⁹¹ Similarly, Mrs Morris's father was strict, and although she herself didn't like dances, her sister in law, Ada, did, and she remembers her hiding her shoes to go out and then creeping upstairs when she came in.⁹²

Dancing was very popular with girls in the Rhondda from all backgrounds, but there were vast differences in the venue of the dance for those of contrasting circumstances. There were also differences in the way that the dances were perceived, as Liz Oliver noted in her study of dance halls in Bolton. For middle-class girls, she concluded, the dances were places where wealth and status could be displayed in terms of dresses and fashions, and provided a showcase for a girl looking for a husband. Dancing, for these women, was a socially approved activity, and the ballroom was seen almost as an extension of her domestic domain,

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs M., August 2000.

⁹² SWCC: Interview with Maria Williams.

where her virtue and purity were celebrated and where she could exert social power and influence.⁹³ Reports of such dances, attended by the more affluent women and girls in the Rhondda, often appeared in the local press. These were often held for charitable purposes, or in one case a 'coming out' party held by Miss Iris Williams, Emporium, Penygraig, in 1926, to which 50 guests were invited.⁹⁴ Great attention was paid to the dresses worn by women attending such events, and they were often described in great detail in the reports.

For the working classes, however, the dances offered a form of entertainment other than pubs and welfare halls, and were believed amongst some to be dangerous places that were in need of careful monitoring.⁹⁵ Dances attended by the less affluent were given very little attention except those occasions when girls' morality was called into question, or something out of the ordinary had taken place. Nevertheless, the function of the dance remained the same. The dance halls provided a forum for interaction with other youngsters in the districts, under supervised conditions. Phyllis King started going dancing in Tylorstown when her brother took her to her first dance, and she enjoyed it so much that she started attending on a regular basis. The attraction for her was the friendliness of the dances, especially after having grown up in a community where most people knew each other. Sometimes she went to the dance hall with boys, sometimes with a group of girls. Also, she often went down on her own, as she always knew somebody there:

You could always go on your own and see someone you knew and say 'I know you' and you were alright. People mixed more in those days, it was not like today.⁹⁶

⁹³ Liz Oliver, 'From the Ballroom to Hell: A Social History of Public Dancing in Bolton from c. 1940 – 1911', *Women's History Notebooks* 2, 2, (Summer 1995), pp. 17-18.

⁹⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 1 January 1926.

⁹⁵ Liz Oliver, 'From the Ballroom to Hell', p. 16-18, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Interview with Phyllis King, August 2000.

Of course, the dance halls also provided the opportunity for interaction with members of the opposite sex. Many women did meet their partners at dances, in spite of the close monitoring of behaviour, but the dancing did not usually continue once courting had begun.

Dance halls did not provide the only form of entertainment for young people in the Rhondda. In addition to the increasing participation of some women in the newly developed commercial activities, it was also becoming more popular for them to become involved in sporting activities. Whilst it is true that the sports pages of the local press were largely devoted to men's achievements in rugby, football, cricket, bowls, boxing and a number of other activities in which they partook, from the turn of the century onwards sports involving women were reported with increasing regularity. Until 1907, the only sports mentioned in the press in which women were involved were school sports and inter-school competitions. In 1907, however, the *Rhondda Leader* found itself discussing the possibility of a women's hockey team being formed in the district. In order to demonstrate its support for such a development, the reporter added enthusiastically that 'there is all possibility of the formation of a good team'.⁹⁷ After this, and progressively more so in the inter-war period, female teams and activities graced the sports pages more and more often. The results of the ladies' hockey team, for example, were often published, and Miss A. Pickens of Treherbert emerged as the star of her local team and proved herself to be a valuable member of the 'Gollywog' mixed hockey team. The *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* was particularly impressed with her skill, noting that 'often lady members of the [mixed] hockey team are merely passengers' but that Miss Pickens 'seemed to be here, there and everywhere, and saved her side on many occasions'.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 7 December 1907.

⁹⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 20 January 1922.

Whilst hockey was the most reported sporting activity for women, a number of other ladies' teams and clubs were founded. Table tennis appeared to be a popular sport for women, and members of the Cymric Table tennis club, Treherbert, and the Porth Table Tennis Club not only played in the locality but also hoped to affiliate into the South Wales League.⁹⁹ In addition, there were reports on women's cycling, golf, cricket and athletics. As well as sex-segregated clubs, it is also clear that there were some clubs in which interaction between the sexes was positively encouraged; the mixed tennis club at Porth received a great deal of attention from the local press and there is evidence that a mixed, socialist cycling club also existed in the district, known as the 'Clarion' Cycling club. This club was open to all who could spare the time to participate in cycling trips, and who could afford to purchase the necessary equipment. In 1912, the 'Sports Depot' in Treorchy was advertising a new type of bicycle, 'The No.3 Wiltshire', at a price of £4 17s 6d, with an additional 5 shillings added for the ladies' model, which suggests that only the relatively wealthy would have been able to purchase such a machine.¹⁰⁰ As technology continued to improve, however, the cost became much lower, and second-hand machines were often advertised in the local press, allowing for a greater number of people to partake in cycling. Cycling, whether as part of a club, or individually, offered a greater freedom to explore the area surrounding the district and further afield.

Clearly, it was becoming more and more acceptable for women to play sports and be accepted into some clubs, a distinct shift from the predominant ideology at the turn of the century when competitive sports for women were discouraged as being too physically demanding and unladylike. As Jeremy Crump noted in his study of athletics: 'the dress,

⁹⁹ *Rhondda Gazette*, 24 March 1934; *Rhondda Fach Gazette*, 24 February 1934.

¹⁰⁰ *Rhondda Leader*, 13 April 1912.

exertion and freedom of movement which athletics entailed were hardly compatible with Victorian notions of respectable womanhood'.¹⁰¹ Sport in general, it was believed, was detrimental to women both in terms of grace and in their capacity for childbearing. To some extent these fears continued; in 1921, an article appeared in the *Western Mail* concerning the dangers that sport, playing football in particular, could present to women, causing over-exhaustion, bad health and reproductive difficulties. Such assumptions regarding the dangers of sport for women and their feminine nature resulted in the denial of membership for women to some clubs, as well as the spread of derogatory ideas about the femininity of women who enjoyed sport. However, as a female correspondent pointed out in 1921 when discussing female participation in football, the appearance of women cyclists, tennis players, hockey players and horseback riders at various stages had also prompted the same concerns, but by this time the presence of women in these activities was taken to be acceptable.¹⁰² Opinions such as these were not the only factors that conspired to keep women out of sporting circles, however, for lack of adequate facilities and the expense of equipment and club fees often ensured that only fairly affluent women were able to participate in some sports. The cost of using facilities such as tennis courts regularly was probably out of the reach of most working-class women and girls. This, combined with the cost of specialised clothes and of equipment such as bicycles, racquets and hockey sticks, and the fees for clubs and use of courts, ensured that some women's sports maintained an elite status. The Mid Rhondda Ping Pong Club, for example, was very popular amongst Rhondda youth, but the club subscription fees of 5s. for men and 2s. 6d. for women meant that membership was restricted to those with enough time

¹⁰¹ J. Crump, 'Athletics', in T Mason (ed.), *Sport in Britain: A social history*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 59.

¹⁰² *Western Mail*, 10 December 1921.

and the resources to play. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that golf, tennis and table tennis were very popular with middle-class girls.

Lack of some facilities in the district until the inter-war period also limited the activities of women and girls in the Rhondda. Bathing, for example, was popular in the streams and ponds in the mountains surrounding the valleys amongst men and boys, but the practice was unacceptable for women and girls, who had to ensure that their modesty was preserved. Mary Davies Parnell remembers sneaking out of the house with her bathing costume to swim in the ponds above Trehafod, although her mother was adamant that it was not an acceptable activity for girls.¹⁰³ Women were able to swim for the first time in the 1920s, when the Gelligaled sports park opened, housing the only pool in the Upper Rhondda.¹⁰⁴

It is clear from the reports carried in the sporting pages of the local newspapers that some women were able to participate in a number of sporting activities in the latter part of the period. Medical discourse and general hostility, however, continued to question the impact of such activities upon women, and this, alongside the cost of taking part, served to ensure that sport was probably confined only to those girls with the time and money necessary to train. For those who were able to participate, sports were usually sex-segregated, and provided little opportunity for interaction with the opposite sex. Nonetheless, there were certain activities that were mixed, as well as non-mixed clubs which shared the same premises and might socialise together.

¹⁰³ Mary Davies Parnell, *Block Salt and Candles*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰⁴ Ron Dallimore, *Welsh Connections: Memories of a Rhondda boyhood c.1920-1937*, (Printed Booklet; compiled 1990), p. 24.

Taking part directly in sporting activities, however, was not the only way in which women were able to enjoy them. Although there is no direct evidence from the Rhondda itself, a series of articles published in the *Western Mail* and evidence from other towns in south Wales suggest that women were often spectators of men's sports, especially rugby.¹⁰⁵ So much so was this the case that during the 1881-82 season, Cardiff Rugby Club erected its first stand, seating 300 people 'for the convenience of the spectators, and the ladies in particular'.¹⁰⁶ A letter to the *Western Mail and South Wales News* in 1936 nevertheless suggested that women were not always welcome at such events. The correspondent declared that:

It would help matters very much if women were not allowed to attend international matches. They cannot possibly know anything about the finer points of the game and their presence is but a pose.¹⁰⁷

Other articles in the press suggested that the presence of women at sporting events should not be encouraged as they would have to mix with the 'rough' element of society, which was thought to be an unacceptable situation for all women.

Participation in leisure pursuits such as sport, dancing, attending chapels and numerous other groups could often result in the meeting and subsequent marriage of two people. Numerous examples of this can be found, including that of May Jenkins, who met her husband at a Treorchy cycling club, or, again, that of Mrs Lloyd of Treorchy, who met her husband at a dance.¹⁰⁸ The very act of searching for a partner in itself could also be

¹⁰⁵ For more information, see D. Smith and G. Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

¹⁰⁶ Smith and Williams, *Fields of Praise*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 7 April 1936.

¹⁰⁸ Scadden, 'Be good sweet maid', p. 123; SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lloyd.

perceived as a form of leisure, rather than simply a result of it. In an interview with Hywel Francis, Maria Williams talked about meeting her husband whilst taking part in something very much like the monkey parade described in many studies of working-class youth, where youngsters, in groups of boys and girls, would walk up and down a specially designated street in the village in the hope of attracting a partner. In the case of the young people of Mardy:

We used to walk up and down the streets, I don't know why we used to do that after chapel. Crowds of us would walk up and down you know, walk from the chapel down to the con [Conservative Club] and back up.¹⁰⁹

It was on one such walk that she met the man who would subsequently become her husband.

It was not just the act of meeting members of the opposite sex that was exciting for young women. Hours were spent in companionable discussion about, and in preparation for meeting a suitable husband, and there were numerous superstitions attached to predicting a future spouse. Catrin Stephens has drawn attention to many practices and traditions in rural Welsh society regarding romance and courting, one of which she found examples of in the new urban community in Tylorstown in 1876. Her informant's aunt, and another young woman, a teacher, attempted a charm which they thought would foretell the future. The charm involved washing shirts in the river and laying them out at home to dry before the fire. The girls then sat before them, in the hope of seeing the face of their future husbands.¹¹⁰ Similarly, G. M. Oliver, in her memories of growing up in Cwmparc, recalls playing courting games with her friend who lived next door to her. They would try to peel apples without breaking the peel and then throw it over their shoulder to see what shape it would land in, the shape forming the initial of their future husband. If the girls wished to see the face of their

¹⁰⁹ SWCC: Interview with Maria Williams.

¹¹⁰ Catrin Stephens, *Welsh Courting Customs*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1993), p. 26.

future spouse, they would look over their left shoulder into a mirror, close their eyes and open them suddenly, whereupon his face would appear in the mirror.¹¹¹ The more practical methods of finding a partner, however, were far more likely to be through various clubs and associations, through family and friends, or through forming a partnership with somebody well known to them in the community, somebody, for example, who might have grown up a few streets away.

Whatever the means of finding a husband, it has been noted that a woman's experience of leisure altered dramatically once courting commenced.¹¹² Rather than spending most of her free time with her friends, the couple would spend more and more time together and, once it became clear that the relationship was a serious one, with their families. Thus, rather than spending a Sunday night in the cinema, it would be spent having a family tea at a partner's home. Not that this was the case for all courting couples; when Mrs Morris was courting, her father would not allow her and her boyfriend to sit in the front room of their family home in Mardy alone together, so they would have to go out. As couples did not usually attend dances together, and both dancing and the cinema could prove to be rather expensive if attended very frequently, they used to go for a lot of walks, even in winter.¹¹³

If women's leisure began to alter during the courtship period, it changed completely once a marriage had taken place. This was, according to Abendstern, in direct contrast with men's leisure, which was more continuous. She points out, however, that this came about as a direct consequence of the change which women's leisure had undergone.¹¹⁴ Some activities were not seen as appropriate for married women to take part in. Dancing was one such form

¹¹¹ NLW: G. M. Oliver, 'Before the wars', autobiographical essay written for Welsh Arts Council Competition, pp. 4-5.

¹¹² Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', Chpt. 4, p. 205.

¹¹³ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Morris..

¹¹⁴ Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 203.

of entertainment, because of the interaction between the sexes which it provided. If married couples did attend dances together, it was unlikely to be the commercial dance halls, which had a reputation, whether it was justified or not, for immorality; accordingly, dancing in these places was not suitable for couples, and certainly not for a married woman intending to attend with girlfriends. It was more likely that if couples did attend dances, they would be charity or church occasions. The numbers of them at such dances, however, was still relatively low; of the 61 guests reported as attending a dance at St Lukes Church in Porth in 1912, only nine married couples were listed.¹¹⁵ More usual was the situation that Mrs Lloyd found herself in once she was married. Despite having met her husband at a dance in Treorchy, and his being very much aware of her passion for dancing, he strongly disapproved of her continuing the activity once she was married. She nevertheless found ways to continue attending:

And I did do wrong, mind, I did go for a year, when Margaret [her daughter] was about six without him knowing on a Saturday night, and of course it caused a terrible, terrible, terrible upheaval, but I don't think he ever forgave, he didn't forget. He did forgive me, but he never forgot it, you see, because I loved it, I mean, I begged him to come you know, I said "we can go on Saturdays now" my mother got Margaret, we lived quite near [her mother], and he would buy tickets mind for the dance...and he'd say "we're going to the Buff dance" and I'd have a new frock and when the time came...he'd say "No, we're not going" "Well, I said, you've bought tickets" "yes, I know, well I'm not going to start you off again" so, we just never went.¹¹⁶

Although there seems to have been very strict ideas about the types of entertainment that married women could attend, there was still a variety of activities which were acceptable for all classes of women, whether married or single. One such facility was the cinema, many of which were established quickly in the Rhondda, and, like cinemas elsewhere, they soon

¹¹⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, 6 January 1912.

¹¹⁶ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lloyd.

assumed a place in community life which was as important as that of the local pub or other meeting place.¹¹⁷ A wide choice of both cinema and film was available, and they catered for all age groups and sectors of the community. The reasons for their popularity, as Stephen Ridgewell has pointed out, were numerous:

Inexpensive and accessible, they were an integral part of the communities they served, places where people could come together and for a few hours at least escape from the harsh realities of valley life.¹¹⁸

This conclusion by Ridgewell encompasses the primary reasons for the popularity of cinema in the inter-war period in south Wales, in that it was cheap, widely available, and provided a means of escapism. A further, and very important aspect of their popularity, was that they were, above all, a forum for entertainment, as Peter Stead has pointed out.¹¹⁹ The variety of films shown in the Rhondda were immense and held wide appeal. Saturday mornings were times for children to attend, and films, starring actors such as Shirley Temple, were shown, and youngsters queued up for the excitement of seeing the latest adventure film or western. Saturday nights, on the other hand, were times for courting couples to view the latest Hollywood film.

Far from being dirty, sleazy places that were not considered to be suitable for middle-class women, cinemas appealed to both the affluent sectors of the community and the working class in varying numbers.¹²⁰ The abundance of cinemas established in the valleys led to a hierarchy being developed, from those catering for the poorer sections of the community,

¹¹⁷ J Richards, 'The cinema and cinema going in Birmingham in the 1930s', in Walton and Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain*, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ Stephen Ridgewell, 'Pictures and Proletarians: South Wales miners' cinemas in the 1930s', *Llafur* 7, 2, (1997), p. 80.

¹¹⁹ P. Stead, 'Wales in the Movies', in T. Curtis, (ed.), *Wales: The Imagined Nation, Essays in Cultural and National Identity*, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), p. 162.

¹²⁰ Oliver, 'Liberation or Limitation?', p. 213.

often referred to as 'flea-pits', to the more expensive establishments which worked hard to attract a better clientele, with many more cinemas in the middle. John Prior and his brother, whose father was a manager at Porth Colliery and therefore a class above his peers in the neighbourhood, only ever attended the Central Cinema in Porth. He and his family clearly thought very little of the cinemas frequented by other families in the neighbourhood.¹²¹ Those establishments wishing to retain high standards and thus cater for the more affluent in the Rhondda often enforced strict codes of dress and behaviour in order to retain their standards and thus be viewed as respectable establishments, as did similar cinemas elsewhere.¹²² The respectability that cinemas gained proved to be a great attraction, and ensured that they were perceived as facilities that were appropriate for women of all backgrounds including those from the working classes who were often excluded from other forms of leisure activity.¹²³ This respectability meant that it was not necessary for women to be chaperoned in order to go there; they could go alone, or with their children to matinee performances, or, again, with husband, friend or sweetheart.

Aside from the issue of respectability, another important consideration for working-class women was one of cost. As we have already seen, there was a hierarchy of cinemas in the Rhondda, so one could be found to suit most budgets. To watch a film in Town Hall in Porth, one could expect to pay 6d for a seat in the gallery, 9d for the balcony, 1s for the stalls and 1s 6d for the balcony stalls.¹²⁴ At the 'better class' Central Cinema, Porth, the cost of a seat ranged from the cheapest at 1s. 6d, to the most expensive at 9s. The cashbooks from the cinema illustrate that the most popular seats were those costing 6s, followed by the 3s seats,

¹²¹ Grenfell Hill, *Growing up in Wales*, pp. 133-34.

¹²² Oliver, 'Liberation or Limitation?', pp. 184-193.

¹²³ Stephen Ridgewell, 'Pictures and Proletarians', p. 69.

¹²⁴ *Porth Gazette*, 10 May 1902.

and then the 9s ones.¹²⁵ An evening at the cinema could be much cheaper than this, however, as Mrs Morris of Mardy illustrates:

We would walk to Ferndale, the six of us, thre'pence we had, to start with. We would walk down and we would go to the workmen's hall in Ferndale, tu'pence to go in, back seats. Chicken's run we used to call it, long seats, and we would see the picture better than the ones at the front, now the back seats are the best there. We used to go in there for tu'pence and have a pen'orth of chips in a bag, and walk back up. That was a night out, for thre'pence.¹²⁶

As Gwynne Meara pointed out in his study of juvenile unemployment in south Wales, adolescents did not mind sitting in the cheap seats; they were just content to be watching the same programme as those further back in the more expensive ones.¹²⁷

Watching films was therefore accessible to women and men from a wide variety of backgrounds and family situations, and most people who wished to attend found that there was somewhere that they were able to do so, albeit on an infrequent basis. Thus, attending the cinema was a very popular pursuit in the Rhondda, and its popularity continued, with some slumps, throughout the inter-war period. For the week ending 13 October 1923, for example, when 'Beauty's Worth', 'Sky High', 'Circus Days' and 'Lights of the Desert' were being shown, some 6,163 patrons attended the Central Cinema. Later, during the 1926 strike, attendance decreased, but figures still remained fairly steady, from a low of 1,456 during the week ending 3 July, to 4,413 during the week ending the 24 July.¹²⁸ In spite of its popularity there were, nevertheless, some moral issues which were raised in the press from time to time;

¹²⁵ GRO: MS. D/D AB 41/2, Solomon Andrews Collection: Cash books of Central Cinema, Porth, week ending 13 October 1923. The entry shows that of the 6,163 attendees during that week, 1,919 paid 6s, 1,421 3s, and 1,332 9s.

¹²⁶ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Morris.

¹²⁷ Meara, *Juvenile employment in south Wales*, p. 98.

¹²⁸ GRO: MS. D/D AB 41/2, Solomon Andrews Collection: Cash books of the Central Cinema, Porth, 1923 and 1926.

these ranged over the types of films that were suitable for viewing by women and children, reports of rowdiness in some cinemas, and possible health risks connected with staring at a large screen. On the whole, however, cinemas appealed to all classes of society, and attracted very little criticism

Similarly, as we have already seen, the Rhondda Valleys were home to a number of music halls and theatres which attracted a wide variety of acts, professional and amateur, both from within the Rhondda and from further afield. Women were frequently present in audiences for events such as *Cymanfa Ganu* (music festivals), *eisteddfodau*, oratorios, plays and dramas as well as shows and music hall programmes. They were not just confined to the audiences of such events, however, for some women took an active part in the singing and dramas.

Entertainment, and singing in particular, became synonymous with the Welsh Valleys, so much so that singers have been described as the Rhondda's 'second best export'.¹²⁹ It is fair to claim, indeed, that the Rhondda had some of the best choirs and musical societies in the country. The most renowned choir in the district was probably the Royal Treorchy Male Voice Choir, which conducted tours of Wales and Britain, and embarked upon visits to Europe and America as well as giving local performances. In addition, most Rhondda towns, including places like Ferndale and Tylorstown, could boast a good male voice choir. But until now, the mixed and ladies' choirs have received little attention. We shall see, however, that a vibrant musical culture existed in the Valleys, in which women took a full and active role. In fact, such was the part that women played in the musical life of the district that Alun Morgan was moved to comment that it was through

¹²⁹ Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song*, p. 114.

music that women were able to play one of their most active roles in community life outside of work and the home.¹³⁰

Female choirs in the Rhondda have not had the long and prominent history that their male counterparts in the district have enjoyed. As Gareth Williams has pointed out, choir competitions for women were not included in Rhondda *eisteddfodau* until the one held at Porth in 1893, and their first appearance at the event was reputed to be the cause of much excitement. Such was the dearth of women's choirs in the Valleys, however, that only one choir made an appearance.¹³¹ Nevertheless, the impact and appeal of this first choir was quickly felt, and similar groups soon established themselves throughout the Valleys. The Treherbert Ladies choir and the Treorchy Ladies choir, the latter being conducted by Madame Felix Evans, sprang into existence soon afterwards, and the Cwmparc Ladies Choir was reported to have 50 members in 1902.¹³² Many of these choirs gained large followings and gave concerts in the locality in addition to taking part in competitive singing. Some ventured further afield, and gained notoriety and received awards outside of the district, such as the Rhondda Ladies' choir which, in 1929, won the Choir Competition at the Liverpool *Eisteddfod*, and repeated their success in 1930 at the Llanelli *Eisteddfod*. Further fame was to follow, when in 1931 they appeared on a radio broadcast.¹³³ A large number of ladies' choirs came into existence after the First World War, and boasted sizable memberships. When a ladies' choir was formed in Treherbert in March 1922, forty women were reported to have attended the first rehearsal. Soon afterwards, in September 1922, the Porth Ladies' Choir under the conductorship of Madame Hooper Rees was formed.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Alun Morgan, *Rhondda, 1860-1914*, (Mid Glamorgan: WHRU, 1983), p. 18.

¹³¹ *Western Mail*, 24 May 1893.

¹³² *Rhondda Leader*, 5 April 1902; 10 May 1902.

¹³³ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 13 June 1931.

¹³⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 2 March 1922.

Many of the choirs founded were linked to religious bodies, whether directly through being established by members of a particular church or chapel, or indirectly, by virtue of using churches and chapels, or their halls, for practice and for concerts.¹³⁵ It is for this reason that such activities were deemed respectable for women, whether married or single, to enjoy. In spite of Croll's belief that the dichotomy between respectable and rough culture was blurred, the idea existed amongst contemporaries that activities associated with the chapels were respectable, and therefore acceptable for women. In addition to the many church and chapel choirs, however, there were also a great number of secular choirs, like those mentioned above, as well as other types of musical societies which were popular with women, such as the Ynyshir Operatic Society.

The popularity of music for women, Williams believes, can be explained by the fact that it could function as an equaliser, allowing them the opportunity to attain something approaching comparable status with men. It was certainly one of the only ways, apart from sporting prowess and charity work, that women could be mentioned in the local press on their own merits, rather than merely in a complementary role to their father or husband. Williams also draws attention to the feelings of pride and accomplishment felt by women regarding their singing and the distance that it took them from their everyday life. He repeats a line voiced by Rachel Thomas in the 1953 film 'Valley of Song':

None of you could ever know what it means to me to sing that part. All the year it's cooking and washing and mending I am. But when 'Messiah' came around I stopped being Mrs Lloyd, Undertaker. I was Mair Lloyd – contralto.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Williams, *Valleys of Song*, p. 44; contemporary news reports about choir practices and concerts also illustrate this point.

¹³⁶ Williams, *Valley of Song*, p. 198; p. 224.

It was not just women's choirs and operatic societies which gained fame in the district; there were also a number of women who gained notoriety as individual singers. For example, Tonypandy-born Amy Evans won over 30 *eisteddfod* prizes at quite a young age, and at one such competition was spotted as a remarkable future talent. Mr Robert Forest, an Agent of Lord Plymouth, paid for her to receive vocal training in London and, following this opportunity, she went on to win parts in many operas and shows in London. In the early months of 1910 alone it was reported that she had received a rapturous reception for her role as Queen of the Fairies in 'Fallen Fairies' at the Savoy; that she had performed with the Queens Hall Orchestra at Queens Hall; and that she had taken part in a concert held at the Earl of Plymouth's residence in order to raise funds for the Belgrave Hospital for Children.¹³⁷ The local press was immensely proud of the person that they referred to as 'the greatest soprano in Wales' and always took great interest in her career, which progressed rapidly so that by 1922 she had toured New Zealand as well as having appeared on stage in London and Cardiff. In spite of her fame in London and other parts, she continued to play an important part in the local community, often returning to the Rhondda to sing and to appear at local charity performances. Equally celebrated was Madam May Moses Jones, a singer from the Rhondda who travelled to America on a number of occasions. On one such instance, she was chosen as one of the two women accompanists to the Rhondda Glee Society when they embarked upon a three-month tour; in addition, she toured there twice as a soloist, performing oratorios and grand opera. Upon her death in 1922, the *Glamorgan Free Press* and *Rhondda Leader* honoured her with the accolade 'the finest soprano vocalist in the principality' and also referred to her as 'the Welsh Nightingale'.¹³⁸ It is clear that in the case

¹³⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 29 January 1910; *Western Mail*, 17 March 1910; *Western Mail* 29 March 1910.

¹³⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press* and *Rhondda Leader*, 13 January, 1922; 20 January 1922.

of these two gifted vocalists, music offered the opportunity for travel and for fame and success further afield.

The musical talent in the Rhondda did not stop at singers and choirs; Miss Maud Gold, a violinist from Tonypany, made a name for herself after winning a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1912, following which she played at the Savoy's 24th Orchestral concert in 1926 and gave concerts at many English cities and towns, including London and Bournemouth.¹³⁹ Furthermore, for every singer or musician who found fame through their talent, there were large numbers of women who were musically gifted and who shared their talents by becoming music teachers. The pages of the local press are filled with advertisements of the services of teachers - many of whom were very highly qualified - as well as congratulatory notices for sons and daughters of the valleys who had gained scholarships, places or passed examinations at the country's leading music institutes.

Activities such as dramatic societies and choirs, in addition to other forms of entertainment such as cinema, dancing and groups and associations linked to the churches and chapels, were often commended to women as a respectable alternative to the public house. The latter sprang up in the Rhondda at the same rate as chapels in the early development of the Rhondda; by 1875, right at the beginning of the growth period of the Rhondda, there were 90 licensed public houses, inns and hotels. It is commonly thought that women partaking in alcohol and frequenting the public houses were frowned upon by the rest of the community, and were regarded as part of the 'rough' element of that particular town. This was not necessarily the case. Andrew Davies, in his study of leisure and gender in Salford and Manchester, makes the very important point that communities are not

¹³⁹ *Rhondda Leader*, 2 March 1912; *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 19 March 1926.

homogenous, and that different sections of society all have rules and modes of behaviour that they find acceptable.¹⁴⁰ Thus, drinking in moderation might have been perfectly acceptable in some sections of the population. Further, he argues, the perception of whether drinking was acceptable or not was fairly fluid throughout the period. So, by the inter-war period it was admissible, certainly in some circles, for women to go to the 'Jug and Bottle' to get drink to take away. Similarly, they could sit in the lounge of a respectable pub or hotel, such as the 'Commercial Room' in the Royal Hotel in Mardy, with their husbands. Whilst they were in such establishments, however, strict rules of behaviour had to be followed. Mr Lewis often worked behind the bar in his parents' pub, The New Inn in Tonypandy, and he recalled that there were accepted ideas rules regarding both where women should sit, and what beverage was acceptable for them to drink. Women did not go into the Bar area with their husbands and other men, but rather drank in the more secluded lounge area. Similarly, they could go to the pubs with their husbands and but with other women friends, although once there, their spouses might go into the bar and leave them with the wives of others. If women did come into the pub, Mr Lewis recalled, they were taken into the back:

And you asked them to have a drink, what you always offered them was a port wine, you see. Never any beer or anything like that. I never saw women drink beer...until I went to London in 1926.¹⁴¹

As long as these informal, yet well-known, rules were adhered to, the presence of women in pubs was an acceptable part of social life in the inter-war period. The ones frowned upon, however, were those women who entered into the rougher, working men's pubs in the district, and those who drank to excess and engaged in rowdy and riotous behaviour.

¹⁴⁰ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, p. 172.

¹⁴¹ SWCC: Interview with Mr Lewis.

Contemporary newspapers often commented upon the spectacle of drunken women fighting in the street, and they were portrayed in a very negative light. The following comment from an article about Rhondda in the 1880s captures some of the flavour of contemporary news reports regarding drunkenness amongst women:

Women under the influence of drink quarrelled and incited by their menfolk would fight with each other, usually by digging their nails into the other's face and pulling handfuls of hair. Some more skilled used their fists like men.¹⁴²

Therefore, female drinking was often associated with female drunkenness, which was a very different matter. Female drunkenness was a concern for contemporaries, many of whom were quick to condemn the women reported and those appearing in the local police court for crimes associated with drink, most commonly assault, violence and rowdiness. Although these women were often viewed as 'rough', some observers strove to find reasons behind the need to drink. Daniel Lleufer Thomas, for example, took a very sympathetic view of drunkenness in his report for the Licensing commission in 1930. He attributed the problem to the conditions in which the working class found themselves, including deplorable housing, overcrowding, and the lack of suitable alternative leisure facilities.¹⁴³

The towns in the Rhondda, then, provided a wide range of entertainment facilities, which the residents readily embraced, both middle-and working-class, male and female, married and single. What is clear, however, is that the different groups partook of different types of leisure activity and, even if it was the same activity, it might be in different venues. Although the facilities existed it is evident, however, that as far as some pursuits were concerned, only a minority of the population could take advantage of them at any time: some

¹⁴² Daniel Davies 'The Rhondda in the Eighties', *The Quarterly Review*, 1952, p. 220.

¹⁴³ NLW: MS. C1/2, Daniel Lleufer Thomas Papers; Royal Commission on Licensing (England and Wales), 1929-1930, statement of evidence, p. 1.

forms of leisure, for example, could only cater for the young, such as the guide and brownie groups, or for the wealthy, such as many of the sporting facilities; and there were some activities which it was normal for only single women to attend, such as dance halls. Conversely there were other activities which could be enjoyed by all, even if only infrequently, as, for example, the cinema, choirs and music, parks, the surrounding countryside, and activities and groups associated with the churches and chapels.

For many women, however, activities which took place outside the home became less and less frequent following marriage, as finances became tighter, children came along, and the amount of household chores increased. In addition, criticism and hostility directed by some observers towards mothers who 'neglected' their children in order to see a film, or go to a dance, ensured that leisure for women changed dramatically upon marriage.¹⁴⁴ Women thereafter were faced with new constraints which narrowed their opportunity to take part in leisure activities. As young, single women, they might have been earning some money from employment; once married, however, the wage disappeared, and they were dependent upon the earnings of their husbands. Although women mostly held the responsibility for the family budget as a result of the wages being given to her, this could actually form part of the problem, as feminists have pointed out.¹⁴⁵ The tradition in working-class districts, we have emphasised, was for the husband would give all the wages to his wife, either taking out, or receiving from her, 'pocket money' to spend on beer, tobacco, newspapers and other activities. The rest of the budget was devoted to the family. This means that any money women had to spend on leisure, for themselves and for their children, had to be deducted

¹⁴⁴ Oliver, 'Liberation and Limitation', p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 191.

from the family's money, which also had to cover food and clothes.¹⁴⁶ This was a cause of great guilt for many women, with the result that they simply would not take any money out to spend on themselves. Further, the difficult economic situation of the 1920s and 1930s meant that there was very rarely money left over for women and even if there was, they probably would not have had any clothes that they considered suitable enough to permit them to go very far.

Therefore, following marriage, 'leisure' for many women became centred in the home, the family and the immediate community. As Mrs Lloyd of Treorchy testified: 'I never went anywhere really, other than on the door knitting, in the house and up home to my father and my sisters.'¹⁴⁷ Studies of the working class, such as those conducted by Rosemary Crook, Elizabeth Roberts and Melanie Tebbutt, have all indicated the importance to women of familial and community networks to which they could turn in times of need, or even to reduce the isolation that they might experience. There was, however, a time and a place for such interaction. When Mair McLellan's mother had time to spare, she would often visit her old school friend. The McLellan family knew this friend by her maiden name, Annie Beese, even though she had been married for years, an indication of longevity of the friendship between the two women. Even though the two women had been friends for a number of years, provided mutual help and practical support in times of crisis, and were obviously close, Annie always left the house before Mair's father returned from work.¹⁴⁸

As some women were rarely able to escape from the home environment in order to interact with other people, activities usually thought of as chores took on a new

¹⁴⁶ Abendstern, 'Expression and Control', p. 191.

¹⁴⁷ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Lloyd.

¹⁴⁸ McLellan, 'Shadows on the Wall', p. 24.

significance.¹⁴⁹ Shopping, for example, although not usually thought of as a leisure pursuit, and indeed constituted a necessary chore for all women, was a very important means of socialisation and interaction for women, many of whom may have felt isolated in their homes while their husbands were at work. Many working-class autobiographies, including those of both Rhys Davies and Mary Davies Parnell in the Rhondda, testify to the importance of the local shop in providing a meeting place for local women, offering them an opportunity to exchange gossip whilst purchasing their necessities.¹⁵⁰ Even for non-essential items, shopping was an experience which could be enjoyed by women, an opportunity to escape from the home environment for a couple of hours. Most of the Rhondda townships boasted bustling shopping centres, such as Dunraven Street in Tonypandy, Hannah Street in Porth, and Ystrad Road in Pentre. Mrs Morris remembers that Mardy had a busy central street which contained a wide variety of shops:

Mardy used to be a nice place for shops. There used to be two shoe shops, two clothing shops, tailors, oh it used to be a beautiful place Mardy. Money was small, but you had a nice variety of things.¹⁵¹

With a variety of shops available in the nearest big town, the majority of inhabitants rarely went out of the Valley in order to shop, not even to nearby Pontypridd, which was famous for its market. As Mrs Lewis from Tonypandy comments:

We never went to Ponty or anything. What shopping was done was done in Pandy... very few people went to Cardiff...mind you, they had nice shops in

¹⁴⁹ Langhammer, 'Women's 'Leisure' in the Life-cycle', pp. 8-9.

¹⁵⁰ Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place*; Rhys Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*; Mary Davies Parnell, *Block Salt and Candles*.

¹⁵¹ SWCC: Interview with Mrs Morris.

Pandy, Mrs _____ for one, she had a nice shop down by the post office in the middle of Pandy.¹⁵²

Other inhabitants have also testified to this.¹⁵³ Rhys Davies' mother, on the other hand, went shopping to Cardiff regularly. Middle-class families, such as that of Rhys Davies, with a servant to help in the house, could afford to leave the Valley, not only to shop but to visit family and friends, and perhaps enjoy time away from the Valleys. Such was the case in the instance of John Prior's parents; his father was a colliery manager and could therefore afford to take his wife away for weekends in London to watch shows, in addition to attending whist drives in the locality, entertaining friends in their own home and being entertained in the homes of others.¹⁵⁴

Most working-class married women, however, could not often afford trips outside of the Valleys. Trips and holidays were advertised with increasing frequency in the pages of the local press, although the nature of the newspapers meant that they were probably aimed at the more affluent sectors of the community rather than the community as a whole. A number of advertisements appeared from E. H. Davies and son, Pentre, agents for cruise companies such as Cunard, White Star and P& O, and holiday resorts such as Aberystwyth, Towyn, Dolgelly, Harlech, Pwllheli and Barry were promoted throughout the spring and summer months.¹⁵⁵ Few families of miners in the Rhondda were able to take advantage of such offers, however. Not only was the cost of booking rail fares and accommodation, for what were often large families, too expensive for them, but also they simply could not afford to do without the wages which would have been earned during that week. The Holidays With Pay Act was not

¹⁵² SWCC: Interview with Mr and Mrs Bryn Lewis.

¹⁵³ Interviews conducted with Mair McLellan; Mrs M, August 2000.

¹⁵⁴ Grenfell Hill, *Growing up in Wales*, p. 136.

¹⁵⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, 3 August 1907; 17 July 1912.

introduced until 1938, and although some industries offered their employees paid holidays before this date, given the financial difficulties that they were experiencing during the inter-war period the mining industry was not one of them. Thus, a week at the seaside for a miner and his family before the widespread introduction of holidays with pay would cost the amount of the holiday, plus ensuring enough money remained to pay for the rent on their house, and would involve the loss of a week's wages. Clearly, only the more affluent families would have been able to afford the luxury of any time spent away from the Valleys. For the many families of the unemployed in the inter-war years, the opportunity for a week away was impossible. As Hannington, in his study of distressed areas, comments:

There are women who for 10, 12 and 15 years have had no relief from household drudgery and the worries of keeping a family on the labour exchange or UAB [Unemployment Assistance Board] pittance... the publicity that starts in the spring about holidays at the seashore is a mockery to them.¹⁵⁶

Even for relatively well-off families, the opportunity for a holiday at the seaside was not particularly widespread. Rhys Davies had left school before he had his first holiday - to Porthcawl - and his family, as shopkeepers, were more affluent than most.¹⁵⁷

Additionally, it has been pointed out that even if holidays were attainable by the working class, they might not have proved to be such a relaxing experience for women. The practice of renting of rooms and apartments was far more common than that of holidaying in hotels, and women would continue to carry out many of the household chores, including shopping, budgeting, cooking and washing, albeit in a different locality. There is an essential distinction, it has been argued, between 'personal' leisure for women, and family-orientated

¹⁵⁶ Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁷ See Davies, *Print of a Hare's Foot*, pp. 89-94.

leisure, which did not necessarily mean leisure for women.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Sunday school outings have often been heralded as a chance for women and their families to escape from the Rhondda to the seaside, even if only for a few hours, and relax. Indeed, most working-class autobiographies and oral histories mention the outings in some capacity. They were an event of great excitement for the children, but the work that it caused the women is often overlooked. Preparation would be started days in advance, with budgeting for food for the picnic, and perhaps extra pocket money for ice creams and donkey rides; clothes were washed and pressed, whole families bathed the night before, and the picnic had to be prepared.¹⁵⁹

The expense, time and preparation involved in activities outside the home necessarily resulted in a large degree of leisure for the working class taking place inside the home. Entertainment during the early part of the period was characterised by cosy image of families sharing time through musical evenings or family get-togethers, and to some extent this continued for those who lacked the time and resources to participate in leisure elsewhere. As time passed, technology also allowed the leisure that took place inside of the home to alter. Greater literacy and improved facilities for light, for example, meant that, as long as there was enough spare time, reading became a popular pastime. Mair McLellan was a prolific reader in spite of the fact that she had never attended school. She would read anything her father brought home, including newspapers and political books, and joined the local library as a junior member as soon as she was old enough. She recalls, however, that her mother hated her 'bookishness'.¹⁶⁰ Few, though, criticised girls for expanding their education by reading;

¹⁵⁸ Oliver, *Liberation or limitation*, Chapter 2; Langhammer, 'Women's "Leisure" in the Life Cycle', pp. 5-8.

¹⁵⁹ See Maggie Pryce Jones, *Kingfisher of Hope*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁰ Mair McLellan, 'Shadows on the Wall', p. 52, also noted in White and Williams (eds.), *Struggle and Starve*, p. 191.

indeed, in an article in the *Western Mail*, Lady Gordon suggested novel reading as a particularly suitable pastime for girls.¹⁶¹ It was very important, however, that they were reading 'correct' material.

Even the quiet pursuit of reading caused problems for some women, as, despite improvements in lighting supplies in the district, the lack of space and light to read in working-class homes made reading difficult.¹⁶² Similarly, the oft-quoted constraints faced by married women played a part even in this pursuit.¹⁶³ Although books, and especially newspapers, were relatively cheap to purchase, they were still an expensive luxury for those who had little or no money to spare.

This problem was in some way solved by the existence of reading rooms and libraries which were available throughout the district. The Public Libraries Act was introduced in 1919, with the explicit aim of establishing free borrowing and reference facilities for the people of the district. The RUDC, however, did not implement the Act until 1933, because the libraries of the many Workmen's Institutes and Welfare Halls in the district already provided such a facility for the women and children as well as miners. The libraries in these institutes did not just cater for the miners who paid for its running and maintenance, but also their wives and children. In addition to being able to borrow the books, some institutes catered specifically for their female users. The Institute at Mardy, for example, had two reading rooms attached to its library, one of which was specifically designated as the Ladies' Reading Room. Thus, facilities were available for women to borrow books, rather than purchase them, but evidence suggests that women did not utilise them as much as men. The

¹⁶¹ *Western Mail*, 22 January 1910.

¹⁶² David Vincent 'Reading in the Working Class Home', in Walton and Walvin, (eds.), *Leisure in Britain*, pp. 219-20.

¹⁶³ Tebbutt suggests that lack of defined leisure time and poor literacy levels meant that reading was not a popular pastime for women: see *Women's Talk*, p. 42.

Library Register for the Cynon and Duffryn Welfare Hall, in the nearby Cynon Valley, thus illustrates that of the 1, 610 books lent out to members between 1927 and 1931, only 23 per cent were to women. A large percentage of the latter were schoolteachers.¹⁶⁴ Few were lent to housewives, and a reason for this might have been that books might have been difficult for women to read in the face of constant interruptions from the family, and so interest in a long story might not have been sustained. As Melanie Tebbutt noted:

Reading was an individualistic activity which cut the reader off from other family members, while chores like sewing gave women the opportunity of a relaxing chat yet also indicated that they were readily available to the rest of the family.¹⁶⁵

Newspapers, however, had the benefit of much shorter articles, which could be picked up, put down, and returned to later, as and when required. It is difficult to assess readership amongst women, and even readership amongst the population in general; but it can be assumed that even though only one newspaper would have been purchased per household, it probably would have been read by a number of persons, including women. Popular newspapers in the district certainly made an attempt to appeal to the female readership; the *Rhondda Leader* printed a 'Women's Column' in which the latest fashions were discussed and household tips and gossip titbits were given. The *Western Mail* went one step further, publishing a women's section of the newspaper on a Saturday, which could be removed from the rest of the paper and thus read at the same time as another member of the family was reading the main body of the paper.

¹⁶⁴ Canon and Duffry Welfare Hall: Library register, 1927-1931

¹⁶⁵ Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*, p. 58.

Similarly, listening to the radio from the 1920s provided women with something to take their mind off the chores, whilst at the same time allowing themselves to be available to the rest of the family. A radio could be played whilst the chores were being done, as well as in the evenings as part of a family or communal leisure activity. Radios have been heralded as a very economical means of supplying entertainment and information to society, but in practice sets were expensive, as were licenses, with the result that levels of radio ownership were lower in south Wales than in other parts of the country.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, in practice most communities or neighbourhoods contained one house with a wireless, and that household became the focus of attention during certain events. The jubilee celebrations of 1935, and the coronation in 1937, for example, were broadcast on the radio, and the houses of friends and relatives could be visited in time for listening to the news and other programmes.¹⁶⁷ Far from being a solitary pastime, listening to the radio could often be quite a communal activity.

It is clear that a wide variety of leisure activities and pursuits were available in the Rhondda, and that women partook of them in various degrees and had very different experiences of leisure, depending upon their personal circumstances and notions of what was acceptable for them to be doing. Whilst married working-class women might have had little experience of commercial leisure, by using a wider definition of 'leisure' and shifting the emphasis away from its relationship with work, it is possible to see that activities such as shopping, religious groups and associations, and reading certainly constituted leisure for many women. At the same time, there were other groups of women, namely single and middle-class women, who were able to take greater advantage of the facilities available in

¹⁶⁶ M. Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society 1918-1939*, (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 4 and p. 15.

¹⁶⁷ In *Block Salt and Candles*, for example, Mary Davies Parnell vividly recalls being sent to the house next door to listen to the news during the Second World War, and would then report the information back to her parents: pp. 12-13.

the district, and were visible and active in many of them. Single women of all ages, and middle-class women in particular, had both the time and the money to indulge in pursuits outside of the home. In addition to leisure activities, they could also devote themselves to political causes, as we will see in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Politics

The activities of women outside the private sphere were not just confined to those associated with leisure and entertainment. For some women, and especially, although not exclusively, those of the more affluent groups, activities also extended to the political arena in various forms. The period 1870-1938 was one of immense political change in the Rhondda, witnessing, as it did, the transition from Liberal domination to the increasing influence of the Labour movement and the threat to the latter's hegemony by the Communists in the tumultuous inter-war period. These years also witnessed the increased participation of women both in local organisations and in the political parties. In the early part of the period, women had very little, if indeed any, impact upon local politics, but as the population expanded, and more and more official bodies began to be established, some began to take an increasingly active role.

The high degree of political activity in the South Wales Coalfield, and particularly in the Rhondda, in the form of union activism and the influence of the Labour movement, has led to a number of histories being published on these aspects. What is significant, however, is that few historians draw attention to the role that women played in the political life of the Rhondda, to the point that it could be believed that women were not involved at all in the political events taking place. As noted in the introduction, some historians have addressed this, such as Dai Smith, Hywel Francis and Chris Williams, but women are generally found in the margins of these studies rather than taking a centre stage,¹ ensuring that the

¹ See Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*; and Francis and Smith, *The Fed.*

historiography of politics in the Rhondda has been extremely male centred. The focus in existing studies has mainly been upon two branches; the industrial disputes and trade union activities on the one hand, and 'formal' politics such as membership numbers of political parties and parliamentary representation on the other. Such singular concentration upon these aspects of coalfield politics has been at the expense of rendering women exempt from study and invisible in the political life of the community. In an attempt to remedy this defect, the present chapter will look at: the types of politics and campaigns that women were involved in, including temperance and suffrage; women as representatives of the people on public and administrative bodies, such as members of School Boards, Poor Law Guardians and members of the RUDC; and the opportunities available for women to become involved in the local Labour and Communist parties.

In order to reveal the extent to which some women were able to become active and visible in the political world, it is necessary, as it is in other aspects of women's lives, to change the emphasis used in traditional studies. Rather than studying elections to parliament, for example, in which women would not have been involved to any large degree, a study of local politics will indicate the true extent of women's presence. By using this method, we will see that a study of the Labour Party at grass roots level will uncover the fact that women were highly active in the Labour movement in the Rhondda. A network of women's Labour Sections sprang up across the two valleys during the inter-war period and gave the local Labour party much support, not only in election campaigning and fundraising, but also by suggesting policy and acting in an advisory capacity. In addition, not content with simply playing a supporting role, female Labour members also stood for membership of the RUDC themselves, often with great success. Similarly, studies of local Trades and Labour Councils,

upon which representatives of local Labour organisations sat, revealed that female members provided a voice for local women's organisations and trade unions that included women.

The chapter will thus show that far from being inactive in the political sphere, some women were active, and that some, in fact, were extremely active. Opportunities for women to enter the public sphere were available, and a few chose to capitalise upon this. Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour Woman Organiser for Wales during the inter-war period, Annie Price, a former schoolmistress and one of the longest serving members of the RUDC between the wars, and Elizabeth Davies, who commenced her career in public life as a Rhondda representative on the Pontypridd Board of Guardians and became a prominent member of the RUDC, are three women who clearly played a prominent role in the community politics of these years.

The political campaigns in which women became involved were similarly diverse, including the promotion of temperance in the district and the struggle for universal suffrage. The advancement of temperance was one of the first campaigns in which women participated, and was regarded as an extremely important one by contemporary campaigners who were concerned about the moral impact that excessive alcohol was having on the new communities. We have seen that the number of public houses in the Rhondda increased quickly alongside the growth in population, and the impact that this had upon inhabitants was of grave concern to those advocating temperance. Such fears of the effect of excessive alcohol consumption appear to have been justified, with frequent cases of drunkenness, rowdy behaviour and assaults associated with drink appearing in the pages of the press.

Temperance groups emerged as a counter-culture to the pubs throughout Wales and Britain in the nineteenth century, with the expressed aim of educating the population about

the evils of alcohol and providing leisure facilities and attractions with the object of encouraging men and women out of the pubs and into an alcohol-free environment. Thus, temperance *eisteddfodau*, plays and choral music were actively promoted as alternatives to the public house. The importance of such activities to those taking part has been noted by W. R. Lambert, who claimed that 'there is little doubt that the temperance society provided colour, interest and amusement in what was, to many of its members, a fairly drab life'.²

The aim of the movement and its constituent societies, however, was more fundamental than simply providing entertainment in an alcohol-free environment. More importantly, it sought to educate the populace about the dangers of alcohol, both to their health and to the moral life of the community. Entertainment simply provided them with the means with which to facilitate this aim, but the backbone of this organisation were the various societies which were established to provide such education and to co-ordinate the campaign. Such societies sprang up throughout Wales, which Lambert noted were particularly popular with working-class men. The democratic nature of such societies, he has argued, allowed these men to hold posts that they would not have had access to in other organisations. He further argues that, for women, the movement helped to raise their status, as it defended them against intemperate husbands.³ Studies have shown, however, that the temperance societies allowed women the same opportunities for involvement as Lambert argued they afforded working-class men. Although Lillian Lewis Shiman has argued that few women in Britain put themselves forward for temperance work when the societies were first established in the nineteenth century, it is clear that they soon began to carve a role for themselves and became more involved in the movement. At first, the early pioneers of the

² W.R. Lambert, *Drink and Sobriety in Victorian Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), p. 109.

³ Lambert, *Drink and Sobriety*, pp. 253-54.

movement, who joined mixed-sex societies, were segregated into women's committees and appeared to play a supportive rather than an active role. By the end of the century, she continues, women had become increasingly active, with large numbers of them having been drawn into working in the movement as a result of a few pioneering women having paved the way for the others to enter public life and having made temperance work respectable for them.⁴

The evidence from the South Wales Coalfield suggests that, by the end of the nineteenth century, women were being drawn into the temperance movement to a large degree. They were undoubtedly involved in the mixed temperance societies that existed in the Rhondda during the 1890s, but it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that women-only temperance societies began to be established. Despite Lamberts' claim that the temperance movement was going into decline from the 1890s, a vast number of societies came into existence in 1901-02, including those at Pentre, Ton, Tylorstown, Treherbert, Blaenrhondda, Blaenllechau, Trealaw, Ferndale and Ynyshir. In addition, a Rhondda-wide society, *Undeb Dirwestol I Ferched I Ddwy Rhondda* (The Temperance Society for Women of the Two Rhonddas), was established in 1901. Further societies were established later in Wattstown, Mardy and Llwynypia (all in 1908), at Tonypany (1910), and Porth (1917). All of these branches were affiliated to *Undeb Dirwestol Merched Y De* (The South Wales Women's Temperance Union), in which Rhondda women appear to have been active members. Of the twelve-strong executive committee during the period 1925-27, for example, six were from representatives of Rhondda branches. Similarly, Rhondda women constituted

⁴ Lillian Lewis Shiman, 'Changes are Dangerous: Women and Temperance in Victorian England', in Gail Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930*, (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

almost one quarter of the executive committee in the 1931-32 session.⁵ Women's temperance organisations were to remain in existence in the Rhondda until well into the 1920s. The meetings of these groups, as well as other groups in the locality, were often held in chapels, as was the case of a meeting of the South Wales and Monmouthshire Temperance Association in Salem Chapel, Porth, in 1894.⁶ The reports of the meetings published in the local press illustrate that they also contained a distinctly religious flavour, with prayer and hymn singing being part of the meetings.

In addition to the meetings and organising temperance-based leisure activities, the members extended their role to work with women and families whom they believed to be in 'moral danger', which often involved visits to the homes of the poor where they would attempt to educate household members about the dangers of drink. This aspect of the campaign was judged to be so important that, in 1912, the Mid Rhondda branch of the South Wales Women's Temperance Union decided to engage a missionary sister to assist in their work in educating the women of the mid Rhondda about the effects of alcohol.⁷ The temperance movement was not just a movement focussing entirely upon signing the pledge and abstaining from alcohol, however. Its aims were more far reaching than that and extended to cover a campaign for moral purity. In many ways this was influenced by their work with alcohol because of the perceived link between public houses and prostitution. One such campaign in the Rhondda culminated in 1922 with the opening of Lletty Cranogwen in 1922, a centre for 'fallen' girls and women in Tonypany.⁸

⁵ NLW: South Wales Women's Temperance Union: Report of the Work, Growth and Finances for all the years 1925, 1926 & 1927; Names and Addresses of Officers and Delegates, 1931-1957.

⁶ *Western Mail*, 16 February 1894.

⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 23 November 1912.

⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 24 March 1922.

It is difficult to discover the background of the women in the movement, but as it was philanthropic in nature, the aims of which were to educate and encourage certain members of the working classes, it is tempting to assume that the membership was largely middle class. A glance at the reports in the newspapers would appear to confirm this: the wives of ministers predominate, as well as those of other prominent men in Rhondda society, such as members of the council and other professional men. The *Undeb Dirwestol I Ferchedd I Ddwy Rhondda* included amongst its members the wife of a librarian, and the wife of the *Ton Cymdeithas Cymreigyddion*, whilst the president of the Porth Branch of the South Wales Women's Temperance Union was a Mrs Lloyd Owen, wife of a Congregationalist Minister.⁹ It should be recognised, however, that the very nature of reports in newspapers are such that only the main participants are mentioned. There may well have been members of the working classes present.

It was the middle-class nature of the organisation, its links with religion, self-improvement and education, and the quest for greater moral purity, that made the women's temperance societies respectable. It will be apparent that, for it to receive the support of men and the chapels, the work was deemed to be 'respectable' for women and that their roles did not represent a threat to society. One recent study, however, has suggested that the experience of the temperance movement was an important first step in the greater involvement of women in politics and political campaigns, providing them with vital experience which enabled them to enter public life. In both mixed and single-sex societies, for example, women were elected officers, held posts of authority, organised and attended formal meetings, and above all, made speeches to both members and wider public audiences. Such skills, the argument continues,

⁹ Membership and committee lists were regularly recorded in the local press. See, for example, *Rhondda Leader*, 9 August 1902.

furnished the women with greater confidence to become involved in other movements which were more overtly political, such as suffrage.¹⁰ This is, however, a highly contentious claim. It does not necessarily follow that women automatically progressed from temperance to suffrage.

Unlike the temperance movement, the campaign for suffrage caused a great deal of controversy in the first decade of the twentieth century. Studies of suffragette activity in Britain tend to reinforce the idea that the issue was predominantly a middle- and upper-class one, in which working-class women took little part. Similarly, investigations of Welsh suffragettes have mirrored this notion, when referring to prominent Welsh activists like Margaret Haig Thomas, the daughter of David Alfred Thomas (Lord Rhondda), and the few Welsh branches of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the most militant of the suffrage societies. Such branches existed in Swansea, Cardiff and Newport, areas with a large middle-class population, although they also received limited support in the Rhondda. Working-class women, it has been assumed, had neither the same amount of free time as their middle- and upper-class counterparts to devote to the cause, nor the opportunity to organise together due to the lack of employment opportunities in Wales. Further, the strength of the idea of separate spheres, especially in the coalfield communities, fostered by the masculine nature of communities centred on the mines, and encouraged by the teachings of the chapels, have also been blamed for their perceived lack of activity.¹¹ This view, however, contrasts sharply with a study undertaken of working-class women in Lancashire, where they were found to be highly active in the movement.¹² The women in Lancashire had a strong tradition

¹⁰ Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'From Temperance to Suffrage?', in Angela V. John, (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*, p. 151-55.

¹¹ Angela John "'Run Like Blazes": The Suffragettes and Welshness', *Llafur*, 6, 3, (1994), p. 30.

¹² J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, (London: Virago, 1984), p. 11.

both of paid work and trade union activity, factors which provided them with opportunities to gather together and discuss issues in a way that was allegedly denied women in Wales. There was an exception to this, however. Teaching, we have discovered, was one of the primary occupations for women in the Rhondda, and it was highly unionised. Alison Oram has argued that teachers generally were likely to be well versed in feminism and suffrage, and it is likely that this issue was discussed amongst the women in the teaching profession.¹³

Although opportunities for women to become organised through employment and trade unions in the Rhondda were more limited, they did come into contact with each other in other ways. As was the case in Lancashire, the Labour movement was strong in the Rhondda, as was the Women's Co-operative Guild, both of which supported suffrage for women. Additionally, regular meetings were held under the auspices of the local Independent Labour Party (ILP) branches to which prominent speakers were welcomed. In 1917, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst was invited to address a meeting in the Wattstown/Ynyshir ward, and Miss Waring, the organiser of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) for the south Wales area, was a regular visitor to the Rhondda. The local socialist press also supported the campaign, although this had much to do with the fact that it was in their interest to do so. As Vernon Hartshorn wrote in an article in 1913:

Not only would the enfranchisement of women clear the ground for the coming struggle, but it would give an enormous impetus to the demand for reforms which would give the men the right to work and the women the wherewithal to keep the home going. The working woman's interests as a voter would be essentially domestic and economic. She would take more interest in questions affecting her husband's wages and the feeding of her children, than in all the political jugglery which has dominated politics in the

¹³ Alison Oram, "'Sex antagonism' in the teaching profession: Employment issues and the woman teacher in elementary education, 1910-1939", Unpublished M.Sc (University of Bristol), 1984.

past. If the Labour movement is to progress we must get the women votes so that we may have their powerful aid at the pull.¹⁴

In the same way, women could have been organised through a particular religious denomination, such as the Free Church League, which also declared its support for the franchise.

Following a spate of open-air meetings in the Rhondda, unions began to be established in towns such as Clydach, Treherbert, Tonypany and Penygraig, as support for the movement continued to grow. By 1912-13 there were a number of branches of the NUWSS, the non-militant group, in the Rhondda. Branches at Ferndale and Ton were established in 1911 and 1912 respectively, and were actively raising funds, inviting visiting speakers to address public meetings and organising debates. Public meetings were also held regularly, usually under the auspices of various suffrage societies, and they were widely reported in the newspapers, especially when prominent suffragettes from the national movement were invited to speak.

In addition to attracting support from the organisations mentioned above, many prominent women in the Rhondda readily associated themselves with the cause. Elizabeth Andrews, for example, the founder of the first Rhondda Branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild, and later the Labour Woman Organiser for Wales, joined the suffrage movement as a non-militant at a time when it 'was not very safe for Socialists or Suffragettes' in the Rhondda.¹⁵ Other women who were active included Mrs E. T. Davies, who was a Poor Law Guardian for the Rhondda ward and later a Labour Councillor on the Urban District Council. She spoke for suffrage on behalf of the Free Church League in March 1912.¹⁶ Likewise, Mrs

¹⁴ Vernon Hartshorn in *Rhondda Socialist*, 18 January 1913.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: Being the Recollections of a Childhood and Upbringing amongst the South Wales Miners and a Lifetime of service to the Labour Movement in Wales*, (Ystrad Rhondda: n.d.), p. 7.

¹⁶ *Rhondda Socialist*, 3 August 1912.

Jamieson Williams of Treorchy often chaired and spoke at suffrage meetings throughout the Rhondda and other parts of south Wales, such as at a meeting of the WSPU in Merthyr in 1912.¹⁷ There is also evidence that she was further involved in the labour movement both locally and further afield. In 1912 a letter from Annot E. Robinson was published in the *Rhondda Socialist* thanking Mrs Williams, amongst others, for the help she had given with her campaign.¹⁸

It is clear that many of the women involved in suffrage were those with forceful personalities and strong beliefs. These prominent women, however, were the only ones mentioned in the press as being particularly active in organising. Women who attended the meetings were not mentioned, beyond forming part of 'a large audience'. It is quite likely that audiences would have been made up, in some part at least, of miners' wives, shop assistants and domestic workers. Unfortunately not much is known about the 'ordinary' women who might have been involved in addition to the middle-class women and teachers who were traditionally associated with the cause.

Furthermore, in addition to the various female supporters, Angela John has shown, the issue of suffrage also enjoyed the support of men. Such backing was important to the cause as, because women did not have any influence on parliament, they were reliant on men for the achievement of their goals.¹⁹ Some men did more than offer their assistance, by dint of establishing their own societies, such as the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. Its first Welsh branch was established in Pontypridd in 1909 and attracted the support of clerical and professional men. John argues, however, that support from working-class men was minimal,

¹⁷ *Rhondda Socialist*, 3 August 1912; 22 June 1912.

¹⁸ *Rhondda Socialist*, 16 March 1912.

¹⁹ Angela V John, 'Chwarae Teg': *Welsh Men's Support for Woman Suffrage*, (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1998), p. 2.

as it did not appear to the majority of them to be an urgent priority given that a large number of their own sex still lacked the vote. They therefore supported adult rather than female suffrage.²⁰ This has also been asserted by Martin Pugh, who has claimed that, 'as long as they [suffragists] had no convincing answer to the resentments harboured by the unenfranchised males they would find working-class support elusive'.²¹ There is evidence, however, that some working-class men did sympathise with the women's cause. Deirdre Beddoe, for instance, has suggested that the railway workers and miners in the Valleys had a certain admiration for the bravery displayed by women.²² These more militant groups appear to have provided the greater part of support for the suffragists. As 'Matron', writer of the women's column in the *Rhondda Socialist*, noted:

It is remarkable that, while Liberal and Free Church Women attend the [Suffrage] meetings in large numbers, Liberal and Free Church Men were largely absent. The men who, during the campaign supported the women's cause, were Labour men.²³

While there is evidence that there was support for women in the Rhondda, it is the case that both men and women were selective in the societies to which they offered their support. Evans and Cook have noted that there was evidence of backing for the NUWSS, the non-militant group.²⁴ Press reports regarding the work and activities of the NUWSS took pains to reiterate an important reason for their support, namely that the organisation was non-militant and non-party. Such opinions were not just confined to journalists, however. In 1913

²⁰ John, 'Chwarae Teg', p. 9.

²¹ Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage, 1866-1914*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 237.

²² Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the shadows*, p. 45.

²³ *Rhondda Socialist*, March 1912.

²⁴ K. Cook and N. Evans, 'The Petty Antics of the Bell-Ringing Boisterous Band?', in Angela V. John, (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*, pp. 169-171.

Daniel Lleufer Thomas, offered his support at a meeting of the South Wales and Monmouthshire Federation of the NUWSS. He believed that it was his duty to associate himself with the movement, and, although he considered that militant methods were a mistake, he sought to remind the Government of their unfulfilled pledge to women and urged it to introduce 'a measure of justice long overdue' to women.²⁵ This distinction of support for the non-militants, and hostility towards militants, such as those belonging to the WPSU, was repeated in the press. Following the disruptive appearance of suffragettes at the Wrexham Eisteddfod, for example, the *Rhondda Leader* was quick to condemn, claiming that they had lost any sympathy that they had previously enjoyed. Readers were encouraged not to be too harsh upon the activists, however, as 'Women are excitable creatures, particularly if they are of the shrewish class, and demand pity rather than penalties.'²⁶ Whilst excusing the women, the press was also justifying the stance that women were unsuitable for political life, an opinion which affected women's participation in many other aspects of politics.

In spite of the support that accompanied the fight for universal suffrage by some groups, such a controversial subject was bound to cause debate and hostility from some sectors. Elizabeth Andrews's much quoted account of a suffragette meeting held in a café in Pentre in 1909 illustrates the degree of hostility towards the cause. At this meeting the speakers were attacked with stones and rotten fruit, and the window was smashed. The women inside had to escape by climbing down a ladder.²⁷ This incident was also reported in the *Rhondda Leader*, and evidence from suffragettes' own reports of their experiences around the country indicate that these reactions were ones with which they had to deal frequently.²⁸

²⁵ *Western Mail*, 31 May 1913.

²⁶ *Rhondda Leader*, 14 September 1912.

²⁷ Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, p. 8.

²⁸ Similar accounts feature in the autobiography of Margaret Haig Thomas. On one occasion, a meeting of suffragettes was disrupted by a hostile crowd who had brought with them trumpets with which to disrupt the

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the attitudes towards suffrage and politics in general were, although the correspondence pages of the press offer some idea. The Rhondda press did not publish letters with regard to such issues, but in 1897 the *Western Mail* specifically asked its readers for their opinion on whether women should take part in politics and demand the vote. The response was disappointing: only 21 letters were sent in, which was less than the number of replies to the questions regarding whether women should smoke and if it was acceptable for women to flirt. Only 11 of the letters received had been written by females, and five of these were against allowing women the vote. Six out of the ten male respondents, however, believed that women should be given the vote. This led the reporter to suggest that 'it seems quite clear that here at least the women are by no means keen on the cause'.²⁹

A column published in the *Western Mail* over a decade later by Helen Mathers, outlining the reasons why she believed politics were best left to men, attracted a large amount of correspondence from both males and females. The crux of her crude argument was that women should not vote because they had neither the physical nor mental strength to deal with political issues. 'Nice women', she commented, 'don't like practical politics and things that make their heads ache.'³⁰ Of particular importance to her, as to many others who expressed their opinion in the press during this period, was the 'correct' role that women should play. Women were not meant to be political creatures, it was regularly argued, they were too sentimental for that. Rather their true sphere was the domestic one, which might be neglected

meeting, and food items such as herrings and tomatoes to throw at the speakers. On another occasion, in Scotland, the speakers themselves were physically attacked. Margaret Haig Thomas, *This was my World*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1933), pp. 122, 146.

²⁹ *Western Mail*, Supplement, 13 March 1897.

³⁰ *Western Mail*, 2 April 1909.

should they choose to 'dabble' in politics. Further, the question of the ability of women to make political decisions independently also arose:

At heart, all gracious women have a natural tendency to lean on men, instinctively realising the common sense of the latter in the conduct of the difficult problems of life.³¹

Prominent suffragettes living in Cardiff and Barry wrote many of the letters to the *Western Mail* in support of female suffrage, but few 'ordinary' people expressed their opinion. The *Rhondda Leader*, in its account of a Debating Society meeting in Pontygwaith in 1907, attempted to give readers the chance to discover the attitudes of the 'average women' in comparison to the well-publicised actions of the 'shrieking sisterhood'. The arguments in favour of female suffrage were put forward by Mrs Lloyd, the wife of a Ferndale cashier, and were based on the rights that she believed women should possess. She argued that women should be entitled the vote because, paying taxes and being subject to the same legislation as men, they should also be entitled to representation and the opportunity to oppose legislation, especially in matters that particularly affected their own gender. Also, she persisted, there should be some continuity; if women could vote for poor law guardians and district councils then, by the same token, they should be able to vote for members of parliament. Denying women this right, she claimed, was the result of the selfishness and assumed superiority of the male sex, which continued to treat women as 'toys'. Her opponent, Mrs Hayes, predictably concentrated upon the ability of women to be involved both in politics and the domestic sphere, and alerted her listeners to the danger of arguments and family breakdowns that would ensue should women be given the vote and support a

³¹ *Western Mail*, 2 April 1909.

different party or candidate to their husband. Further, she questioned the ability of women to make independent and intelligent decisions in this field, arguing that women:

were far too sympathetic and not far-seeing enough. She would be liable to render her vote and energies in favour of the weaker cause, which would probably be detrimental (in many cases), and, possibly disastrous, to the ultimate end in view.

Mrs Hayes went on to argue that women should be content with the power they wielded over their husband and families within the domestic sphere.³² At the close of the debate, a vote was taken, which was found to favour female suffrage, which could be perceived as an indication of the levels of support, at least in some quarters, for the cause.

The work of the women involved in the campaign for suffrage attracted more hostility than their participation in other movements, such as temperance, as it represented a threat to the established gender roles. Perusal of the pages of the local newspapers suggests a mixture of opinions: in addition to hostility from some parts, there was also a degree of support for the cause, which came mainly from the more progressive groups and associations and in particular from the labour movement. This support was forthcoming especially for the non-militant branches of the movement. It may be the case, however, that opposition to women's entry into politics in this way was so fundamental and ingrained that it was not articulated within the pages of the local press. No doubt, though, it featured in a number of the debates that were taking place in the district at this time.

Although campaigns for suffrage and temperance succeeded in allowing women greater access to the public sphere, they did not facilitate the opportunity to take a part in the decision making process of the local community. Their presence on public and

³² *Rhondda Leader*, 7 December 1907.

administrative bodies, upon which they had become increasingly prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century, however, allowed them to do just that. Prior to this, all representative bodies were male, and dominated by the middle classes, but this changed in the 1890s when alterations were made to the systems of election. Of great significance for the future shape of politics, a large number of women and working-class men were able to take advantage.

The Ystradfydwg School Board was the first public body in the district to which women could be elected, and this paved the way for women to formally enter the public sphere. Upon its establishment, the Board contained 48 members - all male - representing a variety of backgrounds and occupations, including ministers, colliery manager, colliers and farmers. The voting system for the school boards had been designed to allow greater representation of the minority groups by introducing a cumulative vote, but the election of women and working men onto the boards came as a surprise to some observers.³³ According to Peter Stead, the introduction of school boards formed the 'first chapter in the story of working class representation'.³⁴ The first woman to appear on the Ystradfydwg Board was Miss Ada Jones, a spinster ex-schoolteacher from Ynyshir, who served seven years from 1896-1903. She had been elected onto the Board with the third largest number of votes.³⁵ Like the other members, Miss Jones was a woman with a strong commitment to education, and, as a life member of the Association for the Promotion of Education for Girls in Wales, her loyalty to the cause of education for girls was formidable. She made a valuable contribution to the Board.

³³ G. Sutherland, 'Education', in F.M.L. Thompson, (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, 2, p. 143.

³⁴ Peter Stead, 'Schools and Society in Glamorgan before 1914', *Morgannwg*, xix, (1975), p. 43.

³⁵ *Western Mail*, 17 October 1899.

In 1902, however, the school boards were transferred to Local Education Authority (LEA) control, and were to consist of councillors only. As women could not be elected to the council, they lost the right to be elected onto the LEAs. But it was a statutory requirement that the membership of the LEAs should include women, and, as none had been voted to the RUDC and would not make their appearance until the 1920s, women had to be co-opted into service for the Authority. The councillors in the Rhondda, although not necessarily opposed to women sitting on such bodies, were against the idea of co-opting members in general, and so consented to only minimal observance of the legislation. Thus, only one woman was asked to serve.³⁶ This was the aforementioned Miss Ada Jones, previously a member of the Ystradyfodwg School Board who had already shown her dedication to the cause of education in the locality. She served on the Rhondda Education Committee from 1903-1911. Lady Florence Nicholas was later co-opted, and joined Miss Jones from 1909 to 1920. Mrs Edith Williams and Mrs Eliza Williams were added in 1920. The appearance of women on the RUDC in 1920 ended the practice of co-opting women from outside the council, and from then onwards female members of the council automatically sat on the education committee.

A further way in which women could become involved in the decision-making process in local politics, and thus make some impact upon the development and well being of the community, was through their role as Poor Law Guardians. Female Guardians were few and far between in the nineteenth century. Although the 1834 Poor Law Act had not prohibited women who were qualified to do so from sitting on local Boards, the first woman Guardian in Britain was not elected until 1875. After this date, only a very small number of

³⁶ G. Robbins, 'Education Administration and policy making in the Rhondda 1840-1974', Unpublished M.Phil (Polytechnic of Wales), 1986, pp. 63-64.

women sought election, a result of convention and precedent.³⁷ D. M. Lloyd, in his study of the Poor Law in south Wales, has shown that male Guardians tended to come from the lower-middle classes, such as shopkeepers, merchants, colliery owners and ministers.³⁸ But the early female Guardians tended to be of higher status, as women's involvement was constrained by the property qualification which had to be met in order to be eligible to be voted onto the board, a criteria that few females in the Rhondda would have been able to fulfil. On a more practical level for the women themselves, only those with enough time to devote to the many meetings and visits to be undertaken would have been willing to volunteer for such a time-consuming task. The replacement of the property qualification with a twelve-month residential qualification in 1894 allowed greater numbers of working-class men to become involved in the workings of the boards, but an additional effect of the legislation was to allow more women to become active. Following this revision of the qualifications, the *Western Mail* reported that the number of women Guardians in England and Wales had leapt from only eight to 830, some 88 of whom could be found in Wales.³⁹ The legislation did not just allow single women the opportunity to enter the public sphere in this way, but, as the result of a clause written in that no person would be disqualified by sex or marriage from being elected or being a Guardian, married women's opportunities were also enhanced.

In the Rhondda, this opened the gate for women's entrance into the public sphere. Work as a Poor Law Guardian was viewed as 'respectable' work for women, as it was very closely linked to other 'traditional' forms of women's work, such as charity work and sick

³⁷ E. M. Ross, 'Women and Poor Law Administration 1857-1909', Unpublished M.A (University of London), 1956, p. 211.

³⁸ D. M. Lloyd, 'Some Aspects of the Poor Law in South Wales, 1870-1930', Unpublished M. Sc (Econ) (University of Wales), 1979, p. 96.

³⁹ *Western Mail*, 14 February 1895.

visiting. This opinion was expressed in the *Rhondda Leader* in 1907, which drew attention to the role which they believed women were particularly well qualified to act:

As we have already expressed, we are very strongly of the view that women should have larger opportunities in the administration of relief. The special sympathy which widows and orphans require can be best dealt by a corresponding intelligent treatment from a woman. Our female dependants are many, and the future inwardness and secrecies of their helpless dependence can only be partially grasped by another woman.... We believe there is a sphere in the Homes with those for children and the aged, in particular, which she will fill with pronounced efficiency.⁴⁰

The responsibility, even if only for the groups noted above, was not a small one, as women and children accounted for 72 per cent of the pauper population in 1900.⁴¹

The Pontypridd Board of Guardians, under which the Rhondda district fell, consisted of a number of women Guardians. As early as 1898, four of the 44 new members elected that year were female, two of whom were responsible for wards in the Rhondda, namely Treherbert and Ynyshir, and there may have been others who were already serving.⁴² Within the Board, the roles of members were strictly divided by gender; for example, there were no women on the finance, building or assessment committees, but there were four women each on the workhouse visiting committee and the cottage house committee. The Guardian career of Mrs Letitia Morgan, who represented the Tonypandy and Trealaw ward, is an illustration of this. Mrs Morgan sat on the Board of Guardians from 1904 until at least 1921, and during this time she variously served on the cottage home committee, the Pontypridd workhouse visiting committee, Llwynypia workhouse committee and St Michael's home and Nazareth House committee. When she was re-elected to her seat in 1910, she sat upon the children's

⁴⁰ *Rhondda Leader*, 23 March 1907.

⁴¹ E. M. Ross, 'Women and Poor Law Administration', p. 272 (appendix)

⁴² GRO: MS. U/PP, Pontypridd Board of Guardians: Minute Book, 1898.

committee in addition to those mentioned above.⁴³ By 1921, however, women's roles were beginning to expand, and some women sat on the salaries and contracts committee, but there remained a number of roles that continued to be viewed as essentially female. There were, for example, no men sitting on the kitchen committee. It could be argued, however, that although women were generally found in roles believed to suit their gender, the work took women beyond domesticity into involvement in a wide range of social problems such as health, mental illness, unemployment and illegitimacy.⁴⁴

It is clear from the election addresses of females hoping to be elected to the Board that they themselves recognised their value in the roles to which they were assigned, and indeed used them blatantly in their quest for election. In 1907, Letitia Morgan argued that:

The election of Lady Members to seats on the Board of Guardians is by no means unusual. There are already a considerable number of Women Guardians throughout the country, and it is practically admitted by those in authority that MY SEX IS SPECIFICALLY ADAPTED TO COPE WITH THE CIRCUMSTANCES GENERALLY MET WITH IN THE RELIEF OF THE POOR AND NEEDY. We think we are better judges as to the quality and cost of provisions and clothing, and other requirements relative to domestic needs.⁴⁵

Almost twenty years later, in the campaign for election as the representative for Porth, Minnie Chivers used her sex to appeal for the vote, and also to differentiate herself from the other Labour candidates. Her Labour colleagues, Robert Perry and John Treharne, and herself were all campaigning on similar issues, such as the use of the best doctors and nurses for the poor and the bestowal of greater attention to the children in the care of the Guardians. Both John Treharne and Minnie Chivers had sat on the board previously, and in their election

⁴³ GRO: MS. U/PP, Pontypridd Board of Guardians: Minutes, 1904-1921.

⁴⁴ K. Cook and N. Evans, 'The Petty Antics of the Bell-Ringing Boisterous Band?', p. 164.

⁴⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, 23 March 1907. Capitalisation in the original.

addresses stressed their working-class roots whilst pledging to help the ‘unfortunate poor’, that is, those workers who found themselves destitute or unemployed through no fault of their own. The only distinguishing feature between the two leading candidates was gender, and Minnie Chivers chose to emphasise this, claiming that:

A woman is absolutely necessary to deal with women and children; there is a certain work connected with the Guardians that is distasteful to men, therefore the only fit and proper person is a woman...It is imperative that a woman should be returned in the Labour interests...⁴⁶

It would appear that the voters agreed that women were a necessary and desirable addition to the Board, and when Letitia Morgan and Eliza Davies stood for election in 1907 they were elected with majorities of 281 and 1,153 votes respectively.⁴⁷ Pontypridd Board of Guardians, in fact, compares favourably with other urban areas in the number of women included on them:

Table 5: Percentage of women Guardians on Boards in Wales.

	Pontypool	Bedwellty	Cardiff	Merthyr	Pontypridd
1898	2.9	0	10.1	7.4	9
1907	11.7	2.2	12.3	5.3	11.5
1925	26.3	-	20	28.1	22.4(1924)
1928	26.3	-	15.7	21.8	28.2(1929) ⁴⁸

Whilst it is clear that women were active on these Boards, little is known about the backgrounds and status of the women themselves. A previous study of women Guardians in

⁴⁶ SWCC: Sonia Evans Collection, MS. MNA/PP/30/4, Election Addresses of John Treharne, Minnie Chivers and Robert Perry for Pontypridd Board of Guardians, 1925.
⁴⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 30 March 1907.
⁴⁸ Figure for Pontypool, Bedwellty, Cardiff and Merthyr are taken from D. M. Lloyd, ‘Some Aspects of the Poor Law in Wales’ p. 123; Pontypridd figures are taken from the minute books of Pontypridd Board of Guardians.

Wales has concluded that: 'in general, the women Guardians tended to be liberal or independent in politics, came from urban areas and were mostly middle or lower middle class in background'.⁴⁹ Apart from two exceptions, all the women mentioned in the minutes of the Pontypridd Board, however, were married women. It is impossible, therefore, to ascertain their social status, as they are referred to as housewives, or simply by their marital situation as spinsters, married women, or widows rather than being in any occupation – the traditional way in which class is defined. Lloyd, however, used the occupation of the husbands of women Guardians in Cardiff to give an indication of the women's backgrounds. He found that the majority of them came from a middle-or lower-middle-class strata, and were mostly the wives, daughters or sisters of ministers of religion, doctors and shopkeepers.⁵⁰ From what is known about the predominant or long-serving women on the Pontypridd Board, however, it would appear that they came from a slightly more mixed background. No doubt there were women from the middle and lower middle classes, such as Annie Price, who was an ex-schoolmistress, but, in addition, there was Eliza Williams, who was described as a miner's wife and Lillie Annie Hughes, a housewife.⁵¹ There is evidence also that there was a bias towards Labour rather than Liberal or Independent politics, especially in the 1920s when Annie Price, Eliza Williams and Lillie Annie Hughes were all voted as representatives of Labour, as was Eliza Davies in the period before the First World War. Of course, other women might well have stood as Independent or Liberal candidates.

Annie Price, Eliza Williams and Lillie Annie Hughes were all Guardians during the 1920s, and also sat on the council, suggesting that the women involved were very socially

⁴⁹ D. M. Lloyd, 'Some Aspects of the Poor Law in South Wales', p. 121.

⁵⁰ D. M. Lloyd 'Some Aspects of the Poor Law in South Wales', p. 121.

⁵¹ G. Robbins, 'Education Administration and Policy Making', pp. 191-97.

active. Likewise, Janet Jenkins, who represented Pwllgwaun (Pontypridd) on the Board, is a good example of the type of woman active in the area at this time. Mrs Jenkins was elected a Guardian in March 1923, and she had previously been, amongst other things, District Organiser for the campaign against Tuberculosis, the organiser of collections for local hospitals, and the president and secretary of the Queen Mary Needlework Guild.⁵² Annie Price is another example; whilst sitting on the Board in the 1920s, she was also a member of the RUDC, as well as a local Magistrate and a member of the Rhondda Public Assistance Committee.⁵³ The *Western Mail* referred to her in one report as 'one of the best known public women in the Rhondda'.⁵⁴

Although women were able to sit on the RUDC from 1907 and had been campaigning for election since the years before the First World War, their presence was not really felt until the 1920s. Mrs E. T. Davies, for example, had been seeking election to the council since at least 1912 when she stood as an independent and was the only female candidate. The virtual absence of women seeking election was a result, in part, of the method of selection of the Labour candidates, as there was a heavy male bias to the procedure. Firstly, local branches of various organisations involved in the Labour Movement nominated potential candidates, and the Trades and Labour Council would then vote for its 'official' candidate. Before the First World War, the Trades and Labour Councils were very much dominated by male organisations such as the local lodge of the South Wales Miners' Federation and other trade unions. In 1910, the Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council consisted of members of the Llwynypia Steam Coal Lodge, the Cambrian Lodge, Blaenclydach Lodge and the Dinas Isaf

⁵² *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, March 16 1923.

⁵³ *Rhondda Gazette*, 28 April 1934.

⁵⁴ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 26 April 1934.

Lodge, the Shop Assistants Union and the Rhondda Class Teachers Association amongst others,⁵⁵ so it was unlikely that female candidates would be chosen.⁵⁶ Election for women was therefore very difficult, unless they stood as independent candidates. It was not until 1919 that the affiliation rules were changed to allow all bodies qualified to join the Labour Party to become affiliated. Thus, in May 1919 branches of the main organisation representing working-class women, the Women's Co-Operative Guild, were affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council, and the likelihood of female candidates increased.⁵⁷

In 1912, Mrs E. T. Davies stood as an independent candidate in the council elections in the face of much criticism from the Labour movement. On this occasion, she failed in her bid to gain a council seat, an outcome which was considered to be a result of male prejudice, which had weakened her support both from the electorate at large and the local labour movement'.⁵⁸ The *Rhondda Socialist*, which hailed itself as the voice of the Labour Movement, took pains, however, to illustrate that the movement was not against women standing for election, but that the reason for the hostile reaction to Mrs Davies's candidature was the result of a purely political consideration. As she was standing against the official Labour candidate, it was explained, she could have split the labour vote, thereby allowing a member of an opposing party to win:

Mrs Davies took a good part of the Labour vote owing to the fact that her programme of reform is part of the programme of the great labour movement...Her sympathy towards labour, and the straightforward manner in which she concluded her campaign accounts for her very substantial poll. We do not begrudge her the votes she has received, as we can truly say that she won them honestly, and we would welcome the day when women will form an

⁵⁵ TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council, Minute Book, 1910-1922.

⁵⁶ TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council, Minute Book, 1910-1922.

⁵⁷ TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council, Minutes, 23 May 1919.

⁵⁸ Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*, p. 95.

essential part of the RUDC. The only thing we do regret is that Mrs Davies deemed it wise to fight a labour man.⁵⁹

During the 1920s, however, women became more visible as suitable candidates for election to the council, and many campaigned with the full support of the Labour Party as official Labour candidates. The election addresses of the Labour candidates, it has been pointed out by Chris Williams, had become more uniform in content during the 1920s. The examples of such addresses held as part of the South Wales Coalfield Collection amply illustrate this. Like the female candidates to the Boards of Guardians, female contenders for seats on the RUDC sought to differentiate themselves from other candidates by specifically drawing attention to their gender. In her 1935 campaign, Eliza Williams thus appealed:

To all men of goodwill, and to my sisters in particular, to endeavour at all costs to retain this seat for a woman – do it in the interest of right and self respect. There are only three women councillors out of 35 members on the RUDC. Are you prepared to give another away?⁶⁰

In the same address, she emphasised the special role that women could play:

With the interest of social legislation dealing with mothers and children, the rapid expansion of maternity and child welfare centres and clinics, the addition of female medical doctors, school nurses, health visitors, and the introduction of medical inspectors into the secondary schools, where young girls of tender age are to be dealt with, makes it imperative that more women should share the work of local administration.

This appeal for election was addressed directly to the female electorate, who were encouraged to vote for Mrs Williams. Her address also encouraged them, if possible, to ‘see that your good husband and kind father comes along with you to the poll’. Likewise, Lillie Annie Hughes, in her 1936-campaign in the Ynyshir Ward, stood on the platform as ‘the

⁵⁹ *Rhondda Socialist*, 11 April 1912.

⁶⁰ SWCC: Beatrice Davies Collection, MS. MNA/PP/12/14, Eliza Williams’s Campaign Address, 1935.

candidate of women and mothers'. She drew attention to the work that Labour had done for women, including the payment of midwives' fees in cases of poverty, establishing expert advisers for midwives and the clinical examination and treatment of mothers and babies. Women were urged in this way to: 'Give your support to the Labour Party Candidates. Remember the party that does good work for you and your children.'⁶¹

Once the female candidates had been elected to the council, however, their sisterly solidarity was not always apparent, as they did not consistently vote in favour of women on certain council issues. For example, when the council voted in 1922 on the decision to terminate the engagements of all married women teachers in the employ of the council in order to make jobs available to newly qualified teachers, the two female councillors, Mrs Annie Price and Mrs Eliza Williams, voted in favour.⁶² This has been identified as a problem for women, who felt constantly torn between class loyalty to the Labour Party and their desire to support women.⁶³

Nonetheless, in the 1920s women were beginning to win seats on the local council. Whilst this was an achievement for women, it was admitted that the numbers of women on the council fell far short of the women that they were meant to be representing. The *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* pointed out that only two out of the 35 representatives in 1922 were female, which hardly constituted a fair representation for a group that made up half of the population. They argued that more women should be admitted onto the council because 'there are some committees on which women are specially fitted to serve, such as the maternity committee etc; and in all the activities of the Council there is

⁶¹ *Rhondda Clarion*, April 1936.

⁶² GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, Minutes, 5 July 1922.

⁶³ This is argued by C. Rowan, in 'Women in the Labour Party 1906-1920', *Feminist Review*, 12, (1982).

always 'a woman's point of view'.⁶⁴ Two years prior to this the *Welsh Outlook* had made a similar case for the greater use of females on public bodies. Women, it was suggested, urged more extensive health and childcare work, and were instrumental in the establishment of playgrounds, district nurses and health visiting. All of these were previously neglected areas.⁶⁵

As with the female Guardians, once they had gained a seat on the council they tended to become involved in what were seen as 'women's issues', sitting on the Maternity and Child Welfare Committee, on the Education Committee and the Housing Committee. Both Lillie Annie Hughes and Eliza Williams spent short periods on the Roads Committee and the General Purposes Committee, but in general women remained in the more 'feminine' aspects of the work. As early as 1902, eight years after the passing of the District Councils Act but long before the first woman sat on the RUDC, an editorial in the *Western Mail* questioned the qualifications that women possessed to sit on the new committees. A distinction should be drawn, the editor concluded, between the duties bestowed upon women administering the poor law and occupied with the school boards, which were both acceptable posts for women, and:

Those difficult questions of finance, road making, sewer inspection, rate making and the adjustment of assessments, such as form in the main work of the Borough Councils, and not the kind which is either attractive nor suitable to the best class of women.⁶⁶

In spite of the acceptance, by some, of the important role played by female councillors, albeit in traditionally female responsibilities, there is some evidence of hostility

⁶⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 31 March 1922.

⁶⁵ *The Welsh Outlook*, December 1920, p. 296.

⁶⁶ *Western Mail*, 2 June 1900.

towards women performing this function. In one letter to the *Western Mail and South Wales Daily News* in 1934, when female councillors had become well established, a correspondent from the Canton Ward of Cardiff expressed his distaste of women in such a role, and even suggested that their fellow councillors did not enthusiastically receive the women.⁶⁷ In spite of this claim, women members of the RUDC do appear to have earned the respect of their colleagues and the electorate; their longevity and the positions that they achieved are illustrative of this. Whilst some women are noted in the council minute books as having served only three or nine months, and others sat in office for only one term, it is also the case that some women devoted themselves to council work. Both Eliza Williams and Lillie Annie Hughes, for example, have been described as being members of the council's 'Inner Ring', a term used to describe those monopolising committee chairmanships, and served 14 years and 16 years respectively.⁶⁸ Also, by virtue of her being in office continuously from 1921 – 1942, Annie Price could be added to this list. In addition to the amount of time they served, these women reached very prominent positions. They were chairpersons of various committees, and in 1932 Eliza Williams became the first female Chairman of the Council, an achievement later to be repeated by Annie Price in 1934 and Lillie Annie Hughes in 1938.

Manifestly, women were increasingly becoming more visible in the public sphere, beginning with the School Boards, then the Board of Guardians, and later the RUDC. This has been attributed to the changes that were taking place in politics at this time which served to benefit women. As Cook and Evans have noted: 'the more that social issues became an integral part of high politics in the Edwardian Period, the harder it became to deny women a

⁶⁷ *Western Mail and South Wales News*, 11 October 1934.

⁶⁸ G. Robbins, 'Education Administration and Policy Making', pp. 187-89.

role in political institutions'.⁶⁹ Much of the acceptance of women in such roles can be ascribed to the fact that the duties they performed were in keeping with their perceived roles, and were very much based upon welfare work. This was similarly the case with the other public roles which they were able to embrace, many of which they had previously been denied, like Justices of the Peace. A number of Rhondda women became magistrates in the 1920s and 1930s, including Annie Price, Elizabeth Andrews and Lady Florence Nicholas; one of the reasons behind this was the belief that 'certain aspects of divorce and girl assault cannot possibly be understood except by women'.⁷⁰

As was shown in the case of Mrs. Davies, involvement in the RUDC was made easier if women stood as candidates of a specific political party, receiving official backing and financial assistance than if they stood as independent candidates. It is no coincidence, therefore, that women did not emerge on the council until the 1920s, a time when access to the Labour movement in particular became easier for them.

Women had been involved in political parties from a very early stage, and became increasingly more so during the tumultuous inter-war period. From the early 1900s branches of the Women's Liberal Association (WLA) and Unionist Women's Groups were being formed in the Rhondda alongside the men's branches, and they quickly became popular. By the eve of the First World War, a number of WLA branches had been established in the Rhondda and a network had been formed to include branches throughout south Wales. The local Rhondda branches were affiliated to one of two Rhondda-wide Women's Sections of the Liberal Association, based in Rhondda East and Rhondda West, with delegates regularly attending meetings. In turn, delegates from the Rhondda East and West associations were

⁶⁹ Cook and Evans, 'The Petty Antics of the Bell Ringing Boisterous Band?', p. 165.

⁷⁰ *The Welsh Outlook*, April 1921.

sent to Liberal conferences around Wales and the rest of the country. The Unionist groups also spread quickly in the Rhondda, and established a hierarchy of organisations, such as the East Rhondda Women Unionist Association to which branches in Ton and Pentre, Mardy, Tylorstown and Ferndale had affiliated by 1920. The women involved in such associations experienced a multitude of roles, from fundraising and attending addresses by visiting speakers to campaigning for their local candidate and lobbying council on certain issues. It was the fundraising or campaigning efforts of the women which were usually highlighted in the press, but often the associations were involved in more direct action. In 1926, for example, the Tylorstown Women's Unionist Association wrote to the RUDC in protest against a rates increase at a time of high unemployment.⁷¹ Such actions by women, in addition to their other roles, were recognised by the party branches, who acknowledged the value of women as contributors to local politics.

The Women's Labour League (WLL) came into existence in 1906, but few branches existed in Wales, the only ones in south Wales being at Swansea, Newport and Cardiff. Those wishing to be involved in the Labour movement therefore had two options. In the first place they could attend the men's meetings, as was the case for Elizabeth Andrews, who attended Independent Labour Party meetings in Ton Pentre with her husband, and was the only woman present, although female membership in the branches did increase.⁷² Secondly, they could join the Women's Co-operative Guild, whose aims were very much in unison with those of the Labour movement itself. Few opportunities existed within the Labour movement itself, the membership of which consisted chiefly of Trade Unions and socialist societies.

⁷¹ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, Minutes, 12 May 1926.

⁷² Elizabeth Andrews, *A Women's Work is Never Done*, p. 7; Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*, p. 71.

Opportunities for women, and the discussion of issues affecting women, as Chris Williams has noted, were virtually non-existent:

Considerations of occupational and class interest so dominated the ethos of the local labour movement as to exclude almost completely any sense of gender, even to the extent that the campaign for pit head baths took until the inter war period to make much headway.⁷³

In 1912, the *Rhondda Socialist* drew attention to the lack of opportunities available for women to become involved in the movement, and discussed the problems faced by women in relation to the three main branches of the movement. The ILP, it discovered, held meetings with a complete disregard for women and matters in which women were interested; the lodges of the SWMF, it felt, had no right to make decisions concerning women without consulting them, finally, the Trades and Labour Councils represented only working-women members, therefore leaving a whole class of women, namely working-class wives, unrepresented.⁷⁴

The Women's Co-operative Guild, hailed as the Trade Union for Wives, was the only available women's Labour organisation available in the Rhondda for women to join, and became an influential pressure group for women's rights as well as a vehicle for community development.⁷⁵ The Guild was unique at this time, in that it allowed working-class women to speak for themselves. This was in direct contrast with organisations such as the WLL, which comprised mostly single, middle-class women, who looked at married working class-women's problems from the outside.⁷⁶ Established in 1884 as one of the first organisations

⁷³ Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*, p. 17.

⁷⁴ *Rhondda Socialist*, 21 December 1912.

⁷⁵ J. Gaffin and David Thomas, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1989), p. 1.

⁷⁶ Gillian Scott, "'The Working Class women's Most Active and Democratic Movement': The Women's Co-operative Guild from 1883-1950", Unpublished Ph.D (University of Sussex), 1988, p. 91.

for working-class women, the first branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild in the Rhondda was formed in Ton Pentre in 1914, and at its first meeting there were 12 women present. The movement quickly spread throughout the valleys, with a number of other branches being established throughout the war years, including one at the bottom of the valley in Porth. The Guild provided women with opportunities to meet and discuss issues that they believed relevant to their situation, and in addition served an educative purpose. Lectures on topics such as women as poor law guardians, women's suffrage, women's work in local government and technical education for girls were organised regularly by the local branches.⁷⁷ These, it could be argued, helped women to see that there was a role for them within the wider community. Additionally, the Guild was committed to improving the lives of working-class women, and campaigned for many issues above all those of health and housing, which they viewed as fundamentally important to women of the working classes. At varying points, for example, they sought to reform the divorce law, battled for equal pay and the improvement of maternity conditions. The official objectives of the Guild were given by Mrs Vaughan of Porth, in the *Rhondda Clarion* in 1936. They included:

Promotion of co-operation amongst women

To assist women to take their full share in every aspect of the movement

To give expression to the needs and views of women generally in relation to social problems

To promote reforms directly bearing upon the lives of women

Domesticity is the main occupation and the basis of existence for most women. It is through co-operation that they have the best means of dealing with their particular problems.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Gaffin and Thomas, *Caring and Sharing*, p. 44.

⁷⁸ *Rhondda Clarion*, February 1936.

The idea that married women had interests separate from their husbands or from single women was promoted strongly by the Guild. By publishing accounts of the lives of their members, such as *Life As We have Known it* and *Maternity*, sought to make the problems experienced by working-class women known to the public at large, and hopefully to pave the way for changes.

Although it was a national organisation, the branches made a great impact at local level and were highly active in promoting the problems suffered by working-class women in the district. In 1919 the Rhondda Co-operative Women's Guild sent a deputation to the RUDC to discuss the question of housing in the locality. At the meeting, Mrs Brown of Porth, requested that the Guild be able to express their views on planned new houses for the workers before they were actually built. She went on to criticise the plans, her primary cause for concern being the 'shameful neglect of labour saving devices' in the homes, and tried to convince the council of the benefits of making bathrooms and sculleries compulsory. Her colleague, Mrs Smith of Ton Pentre, drew attention to the overcrowding of many houses, with many families having to share. She concluded the discussion by begging the council to enact their powers and provide decent homes. The formation of a housing advisory committee, on which women should be represented, was suggested by the women, and the council resolved to put it on the agenda for discussion at the next meeting.⁷⁹ A further issue which was strongly campaigned for by Rhondda members was for the establishment of pit head baths. The lack of bathing facilities at the pithead, combined with the less than satisfactory sanitary facilities available in the majority of coalfield houses, made life very difficult for both the miner and his wife. It was felt by the women that too little effort was

⁷⁹ *Rhondda Leader*, 19 July 1919.

being devoted to this issue by the miners' organisations, as, after all, travelling home damp and dirty from a shift was detrimental to the health of the miners also, especially in the winter. The SWMF, however, continued in their pursuit for improvement of the working conditions and levels of pay, paying little attention to this particular concern. The exasperated women, however, felt that they too should work shorter days, and that something should be done to ease their domestic burden. Thus, the women of the Ton Pentre Women's Co-operative Guild wrote a letter to the miners' conference supporting their demands for better pay and conditions. In addition, they put forward their argument that shorter hours for miners' wives should be considered, and requested that the SWMF take up the matter of pit head baths as part of their campaign.⁸⁰

Issues associated with women's health, and especially those linked to childbirth, were also important to the Guild, and were tirelessly campaigned for. In 1917 a deputation from the Guild was sent to a meeting of the Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council to put forward a request that they pass a resolution pressing the RUDC to form Maternity centres and committees, which were to be partly composed of representatives of the women's Guild and working class generally.⁸¹ As a result of this action, it was agreed that district councillors associated with the trades council be instructed to use all their powers to secure the co-option of working-class women, to be nominated by women's organisations, on the maternity and child welfare committee of the RUDC.⁸² They also, through a letter to the RUDC in 1926, encouraged the council to rethink their policy of restricting birth control information.⁸³

⁸⁰ White and Williams (eds.), *Struggle or Starve*, p. 223.

⁸¹ TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council, Minute book, 1 February 1917.

⁸² TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council, Minute book, 7 February 1919.

⁸³ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC, Minutes, 12 May 1926.

Although the Guild was a non-political organisation, its links with the Labour movement were strong, and they grew closer still after the war when Guild members became eligible for affiliation to the Labour Party and were represented on the local Trades and Labour Councils. Further, changes in the conditions of membership following the introduction of the new constitution in 1918, it has been argued, allowed women greater and easier access to the party. Importantly for women, they were able to become individual members and the Women's Labour League (WLL) was merged into the party, the members of which constituted the new Women's Labour Sections. Thus, the Labour Party in the inter-war years opened itself up to women, and many chose to take advantage of the opportunity. Women comprised a high proportion (45 per cent) of the individual membership in the coalfield by the 1930s, and, in the Rhondda, constituted a massive 62 per cent of the individual membership.⁸⁴ Women's sections were established throughout the district, each of which sent delegates to Rhondda-wide women's labour organisations, which in turn affiliated to regional and Wales-wide organisations. Thus, a strong network of organisations came into existence. The shift away from industrial politics towards welfare politics as a result of the Labour domination of local bodies such as the RUDC, it has been noted, served to make the Labour party more attractive and far more accessible to women, including those of the Rhondda.⁸⁵ The minute books of the Lower Rhondda Fach branch of the Labour Party illustrate this shift by showing that the emphasis before the war was very much placed on working conditions, with some aspects of community issues being discussed such as the water supply, street lighting, election candidates, and the high cost of foodstuffs.⁸⁶ During

⁸⁴ Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict*, p. 59.

⁸⁵ D. Tanner 'The Labour Party and Electoral Politics in the Coalfields', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell (eds.), *Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-1947*, (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), p. 81.

⁸⁶ NLW: Lower Rhondda Fach Labour Party, Minutes, pre 1918.

the 1920s, however, the Labour Party became more wide-ranging and encompassing, campaigning for issues such as the provision of pensions for widows with children, and adequate housing. But whether these policies attracted the support and involvement of women, or whether they were the result of greater female participation, is unclear. The decision of the Trades and Labour Councils to extend their membership base to include teachers, municipal employees, shop assistants, and women's groups, also served to 'extend their relevance across the community at large'.⁸⁷ There is evidence that, after the war, women were taking an increasingly active part in the Trades and Labour Councils; in addition to being members, they could be found sitting on many committees and sometimes achieving prominent positions. Mrs Gwen Ray Evans, for example, was president of the Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council in 1920, and three of the thirteen members of the executive Committee of the Rhondda Borough Trades and Labour Council were female.

By virtue of the increased means of entry into the party in the inter-war period, women had the opportunity to become much more involved, although it has been suggested that the Labour Party Women's Sections pursued much social and cultural activity, perhaps to the exclusion of more 'political' work.⁸⁸ Doubtless there is some truth in this; thus women worked in soup kitchens, carried out a number of fundraising activities, both locally and nationally, and campaigned on behalf of their local Labour candidate during the election period.⁸⁹ Such undertakings were certainly widely reported in the press at the time, but it has been pointed out that this could have been because it was the only area where their sex was

⁸⁷ Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*, pp. 104 -105.

⁸⁸ Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*, p. 197.

⁸⁹ Women were involved in fundraising both for the party and for local causes. In 1926, several Rhondda Women, including Mrs Jamieson Williams and Mrs Johnna James travelled to London to appeal for funds to help the wives and children of miners affected by the strike. See Marian Phillips, *Women and the Miners' Lockout: The Story of the Women's Committee for the Relief of the Miners' Wives and Children*, (London: Labour Publishing Co. Ltd., 1927); and J. Gier, 'Miners' Wives', p. 264.

deemed to be a significant factor, rather than being an indication that it was the only role they performed.⁹⁰ There is a great amount of evidence available from study of the minute books of the women's sections, to suggest, on the contrary, that women's role was far more 'political' than some historians would have us believe. In 1922 the Ferndale Women's Labour Section, for example, protested to the local press against the 'Geddes Axe' Education cuts, outlining the effect that it would have upon children in the Rhondda.⁹¹ The same branch protested again in 1924 about the proposed pay increase for chief officials in the RUDC 'at a time when hundreds of poor folk, through no fault of their own, were unable to pay rates and when many hundreds of colliers were out of work'.⁹² In addition to these practical beliefs, there were widely-held ethical and moral beliefs espoused by the party itself which women fought to uphold. In 1934 the Women's section of the Labour Party in the Rhondda thus wrote to the council expressing concern regarding school trips to the Tattoo at Aldershot at time when nations were struggling with disarmament.⁹³

Similarly, at meetings of the East Glamorgan Women's (Labour) Advisory Committee, which included representatives of trade unions, political parties and the co-operative movement, political matters were certainly discussed. Issues such as the establishment of nursery schools, equal suffrage, high food prices, widows' pensions, housing problems, disarmament and peace, the maternal death rate, and a domestic servants' charter all crop up in the minute books regularly. As a result of the Annual Conference in Aberaman, held in February of 1934, resolutions were sent to the Prime Minister, Minister of

⁹⁰ C. L. Collins, 'Women and Labour Politics in Britain 1893 – 1932', Unpublished Ph.D, (London School of Economics), 1991, p. 19.

⁹¹ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 27 January 1922.

⁹² *Western Mail*, 29 August 1924.

⁹³ *Rhondda Gazette*, 10 February 1934.

Labour and Minister of Health regarding antenatal clinics, birth control and the raising of child allowances.⁹⁴

In addition to work in the Labour party, a vast network of Labour organisations existed for women, in which they participated at every level. The organisation of the branches into a coherent network was very similar that of the Women's Liberal Organisation, with local branches feeding into Rhondda East and Rhondda West divisions, which then sent delegates to the East Glamorgan Women's (Labour) Advisory Committee the central aim of which was to act 'in an advisory capacity to the Labour Party in all matters concerning women'.⁹⁵ Women were also sent further afield to conferences in order to discuss issues of relevance to women. For example, Mrs Pearce of Clydach Vale was the Rhondda representative at the Labour Party Commission Conference in Cardiff in 1936, where she spoke of how mothers in the Rhondda were concerned about the approach of Christmas.⁹⁶ A further dimension to the Advisory committee was its investigative role. In 1933 questionnaires were sent out to all sections asking for information on malnutrition in the area so that the effects of the insurance Act on maternity benefit could be assessed.⁹⁷

The minute books of local organisations clearly show that women could be highly active in local political organisations. But it is difficult to ascertain the background of the women involved. Although there were a few single women noted, many were married women, and some, like Elizabeth Andrews, drew attention to their status as the wives of miners. The amount of time that had to be devoted to such activities, however, would suggest that married women who may have been actively involved perhaps had small families, or

⁹⁴ NLW: East Glamorgan Women's (Labour) Advisory Committee, Minutes, 24 February 1934.

⁹⁵ NLW: East Glamorgan Women's (Labour) Advisory Committee, Minutes, 6 March 1926.

⁹⁶ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 12 December 1936.

⁹⁷ NLW: East Glamorgan Women's (Labour) Advisory Committee, Minutes, 8 March 1933.

grown-up children, enabling them sufficient free time to devote to their chosen cause. Whilst there were apathetic women, and other highly active women, there were others who were interested but may not have had the time available to devote to politics. The extent of their activity might have been confined to attending some of the women's sections meetings, fundraising and social events. Others were not members of formal groups, but gave the party their support in other ways, such as delivering leaflets and voting for party candidates. May Jenkins, for example, was on what she referred to as the Treorchy 'labour ward' in the inter-war period, and would go knocking on doors in her district, presumably campaigning for support.⁹⁸

Whatever form the support took, the work of the women was recognised as very important to the Labour party, who, in its endorsement of its female members, asked the rhetorical question: 'who is, and can be more deeply interested in the need for creating work and jobs for our husbands and children?'.⁹⁹ There were a number of measures set in place to aid women in their involvement, and the financial assistance offered was especially important to working-class women. They were able to take up prominent positions, as expenses for trips and attending conferences were paid.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, in many cases, women were paid for their work. In 1925 Mrs Pryce received £2 2s for performing the task of ward secretary, the same amount that was given to the male secretaries.¹⁰¹

It has been questioned, however, to what extent the Labour Party took notice of the women's sections, which after all were segregated from the main decision-making bodies. Collins has suggested that the women's sections were especially important in building up

⁹⁸ Scadden, 'Be Good Sweet Maid', p. 125.

⁹⁹ *Rhondda Clarion*, October 1935.

¹⁰⁰ NLW: Treorchy Labour Women's Section, Treasurers Book, 1934-1954.

¹⁰¹ NLW: Rhondda Borough Labour Party, Account Book, 1925-1956.

party organisation, especially at a local level, and they were also able to influence policy, particularly with regard to welfare issues.¹⁰² But it has also been argued that, on a national level, the male view usually triumphed at the expense of the female, for example in the cases of suffrage before the war and birth control in the inter-war period.¹⁰³ Regardless of the impact that they had on actual decision and policy making, however, it is clear that a wide range of women took an active role in Labour politics in this period, at a local level.

But it was not just through Labour politics that women were able to become involved. The increasing popularity of the Communist Party in the inter-war period also provided women with a legitimate forum for political activity. In the 1920s and the 1930s the 'Red Threat' in the Rhondda was a very real fear. Newspapers such as the *Western Mail* and the *South Wales News* were instrumental in manufacturing and perpetuating the 'RED REIGN OF TERROR', in which graphic descriptions were published of 'lawless Mardy' which played upon and perpetuated the public's fear of Communism and of radical politics. The image given by the press was that of a lawless, anarchic town which was so steeped in Communist ideals that a Communist culture had emerged in which 'red' football teams, clubs and funerals were the norm. Francis and Smith, however, have argued that Communist culture was by no means as far reaching as the newspaper reports would have us believe; that the activists within the Communist Party never exerted complete control over life in Mardy as they were not numerically strong. Instead, they argued, they created a 'counter-community' within the existing one, which manifested itself in groups such as the Young Pioneers, soccer

¹⁰² See Collins, 'Women and Labour Politics', p. 16; P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapter 5.

¹⁰³ See Graves, *Labour Women*, chapter 3.

teams and the singing of the 'Red Flag' and 'Internationale' in place of Welsh hymns at funerals and other events.¹⁰⁴

When looking at the membership figures for south Wales in 1935, it is clear that, certainly in terms of membership, Communism was far less of a threat than it was generally perceived to be. This was true, it has been argued, for Britain as a whole, not just the South Wales Coalfield. Membership figures country wide were always small, though 'never negligible'.¹⁰⁵ Recently Nina Fishman has also questioned the assumed popularity of the Communist Party of Great Britain amongst the miners of South Wales. She stresses the esteem for the party amongst those in engineering areas, as well as amongst socialists in Manchester and London rather than the population of mining districts.¹⁰⁶ The fear of Communism and the Communist myth surrounding the Rhondda is not borne out by the membership figures, which illustrate that although the party members in the Rhondda accounted for 88 per cent of the membership in the Glamorgan district, the actual number of members was quite low, only 188 members in 1935, 32 of whom were female. The table of party membership, below, illustrates that despite the impression given in the newspapers, the largest branch was not, in fact, in Mardy. That accolade goes to Ton Pentre. In addition, it clearly shows that, by March 1935, few of the branches were without female members, even if they only had one or two.

¹⁰⁴ Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 161.

¹⁰⁵ W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1992*, (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ N. Fishman, 'Heroes and Anti-Heroes: Communists in the Coalfields', in A. Campbell et al, *Miners, Unions and Politics*, pp. 93-94.

Table 6: Membership of the Communist Party in the Rhondda, 1935:

Unit	Male		Female	
	November	March	November	March
Treherbert	6	5	-	2
Llwynypia	5	7	4	3
Ton Pentre	5	24	-	1
Clydach Vale	6	9	2	7
Cambrian	7	4	-	-
Ynyscynon	4	8	4	3
Naval	5	9	-	-
Mardy	5	5	-	-
Tylorstown	14	14	3	3
Ynyshir	4	3	1	1
Porth	5	5	1	1
Upper Lip	-	26	-	-
Treorchy	-	8	-	2
Ystrad	-	21	-	1
Wattstown	-	8	-	2 ¹⁰⁷

It is clear from the figures that very low numbers of women became formal members, although it is often the case that women generally had a tendency not to become formal members but rather gave their support in other, more informal ways. And there is clear evidence that they took part in Communist activities throughout the Rhondda: 23 men and 11 women, for example, appeared at Porth Police Court for organising a demonstration on Empire day in 1928. Ethel Horner, the organiser and prominent Communist activist, described the action as a 'protest against celebrating empire day in Mardy whilst our children are starving'.¹⁰⁸ And in November 1931 some 29 men and five women were arrested for 'inciting to riot' against a council bailiff who had attempted to remove possessions from the house of Bill Price, an unemployed miner from Mardy. According to the *Western Mail*, a

¹⁰⁷ SWCC: Glyn Evans Collection, MS. G1, Communist Party: Report on the South Wales District, 1935 pp. 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ *South Wales News*, 15 May 1925.

'large and hostile crowd' of between 200 and 300 Communists arrived to prevent the bailiff gaining access to the house. Although the numbers quoted by the newspaper are likely to be greatly exaggerated, it is certainly the case that a large crowd was present, whether actively involved or merely as spectators. Arthur Horner, prominent Communist and husband of Ethel Horner, was sentenced to 15 months' hard labour for his part, and many others received sentences. Amongst them was Esther Sweet, who was highly active in such events, and extremely vocal in urging others to support the Communists. In one report, it was claimed that Mrs Sweet had shouted to the crowd to 'stand by the council of action and to ____ with the police'.¹⁰⁹ For her role in this particular incident, she was sentenced to one month's hard labour.

In addition to taking part in such political protests, women were also involved in more formal ways. In 1931 and 1934 respectively, both Ellen Rachel Paddock and Gwen Ray Evans stood as Communist candidates in local elections, although neither was successful in gaining seats. When, in 1931, Ellen Rachel Paddock stood as a candidate for the RUDC for the Tonypany and Trealaw ward, she received 309 votes against the 1,967 won by Owen J Buckley, the socialist candidate.¹¹⁰ In 1934 Mrs Evans received 334 votes from the Ynyshir ward in her bid for a seat on the Glamorgan County Council.¹¹¹

For those who did not wish to take such an active and visible part in the campaign, risking arrest and possible fines and imprisonment in the process, there were other ways in which they could demonstrate their support. For example, they could vote for and support their local Communist candidate, male or female, and it is clear that despite the low

¹⁰⁹ *Western Mail*, 19 February 1932.

¹¹⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 4 April 1931.

¹¹¹ *Rhondda Gazette*, 10 February 1934.

membership figures, communists enjoyed quite a degree of support, which probably included women. In 1935 the Communist candidate for Pentre ward was elected to the RUDC with 35 per cent of the vote, which amounted to over 1,300 votes.¹¹² For those who wished to involve themselves a little more, the social activities of some communist groups held an appeal, such as the socialist Sunday schools and the Young Communists League, and the socialist cycling club in Wattstown. And, rather than attending the regular and lively, although formal Communist party meetings alongside the men, there is evidence that women enjoyed smaller, more informal meetings. In an interview with Hywel Francis, Mrs J. Evans told how the women in Mardy would take it in turns to hold meetings in their houses:

my mother, my mother's sister, Mrs Horner, Mrs Jones Cymro, as we used to call her, (Lorna Jones),...they would come to our house one night and they would have supper, and then they would go to Mrs Horner's house another night to have supper and you know, they used to go to one another's houses like that. They used to have a really good night, no harm or anything, only just have a nice little joke amongst themselves.¹¹³

Given, however, that Mrs Horner and the informant's mother, Mrs Helen Tudor, were usually amongst those regularly featured in press reports as appearing in court for their activities, it seems likely that they were doing more than having 'a nice little joke amongst themselves'. The meetings, regardless of how radical their content, provided the women with a more relaxed and non-threatening arena in which they could debate issues and plan their activities.

Clearly, women were involved in Communist activities to varying degrees. The women mentioned in the above cases were exceptional women, however, as their activities

¹¹² SWCC: George Thomas Collection, MS. MNA/PP/115, Election Address of Evan George Thomas, 1935.

¹¹³ SWCC: Interview with Mrs J Evans, the daughter of Mrs Helen Tudor, a prominent communist activist in Mardy.

gained them some notoriety in the area and brought them to the attention of the police and the courts and subsequently the newspapers. Although this was not the case for the majority of the women involved, who did not achieve the same levels of infamy, they nevertheless attended meetings, bought Communist newspapers, and voted for Communist candidates.

The newspaper and court reports illustrate that a wide cross-section of women were involved in Communist activities. Most of the women mentioned were referred to as 'housewives or married women', some were described as domestic servants, while others were not given any additional details apart from their ages. What is surprising, however, is the low numbers of younger women mentioned. Whilst one or two were referred to, in the main the women tended to be slightly older. Esther Sweet, for example, was 46 when she was imprisoned for her role in the case involving the council bailiffs, and Helen Tudor was 43 with five young children. Ellen Rachel Paddock, a married woman from Trealaw, was 40 when she appeared in court charged with unlawful assembly and incitement to riot at an anti-fascist demonstration in Tonypany. Although Sarah (Sal) Evans, at the age of 24, was one of the youngest mentioned, she was also married with a young family. Many of the women mentioned were also members of families with strong Communist sympathies, which Pamela Graves has noted was also the case with women involved in the Labour movement.¹¹⁴ Helen Tudor's husband, for example, was a party member, but was not active because he preferred 'to keep his views to himself'; in addition, all of his brothers were members, as was Mrs Tudor's sister. Their children were all sent to a socialist Sunday school.¹¹⁵ Likewise, Ellen Rachael Paddock was charged alongside her husband for their activities in the anti-fascist demonstrations in Tonypany. Ethel Horner, as we have seen, was a leading figure amongst

¹¹⁴ See Pamela Graves, *Labour Women*, p. 41.

¹¹⁵ SWCC: Interview with Mrs J Evans.

the women Communists, and shared political sympathies with her husband Arthur. Finally, the 'Sweet' family appear to have been highly active in the cause: husband Alfred was often in court for his part in demonstrations, alongside his wife Esther. Their son Jesse was a prominent Communist, and their daughter, or daughter-in-law, Betty, was also listed in the court records as a regular participant. It would be very simplistic, however, to assume that the women became involved in Communist activities purely because of the influence of their husbands and families, although it no doubt made it easier for the women to participate.

The most obvious reason for women to support the Communist party was because of what it was trying to achieve. Whilst for the men, Communism applied more to the workplace, the community aspect would have held strong appeal for the women, especially during the 1920s and 1930s when unemployment was widespread, maternal mortality was high, and hardship was extremely visible. Women could have become involved out of a desire to improve their community and surroundings and an attempt to remedy the injustices that they felt existed. Many surely empathised with the sentiment set out in the Local Election Handbill issued by the South Wales District of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1935, which stated that the party was:

against the hundreds and thousands of pounds spent on jubilee celebrations and money spent on the war when thousands are unemployed and suffering means tests. When it is claimed there is no money for houses, work schemes, maternity and child welfare and education.¹¹⁶

The election address of Evan George Thomas, the Communist candidate for the Pentre and Ton Pentre ward in 1935, followed much the same lines. Thomas pledged to fight for an adequate housing scheme; the provision of two free meals daily for children; for maternity

¹¹⁶ SWCC: Glyn Evans Collection, MS. G1: Communist Party Handbill, 1935.

clinics throughout the valley; a children's playground; the abolition of war and fascism, and, finally the complete withdrawal of part two of the unemployment Act.¹¹⁷ Francis and Smith have also noted that the Communists were the only party to support the women's right to contraception, but it is likely that this would appeal to only a small number of enlightened women.¹¹⁸

The addresses and aims of the Labour Party, as we have seen, ran along a similar vein to this, but Labour had been in the majority on the council since the early 1920s and the economic situation in the Rhondda had continued to deteriorate. It is entirely possible that women had become disillusioned with the economic situation and Labour's failure to make a difference. This was certainly the case for Mair McLellan of Pentre. She felt that the Labour party, which she had previously supported, no longer went far enough, and so she transferred her allegiance to the Communists.¹¹⁹ This may also have been the reason why Gwen Ray Evans emerged as Communist candidate in the 1934 elections, after spending much of her political life as an active member of the Labour Party and official Labour candidate for the 1922 RUDC election.

Far from excluding women from their activities, the Communist Party actively sought to include them, celebrating women's day on an annual basis with marches and demonstrations, and appealing directly for women's support on a number of occasions. Pamphlets and fliers issued by the party appealed to women as wives and mothers as well as workers and activists. One such flier appealed to working women to join the Women's Day demonstrations on 8 March when women would march against the threat of starvation and

¹¹⁷ SW/CC: George Thomas Collection, MS. MNA/PP/115/20 Election Address of Evan George Thomas, 1935.

¹¹⁸ Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 62.

¹¹⁹ Mair Eluned McLellan, 'Shadows on the Wall', pp. 176-78.

war, and encouraged them to march 'for our homes, for our loved ones, for peace and security'.¹²⁰ Support was also offered to women in the form of financial assistance: in 1927 Mrs Smith, a Communist candidate for the RUDC, was given a loan of £20 by the Ferndale Lodge of the SWMF in order to help with her campaign. Similarly, the Mardy lodge of the South Wales Miners' Federation, well known for its Communist sympathies, sought to involve women in their campaigns, and at various stages brought them into meetings to explain to them the industrial situation and to appeal for their support. In spite of this encouragement, however, few women sought formal membership in the Communist Party.

Whatever the reasons, support for the Communists amongst women is clear, and reactions to these women and their activities varied greatly. Press reports were generally hostile to them, as they were to the male activists. The contemporary reports warned of the threat to society that Communism posed, and almost all of those Communists who appeared in court, both men *and* women, were described as 'dangerous' in some way or another. Female Communists were perceived to be an even greater threat, as such overt political activities were not perceived to be respectable for women, especially when their actions resulted in arrest and court appearances. What the press saw as 'unfeminine' behaviour was manifested in alluding to the women's lack of morals and attributing them with 'masculine' characteristics. Sal Evans was therefore described as 'a very low type' of woman, Esther Sweet as a 'most impossible, aggressive and dangerous woman who never misses a demonstration or procession', and Mary Ann Powell as an 'associate of the extreme element who flouts the police'.¹²¹

¹²⁰ SWCC: Flier published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, N.D.

¹²¹ *Western Mail*, 25 February 1932.

The courts themselves, already aware of the danger that Communism represented, were keen to stamp out Communist activity and sought to make examples of those prosecuted. Thus, punishments could be quite harsh and women were not let off lightly. Although some women were prosecuted for incitement to riot, the most common charge brought against them was 'obstruction of the highway', which could be used against women taking part in rallies, demonstrations, marches, or even simply listening to a speaker. For this crime they were usually fined. When the 11 women were charged with obstruction following Empire Day Demonstrations, Ethel Horner was fined 20s, and six other women, including Esther Sweet, were charged 5 shillings each. In comparison, the men were fined between 10 and 30 shillings. Also, magistrates were not afraid to give women prison sentences and hard labour. When in court for her role in the Bill Price case, Ethel Horner was given a choice between paying a fine, or serving a prison sentence.¹²² She chose prison, an illustration, perhaps, of the conviction of her beliefs. Once in prison, she and fellow prisoner, Esther Sweet, were put to work in the Laundry. Arthur Horner arranged for the fine to be paid by the Class War Prisoners Aid Organisation, albeit against the wishes of the imprisoned women, and they were released.¹²³

Whilst it is true that all politically active women found it difficult to reconcile their commitment with their domestic responsibilities, the Communists, like militant suffragettes, experienced special difficulty as, in many cases, they were held in remand until their cases were heard and it was not inconceivable that they could be sent to prison for their actions. Mrs J. Evans recalled the time that her mother was awaiting her court appearance following

¹²² *South Wales News*, 15 May 1928; *Western Mail*, 25 February 1932.

¹²³ Arthur Horner, *The Incorrigible Rebel*, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), p. 118.

her involvement in the Bill Price case; she and her sisters were very worried about their mother going to jail:

mind you, we used to try and make a joke of it to my mother, because we could see she was really worried over it, and we used to tell her, 'oh everybody will be pointing out to us, and saying 'do you know their mother, she is in jail'. And of course that used to upset her, but for all that we were really worried.¹²⁴

Such devotion to their families by politically active women who risked imprisonment for their actions has also been noted in another study. One suffragette in Lancashire made preparations for such an eventuality; upon anticipating a prison sentence, she prepared meals for her family that she gauged would feed them for a fortnight.¹²⁵

It is clear that women were involved in the Communist movement to varying degrees, their levels of support ranging from a quiet endorsement of their aims and values, to voting for Communist candidates, to active involvement. The women mentioned above were exceptional in their active support, and not representative of the majority of their sex, but they do illustrate that women were actively seeking to better the conditions for the community. For this they received condemnation from conservative newspapers and the courts.

In spite of the virtual absence of politically active women in Rhondda histories, it is clear that women were involved in many levels of politics. Not all women were actively involved: Mair McLellans' aunt, for example, once boasted that she had never once used her vote, and was apparently quite proud of this fact.¹²⁶ In contrast, Mair herself became interested in Labour politics from a very young age, and later became a member of the

¹²⁴ SWCC: Interview with Mrs J Evans.

¹²⁵ Liddington and Norris, *With One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p. 217.

¹²⁶ Correspondence with Mair Eluned McLellan, 3 April 2000.

Communist party. Although it has been argued by some historians, however, that even everyday activities and non-political groups had a 'political' element to them,¹²⁷ there is evidence to show that some Rhondda women went far beyond this in their support: they were actively involved in political campaigns, were highly visible on public and administrative bodies and had an important role to play in the political parties. This involvement took place in spite of some hostility, whether articulated or not. Nor did their activities simply revolve around fundraising and social teas, as some have argued. In addition to this very important supportive role that they performed, it is obvious from minute books that, especially within the women-only organisations, they were instrumental in advocating change for the betterment of society, in fields such as health and housing.

While it is easy to see that women were involved in the political life of the Rhondda, it is more difficult to discover what types of women were involved. The evidence does suggest, however, that a wide range of groups were represented in various ways. Helen Tudor, the communist activist, for example, was a shop keeper, miner's wife and mother of five; Elizabeth Andrews, Labour organiser and member of the Women's Co-operative Guild, was the daughter of a miner and a dressmaker prior to her marriage. But such involvement was not just confined to married women from mining backgrounds. Miss Ada Jones, the first woman to sit on the Ystradyfodwg School Board and, later, the first of her sex to sit on the Rhondda Education Committee, was a spinster ex-schoolmistress; and one of the most

¹²⁷ See, for example, Tebbutt, who claims that 'gossip' amongst women could be highly political. In her work she points to a study of Glasgow by Kate Phillips, who notes that women's discussions of the damp in the back bedroom, doctors waiting lists and the price of a loaf of bread should be viewed as political discussions, rather than idle gossip. See Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*, p. 11. Additionally, studies such as A. Laverick, 'The Women's Institute: Just Jam and Jerusalem?', M.Sc (University of Wales), 1990, and M. R. Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute Movement, 1915-1960', Unpublished Ph.D (University of Sussex), 1993, have drawn attention to the possible feminist nature of the WI, the arguments of which could equally be applied to other women's groups.

prominent female politicians in the district, sitting on the Rhondda School Board, and later the RUDC; was Lady Florence Nicholas, The Garth, Trealaw, who was extremely active in other aspects of community life, both charitable and cultural. In addition to their role in formal politics in order to facilitate change in the district, women were also disposed to take part in a more visible activity taking place in the locality during the inter-war period, that of protest.

Chapter Six

Protest

Their involvement in the campaign for suffrage and their participation in the Labour and Communist movements illustrate that groups of female activists were willing to demonstrate their beliefs or opinions and often risked arrest and possible imprisonment for their allegiance to a particular cause. Political activity, however, was not the only way in which women expressed their opinions about the community in which they lived, and in particular the threats to that society. The Rhondda, as we have seen, was a hotbed of protest and politics in this period; the Tonypandy riots of 1910, the General strike of 1926 and a multitude of other demonstrations and events took place during this tumultuous time, in which it will become clear that some women were highly active. Although little attention has been paid to the precise participation of women in such activities, it has at least been recognized that they took part in a wide variety of disputes.¹ These disputes taking place in the Rhondda at this time were frequently a reaction to a challenge to a way of life or accepted living standards.² But they took a variety of forms, sometimes in the shape of organized responses, such as the marches against the means test and the married-women teachers' dispute, or were more spontaneous, as their involvement in the many actions against strikebreakers. Either way, the protests which women joined, or even orchestrated, were far more reactionary than that of the political activity in which they were involved and women took a much more visible role.

¹ See, for example, Smith and Francis, *The Fed*.

² Deirdre Beddoe has made an important distinction between politics and political action, (or protest). Politics, she argues, was actively seeking to change an established set of norms, to challenge the existing status quo. In contrast, protests generally took place as a reaction or response to a threat to a given way of life. See D. Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Guide to Researching the Lives of Women since 1800*, (London: Longman, 1998), p. 174.

A documentary piece produced by Boadicea films illustrates just how long this history of radical action by women has been. The film commences with discussion of their involvement in food riots in the 1790s, and continues with Chartism in the 1830s. The struggle for female suffrage in the 1900s and the marches against unemployment and poverty in the 1930s are also discussed, and finally attention is drawn to the protests against nuclear missiles at Greenham Common in the 1980s.³ Such a long tradition has been corroborated by historians such as Rosemary Jones, who has shown that women played a particularly prominent part in the rural community during the early nineteenth century, being involved in community-wide issues such as food riots, enclosure disturbances and attacks on bailiffs, and were cast in the role of guardians of morality in rural districts. In their role as moral guardians, they were instrumental in shaming and punishing those who were deemed to be breaking the strict moral codes of the society, using a variety of rituals and sanctions including the *Ceffyl Pren* or 'Wooden Horse', (that is, a noisy procession of 'rough music'), gossip, and ostracising a family or individual from the community.⁴ Such methods, Jaclyn Gier has argued, were transferred with the women from rural society to the new urban communities, and aspects of them, she indicates, can be found in later protests. Rough music, white-shirting and hostility to those not harmonising with the ideas of the society featured prominently throughout the modern period; they and were as much a characteristic of the women's support groups during the 1984 strikes as they were of the 1926 disturbances, and their roots can be found in the rural communities.⁵

Few studies, however, draw attention to the role of women in coalfield protests, in spite of their established tradition of such activity in rural societies. Notable exceptions do

³ 'I'll be Here for All Time', Boadicea Films, 1985.

⁴ For more information on women and community protest, see Rosemary A.N. Jones, 'Women, Community and Collective Action: The *Ceffyl Pren* Tradition', in John (ed.) *Our Mothers' Land*.

⁵ Gier, 'Miners' Wives', Chapter 5.

exist, nevertheless, such as those by Angela V. John, J.E. Coleman and Neil Evans, which have located women firmly in the arena of radical action by analysing their role in the 1926 strike, the hunger marches and means test demonstrations of the mid-1930s, and the 'hidden' areas of protest located in the private sphere.⁶ The comparative lack of studies of women and protest in the coalfield, as compared to those of male activity, is the result of a number of forces which have combined to emphasise the activities of men to the exclusion of women, many of which have already been mentioned. These include the notions of 'respectable' behaviour for women, the powerful labour tradition in the mining industry, lack of employment opportunities for women, and the problems inherent in locating women in such activities.

In the new urban societies, women were seldom the instigators of disputes in the way that they were in the rural societies. This is due, to a large extent, to the changes that took place in the nature of disputes. The focus shifted from community issues to industrial and political ones, and protests became more institutionalised and formalised, usually instituted by male trade unions, or were the result of activities taking place within the workplace. We have already seen that formal employment amongst women was always low in the Rhondda, and as such women lacked the necessary prerequisites for involvement. Trade union membership amongst women was low; the largest employer of women, domestic service, was not a unionised occupation, in spite of the notoriously bad pay and inadequate conditions that some women were forced to endure, because of the very temporary and isolated nature of the work and the high turnover of staff. Thomas and

⁶ Angela V. John, 'A Miner Struggle?: Women's Protests in Welsh Mining History', *Llafur*, 4, 1, (1984); Neil Evans, "'South Wales has been Roused as Never Before": Marching against the Means Test, 1934-1936', in D. W. Howell and K. O. Morgan (eds.), *Crime, Protest and Police in Modern British Society*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999); J. E. Coleman, 'Working Class Women's Protests in South Wales in the Inter War Years', Unpublished BA Dissertation, (Polytechnic of Wales), 1991.

Grimmet have noted, however, that even domestic staff enforced their own means of informal protest, by spoiling food, sulking and time wasting.⁷ This lack of occupational organisation offered little opportunity for women to organise themselves in the way that men could, with the exception of teachers, as will be shown later.

In spite of this, women have been found to be visible in many of the disputes orchestrated by men, although they have sometimes been difficult to locate. It has been argued that much of this problem derived from the fact that newspaper articles and other reports often exaggerated or contrariwise downplayed the role of women. The presence of women in protests could be used to reduce the significance of a particular gathering. Suggesting that women were involved, it has been argued, somehow lessened the importance of the action, so, in order to emphasise the seriousness of the protest, the presence of women might be played down, or possibly even overlooked completely. Thomas and Grimmet have pointed out that this was almost certainly the case with Chartist disturbances; very few women were reported as taking part whereas they would doubtless have been involved in large numbers.⁸ Similarly, women were rarely mentioned in contemporary reports of hunger marches, although some were certainly actively involved. Conversely, they argue, the presence and role of women could be exaggerated in order to reduce the importance of a gathering or action. It is difficult, therefore, to estimate the number of women active, although this is a problem as much for male activists as for female. Contemporary reports tend either to enhance or understate the number of protesters, depending upon their own agenda. The *Western Mail*, for example, published extensive coverage of disturbances in the Coalfield throughout disputes, whereas in the

⁷ M. I. Thomas and J. Grimmett, *Women in Protest 1800-1850*, (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 24.

⁸ Thomas and Grimmet, *Women in Protest*, p. 14.

local press they were mentioned only fleetingly. In addition, the protesters who found themselves mentioned in the press, or found themselves summoned to appear in court as a result of their actions, can give very little indication of numbers, as they formed a very small minority of the crowd, perhaps being mentioned because of a particular part that they played, or perhaps as a result of an arrest. Women might not feature simply because they were not involved, or because the newspaper might have concentrated upon one aspect of the protest only, one in which women might not have been taking part.

Dependence upon press reports in order to gain an idea of the social or gender make-up of a crowd or gathering presents additional problems of accuracy, as Dai Smith has pointed out. He has illustrated the inaccuracies of the reports in the local press regarding the rioting, looting and violence that accompanied the dispute in Tonypany in November 1910. According to the newspaper reports, he observes, the violence and looting was carried out by youths and others from outside the district, therefore absolving locals from blame and confirming to readers from outside the district the image of a respectable Rhondda. Court proceedings, however, testify to the fact that a large majority of those taking part were local.⁹ It is therefore difficult to draw any firm conclusions about protests from contemporary reports as so many factors need to be taken into account when studying them.

Contemporary accounts, autobiographies and oral histories show that when women did take part in strikes and protests, their experiences were often very different to those of men. They took on distinct roles, showing their support for the men, whether actively, or through practical means, such as providing coalminers engaged in a stay-down strike with food.¹⁰ The role of the women in consolidating support throughout the community, and

⁹ Dai Smith, 'Tonypany 1910: Definitions of Community', *Past and Present*, 87, (May 1980), pp. 167-68.

¹⁰ Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 280.

ensuring that the families of those involved were not adversely affected, were as pivotal to the continuation of the action as actually protesting alongside the agitators. As Gier contends:

Although direct support of their husbands through protest and activism was certainly crucial for the maintenance of community morale, the indirect forms of support carried out by the miner's wife, such as shrewd household management during the period of strike could be just as significant.¹¹

No matter how shrewdly women were able to manage the household in times of strike, however, there were always going to be families who suffered as a result of the actions. Helping to alleviate the distress felt amongst such families, for example, through the organisation of soup kitchens, and fundraising, were very popular roles for middle-class women. Others, however, found more formal means of expressing their solidarity, through the establishment of specific action groups like the Mardy Council of Action, upon which sat representatives of a number of organisations, including the Women's Co-operative Guild. In 1932 the council encompassed 10 women amongst its 47 members, including such well-known local political figures as Mrs Sweet (Senior), Mrs Sweet (Junior) and Mrs A. L. Horner.¹² Similarly, more direct roles could be obtained through involvement in political parties. The Women's sections of the Labour Party, for example, played a part in the organisation of the unemployment marches of the 1930s, both by supporting the men in their actions and later holding a series of women-only meetings, addressed by Rose Davies and Elizabeth Andrews, at which women were encouraged to take part in the protests.¹³

¹¹ Gier 'Miners' Wives', p. 259.

¹² SWCC: MS. NUM/L/50/D2, Mardy Distress Committee Records, Registration of Council of Action, 1932.

¹³ Evans, 'South Wales has been Roused as Never Before', p. 185.

Those participating in the actual *organisation* of disputes; however, were very much in the minority. Nevertheless women did take on more direct roles in actions themselves, and were frequently to be found on the front line of the disturbances. They were particularly active in the demonstration of hostility towards strikebreakers and their families. Such hostility towards this group arose from a sense of frustration regarding the conditions under which striking families had to live and a profound resentment at the lack of loyalty of those who would not support the actions and thereby jeopardizing their success. The financial circumstances for men and their families whilst they were out on strike were extremely difficult. Those who were members of the union might be eligible for strike pay, if there was any available, but long strikes and coalfield-wide disputes ensured that the funds put aside for the relief of the men and their families would not last very long. If the man was not a union member, help had to be found in other ways. Women and children could claim relief from the poor law guardians in the form of outdoor or 'parish' relief, but men on strike were ineligible for this and were also unable to claim unemployment benefit. The amount of money that could be obtained from the Guardians, however, was very low, and many families found that they had to resort to such lifelines as attending one of the many soup kitchens that had sprung up throughout the Valleys, established by religious bodies and charitable institutions. Again, women could eke-out the parish relief to feed another mouth, or rely on the charity and goodwill of others.

The financial hardship experienced during periods of strike clearly resulted in great strain on the miner's wife, as although there was very little income coming into the household, the rent, and other expenses, still had to be paid and the family clothed and fed. The willingness to endure such suffering and deprivation showed a great commitment to the cause for which they were fighting, and, as such, strike-breakers, or 'blacklegs' were

greeted with hostility by both men and women. They were judged to be jeopardizing the protest for which the other families were enduring so much. These despised men continued to work and draw an income, and therefore did not suffer as much as other families. They would also profit from any changes brought about as a result of the suffering of other men.

When 'blacklegs' did appear, they and their families were subjected to very harsh treatment. Attempts to prevent them from entering the pithead by congregating around the entry to the works and intimidating those trying to pass were common. During one incident at Ynyshir in the 1921 coal stoppage, safety officers and other workers from the local pit were prevented from going to work - although they were being escorted by a contingent of policemen - by what was described as a 'large gathering' of workmen, women and children. According to reports, the workers were greeted with a roar of booing and hissing in which it was stated that the women took part. Indeed, the police had been unable to charge at the crowd and clear a path through to the pit for the workers because the women had placed themselves at the front of the gathering, a tactic which ensured that there was a physical barrier between the police and the male protesters. In the subsequent reports, such conduct by the women, and their behaviour generally, was described as 'disgraceful'. Some 38 summonses were issued as a result of this incident, two of which were served upon women, namely Annie Moon and Gwawrddydd Lloyd, who were prosecuted for intimidation and unlawful assembly. Although only a very small number of those appearing in court in this case were female, the leading article about the dispute in the *Western Mail* was entitled 'Police and Ynyshir Women'.¹⁴

Not only did the blackleg suffer as a result of his decision to return to work; his whole family were made to suffer the consequences of his actions. Towards this end, more

¹⁴ *Western Mail*, 5 May 1921.

traditional methods of protest, such as ostracising and embarrassing the family, were employed to demonstrate the displeasure of the community. Maggie Pryce Jones, in her reminiscences of growing up in the Rhymney Valley during the inter-war period, recalls being a schoolgirl during one strike when her neighbours were subjected to such treatment. Soon after the husband returned to work, their house was splattered with tar, the front windows were smashed, and more vocal methods were employed with the shouting of names, such as 'scabs', through the letter box. The result of these attacks was that the children were too scared to go to school, in case they faced similar treatment there, and their mother was too afraid even to visit the local shop. Whilst Maggie, as a child, could sympathise with the children and the wife, other sections of the community of both sexes had clearly decided that the whole family must be punished.¹⁵

In addition to participating in the treatment dished out to blacklegs, women also took an active part in the actual protests themselves, for although the disputes usually took place as a result of action taken by men and their unions, and which on the surface appeared to be purely industrial in nature, they often took on a wider significance. This was manifestly the case at Tonypandy in November 1910. It is well known that the dispute began as a result of the refusal of the men in the Ely Pit, Tonypandy, to work a new seam of coal at the price offered by the management. It was judged to be a difficult seam and the men thought it would be impossible to mine enough coal to achieve a wage big enough to live on. The workers were locked out of the pit by the owners, and men in other pits of the 'Cambrian Combine', of which the Ely pit was a part, stopped work in demonstration of their support. Whilst the strike itself was purely the result of an industrial dispute which

¹⁵ Jones, *Kingfisher of Hope*, pp. 30-31.

involved only those men connected with that pit, it has been noted that the riots which took place within this strike were far more emotive and involved the whole community.¹⁶

On the night of 7 November, a large crowd thronged the High Street in Tonypany and a number of small businesses and shops came under attack. Women were highly visible in looting the High Street; indeed the *Rhondda Leader* claimed that they had been involved from the very start. On 8 November, according to this newspaper, they were out in the streets in Penygraig, Llwynypia and Clydach Vale as early as the men and led the cheering as action was taken against the non-unionists and later the police.¹⁷ The *Western Mail*, however, reported that women had taken a far more active role than simply cheering the men on. It was suggested that women had used stones gathered in aprons and buckets as ammunition against the police.¹⁸ Of the 17 people tried for their role in the riots, five were women. Their actions were mostly described as harassing blacklegs and the police, and gathering and throwing missiles, such as stones. They were also frequently reprimanded for activities such as using violence and bad language, and spitting at police and other officials. Such behaviour by women was heavily criticised by Daniel Lleufer Thomas when those awaiting trial appeared at the local police court. During his summary of one intimidation case appearing before the court at Trealaw, he was reported to have commented that:

If women thrust themselves into the fighting line in this way, and if those who are responsible for the processions of the workers allow women to disgrace and unsex themselves by lawless conduct such as this, and, indeed, accept their services, then such women must suffer the consequences, and it is only by taking care that in such circumstances they do suffer the consequences of their guilt even to the extent of imprisonment that we can hope to stamp out the very reprehensible part they play on such occasions.¹⁹

¹⁶ See D. Smith, 'Tonypany 1910', pp. 163-69.

¹⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 12 November 1910.

¹⁸ *Western Mail*, 8 November 1910.

¹⁹ Quoted in D. Evans, *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911*, (Cardiff: Educational Publishing Co. Ltd., 1911), Appendix C.

As if to give the impression that such conduct was not usually resorted to by Rhondda women, some of the female witnesses to the Tonypandy riots were described in much more traditional terms. It was noted in one local newspaper that 'a group of women on the opposite bank who were eyewitnesses of the charge screamed hysterically as they saw the men dropping down and some of the women fainted'.²⁰ Clearly, this was seen as the correct way that women should have reacted to such violence, rather than joining in as many obviously did.

The involvement of women in protests such as this continued throughout the period, with female activists featuring prominently in disturbances taking place in the troubled 1920s and 1930s. They took part in strikes, protests, marches and demonstrations and are frequently to be found in the pages of the local press for their contribution and, in many cases, in the records of the local courts. Hywel Francis and Dai Smith have illustrated that women were particularly active during the 1926 strike, featuring in 12 of the major prosecutions brought about by activities during that time.²¹ The events of 1926, as with the other disputes in the coalfield, appeared to attract support from a wide cross-section of the community, and it is clear from the ensuing prosecutions just how wide the participation was. One case reported upon in the local press concerned a Mrs Elvira Bailey, described as 'an elderly woman of High Street, Treorchy', who was appearing in court on a charge of violence. She became so incensed by the spectacle of blacklegs returning from their shift under a police escort that she and her son, Harry, ran out of their street, throwing stones and shouting 'Take that, you wasters'. Both Mrs Bailey and her son were summoned to appear in court for their actions. The punishment she received was intentionally harsh because she

²⁰ *Rhondda Leader*, 12 November 1910.

²¹ Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 65.

had allegedly thrown the first stone that had incited some onlookers to join in. As such, she was to be used as a deterrent to other women who might decide to become involved in such actions. In summing up the case, the magistrate commented that Mrs Bailey had:

Set a very bad example to the women of the district. I find that women have been taking too prominent a part in these disturbances, and I must impose a penalty that will be a deterrent to others.²²

A sentence of two months' imprisonment was passed on her, and three months' on her son.

Although it might appear to be unusual that 'an elderly' woman such as Mrs Bailey should take part in such activities, it is clear from the court reports that considerably more mature, married women were being prosecuted, and by implication, many more were active participants.²³ This has previously been accounted for by the fact that many of the younger women had left the area for domestic service in towns and cities like London, Cardiff and Liverpool, leaving only the wives and mothers in the district to protest.²⁴ This explanation, however, is not wholly viable. Whilst it is true that large numbers of girls and young women had left the coalfield in search of work to assist their families during strike times, there were still many young women in the area. We have already seen that there were numerous young women in the district who might have been employed in service locally, who were working as teachers or nurses, or might have been the sisters of miners not sent away because they were needed at home. Many of these women and girls were appearing in court for participating in demonstrations and hostility and violence towards blacklegs and policemen. It might simply be the case that Francis and Smith assumed that fewer 'older'

²² *South Wales News*, 3 November 1926, also quoted in Francis and Smith *The Fed*, p. 65, and by D. Beddoe, *Our Mothers' Land*, p. 91.

²³ This is evident from a study of the court reports published in the local press.

²⁴ Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 65.

women would have been involved, and thus found their participation surprising. Jaclyn Gier, however, has argued that the participation of older women is not unexpected as they were more likely to have experienced such conditions before, were well versed in the tactics of popular protest, and therefore were perhaps more highly politicised.²⁵ They would certainly have been in the coalfield for long enough to witness the deterioration of living standards in the district since the intervention of war, and might have joined in protest which campaigned for a return to an earlier 'Golden Age'.

Whatever the age of the women, for their participation in such activities they were treated just as harshly as the men. In most cases, those convicted of involvement were given a choice of a fine or imprisonment; sentences handed out would usually be for a period of between one and three months, depending upon the degree of involvement and upon the seriousness of their actions. During strike time, when money was in short supply and often could not be spared from the budget in order to pay the fine, it has been argued that working-class women and men often had little choice but to serve a prison sentence.²⁶ Further, in some cases, actions were deemed to be of sufficient seriousness for a sentence of imprisonment to be passed, rather than the choice of a fine or imprisonment being offered.

In 1926 five women were convicted at the Glamorgan Assizes of offences connected with riots that took place in the Rhondda Fach during the coal stoppage. The women, all of whom were from the village of Tylorstown, were convicted of riotous assembly alongside 22 men and were sent to the County Gaol in Cardiff for periods varying from three to four months. The judge, Mr Justice Finlay, while stating his regret at having to pass the sentences, nonetheless felt that he had no other option:

²⁵ Gier, 'Miners' Wives', p. 247.

²⁶ Gier, 'Miners' Wives', p.283.

I bitterly regret that it is my duty to send to prison women for crimes of violence. I do it only because I conceive it my duty, and although I do it without hesitation, it is with deep regret. It is a lamentable thing that women should have been guilty of doing and saying the things that they did do and say.²⁷

The sentences imposed on the women aroused a great deal of hostility in the press, and a major campaign was commenced for their release. Colonel Watts Morgan and Mr William Mainwaring both bombarded the Home Secretary with letters in an attempt to secure their release.²⁸ In a further bid to free the women from their sentences, Alderman Lewis conducted a detailed report into the domestic circumstances of the imprisoned women which was then submitted to William Joynson Hicks, the Home Secretary, the only person who could grant their release. The report explained that all of the women sentenced were wives and mothers, some of whom had very large families to care for; one of the women, for example, was a mother of ten, and another had six children to look after. In the larger households there was reported to be considerable poverty, and the family members were finding it very difficult to cope in the absence of the mother.²⁹

In spite of the protests, the Home Secretary refused to grant the women release from their sentences. His decision was conveyed in a letter to Colonel Watts Morgan, which was reproduced in the press. In the letter, he justified his decision as follows:

These persons, having been found guilty of serious offences by a jury of fellow citizens, and having been sentenced by the courts to terms of imprisonment, I am asked to consider whether there are in the cases of the women prisoners certain circumstances which would justify the uses of the prerogative of mercy, and it has been suggested that the hardship resulting to the children may be grounds for clemency. I am not, believe me, insensible to such an appeal, but I have also to consider the absolute necessity of making it clear that crimes of violence by whomsoever perpetrated will be adequately punished. It would obviously be gravely prejudicial to the public

²⁷ *South Wales Daily News*, 25 March 1927.

²⁸ Colonel Watts Morgan was the Labour MP for the Rhondda East constituency.

²⁹ *South Wales Daily News*, 30 April 1927.

interest if the impression were to be given that women who commit crimes may escape the consequences because their imprisonment causes hardship in the homes and to children who are dependent on them.³⁰

He had, however, inquired into the position of the families of the sentenced women, and reported that the children were all being looked after by relatives.

In response to the refusal of release, a further campaign was commenced to shorten the sentences that the women were to serve. As part of this campaign, a deputation of representatives of the South Wales Miners' Federation and the Welsh Parliamentary Labour Party was sent to meet with the Home Secretary in London. It is not known whether the women's sentences were shortened as a result of the campaign.

Sympathy for women who had taken part in the disputes of the district was aroused because they had stood by the men in the fight for better pay, conditions and recognition of the work that they did. As they were supporting the men, rather than fighting for demands of their own, it was difficult for those who sympathised with the miners' cause to criticise the women who became involved. In these cases, the movement into the public sphere was not seen as a distortion of women's natural role, but a fulfilment of it as man's helpmate.³¹ Even though it could be argued that they were fighting for demands for themselves, in that they desired a better way of life for themselves and their families by means of higher pay, cheaper food and safer working conditions, these issues were of benefit to the whole community. In fact women had been actively encouraged by some groups to take part in such actions. In 1923, the *Colliery Workers' Magazine*, the magazine of the South Wales Miners' Federation, announced its intention to encourage women to become more involved in the politics of the coalfield, declaring that:

³⁰ Published in the *South Wales News*, 25 April 1927.

³¹ Thomas and Grimmet, *Women in Protest*, pp. 113-14.

Too long have we neglected the effect of our poverty upon our womenfolk, and have afforded them but scant opportunity to plead their own cause. We hope to make amends by giving nature's masterpiece a page in the magazine to bring to our assistance their counsel and advice.³²

The page, which was edited by Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour Women's Organiser for Wales, served to keep women informed of important decisions that would affect society, rather than focussing on issues specifically affecting women. Therefore, it was emphasised how the men's industrial and political matters affected women and their families. Less pay, it was pointed out, equalled less food for the family, which in turn produced unhealthy bodies, so rendering families susceptible to illness and germs.³³ Similarly through this avenue, women were informed about compensation laws and the effect of the Budget on housewives, and were prompted to protest against low wages alongside the men. Such an overt, and belated, intention to politicise women and draw them into coalfield protests, ignores the fact, however, that by this time there were already a number of organisations in the Rhondda in which women were active, such as the Women's Co-operative Guild and the political parties, and that women had, for a long time, been involved in the activities of the district.

Women were not always prepared to go to such lengths to support the men, however, and there are many examples recorded of those who disagreed with striking miners, mostly because of the increased burden that low incomes placed upon themselves and their families.³⁴ In 1926, the South Wales Miners' Federation called for a reduction in miners' working hours, and a strike ensued. The *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda*

³² *Colliery Workers' Magazine*, 1, (January 1923), p. 6.

³³ *Colliery Workers' Magazine*, 1, (January 1923), pp. 18-19.

³⁴ A good example of this is the reaction of Maggie Pryce Jones's mother upon hearing of a strike. Whilst wishing to support her husband, she worried about how the family were going to be able to eat. See Jones, *Kingfisher of Hope*, pp. 28-29.

Leader soon published a report on opinions of the action, which featured a letter from a 'wife and mother from Pontypridd'. The correspondent believed that the more responsible men in the coalfield should be glad to work an extra hour for the benefit of bringing extra money and therefore comfort into their family's homes. The letter ended with an attack on the Union:

We women would be glad of it too [the extra hour]...men who refuse to work an extra hour to benefit their homes – where are they? Have not our men sufficient pluck to rebel against the tyranny of the Federation, to protest against their money being used to provide talkers with soft jobs?³⁵

Later in the summer the same newspaper featured a letter from 'A Rhondda Mother', which expresses her feelings about the strike and left the reader in no doubt as to who was to blame for the hardships that miners' wives and families were suffering as a result:

The young men and boys are dragging their elders down; middle aged fathers and mothers are being humiliated and pauperised because boys and young men are followers of Cook. **If I was a young miner I should hang my head in shame** at what is happening in our coalfields, or I should rebel against the Federation and lead the way for a resumption of work at eight hours a day. The young men who now stand in the way of a settlement were spoiled by the high wages of a few years ago. Fancy a man who would see his home, wife and family suffer rather than work an extra hour- an extra hour which would enable him to make for any reduction in wage rates. What are our men coming to? **Have boys and youths no respect, no feeling for their elders, for those who have toiled and suffered for them?**³⁶

According to the writer of the article in the newspaper in which this letter featured, this was the feeling of many wives and mothers in the coalfield; a growing sense of hopelessness. This sentiment was also shared by some of the miners who wrote to the newspaper.

³⁵ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 11 June 1926.

³⁶ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 18 June 1926. Emphasis in the original.

Hostility to such actions, however, was confined to some sectors only of the community and large numbers of both men and women continued to actively campaign for better pay and living conditions in the South Wales Coalfield. Some of the most well-known protests occurred in the 1930s at a time when attacks on the living standards of the working class were continued. Unemployment benefit was facing the threat of serious cuts, and a humiliating means test was introduced to ensure that only those deemed to be entitled to do so could claim benefit. A wave of protests across the coalfields of Britain greeted each successive threat to benefit, and women were involved in a great many of them in a number of ways.

Many demonstrations, meetings and marches took place throughout the South Wales Coalfield in protest at the continuing lowering of living standards for the unemployed and their families. Demonstrations took place on such a regular basis, in fact, that it has been pointed out by Neil Evans that by the mid 1930s there was a demonstration of some kind taking place in the coalfield almost every day, involving large numbers of men, women and children and embracing a wide range of community organisations from chapels to the British Legion.³⁷ Such activities continued to take place throughout the period, but the ones now receiving the attention of the press were the larger, more organised national marches of protest. In 1930, 1932 and 1934 contingents of marchers started their journey from various parts of Britain, planning to walk to and converge upon London for mass protests against cuts to benefits. Marchers from the troubled coalfields of south Wales and the north of England were very well represented amongst those descending upon the capital.

³⁷ Neil Evans, "South Wales has been Roused as Never Before", p. 184.

Although women had participated in many of the local marches they were not present in the earlier national ones, which were deemed to be too strenuous and unsuitable for women. Conditions, in fact, were extremely gruelling for the marchers. The men would walk many miles a day, lived on simple food made with only the most basic of cooking utensils, and lacked even the most rudimentary of sanitary facilities. At night, they either had to sleep rough, seek shelter in barns or workhouses, or depend upon the hospitality of sympathisers along the way.³⁸ Although they did not participate, women would nevertheless help with the organisation of the march, and were sometimes involved in the organising committees. The Treherbert Marchers Committee, for example, included two women members, Annie and Carrie Pickens, in addition to its ten male members.³⁹ Responsibilities allocated to or taken on board by women included the collection of and donation of equipment and necessities required for the walk, such as food, blankets, warm clothing and sturdy boots. Similarly, monetary donations were also sought and raised in order to pay for food and shelter along the journey. One exception to this pattern, however, was the march that took place in February 1934, in which a number of women marched from the Rhondda to London, many of whom were from the Rhondda Valleys. The women were led by Dora Cox, an active worker for the Communist Party office in the Rhondda, who had spent the months prior to the march organising the women and generally building up support throughout the community. On 11 February about 225 marchers set off from Tonypany, amongst them Dora and nine other women. By the time they reached Bristol there were six more. In a magazine article written much later, Mrs Cox paid tribute to the women who took part:

³⁸ For further information about the marches of the 1930s and the conditions facing the marchers, see P. Kingsford, *The Hunger Marchers in Britain 1920-1939*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982.)

³⁹ SWCC: MS. MNA/PP/115, George Thomas Collection, List of Treherbert Marchers' Committee members.

It was great that we had women marching alongside the men - it was the first time it had happened on a hunger march. Other marches had separate women's sections. We were all different ages – there was one woman in her 60s and several very young women. The older women found the going a bit tough sometimes.⁴⁰

As with the previous marches, conditions were difficult, but the women were pleased with the support that they were shown in the villages through which they passed.

Like the other protests in which women were involved, the participants represented a number of groups within society. Very little is known about the women who took part, however, as, in spite of the unusual occurrence of women partaking in a protest of this kind, they actually received very little attention in the contemporary press; a pattern which had been repeated throughout the reports on protests and activities in the coalfield.

The inter-war period was one in which the coalfield society was experiencing a number of threats to their living conditions and standard of living, prompting community-wide protests, in which women were involved in some shape or form. But in spite of the frequency in which women were appearing in court and in contemporary press reports as a result of their activities, not to mention the fact that they would have been a highly visible group on the streets during the protests, magistrates and journalists consistently expressed 'surprise' at the participation of women in such activities. Following the events of the Tonypandy Riots in 1910, for example, the *Western Mail* noted that:

A surprising feature of the whole disturbance was the part played in it by the women, who, it must be confessed, were the ringleaders in many of the assaults, and exhorted the men to violence.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 'Rebecca' *The News Magazine of Wales*, July 1982, p. 5. (The article was first sourced in A. V. John, 'A miner struggle?').

⁴¹ *Western Mail*, 9 November 1910.

In 1926, the newspaper again commented that 'a strange feature of the disturbance is the surprisingly prominent part played by the women', thus giving the impression every time they were involved in protest that it was the first such occasion.⁴² This was a means by which the press could give the impression that women of the district did not usually condescend to take part in such unlady-like conduct.

Although it appeared to come as a great surprise to commentators, women clearly did participate in a number of the protests that swept through the coalfield in the early twentieth century. As to the reasons which encouraged women to become involved, these are various and complex. It has already been noted in a previous chapter that a strong sense of community existed in the Rhondda, based upon solid kinship networks, which arose in turn from the majority of the population being linked in some way to the mines and their shared experiences of accidents, hardships and work.

Although women generally had no experience of pit work, or any idea about the conditions below ground for which the men were fighting for improvement, they were still taking an active part in the disputes of men against the pit owners. But, as we have seen, women had a first hand knowledge of the repercussions of low pay and inadequate safety conditions, as they had a direct impact upon them and upon their families.⁴³ The correlation between low pay and high food prices experienced by the population during the Great War was explicitly noted as one of the main causes of unrest in the coalfield during the war by Frank Hodges in his evidence, given on behalf of the South Wales Miners' Federation, to the Industrial Unrest Commission. 'The principal cause of temporary unrest', he explained to the commission,

⁴² *Western Mail*, 5 November 1926, also quoted in *The Fed*, p. 65.

⁴³ See Chapter Three on Home, Health and Family.

and one which affects every workman and his family alike, is the fact that the price of the bare necessities of life has outdistanced the purchasing power of the workmen to an unparalleled degree.⁴⁴

And this was not just a feature of wartime. Since the end of the First World War, the price of foodstuffs, and the cost of living generally, had been steadily rising; the *Ministry of Labour Gazette* estimated in 1923 that the cost of living had increased by 73 per cent since the start of the war, whilst, on average, food cost 14 per cent more than it had in 1914.⁴⁵ While the cost of living was steadily increasing, the economic situation of the South Wales Coalfield was becoming more and more precarious. Unemployment was rife, and even miners who were still working saw their real wages decreasing as a result of shorter hours. Frequent strikes ensured that money, even for the most basic of necessities, was not always available. As the coalfield was being faced with the threat of more and more pay cuts, the community as a whole reacted, rather than just the men, as further decreases in wages or benefits would not only affect the miners, but their families also. As A. Francis Handy, the secretary of Bedwellty (Monmouthshire) Women's Labour Party, wrote to the *South Wales Daily News* during the 1921 stoppage:

We as miners' wives cannot do other than give our men all the support we possibly can for we know by experience that the suggested cut in wages will reduce us and our children to such a condition that life will no longer be worth living...Having stood by our men in their struggles to attain the comparatively low standard of life we now have, we are to be reduced at one fell swoop to starvation level even when working six days a week.⁴⁶

It could also be argued that in the absence of more formal channels of protest for women, such as trade unions or widespread membership of political parties and organisations, popular protest was the only means by which women could express their opinions on the

⁴⁴ NLW: Edgar Chappell Papers MS. Box 1, Evidence of Frank Hodges to the Industrial Unrest Commission.

⁴⁵ Statistics published in the *Western Mail*, 19 September 1923.

⁴⁶ *South Wales Daily News*, 20 April 1921.

proposed cuts and place themselves firmly in the political arena. Thomas and Grimmet make an important point about changes which affected the population so profoundly that a new type of protest was needed in order to emphasise feelings about them:

The desperation within existing living conditions, with starving children and downtrodden husbands, was now entering something more than the traditional direct action of economic protest, such as food rioting. It was producing political protest directed against a whole system believed to be operating on behalf of class interests and needing to be radically reformed so that other interests may be accommodated.⁴⁷

Here, they are referring to the Chartist era, but the point could be equally true for women's involvement in the protests of the 1920s and 1930s.

Similarly, although women were not familiar with conditions underground, they also felt the effects of inadequate safety facilities, and were well acquainted with the accidents and disasters resulting from the difficulties of working in the South Wales Coalfield. The South Wales Coalfield, because of its geology, was one of the most dangerous and difficult areas to mine; it was subject to flooding, sudden roof-falls and explosions. Accidents were frequent and a number of large-scale disasters took place throughout the period⁴⁸:

⁴⁷ Thomas and Grimmet, *Women in Protest*, pp. 113-14.

⁴⁸ Table of Rhondda Disasters, taken from the *Western Mail*, 15 October 1913.

Table 7: Large-scale mining disasters in the Rhondda Valleys

Date	Location	Lives lost
13 July 1856	Cymmer	114
8 November 1867	Ferndale	178
10 June 1867	Ferndale	60
24 February 1871	Pentre	28
13 January 1879	Dinas	63
August 1883	Gelli	4
28 January 1885	Penygraig	10
24 December 1885	Naval Colliery, Penygraig	14
18 February 1887	Mardy	91
28 January 1896	Wattstown	37
10 March 1905	Tylorstown	57
11 July 1905	Clydach Vale	33
	Wattstown	119

In addition to the larger scale disasters, many smaller accidents and injuries as a result of the work in the mine occurred almost on a daily basis. Thus, women were confronted by the dangers of working in the pit fairly frequently, if not in their immediate family then possibly in their extended family, or through the misfortune of a neighbour. Having had experience of such accidents, it is hardly surprising that they could empathise with, and very often support, the men in their protests and campaigns for safer working conditions, and higher pay scales for working in dangerous areas.

The protests against actions which would have resulted in a deterioration of living standards are clearly protests in which women took part from a sense of community, as well as to fight against threats to their living conditions. In such activities, women have generally been assigned the role of 'helpmeet', aiding or supporting the men in their struggles rather than the protagonists, resulting in what has been referred to as 'contribution' history.⁴⁹ The main reason for this was the industrial nature of most of the disputes, and the more

⁴⁹ John, 'A Miner Struggle', p. 75.

formalised channels through which men's protests were organised; that is, through the South Wales Miners' Federation, or through political parties. Although some women were members of political parties, or active women's groups such as the Women's Co-operative Guild, they constituted only a small minority. Women were very much viewed as being out supporting the men in their protests, rather than receiving acknowledgement that threats to safety at work, cuts in wages, hours and unemployment benefit would have had as much impact upon their lives as upon their men.

It was also the case, however, that women fought for issues which affected them specifically as women during this period. Angela John has drawn attention to what she refers to as 'hidden areas of protest', which would specifically benefit women rather than the community as a whole, for example, in limiting of family size.⁵⁰ Groups of women also protested if they felt that their rights were being threatened or if they believed that they were suffering from unfair treatment. One such example which took place in the Rhondda Valleys in the years following the First World War which was entirely motivated by a gender consciousness was that of the married-women teachers, which culminated in a group of 60 married women, who had been employed by the RUDC as teachers during the war, instigating court action against the council for terminating their contracts on the grounds that they were married. Under the representation of Messrs WR Davies and Co, Pontypridd, and with Mrs Elizabeth Price as the figurehead of the dispute, they appealed against the action, and the case was heard in the High Court in London in May 1923.

Disputes involving teachers were not unusual; as an occupation they were a highly unionised and active group. In the Rhondda in 1912, elementary schools had been closed for four weeks during a disagreement over salary scales; and again, in 1919, the Rhondda

⁵⁰ John, 'A Miner Struggle', p. 84.

was in the news because of a longer-term dispute which culminated in the teachers striking from the February to the April of that year. The cause of this was, according to the *Western Mail*, an issue of control in the classroom. An assistant teacher at Penrhenglyn Boys' School, Treherbert, was alleged to have not carried out a lesson in accordance with the timetable. The teacher, Miss Mainwairing, refused to apologise and the other teachers in the school supported her by ceasing work. Teaching duties were resumed following a visit from the deputy Director of Education, but teachers in the locality demanded a public inquiry into the matter.⁵¹ Although this was regarded as the immediate or primary cause of the dispute, the impetus was sustained over tensions regarding the new salary scales the council had offered the teachers and dissatisfaction with salary cheques frequently being paid late. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) had been recommending a salary scale for a number of years, but Local Education Authorities (LEAs) usually paid wages at a lower level than the union recommended. The issue of salaries was not a new one, but the problem had escalated during the war when the cost of living had increased dramatically, and salaries had remained at the same level. The teachers were particularly infuriated because those in occupations such as mining, transport and other council employees had been given war bonuses in line with the rising cost of living whilst they had to apply for them under a very strict criteria. The dispute continued to escalate, and by March 1919 there were 1,200 teachers on strike demanding acceptance by the Rhondda Education Committee of the 'Burnham' salary scale as devised by the National Union of Teachers. The dispute was finally settled in April 1919 with the introduction of a more favourable salary scale.⁵²

⁵¹ *Western Mail*, 2 March 1918.

⁵² For more information on the 1919 Rhondda teachers' strike, see M. Lawn, 'Organised Teachers and the Labour Movement, 1900-1950', Unpublished Ph.D (Open University), 1982, p. 77.

Thus the teaching profession, unusually for an occupation in which so many women were concentrated, was very politically active. This has been attributed to a variety of factors, including camaraderie, and the conditions under which they and their male counterparts taught. We have already seen that salaries were a fairly constant source of dissatisfaction for all teachers, but women had further cause for dissatisfaction as throughout the period they were consistently only paid at 75-80 per cent of the male rate, despite performing exactly the same role and functions as their male colleagues.⁵³ Previous chapters on education and employment have already described the conditions under which teachers taught, emphasising the long hours, inadequate facilities and the large classes.

The pay and conditions that teachers endured, it could be argued, were no harsher than those of other occupational groups and, compared to some, would even have been regarded as better. Unlike domestic service, teaching was not 'dirty' work and had the benefit of defined hours of work. As an occupation group, however, they were much more politically active than many of the other groups. Alison Oram has argued that this higher level of participation was a direct result of the educational achievements of women teachers, suggesting that political activity was increased with greater levels of education. Thus, as a logical conclusion to this argument, as one of the better- educated groups in society - many of them were graduates - women teachers were therefore highly active in fighting to improve their own conditions.⁵⁴ In spite of differences in age, experience, qualification and gender, in disputes over pay and conditions the teachers were willing to join together and fight for their rights as teachers. In this, they were often helped by their unions: the National Union of Teachers, which mainly, although not exclusively,

⁵³ Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics, 1900-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics*, p. 1.

represented male, certificated teachers; the National Union of Women Teachers; and the Rhondda Class Teachers Association, by whom the uncertificated teachers, and as such a large number of female teachers, were represented.

The case of the married-women teachers, however, was an example of a protest in which women stood against their male colleagues and against their union. During the war, married-women teachers were employed to replace men who had volunteered in the early stages, and women who were approaching pensionable age were encouraged to remain, under temporary contracts. The school management committee of the district council agreed at an early stage that wives who returned to, or remained in, teaching whilst their husbands were at the front should be in no doubt that their contracts would terminate upon the return of their husbands, and that the positions were for the short term only.⁵⁵ The arrangement was beneficial both to the schools and the council, who were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit replacements for those who had volunteered for service or war work, and also to the women. Former teachers whose husbands had volunteered for service at the front could use the opportunity to bring money into the household and support the family in the absence of the wage earner. Miss Rachel Davies of Cymmer, for example, applied to the council in September 1914 to remain in her teaching post for the duration of the war. She was planning to marry her fiancé before he left to fight, and wished to continue at her post until his return. During the same council session, another request was heard from a former teacher from Pentre, who asked for an appointment whilst her husband was away in the army.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes of the School Management Committee, 18 September 1914.

⁵⁶ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 14 September 1914.

This mutually beneficial arrangement worked well until the return of the servicemen at the end of the war. The problem emerged when many of the drafted teachers wished to continue their employment. The dismissal of the teachers upon the return of the servicemen should not have come as a surprise as the status of married-women teachers had not been secure since their employment commenced. Finally, in 1919 a decision was taken to terminate the contracts of the married women teachers, but a resolution was passed on 3 December 1919 which stated that that the women should be able to remain in the employ of the council until at least they had completed the minimum period necessary to be eligible for a pension. This was a particularly important point for the women, many of whom had only a few years to serve before qualifying. Mrs Price, for example, had been at teacher at Cwmclydach Elementary School since 1896 and by February 1924 she would be entitled to a pension of £2 to £3. The women involved argued that the resolution of the council regarding qualification for pensions was legally binding, and that the subsequent termination of their contract constituted a breach of this agreement.⁵⁷

For many of the married-women teachers, however, it was not a question simply of wanting to work, but was a case of needing to work as they were the main wage earners in many families. The economic slump which followed the end of the war meant that many of their husbands were returning to the prospect of unemployment. Continued employment for their wives was, therefore, a necessity for many families who wished to keep above subsistence level. To remain in their teaching posts would have been the most practical solution as given their ages - most of the women in question were aged between 45 and 50 - they would find it difficult to find alternative employment.

⁵⁷ *Western Mail*, 4 May 1923.

The decision to terminate the contracts was explained by the council as having been taken in the face of the unemployment of returning ex-servicemen and newly qualified teachers, for whom the authority had paid a large amount of money to complete their training. In the aftermath of the war a campaign had been encouraged by the council to increase the numbers of teachers training. By the time these recruits had finished their courses, however, unemployment amongst teachers, especially newly qualified ones, was climbing. By 1923, there was a great amount of publicity regarding unemployment amongst teachers; it was announced in the local press that there were 32 certificated and 51 uncertificated teachers unemployed in the district, which was equivalent to 7 per cent of the teachers employed by the Rhondda Education Authority.⁵⁸ If these new teachers did not find employment, the authority would not be able to recoup its investment in them. The councillors who made the decision were very open about the reasons behind the dismissals; in a meeting on 5 July 1922, Councillor Abel Jacobs explicitly stated that:

having regard to the large number of certificated teachers who will complete their course of training in the month of July next without any prospects of securing employment, this authority take into consideration the advisability of terminating the engagements of all MARRIED-WOMEN TEACHERS.⁵⁹

The motion was seconded by Councillor Eliza Williams. Following discussion, it was decided to include a clause which would allow the authority to employ married-women teachers in the future, should it be necessary. A vote was taken, and the vast majority of the councillors, including the only two women present, Annie Price and Eliza Williams, voted to terminate the contracts of the married-women teachers. Only three councillors voted against the motion. The engagements, it was decided, were to end the following October.

⁵⁸ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 9 February 1923.

⁵⁹ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 5 July 1922.

The unemployment of newly-qualified teachers aroused a great deal of sympathy from the public, and in turn helped to generate hostility towards those who were seen to be preventing them from taking up posts in the district, namely the married-women teachers. Sympathisers, like the council, also dwelled upon the waste of money used to train teachers who then had no opportunity for employment, both public money and that sacrificed by parents. A letter to the *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* written by 'a sacrificing Rhondda father' in June 1922 outlined the difficulties that he and his family experienced whilst struggling to put one of their offspring through training college. He greatly resented the fact that upon completion of training, they were unable to put their knowledge into practice in the schools of the district.⁶⁰ Although the married-women teachers were the primary group towards whom frustration about unemployment was directed, they were by no means the only ones who were perceived to be a threat to jobs in the district. Complaints were also made when appointments were made from outside of the district, for example when a Cardiff woman was appointed as a teacher at Tonypany secondary school rather than an ex-serviceman from the Rhondda.⁶¹

The decision to terminate the contracts of married-women teachers in favour of those newly qualified and unemployed certificated teachers and ex-servicemen received a mixed reaction from members of the public. While some supported the council's decision, we have seen, others expressed sympathy for the position of the married-women teachers. The justifications for the support of the dismissals, as argued in their letters to the local press, were based upon a number of arguments. Many of those proffering opinions stressed the inefficiency and frequent absences of married women who might take time off to

⁶⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 30 June 1922.

⁶¹ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 22 December 1922; *Western Mail*, 16 December 1922.

undertake domestic chores or to look after a sick husband or child. School log books, however, have illustrated that unmarried teachers, both male and female, could be prone to frequent absence, due to familial responsibilities such as illness of parents or siblings, and the deaths of other family members. Similarly, there appeared to be a widespread belief that married-women teachers were 'out of date' or old fashioned, with many letters to the press referring to the benefits of attracting 'new blood' to the schools.⁶² The criticism of becoming old fashioned, however, did not appear to have been directed against unmarried female teachers and their male colleagues, many of whom remained in the profession for a very long time.

In addition, the replacement of married-women teachers by younger and allegedly more energetic newly qualified ones was argued to be a very efficient means of saving money. It was far cheaper to employ younger, less experienced teachers than pay a higher wage for more experienced ones.⁶³ In the economic conditions which prevailed in the aftermath of the First World War, and the ensuing series of cuts in education grants, this was one way in which the council could economise on its spending.⁶⁴ It remains the case, however, that only one group of teachers were targeted in the cuts. If the argument of economic efficiency was to have any credence, then both unmarried female teachers and long-serving male teachers would also have been facing the prospect of dismissal in favour of younger, cheaper teachers.

⁶² This was not a new theme. A letter to the *Rhondda Leader* in 1907, from somebody using the pseudonym 'Puritan', expressed identical sentiments during a debate about the salaries of female married teachers. 'Puritan' argued that there should be a gradual reduction, commencing with those who have not had the modesty to retire voluntarily, and whose out of date qualifications are 'petrifying to the profession'. *Rhondda Leader*, 9 February 1907.

⁶³ M Lawn, 'Organised Teachers', p. 313.

⁶⁴ G. Partington, *Women Teachers in the Twentieth Century in England and Wales*, (NFER Publishing Co; Windsor, 1976), pp. 28-47.

In targeting married-women teachers for dismissal, inefficiency and economic conditions were clearly not the only criteria used. The arguments used against the idea of women working generally - those of separate spheres and the 'correct' role for women, as rehearsed in an earlier chapter - were conveyed in a much stronger manner in the debate against married-women teachers. Arguments against the use of married women in schools focussed upon the mental and physical strain that they encountered as part of their daily work, and the effect that this had upon both her own health and that of her offspring. Such views continued to be expressed from the public at large and from those in authority. During the teachers' court case in London, Councillor Jacobs was reported to have commented that while he did not admit that a woman's place should necessarily only be in the home, he was quite sure that 'that the proper place of married women is not in the school'.⁶⁵ Other members of the community, however, entertained much stricter ideas upon a woman's place. One correspondent wrote to a local newspaper that:

The wife and mother is the home. The married woman is the home, not the house she occupies nor the work she is expected to do in the house, but she herself is the home, her life, her heart, her presence. Her whole life's interest and joy is her home. She cannot be a home and a teacher. If her life's interest is in the school work, then she has ceased to be a home; if her life's interest is her home life, then she cannot be a teacher.⁶⁶

At the heart of perceptions of family life in this masculine industrial community was the concept that the males of the house should be the wage earners. Women bringing money into the home were seen to be a contortion of this idea, even if they were the only household members in employment and there was no other means of income. Those coming under particular criticism, however, were the women who were employed whilst their husbands

⁶⁵ *Western Mail*, 26 April 1923.

⁶⁶ *Western Mail*, 23 August 1922.

were also working. In a letter written by 'an ex-service unemployed certificated teacher', the unfairness of one household receiving two incomes when many others in the district were not gaining any income at all was pointed out. The author of the letter was very much in favour of any action intended to make room for the unemployed, many of whom, he noted, were being maintained by their parents or who were carrying out menial work. Such actions included the dismissal of married women who already had husbands and other household members to keep them and, as such, did not have to work.⁶⁷ The *Rhondda Gazette*, during the lead up to the court case, was quick to point out that this was indeed the situation for those involved in the dispute, all of whom had husbands who were alive and not incapacitated by ill health and who were capable of supporting their wives.⁶⁸ Mrs Price, however, commented that although she sympathised with the unemployed, she resented being made a victim.⁶⁹

This idea of strict roles within the family was of even greater importance following the special circumstances of the First World War, during which women had a greater opportunity to experience different types of employment, and many of whom had entered into employment for the first time. The old structure of society had been challenged, and although the changes were not long-term, women in employment represented a real threat to the previous way of life. This new circumstance led to a crisis of masculinity in the years immediately following the cessation of hostilities, during which time attempts were made to reassert the rights and predominance of males in a number of spheres.⁷⁰ In addition, the losses of the war and the decline in the birth rate were the cause of some concern, and

⁶⁷ *Western Mail*, 6 January 1923.

⁶⁸ *Rhondda Gazette*, 12 May 1923.

⁶⁹ *Western Mail*, 28 April 1923.

⁷⁰ Oram, "Sex Antagonism" in the Teaching Profession: Employment Issues and the Woman Teacher in Elementary Education, 1910-1939', Unpublished M.Sc (University of Bristol), 1984, p. 11.

repopulation was a primary target. A return to the traditional role of women in the home, therefore, was deemed to be essential.⁷¹ The threat of the married-women teachers, however, was greatly exaggerated, as, in fact, only a small number of the female teaching force were actually married. The annual report of the minister of Health for the Rhondda in 1922 documented that of women teachers in 1921, 709 were single women, 80 were married, and 25 were divorced or widowed.⁷²

The fate of the married-women teachers elicited some sympathy from members of the public. During the dispute a number of letters were published demonstrating that part of the community at least were in support of their action. One such letter commenced with a statement of support for the women teachers, and ended with a vitriolic attack on what the correspondent described as 'the high handed action of the Rhondda Bolshevik Soviet'.⁷³ Further messages confirmed a general support for the plight of the women, which was centred on both the practicality and desirability of employing married women in schools and issues of equal rights. At a meeting of the Pontypridd Trades and Labour Council, for example, Chairman John Andrews commented that he would rather see in the schools married-women teachers, who had the helpful sympathy of mothers, than younger, inexperienced teachers with no previous experience of children.⁷⁴ Similarly Marie Stopes, who was received by the RUDC as part of a deputation in support of the women, maintained that the presence of happily married women in a school was essential to the stability and sanity of the teaching staff, and had a soothing influence on children. The dismissal of teachers upon marriage was a waste of the public money expended upon their training, and served to lose the wisdom and experience that they had accumulated

⁷¹ *Western Mail*, 3 February 1920.

⁷² SWCC: RUDC: Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health 1922, p. 102.

⁷³ Printed in the *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 25 August 1922.

⁷⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 28 January 1915.

throughout their time as teachers. She also noted that married women had a right to work, on the grounds of human freedom and personal liberty.⁷⁵

The action of the council in considering issues outside of purely educational ones was also questioned in a letter to the *Western Mail* from an 'unmarried headmistress'. She argued that there were certain aspects of a person's life that should remain in the private sphere and should not bear any relation to issues of employment. The amount of revenue going into a household was one such aspect, and should be of no concern to the local education authority, as it did not bear any relation to educational issues. The only issue of concern to the council, she continued, should be the education of children, all of whom deserved the right to a good education, no matter who it was provided by.⁷⁶ Similarly, the argument that two incomes entering one household at a time of economic hardship and high unemployment was an adequate justification for the dismissal was questioned by others; as one correspondent argued:

to allow two incomes to enter one home in these days of unemployment is hardly fair.... perfectly sound argument, BUT there are many homes where there are four, five or six wage earners, nobody has suggested that they cease work.⁷⁷

In addition to the support forthcoming from some colleagues and other members of the community in the form of letters to the press, messages of protest were also received from various groups in the Rhondda, such as the Women's Labour section and the Women's Co-operative Guild. A letter sent to the RUDC by Miss Mary Williams of Ton Pentre contained a copy of a resolution passed at a meeting in Porth on 11 December 1919,

⁷⁵ As expressed in a letter from Marie Carmichael Stopes to the *Western Mail*, 3 February 1920; GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes of the Education Committee, 4 February 1920.

⁷⁶ *Western Mail*, 3 August 1922.

⁷⁷ 'Tradition', in *Western Mail*, 1 August 1922

which protested against the action of the authority 'in not removing the bar on married-women teachers'.⁷⁸ Teachers' groups also expressed their solidarity with the married-women teachers, such as the Teachers' Representative, which included Gwen Ray and William Cove, which passed a resolution at a Representative General meeting, again arguing for the right of women to chose whether they wished to continue employment following marriage. Gwen Ray also raised a motion at the Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council on behalf of the Rhondda Class Teachers Association, which stated that 'this Trades Council is against women being penalised in their employment because of their sex or marriage'. The resolution was duly seconded and passed.⁷⁹

Although the married-women teachers did receive some support from groups and sections of society, they did not receive any real practical assistance from the National Union of Teachers (NUT). This was the case despite the fact that the majority of the women involved were fully subscribed members.

Essentially, the NUT supported the *principle* of the women's argument, stressing women's right to work regardless of their gender and domestic circumstances. The union argued that: 'It is a woman's right to decide for herself, in view of all her circumstances, whether she wishes to work outside the home or not'.⁸⁰ Alongside this endorsement of women's equal rights more practical issues were voiced, argued from a professional perspective. For example, that the dismissals were a waste of the expense of training women, and that all children had the right to be taught by the best teachers available, whether they were married or single.⁸¹

⁷⁸ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes of the Education Committee, 7 January 1920.

⁷⁹ TL: Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council: Minutes, 19 June 1919.

⁸⁰ *Times Education Supplement*, 19 May 1921, quoted in Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics*, p. 166.

⁸¹ Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics*, p. 166.

The plight of the married-women teachers, which was a problem throughout Britain, not just in the Rhondda, was discussed to varying degrees in the assorted committees of the NUT. The Ladies' committee resolved in 1922 that they 'protest against the dismissal of women employed on account of their marriage' as it constituted an interference with the private affairs of a woman employee which was not exercised in the case of a male employee. Furthermore, the Ladies' committee noted, in the case of the civil service and women employed by local authorities the dismissal contravened the 1919 act.⁸² No further action, however, was taken on the resolution and no form of practical support was given.

The Welsh Committee gave very little consideration to the question, in spite of the fact that one of the most well publicised cases was taking place in their area. This is even more surprising considering that the president of the committee, William Cove, was himself a certificated teacher in the employ of the Rhondda Urban District Council.⁸³

It would be incorrect to say that no support was offered to the women of the Rhondda by the NUT, as letters were sent to the RUDC by NUT headquarters, meetings were arranged with the council, and resolutions of support were passed. In May 1922 a circular was issued pointing out the disadvantages of the action: 'on broad educational grounds, the substitution of young and inexperienced teachers for older and experienced teachers would not be advantageous to the school concerned'. The NUT hoped, the circular continued, that the council would offer a degree of compassion and flexibility in cases of hardship, where the husband might be unemployed, or underemployed, and treat them as special cases. Similarly, teachers who were approaching pensionable should also be treated with sympathy.⁸⁴ And in July 1922, when it was clear that the court action would be going

⁸² Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MRC): NUT, Minutes of the Ladies Committee, 20 January 1922.

⁸³ MRC: NUT, Minutes of the Welsh Committee, 7 July 1915.

⁸⁴ MRC: NUT, circular 43/22

ahead, Mr T.H.J Underwood, the Divisional Secretary of the NUT, met with the Urban District Council in a last minute attempt to urge them to change their minds.⁸⁵ This was supplemented by a letter from Sir James Yoxhall, General Secretary of the NUT, but to little avail.

Given that the women were in danger of losing their livelihoods, however, such expressions of support were of little practical help to them, especially as, by 1922, it was clear that the only way in which the dispute would be solved was through a costly court case. The NUT had been asked by married-women teachers throughout the country to represent them in their cases against various councils, but when NUT officials investigated the Rhondda case, help was refused. The justification given was that although the women had a strong moral case for continued employment, they did not have any legal claim to it.⁸⁶ The union had been advised by its lawyers that there was little chance of success. Additionally, it was argued that such an action would put the jobs of other married-women teachers in Britain in jeopardy if the case was lost, as it would set a precedent for their dismissal.⁸⁷ The NUT did, however, give legal and financial support to Mrs Short, a teacher given a contract during wartime service, in her action against dismissal by the council in Poole.

In addition to the detrimental effect on other married-women teachers if the case was lost, it has been argued that the refusal of the NUT to give any practical support to the women was because they did not want to risk alienating their male membership, many of whom would gain from the dismissal of married-women teachers.⁸⁸ This was a very real

⁸⁵ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 12 July 1922.

⁸⁶ MRC: NUT, Minutes of the Law Committee minutes, 1 September 1922.

⁸⁷ MRC: NUT, Circular to secretaries of Local and County Associations (48/23), May 1923.

⁸⁸ Oram, 'Serving Two Masters? The Introduction of a Marriage Bar in Teaching in the 1920s in London', in London Feminist History Group, *The Sexual Dynamics of History*, p. 143.

prospect, as it is true that this was one fight in which male and female teachers did not unite. The *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader* asserted in September 1922 that:

this action is resented by a large body of the local teachers as an act of disloyalty to the union, and they make no secret of their lack of sympathy with their married women colleagues in view of the unemployment amongst teachers in the district and the necessity of husbanding their resources to counter the impending attack on salaries.⁸⁹

The Rhondda women, justifiably, were angered by this, as many of them had been members of the union for a number of years. A letter was sent on behalf of the group to the NUT by one of the teachers, Mrs Clarke, which expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in which the union had dealt with the case, both locally and at headquarters. They were unhappy, she wrote, both with the lack of financial and professional support and by the way in which they had been treated.⁹⁰ The union responded by issuing a circular regarding the Rhondda Case, in which it stressed the hard work the union had done to investigate the case and in encouraging the LEA to withdraw the notices, at least until the women had qualified for their pensions.⁹¹

As a result of the lack of support forthcoming from the union, the women decided to contest the case without union representation or aid. When the case finally reached the High Court in May 1923, the counsel acting on behalf of the women argued against the action of the council on a number of points. He argued that the notices served to the women were not in line with the policy regarding the termination of contracts. They were not issued directly to the individuals affected, and as such were not legally binding, as they did not give a full

⁸⁹ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 30 June 1922.

⁹⁰ MRC: NUT, Letter to Law committee, 1 December 1922.

⁹¹ MRC: NUT, Circular to secretaries of Local and County Associations

month's notice and were not personally addressed to the women.⁹² Secondly, it was claimed that the action constituted a breach of public policy namely, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, implemented in 1919, which stipulated that a person should not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function; and the Rhondda women were clearly being victimized because of their marital status.⁹³ In addition, it was argued that a council resolution of December 1919, allowing the women to remain in their positions until they had completed the minimum period needed to qualify for a pension should be regarded as a contract, which the later action broke. In short, the counsel believed, the only grounds for dismissal should be inefficiency, and it contended that the council had not acted in the best interests of the education of the children and the management of schools, but on 'extraneous and irrelevant consideration', such as creating jobs for newly-qualified teachers and unemployed men.⁹⁴

The court, however, found against the women, although the judge, Mr Justice Eve, expressed his deep sympathy with them, and urged the authority to take into consideration the alleviation of suffering of those who were close to superannuation.⁹⁵ His focus during the case was the argument made by the women that the action against them lay outside of the power of the authority to pursue policy to dismiss on marriage. The justice decided that the employment of married women was not continuous, due to absences extending over several months and therefore could be considered as grounds for inefficiency.⁹⁶ The rudiments of the Sex Disqualification Act were not discussed.

⁹² MRC: NUT, Minutes of the Law Committee, 7 February 1919.

⁹³ Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919.

⁹⁴ *Western Mail*, 25 April 1923; 26 April 1923.

⁹⁵ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 9 May 1923.

⁹⁶ W. B. Creighton. 'Whatever happened to the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act?', *The International Law Journal*, 4, (1975), pp.157-78.

Even though the case was lost, some of the teachers continued to be employed by the authority. In May 1923 it was decided by the council that any teacher upon whom notice was served and who wished to make an application to continue teaching could do so. By the following week, seven letters had been received from married-women teachers appealing to the authorities to consider their cases, and to grant them two extra months so that they could finish on the same day as their headteachers.⁹⁷ And more appeals followed. They were divided into three groups – those asking to complete the minimum period to qualify for superannuation, those asking on compassionate grounds, and those who had been appointed on compassionate grounds. Further, a decision was made that in the case of those who would have served the minimum period for qualification for a pension in the next two years, the notices would not be enforced.⁹⁸ Several teachers applied to continue service, but, in each of the three groups, several applications were refused, and the number of married-women teachers in the employ of the council gradually dwindled.

The question of the married-women teachers continued throughout the 1920s, however, and was again re-opened by councillor Mark Harcombe in April 1931, when he asked the council to reconsider its policy. Since the court action had taken place in 1923, he said, a married woman had been engaged as a teacher and that he knew there were many unemployed miners in the district who were married to former teachers and were claiming parish relief. Surely, he argued, it would be better to employ married women as teachers, and reduce the number of men claiming relief. Other councillors, however, disagreed, and the arguments which had been used almost a decade earlier resurfaced; for example, that of the ‘correct’ family structure, as Councillor Jacob expressed his belief that those miners

⁹⁷ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes, 25 May 1923; School Management Committee, 6 June 1923.

⁹⁸ GRO: MS. UD/R, RUDC: Minutes of the School Management Committee, 6 June 1923.

with wives returning to work would become a laughing stock in the community.⁹⁹ The argument of taking the opportunity for employment away from younger teachers was also used again, as Mrs Williams claimed that she 'did not want any married women to take the place of any girl coming out of college'.¹⁰⁰ Married women were not employed as teachers *en masse* until they were once again called into service during the Second World War, although, this time, they were not asked to leave upon the cessation of hostilities.

Despite the failure of the court action, the case of the married-women teachers was an important one in the history of female protest in the Rhondda. The women had shown that they were unwilling to simply comply with directives from the council that went against their interests and might have resulted in serious financial hardships for themselves and their families. They fought without financial assistance or legal representation from their union, and in the face of hostility from their male colleagues and from some very vocal members of the community. The fact that they had disputed the action of the council, irrespective of whether they were victorious or not, demonstrated that they were far from complaisant.

Although a preoccupation with formalised protest in mining communities has served to render women more or less invisible in most studies, this chapter has shown that women could be highly active, in a number of ways, as in displays of displeasure against strike-breakers and through their attendance at mass meetings, demonstrations and marches. Just as the married-women teachers sought to protect their livelihood, and the standard of living for their families, working-class women in the coalfield community demonstrated throughout the period that they were unwilling to witness the deterioration of their living

⁹⁹ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 11 April 1931.

¹⁰⁰ *Glamorgan Free Press and Rhondda Leader*, 11 July 1931.

standards or witness their way of life eroded without some form of protest. We can see that women did, indeed, play a very important part in the history of coalfield protests.

Conclusion

It is clear that portrayals of women - in coalfield society in general, and the Rhondda in particular - as the wives and mothers of miners featuring almost exclusively in the domestic sphere, are not always accurate and are unrepresentative of the lives of women as a whole. In reality, their experiences were in fact very diverse and the lives of some often extended outside the home in a number of ways. It has been demonstrated, for example, that women were active in the world of work, on both a formal and informal basis. Furthermore, some were very active in politics and protest, and in the sphere of leisure.

This has been illustrated through the study of contemporary sources such as newspapers, school records, the records of the courts, and the minutes of the local political parties and the district council, and the records of the numerous societies and associations that flourished in the Rhondda. Such documentation serves to demonstrate the activities that were available and indicate that women were often participants – albeit to varying degrees.

Their experiences were differentiated by a number of very significant factors, all of which had direct bearings upon the life style that they were able to lead and the advantage they were able to take of opportunities that might have existed. These factors include the levels of education they had received, and the opportunities arising from this; by their marital status and, if married, the size of their families; by their financial position and domestic responsibilities; and by their stage in the life cycle. Thus, the experiences of young, single girls and middle-class women, for example, were very different to those of working-class mothers with several dependent children which, in turn, were very different to those of a spinster schoolteacher.

A study of the leisure activities of women serves to illustrate this, and showed that they could be highly active in this sphere. This was especially true of young, single women and middle-class women, both of whom had greater resources and more time to enjoy the facilities available to them. Even so, by redefining what is regarded as 'leisure', it is evident that women with lower incomes and greater family or domestic responsibilities could enjoy a certain amount of leisure time, as through shopping trips which involved a measure of interaction with other women, and through pursuits such as reading and listening to the radio.

Such redefinition of traditional terms and concepts has been important in the location of women in certain aspects of community life and by altering the emphasis from high-level politics to grass-roots, local political activity, and from industrial disputes to community-based action and gender issues, the true role of women in this field was uncovered. Some women, such as Elizabeth Andrews and Annie Price, played particularly prominent parts in local politics, but the newspaper reports and minute books of the various parties and organisations demonstrate the *many* ways in which women were involved at local levels. Thus, it becomes clear that women were far more active in Rhondda society and community life than is traditionally believed.

That is not to say that women had the same opportunities and experiences throughout the period. On a fundamental level, the 1870s were a time of prosperity for the coalfield, when wages were high and work for the men readily available. Women with large families of boys could look forward to a time when they might all be employed in the local pit, and the whole family would reap the benefit in terms of increased income. By the 1930s, however, the coal industry as a whole was in terminal decline. Work for men was difficult to come by, and hardship was rife in the district.

In other ways, however, those inhabiting the Rhondda in the latter part of the period found that in some respects life had improved or advanced. The provision of education, for example, was better than it had been in the past. Girls were able to take advantage of increased opportunities at an elementary level, brought about by the increase in the number of school places and the introduction of free education. For those few who were able to take advantage of it, the system of secondary and intermediate education brought benefits, and the availability of funding schemes to aid in university attendance helped girls and young women take advantage of the increased opportunities. Furthermore, women had become increasingly involved in politics and community issues, commencing with participation in movements such as those for temperance and suffrage and culminating in more formal roles on public bodies. Similarly, technological advances helped to ensure that social activity was very different in the twentieth century than it had been previously. Whilst activities associated with the local religious bodies had been the only form of 'respectable' pursuit for women at the beginning of our period, technological advances in the early twentieth century increased the choice of activity for those who were able to take advantage of them. Those who were well placed to do so could enjoy activities such as sport, dancing, attending one of the many cinemas and music halls, and any of the other entertainments available in the Rhondda at that time.

Thus, depending upon their background, family circumstances, their stage in the life cycle and the specific period in which they lived, women experienced – and contributed to – Rhondda society in a variety of different ways. But in addition to illustrating the diversity of women's lives, and the highly active nature of some, the experiences of women who have not previously been studied are also touched upon. As, for example, unmarried women, older women and widows who were often active members of the community and played important roles in the family and in society at large. Unmarried women, for example, often provided

support for elderly parents, were highly active in many of the religious, social, political and charitable groups, and provided the backbone of the education system for girls. Widowed and elderly women also had an important role to play in the family long after their offspring had matured, providing vital assistance to hard-pressed mothers and adding essential income to the household, and also often took an active role in the wider community. The lives of young girls have also received inadequate attention to date, with the notable exception of their educational experiences. Study of their leisure time and home life has hopefully given a more balanced picture.

Above all, what has become clear is that, for some women, their main concern was their home and family, and that they rarely strayed far from it, either by choice or through lack of opportunity. They should not be allowed to remain as background figures, however, and there are many aspects of their lives which require further study. But emphasis upon this group, and upon their way of life, has led to an unrepresentative view of women in the Rhondda. While it should not be forgotten that married working-class women formed the largest group, the significant numbers of widowed women, unmarried women, elderly women, middle-class women and young, single girls, led lives which were very different. Their distinctive experiences should not be neglected. To ignore the diversity that existed is to give a very one-sided view of Rhondda women, and to ignore the contributions that they made to that society.

Appendix 1

Evening Continuation School Curriculum

First Year Boys

English – reading a school text with attention to pronunciation, expression and subject matter

- Translation of passages into welsh
- Reproduction of a tale of composition of an essay on a subject of general interest.
- Simple correspondence.

Arithmetic and Mensuration

- Tables of weights and measures
- Addition and subtraction
- Vulgar fractions
- Decimals
- Writing out bills
- Proportion
- Drawing of common rectilineal figures
- Names of common rectilineal figures
- Measurements of perimeters, areas of squares and rectangles, volume of cube etc.

Knowledge of common things – series of lessons on various topics

Elementary drawing and vocal music.

First year Girls

English – as boys

Arithmetic – weights and measures

- Addition and subtraction
- Very simple fractions
- Addition of money
- Keeping household accounts.

Knowledge of things – lessons on household management

Needlework and vocal music.

(Glamorgan County Council: Report of Secondary Teachers' Work and Salaries Sub Committee, 10 October 1905.)

Appendix 2

Occupational Backgrounds of scholars admitted to Tonypandy Secondary School, January – December 1927.

Father's Occupation	No of scholars
Labourer	1
Rate Collector	1
Butcher	1
Colliery Overman	2
Teacher	2
Railway Guard	1
Tailor	1
Work associated with the pit	10
Coalminer	55
Salvation Army Officer	1
Milk vendor	1
Colliery manager	2
Fireman in colliery	10
Engine Fitter	2
Mason	1
Fitter, electrical	1
Grocer	1
Engineer, mechanic	1
Clergyman	1
Tailors' manager	1
Dentist	1
Clerk in Council	1
Carpenter	2
Manager of Boot store	1
Chauffeur	1
Foreman Tipper of street cleaning	1
Fishmonger	1
Not Given	1
Total Number of Students	105

Appendix 3

Some Female Members of the Rhondda Urban District Council

Lillie Annie Hughes	1930-38	Vice Chairman 1938
Lady Florence Nicholas	1919-20	Co-opted Member, 1911-13
Annie Price	1922-38	
Eliza Williams	1920-39	Vice Chairman 1939
Mrs L. Harris	1927-30	
Edith Williams	1919-20	Co-opted member
Catherine M. Parfitt	1938	Served 9 months

Appendix 4

Some Prominent Rhondda Women

Elizabeth Andrews

Elizabeth Andrews was born in Hirwaun in 1882, as the third of eleven children in a mining family. She became keenly interested in politics soon after she met her husband, also a miner, and moved to the Rhondda. They were both ardent supporters of the ILP, frequently attending meetings together, although at the beginning she was the only woman present. Mrs Andrews was instrumental in the establishment of the first Women's Section in 1918, and was appointed secretary during the first meeting. Her political career was made even more prestigious when she became the Women's Organiser for Wales following the amalgamation of the Women's Labour League into the Labour Party in 1919 and addressed meetings all over Wales and in England. She was particularly interested in the plight of the miners' wives, and campaigned throughout her career for issues such as pit head baths and better living conditions on the coalfield and gave vital evidence to the 1919 report into the coal industry on the effects of the industry upon the women of south Wales.

Despite her national work for the Labour Party, she did not forget her roots and played an important role in Rhondda society. She served for 32 years as a magistrate at Ystrad court, was Chairwoman of the Juvenile court from 1929 to 1957, and early in her career she sat on Rhondda Urban District Council. In addition to her public role, she was always willing to offer her support for local events and causes.

Rosina Davies

From a very young age, Rosina Davies of Treherbert devoted her life to the service of God through the Salvation Army. She was born in Treherbert in the late 1860s into a deeply religious home. She became actively involved in her local chapel, being a member of the children's choir, the band of hope and the Sunday school, and often took part in their *eisteddfodau*, concerts and penny readings. While still at a very early age, she was captivated by the Salvation Army movement, firstly attending a few local meetings and later becoming caught up in the feeling; she was often found leading the singing and was always at the front of the processions.

Once involved in the movement, she turned her attention towards converting others. Her vocation took her firstly to the new mission station at Maesteg, and then to other areas of Wales, some cities in England, including London and Birmingham, and on three tours of America.

Throughout her preaching career she faced prejudice because of her gender. While she found that many people attended her meetings curious to see a female preacher, she had to deal with a certain degree of hostility towards her, as having stones thrown at her at a mission in Porthcawl. Despite this, she continued with her work for most of her life and kept to an extremely hectic schedule of meetings.

Perhaps because of the hostility that she faced, Rosina had strong views regarding the role that women should play in society. She believed that while married women's most sacred duty was care in the home, it did not debar women from taking part in matters that help the welfare of the people, spiritually, mentally and socially. She herself was interested

in these spheres, and campaigned for the establishments of institutes, parks, playgrounds and swimming baths for the locals.

As well as her religious work, Rosina was active in the South Wales Women's Temperance Union, and in 1922 was instrumental in the establishment of a rescue home for girls and women in the Rhondda.

Amy Evans

During the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, Amy Evans was known as the greatest soprano Wales had ever produced. Born in Tonypany in 1884 to a mining family of seven children, she began singing at an early age in Sunday schools and churches, and then in local *eisteddfodau*. At the age of 15 she won the first prize in the National Eisteddfod and her voice was noticed by the successful tenor Ben Davies, who encouraged her to attend a music school for additional training.

By 1907 she was singing before large and fashionable audiences in Cardiff and London, and had even been on tour in America with her first teacher, David Lloyd. She gave her time generously to sing at a number of charitable events in London and frequently returned to the Rhondda to give concerts.

Gwen Ray Evans

As a former teacher from a mining background, Gwen Ray represented both her profession and her class in Rhondda politics from the First World War to the 1930s and her marriage in 1920 did little to temper her ambition. From 1916 she was an active member of the Mid Rhondda Trades and Labour Council. Throughout her years there she could be found on various sub committees, as a representative of the Labour Council on many fact-finding missions, sat on the local War Pensions Committee and she served as the auditor for a number of years. By 1919, she had been elected vice president, and her trades council career reached its zenith when she was elected chairman in 1920. A staunch defender of women's right to equality, she was instrumental in making a resolution in June 1919 against women being penalised in their employment because of their sex or marriage, a complaint that she frequently came across both in her experience as a teacher, and in her work for the Rhondda Class Teachers Association, of which she was president during 1916 and 1917. During her time as secretary, in 1919, she played an active role in orchestrating the Rhondda Teachers' Strike, and early in the 1920s was prominent in the case of the married –women teachers.

Her ardent support of the Labour party led her to be a prominent member of the Rhondda Borough Labour Party's Women's Section throughout the 1920s, and in 1922 she stood as the official labour candidate for Dinas, Penygraig and Williamstown ward, endorsed by the Trades and Labour council. By 1934 however, her political allegiance had altered, and she stood as the Communist candidate for the Ynyshir ward.

Blanche Watts-Morgan

The wife of Rhondda East MP Lieut. Colonel D Watts Morgan, Mrs Morgan devoted as much time as she could to establishing and organising a number of charities in the Rhondda. Her achievements in this area were diverse, from pensions for ex-servicemen to the raising of funds for flood victims. She was instrumental in the establishment of the Lord mayors' distress fund, and appeared before the queen in 1928 to argue for help for distressed families in the area. For this fund she visited practically every town in south Wales to raise funds.

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Mrs Trevor Davies, Ferndale

Mrs J. Evans, Mardy

Mrs Reg Fine, Mardy

Mrs W. R. Jones, Mardy

Mr and Mrs Bryn Lewis, Cardiff (previously of Tonypandy and Clydach Vale)

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