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‘I don’t think Terry would have known what end to change the baby! I didn’t expect him to’: Women’s experiences of marriage in post-war Rhondda.

INTRODUCTION

The context for this paper is a section from my 2016 doctoral thesis : *‘My name was mud !’ : Women’s experiences of conformity and resistance in post-war Rhondda* which I undertook at the University of South Wales. This was an oral history study of the lives of a cohort of Rhondda women who were born between 1929 and 1944. These were women who did not initially go on to university. Some lived all their lives in the Rhondda and others left.

The thesis as a whole examined factors that shaped what was possible for women coming of age in the immediate post-war years. Whilst the whole of the thesis considered the women’s lives in terms of education, employment, influences of chapel life, family and sex, this paper focusses on the discussions we had on marriage. It is not an indepth study of marriage by any means. In a way I didn’t set out to do that, but almost by chance there were some interesting insights on something which reached its high point in mid- twentieth century Britain. I want to allow the women’s own voices tell their stories. I have anonymised them.

If I start with one of the women- Marion. It never occurred to her that she could have both a career and a family. As she explained:

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

Marion’s path was a typical one for many women of her generation. And whilst typical, it also seemed universally expected. Pronouncing on the virtues of good homemaking in the 1950s, Mary Grieve, the editor of *Woman* magazine from 1940 to 1962 argued that for a woman, ‘success in this function is as vitalising to her as it is to a man in his chosen career’.¹

¹ Janice Winship, ‘Women’s magazines: times of war and management of the self in Woman’s Own’ in *Nationalising Femininity, Culture, Sexuality and Cinema in World War Two Britain*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 127.

So the question for me, in this glimpse into these particular women's lives, was how vitalizing marriage was for them.

PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY RHONDDA

The 1950s was a special time for marriage. Love and indeed romantic love was seen as increasingly important in the post-war era and started to supersede more traditional concepts of obligation in marriage. Furthermore, marriage and an idealized family life was regarded as a tool to encourage stability after the War.

Marriage made them complete

When describing their married life, there was a sense that some of the women saw marriage as making them more complete. All of the group, except one, had married. Shirley talked about how nervous she had been before a school reunion and worried about how she would compare with her former schoolmates. Before the event she had worried that they would *'all be teachers, they will all be nurses and what have you'* whereas she had *'only worked in offices'*. However, the lack of status she believed she had in comparison to her former schoolmates was compensated for by her role as a wife: *'But I thought, no I achieved what I wanted. I wanted to be married'*.

Some of the women also believed that being one half of a married couple meant they achieved more than if they remained single. As Ruth described: *'we seemed to do more together than I would have done when I was on my own because we'd go to London for a weekend'*. But as she said, this was compounded by a fairly common attitude within the Rhondda at the time: *'You know years ago it wasn't the thing for women to go to London on their own for a weekend, so Jim and I went a few times.'*

Marriage changed their lives

Whilst they were upbeat about marriage, the women, however, did hint at how it curtailed their leisure activities. As a young single woman Betty had enjoyed dancing, but now this had stopped, particularly when her children were small. So it seemed that being married came at a cost to these women. As cultural historian Claire Langhamer argues: *'While the*

paid work of youth legitimised leisure for young women, the unpaid domestic work of married women limited both the opportunities for and expectations of leisure'.²

Indifference

There was also some indifference towards marriage. Stella married comparatively late at 35 after seeing a number of her friends get married. But prior to her own marriage she had regarded marriage as *'boring'* and *'monotonous'*. Although her parents needed to keep her at home to help with her sick father, she nevertheless believed she had the freedom to go out at night, and to have a good social life, something it seemed her married friends lacked. Along with her family, she loved going to *'see cricket and rugby matches... Friends tried to match me up—it wasn't for me. At the back of my mind I couldn't afford to get married. Too much of a homebird'*.

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

'We hadn't come to the burning bra stage then. Yes I think people thought this is it, this is your life and of course gone are the days then when you had to give up teaching if you got married... I mean I had plenty of friends—we'd meet with the babies, you know, in the park. I have felt- never been unhappy. But there is something inside me when I felt I could have achieved more...'

And this was the bit which bothered me a lot - When Marion described her wedding day in 1952:

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

² Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2000), 132

Deviance

Now, one of the woman clearly decided marriage was definitely not for her. Irene had left the Rhondda in the mid 1950s for a new life and new job in London. She had boyfriends but never married. And in the two interviews with her she told me how much pressure she had come under from her mother about getting married. Irene told me how her mother had visited her in '*the Gower Street hostel*' in London. Her mother saw how Irene's friend was going out with her boyfriend that evening and as Irene described, '*and she laid into me asking why wasn't I getting married? Why wasn't I with someone? When was I going to get engaged?*'

And the way that Irene was regarded by her mother as almost deviant and disreputable by not having a future husband made me think of the disproportionate 'fear' and 'moral panic' about the 'good-time girl' which was a feature of post-war life. Stereotypes of her appeared in surprising places, sometimes under the guise of "objective" social research.' For example, the *British Medical Journal*, warned of the threat to society from the problematic 'good-time girl' who was 'unamenable to discipline and control'.³

The inevitability of marriage

Also, the way the women discussed their experiences of marriage showed how inevitable it felt in their lives. Marriage was a constant, a rite of passage. I was struck by the sorts of phrases and words the women used which suggested how passive and powerless they felt in the process.

Kathleen felt there was pressure from the community to get married. As she explained : '*You couldn't float around*'. Ruth described how '*in a way I went along with the flow. Everybody was getting engaged and getting married.*' She also referred to it as '*a habit*' : '*when I say habit people had been together for a while and they were expected to get married because they didn't live together but if they had been going out for a few years, people expected them to get married and they sort of did*'.

³ Carol Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble, Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2013), 117 ; 'The Unstable Adolescent Girl', *British Medical Journal*, 19 December 1946, 909–12, 910.

Respectability

Whilst marriage was seen as an expectation, if a young woman became pregnant then marriage became almost compulsory. Certainly, pregnancy was frequent in unmarried women but then it was a case of having to get married. As Stella said: *'I knew a lot of people who had to get married and it was just one of those things which went on—and it had always gone on as it is going on now'*.

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

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

Domestic work in marriage

As the 20th Century progressed, new ideas about 'companionate marriage' were increasingly coming to the fore, instigated by Marie Stopes' celebrated and classic sex manual *Married Love*.⁴ Companionate marriage had a number of emphases but, in the main, it was defined by the principle of equal relationships and 'mutuality' and 'the notion that an intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure.'⁵

One aspect of the debates surrounding companionate marriage was that it placed new expectations on women to be 'more professional homemakers'.⁶ But any benefits accrued from companionate marriage were disproportionately in favour of the husband rather than the wife. There was little indication that women were relinquishing their main responsibility for housework. Even though there was a greater availability of labour-saving devices in the

⁴Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, first published in 1918).

⁵Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), 4.

⁶Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945-59' in *The Sociology of the Family*, ed. Graham Allan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

post-war period, little changed for women in the division of domestic labour. For example, even when electricity appeared in the home in the post-war period, it was still women who continued to do the bulk of cooking. The assertion made by Mrs Evans at the opening of the upper Rhondda branch of the Gas Federation that such labour saving tools would mean women would now be able to 'take their rightful place in civic affairs', was probably far too optimistic.⁷

Despite the advent of new technologies the amount of housework to be done was increasing, mainly because of the expectation of higher standards of cleanliness. As the writer Elaine Morgan wryly noted: 'Once you have carpets on the floor you have to keep vacuuming them. Once you have acquired a twin tub washing machine, because it is less laborious, the sheets and everything else get changed much more often and that makes more ironing.'⁸

There were some interesting takes on this in terms of the women's stories. Betty's marriage certainly epitomised aspects of companionate marriage. The work she undertook with her husband was, she felt, 'teamwork' and Betty was proud of her contributions to the home.

As she explained :

'I did all the cleaning because I went on evening shift [the twilight shift] I would be there all day with the children so I didn't expect my husband to do the work in the house or help me because I was quite capable of doing it myself.'

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

Shirley explained how the housework was shared between herself and her husband. In doing so though, she sought to defend him from any possible criticism. Shirley, like Betty, was quick to point out how arduous her husband's working life was, as a justification for him not doing any or very little housework:

⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 16 February 1952.

⁸ Elaine Morgan, 'Living at the End of the World,' in *Changing Times*, ed. Deirdre Beddoe (Dinas Powys, 2003), 145.

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

I think that last phrase was quite telling. I think there was a slight shot across the bows: Don't write us off as weak and put upon in comparison to the younger generation.

But there was also resentment. Marion for example described how, as far as housework and childcare were concerned, she *'did everything'*. She believed that her husband didn't have the skills: *'I don't think Terry would have known what end to change the baby. I didn't expect him to'*.

And when Ruth reflected on how the housework was divided up, she initially said it was *'60/40'*. But then, after giving it some thought, she acknowledged that she did *'a little bit more'*. Ruth worked fulltime, but nevertheless excused her husband for doing less domestic work than her. She explained: *'I suppose looking back I did do most of it because Jim used to do a lot of evening work ... and he was studying.'*

In her analysis of the testimonies of three generations of women in south Wales detailing their experiences of domestic tasks, Jane Pilcher points to differing attitudes as a result of varying time periods.⁹ Like Pilcher's informants, the Rhondda women recognised and accepted that time and tradition had a hand in perpetuating inequalities in the division of labour in marriage. Consequently, Ruth dismissed her experience of the division of housework during her marriage as a result of what went on previously in her own family: *'I mean my father didn't clean his own shoes. They were wonderfully happy but my mother would pour his tea for him. That's the way they had been brought up. You got up from the chair didn't you to let your father sit down.'*

Hazel talked about the unequal division of housework in that her husband's mother had spoilt him and she in fact continued in this role. So it seemed, such inequalities were simply taken for granted.

⁹ Jane Pilcher, 'Who should do the dishes? Three generations of Welsh women talking about men and housework' in *Our Sisters' Land*, eds. Jane Aaron; Teresa Rees; Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994).

Divorce

In the years following the Second World War the rates of divorce increased. In Wales the numbers of divorced women had gone up eight fold from 1931 to 1951. This has been attributed to the 'separation and stresses of war'.¹⁰ But that said, for some time obtaining divorces had been getting easier. The law had changed in 1937, which extended the grounds for divorce. The Legal Aid and Advice Act of 1949 gave better support to those who previously may not have been able to afford the legal cost of divorce.

But it did appear that the Rhondda women's experiences of divorce were rare. As Irene recalled, *'I don't think there was anything like that'*. Shirley could only recollect one person who experienced a divorce and *'he was the only one we knew got divorced, so we never thought about it'*. It didn't feature amongst Shirley's circle of friends and peers, although as she clarified *'their children have been, most of them'*. Shirley also said:

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

Ruth believed divorce for Rhondda women was possible but only *'in extreme'* circumstances. The reality was that divorce would have been difficult. As Ruth described, *'it could take a long time, three or five years'*. Given women's financial dependence it *'was difficult for people because they couldn't earn money to live. They couldn't get any benefits as they can now so I assume that would be one of the reasons.'*

But for the Rhondda women there was also a lot of stigma attached to divorce. It suggested a sense of failure, something to be avoided at all costs. As Hazel explained: *'You didn't hear so much of it then did you that you do now because it's quite common now but I don't think it was looked on very well.'*

Kathleen believed that divorce was regarded as *'terrible'* and from her own experience had *'led to rifts in the family'*. Ruth reflected how *'there was a sort of shame attached to'* divorce, adding that *'Well I think you would feel that you had failed somehow'*. Attitudes towards divorced couples was that *'they were talked about, you know, in a sort of whisper'*.

¹⁰ Peter Hennessy, *Having it So Good* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 130.

Divorce could be a welcome relief for many women experiencing unhappy marriages. Yet the stigma of it made this option an uneasy one for the Rhondda women.

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

'I don't remember people telling me they were unhappy but I don't think they would have in those days. No, no I wouldn't know to be honest. I don't know whether I would have told anybody if I was unhappy you know. I might have told close family but I am sure there must have been people I worked with who were unhappy and they wouldn't have told me whereas now they would just go wouldn't they?'

Such secrecy and lack of discussion about problems at home may seem incomprehensible now. The post-war years, in contrast, was a time when privacy was uppermost.

'Making your bed'

I also picked up the sense that marital unhappiness should be endured. Two of the women used the same phrase of *'making your bed'* to illustrate this. Betty described how :

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

Ruth recalled:

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

Domestic abuse

Problems of domestic violence for women in the post-war years were compounded by the 'prevalent notions of privacy' and a 'lack of services'.¹¹ The hidden nature of domestic abuse in the mid-twentieth century in Wales is also described by writer Marion Tawe Davies, who

¹¹ Gill Hague and Claudia Wilson, 'The Silenced Pain: Domestic Violence 1945-1970', *Journal of Gender Studies* 9, no.2 (2000): 157-169, 164.

recounts her childhood in Ystalyfera at the top of the Swansea Valley: ‘In those days , there was a tendency to be ‘hush hush’ about such matters.’¹² It would be many years before it would be discussed openly.

And that was certainly the case for some of the women I spoke to. Stella’s friend for example had kept her physical abuse at the hands of her husband a secret :

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

CONCLUSION

On this particular subject - marriage - not all of the women I interviewed are included here. But I hope I have given you a flavour of some of their perspectives on this. In terms of the group of women as a whole, some of the things they told me they said they had never shared with anyone before. As such I felt very privileged to be part of their story telling. It really was a wonderful experience and an opportunity to gain such an insight into their lives as young women coming of age in the Rhondda during the post-war years.

¹² Marion Tawe Davies, ‘Violent Husbands’ in *Changing Times*, 181.