A woman’s place is in the home: To what extent was the ideology of separate spheres challenged amongst the mining communities of south Wales during the interwar period 1918-1939?

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Ellen Lawes
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Introduction

This dissertation will explore the lives of miners’ wives in the south Wales coalfields during the interwar years and consider how harsh conditions during periods of unemployment and strike action became a catalyst for female coordinated action in the fight for improved domestic circumstances. Gender historians such as Susan Kent and Susie Steinbach have argued that by the outbreak of the First World War British women’s lives had, for over a century, been dominated by the doctrine of separate spheres; the ideology that man’s domain was the public world of work and politics, and that women’s lives belonged within the private domestic sphere. ¹ To what extent this ideology was consciously observed, or practical in different areas or occupations is a matter for further research, however Deirdre Beddoe has argued that the south Wales mining valleys witnessed ‘the most complete adoption of separate spheres’, where women’s absorption of the domestic ideology resulted in the creation of ‘that archetypal stereotype – the Welsh Mam’. ²

With the advent of war, an unprecedented demand for women’s labour was created, and following partial enfranchisement in 1918 a new world of occupational and political engagement finally seemed within reach for many working-class women. However, such dreams were soon dashed after the Armistice of November 1918, as old patriarchal attitudes resurfaced, and women were expected to resume their roles as wives and mothers to the returning male workforce. In the South Wales coalfields this situation was perhaps compounded by what Sue Bruley has described as ‘deeply entrenched views on the sexual division of labour’, ³ particularly at a time when economic depression and strikes meant devastating unemployment and poverty. However, this dissertation aims to interrogate historiological assumptions that miners’ wives were passive victims of circumstance and consider the extent to which they had agency over their lives.

It was to take three decades before any academic history of these Welsh women was written. Martin Wright has put this denial of a literate past down to ‘the mutually reinforcing influences of academic prejudice and an incomplete historical record’, ⁴ alluding to the dominance of androcentric labour history from the 1960s and a lack of source material relating to the female experience. Furthermore, an upsurge in women’s history from the 1980’s has been criticised by some historians

including Angela V. John, who argues that whilst women’s past experiences were being recognised, they were simply being slotted into an already pre-determined history. 5 Paul O’Leary goes further in suggesting that such work perpetuated ‘a powerful ideology of separate spheres for the sexes that itself has now become an object of historical study and debate’. 6 However, recent studies have called for gender relations to take centre stage, thereby presenting a more balanced and inclusive picture of coalfield society, and it is these that have provided a framework upon which this dissertation will attempt to add new evidence of gender alignment during this period. 7

Chapter one will question how the First World War affected perceived gender roles and then consider the distinct economic, social and cultural factors of interwar south Wales that restricted the lives of miners’ wives once more to the domestic sphere. In her article Munitionettes, Maids and Mams, Deirdre Beddoe focusses on two such factors: employment and home lives. She argues that a lack of employment opportunities and an ‘entrenched domestic ideology’ kept married women at home, and although enfranchised politically, they ‘had little say in public affairs in Wales’. 8 Mari A. Williams’ article on women’s working lives is perhaps more valuable in its targeted geographical focus and its broader view of women’s work, recognising the complexities of the female experience and the contribution they made to the industrial economy as unwaged domestic workers. 9 Whilst both authors discuss the high standards that women set themselves within the home by drawing on Rosemary Crook’s oral evidence, 10 Williams argues that whilst they were able to create a ‘separate female work-culture’ that provided a sense of autonomy, they were still subject to dominant cultural ideologies that maintained the doctrine of separate spheres. 11 Nevertheless, Beddoe suggests in Out of the Shadows that Welsh women ‘played a key role in bringing about improvements in their communities’ at times of poverty, and it is their coordinated activities that will be the focus of the next two chapters, which aim to provide new perspectives on gender roles through oral histories, autobiographies, contemporary photographs and print publications. 12

12 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, p.75.
Chapter two will investigate the role of women in welfare movements during the 1926 General Strike and Miners’ Lockout and assess any impact on gender roles. Sue Bruley’s work on community action during the strike discusses how initiatives such as communal eating provided opportunities for a reduction in gender segregation, arguing that ‘the increased fellowship between men and women in communal feeding made it possible for women to begin to encroach on male space in the public domain’. However, she concedes that ultimately solidarity with the cause was more important to both men and women, and that this ‘could not be separated from male dominance and traditional gender identities’. Bruley’s exploration of both the feminine and masculine experience reflects current thinking within gender history, including O’Leary’s suggestion that the narratives and chronologies of the past would benefit from a history that gives women and men equal validity.

Similarly, Jaclyn J. Gier-Viskovatoff and Abigail Porter’s comparative work on the strikes of 1926 and 1984 places gender at its heart, arguing that the strategies used by women of the coalfield during both strikes, including political organisation and more indirect forms of domestic support, ‘reveal an underlying continuity in the construction of gender relations and the reinforcement of community values associated with them during periods of communal crisis.’ Therefore, whilst the authors establish that suffering was a catalyst for community solidarity and political engagement, they fall short of Bruley’s claim that the strike resulted in increased gender alignment.

Chapter three will consider the prominence of women in the drawn-out campaign for pithead baths and the propaganda strategies employed. It will assess the extent to which the gradual uptake of pithead baths during the 1930’s provided opportunities for women to reimagine their lives. In their revealing article on the pithead bath movement, Neil Evans and Dot Jones describe the campaign as a ‘cameo of the development of welfare measures’ in the early twentieth century, and one of the few which ultimately enjoyed any success. However, they advise caution around assumptions that pithead baths allowed increasing women’s participation in the workforce after World War Two, as ultimately many gains that women made were offset by social expectations and employment limitations within the coalfield. June Hannam’s later work examines the campaign from a political perspective and discusses how Elizabeth Andrews used the issue of pithead baths to convince miners’ wives of the benefits that more time and political engagement could bring to the domestic

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13 Bruley, ‘The Politics of Food’, p.68. See also Sue Bruley, The women and men of 1926: The general strike and miners’ lockout in south Wales (Cardiff, 2010)
arena. 19 This differs from Evans and Jones’ focus on opportunities for employment, as whilst Hannam argues that women organisers ‘did not seek to confine women within the boundaries of domesticity’, she considers the campaign’s success through women’s political engagement. 20 Nevertheless, both articles make a useful contribution to the dissertation’s overriding theme.

Two collections of memoirs: Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams’ Struggle or Starve and Elizabeth Andrews’ A Woman’s Work is Never Done have been particularly informative throughout this research, as have the archives of the Llais Llafur socialist newspaper, and by bringing together existing scholarship with a wider range of primary sources this dissertation aims to shine new light on gender roles during the interwar years. 21 By considering the complexities of the lived experience, it will argue that the ideology of separate spheres was challenged by some, particularly those involved in welfare campaigns, however the harsh conditions of the interwar years meant that the overwhelming majority continued to be confined to the home.

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Chapter One – A return to separate spheres

During the decades before the First World War, Wales was a dynamic country that played a major part in the world economy through coal, metal and slate exports, and her industrialisation brought great wealth and prosperity to many larger towns, ports and coastal resorts. As a result, thousands of Welshmen avoided the need to emigrate for work by moving into areas of heavy industry which tended to be concentrated in the coalfields of the south. However, the demographic upheaval and unique single-industry nature of the Welsh mining communities resulted in a male-dominated culture which was to have a detrimental impact on women’s lives and employment opportunities. Gwyn Williams has argued (of south Wales) that:

‘few regions of Britain have been, over generations, so totally immersed in so macho a perception of work, the home and the relations between the sexes. In the process, women were subjected to what came to be considered a traditional, but was in fact an historically novel, dependence.’

For most wives and mothers of Welsh miners there was ‘total integration of home and work’, as they struggled with uncertain incomes, large families and the extra burden of domestic work that the coal industry created, and therefore their lives were firmly set within the domestic sphere.

At the outbreak of war, a declining trend in Welsh women’s employment was initially compounded by economic cutbacks and a reassertion of women’s traditional roles. Beddoe has argued that ‘no-one foresaw the enormous demand for women workers which the war would create’ during 1914, and large numbers of women, particularly those in the service industry, were thrown out of work as unnecessary consumption was reined-in. Furthermore, in her exploration of gender relationships during interwar Britain, Susan Kent argues that a ‘reassertion of separate spheres with its implied dichotomies of private and public, of different natures of women and men, of home and front, appeared very early’ during the war, as many believed that women could help most by keeping the home-fires burning.

However, from early 1915, and particularly following the introduction of conscription for men in January 1916, women were urged to sign up for a wide variety of civilian roles in order to release

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22 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, P.9.
26 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, p.57.
27 Kent, Making peace, p.15.
men for the forces. Whilst many initially faced opposition born of ‘fear and resentment and widespread disbelief that women could do a good job’ 28 the nation’s need for more soldiers finally overrode objections to women’s work and they joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Welsh women became clerks, shop and library assistants, delivery drivers, public transport operators and industrial workers. 29 In south Wales, large numbers of women were employed in munitions factories and explosives works, such as that at Pembrey, (pictured in Figure 1) where it is estimated that some 70-80 per cent of its 11,000 workforce was likely to have been women. 30 The work was unhealthy and dangerous, however contemporary accounts highlight the patriotic fervour of these women, including a report in the *Cambria Daily Leader*, which attributes success at the frontline in no small part to the Swansea Munitionettes, who had ‘come forward splendidly to help the nation in its hour of need’. 31

Figure 1: National Rectification Factory, Pembrey, 1917. The factory recruited many girls and women from Llanelli to repair or repurpose munitions returned from the front. 32

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Some claimed that the government’s appeal to women for war service was acknowledgment that ‘woman’s place is no longer the home but the nation’, and Kent has argued that the ‘dismantling of barriers between men’s and women’s work and the evident joy women experienced in their new roles fostered a blurring of distinctions that had helped to form traditional versions of gender identity’. 33 Given the propensity towards young, single women involved in war work, it seems likely that the miners’ wives of south Wales saw little benefit from wartime’s opportunities, however coalfield women did play a role in the war effort where they could, as recalled by Katie Pritchard, who witnessed women engaged in place of labourers ‘to empty trucks on top of the tip’ and working on allotments. 34 According to Beddoe, the occupational opportunities of war had ‘spectacularly challenged gender-roles’, and after gaining the vote in 1918, which many saw as a reward for their wartime services, some feminists were optimistic that women could finally take their place in public and political life. 35 But this was not to be.

When the war ended, a powerful array of political, economic and cultural forces came into play, and it was made abundantly clear, particularly by the press, that women should leave their posts and return to their ‘natural’ roles as wives and mothers in the home. 36 Kent has argued that ‘the perceived blurring of gender lines occasioned by war’s upheaval led many in British society to see in a reestablishment of sexual difference the means to re-create a semblance of order’ and that the pressures on women to return to the domestic sphere were both ‘intense – and successful’. 37 Whilst some unmarried women continued to work in commercial and professional occupations, many were coerced into domestic service by government legislation that made it virtually impossible for women to claim unemployment benefits. 38 In his attempt to justify the dismissal of large numbers of women from industry following the war, Sir R. Horne wrote in The Times that whilst women had ‘done great services during the war to the State’, as ‘dilutees’ (unskilled workers performing skilled operations), they should be the first to be discharged and ‘asked to return to laundry work and domestic service’. 39

33 Kent, Making peace, p.35.
34 Katie Pritchard, ‘The Story of Gilfach’, in Struggle or Starve, ed. by Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (Dinas Powys, 2009), p. 239.
35 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, p.72.
36 Beddoe, Munitionettes, Maids and Mams’, p.186.
38 Williams, Capitalism, Community and Conflict, p.64.
39 Anon, ‘Unemployed Women’, The Times, 10 March 1919, p.15. Available at https://go.gale.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Newspapers&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=53&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=13&docId=GALE%7CCS252382314&docType=Article&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZTMA-MOD1&prodId=TTDA&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CCS252382314&searchId=R1&userGroupName=tou&inp=true, Accessed 18 April 2022.
For the married women of the south Wales coalfields, there were very few opportunities to take up official employment. According to Beddoe, the interwar ‘back-to-the-home’ movement was reinforced in Wales by the ‘all-pervasive effect of the long economic Depression’, which led to ‘mass unemployment, means-testing and crushing poverty’, and made it unacceptable for women to work while men were unemployed. 40 Furthermore, Mari Williams has argued that the situation for miners’ wives was compounded by an exclusion from the workplace that was ‘deeply entrenched in the employment culture of the region’, and that when marriage bars were widely introduced in the early 1920s, preventing married women from entering professions such as teaching, nursing and the civil service, they served as a ‘powerful practical and ideological barrier against the employment of married women’. 41 For many educated women who worked as teachers or nurses, this often led to a choice between secret and lengthy courtships or enforced resignation upon marriage, and in her account of school life as a child in the valleys, Edith Davies recalls how married women had to leave their teaching posts:

‘Any woman who married had automatically to resign her post. Very few women could afford to do this and so throughout my elementary and grammar school education I was taught solely by spinsters.’ 42

Upon marriage, coalfield women were therefore expected to trade any degree of economic and personal independence for a life of hard and unwaged domestic labour.

However, as economic conditions deteriorated during the interwar period, some married women proved their resourcefulness by taking on casual, temporary or seasonal work to make ends meet. Many took in lodgers, who could be accommodated by ensuring that they worked different shifts to husbands or sons of the household, 43 and others took on charring or laundry work for neighbouring professionals or businesses, as ‘Phyllis’ (born in 1913) recalled in an interview in 1996:

‘My mother was a very hard worker, a very hard worker. She took in a lot of washing. She did washing for a grocer and his son, which meant the white coats and the white aprons. She took in lodgers, she did everything you had to do for lodgers.’ 44

40 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, pp.74-75.
43 White and Williams, (eds), Struggle or Starve, p.18.
Others sold food or drink in makeshift shops or market stalls, such as the enterprising Mrs Mabel Hoskins of Merthyr, whose biscuit stall ‘was the accolade of all biscuit stalls’, and who kept her regular customers by tempting children with free biscuits. However, many coalfield women did not regard these informal forms of employment as ‘proper’ work, and as Mari Williams has argued, such work ‘was – and still is – devalued both by society at large and, clearly, by the women themselves’.

For the vast majority of miners’ wives, and particularly those with dependent children, life in the south Wales coalfield meant a never-ending round of housework which left no time for a public life. The region suffered from a serious housing shortage, and until 1951 many still lacked basic amenities such as piped water, toilets or cooking stoves, and contemporary images illustrate how this resulted in a great deal of labour-intensive work. (Figure 2) Chris Williams has stated that in 1921, whilst miners were working a seven-hour day, their wives were working for seventeen, ‘performing tasks that were vital to the maintenance of their households and to their husbands’ effective functioning as employees’, thereby supporting Mari Williams’ claim that women should be recognised for their contribution to the industrial economy.

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48 Williams, Capitalism, Community and Conflict, p.66.
The interwar economic depression and mass unemployment hit the Welsh coal industry particularly hard, and families were reduced to extremes of poverty that forced many women to go without for their family’s survival. Furthermore, women developed survival strategies that closely paralleled the patterns of men’s working lives, through rigid routines and an almost obsessive concern with cleanliness that was based around chapel values. Edith Davies recalls that:

‘Some of their homes were described as being so clean that one could ‘eat off the floor’. One such housewife used to take her duster and walk all the way down the garden path before shaking it – over the wall of the house next door!’

In her influential collection of oral evidence, Rosemary Crook has argued that this represented ‘triumph over circumstances – over dirt, poverty and continuous work’, and John has gone further in interpreting this as ‘an attempt to create a life as regulated as the pit demands’, and therefore ‘a defining of a small boundary of power’. Furthermore, it seems that women were not always anxious to change the status quo, and the gendered divisions of duty had become so commonplace that ‘even if such divisions were breached, they were done so covertly’. A Mrs Hughes recalled:

‘One of my brothers did – the youngest brother. Yes! He’d wash the front he’d do it when there was nobody about, you know, helping my mother because my mother wasn’t very strong.’

This could suggest an element of complicity in the maintenance of separate spheres, however, caution is required around the idea that coalfield women wielded any real authority, and Mari Williams has criticised the image of the Welsh mam as a ‘strong matriarch’ and ‘chief exchequer’ of her home, as this was ‘based firmly upon maintaining the strict sexual division of labour both within and outside the home’.

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49 Anon, Washing clothes, 1930’s, People’s Collection Wales, Available at: https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/514751, Accessed 21 April 2022.
50 John, ‘A Miner Struggle?’, p.86.
51 Edith S. Davies, ‘The Innocent Years’, in Struggle or Starve, ed. by Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (Dinas Powys, 2009), p.56.
52 Crook, ‘Tidy women’, p.41.
Evidently, the harsh conditions of the interwar period and elaborateness of women’s rituals made it virtually impossible for miners’ wives to have a job outside of the home, and whilst the Second World War was to bring some female employment opportunities, it was officially noted in 1936 that “domesticity” was ‘the main occupation and the basis of existence for most women’. Therefore, in terms of official employment and perceived gender roles, it seems that coalfield women were firmly reassigned to the domestic sphere throughout this period, however the next two chapters will explore how they played an important role in bringing about improvements to their communities through collective action and assess the extent to which this challenged the separate spheres ideology.

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57 Williams, ‘Capitalism, Community and Conflict’, p.65.
Chapter two – ‘That summer of soups and speeches’: The 1926 General Strike and Lockout.  

The General Strike and Lockout of 1926 followed a period of intense political activity amongst the mining communities of south Wales. The war years had brought growth and comparatively high wages to the industry, and due to their coal’s desirability and dangers of extraction the miners felt that they should be entitled to a better standard of living than that which they were experiencing. Calls for nationalisation failed in 1919 and following the deregulation of the mines in 1921 and a decline in demand for coal following the sudden end of the post-war boom, a number of major industrial disputes occurred over increasing unemployment and coal owners’ demands for longer working hours for reduced wages. For nine days in May 1926, up to two million industrial workers took part in the General Strike in support of coalminers, but in the coalfields the lockout continued for six months.

Much has been written about the 1926 strike and the epic struggle of the miners which followed. Sue Bruley suggests that it is remembered as ‘perhaps the greatest episode in working class solidarity in British history’, which represented a ‘leap in class consciousness’ and an exercise in ‘real workers’ power’. However she also argues that a historiographical emphasis on traditional labour history has ‘left women either invisible or on the margins of the conflict’, despite the crucial role that they played in supporting their families and communities through terrible hardship. Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter argue that whilst the concept of accommodating husbands’ needs during the strike could be considered as ‘merely an extension of the domestic ideology’, it was one which was widely promoted by Labour and the unions. Theirs was the responsibility of providing food and managing the household on what little income they received, and many strategies were developed in order to survive.

In addition to family and neighbourly support, women withheld rent, utilised credit arrangements with local tradesmen, collected coal for fuel, kept allotments and sold goods such as faggots, beer or

59 A quote, pertaining to the 1926 General Strike and Lockout and described by White and Williams in Struggle or Starve as ‘legendary in the history of the mining communities; famous for the solidarity and determination of their people in the face of hardship’, p.21.
60 White and Williams, Struggle or Starve, pp.19-20.
foraged berries. However these measures were rarely adequate, and many women were the first to go without, as recalled by a health visitor from 1926:

‘Very often I visited a miner’s home where the mother wasn’t able to have anything for dinner … it was very terrible to see the miners’ wives – the anxiety they had, because one must admit it was on the mother that all these problems were put on her shoulders.’

Poor health caused by malnutrition and a high rate of maternal mortality meant that women bore the physical brunt of the difficulties brought on by the strike. Nevertheless, White and Williams argue that their resourcefulness was a key element that enabled miners to hold out for longer against the coal owners, not only through their ability to sustain their families on such little income but also their great effort in organising fundraising and the provision of relief.

With the prospect of a long lockout, it soon became evident that the government’s stance on relieving striking families was to keep expenditure to an absolute minimum, and therefore in order to survive it was necessary for the south Wales mining communities to fall back on collective strategies that had enabled the miners to hold out in past disputes, such as communal feeding. In 1926 these initiatives were supplemented by a range of fund-raising and welfare campaigns organised by politically active women who, along with the support of a large number of miners’ wives, played a central role in mitigating suffering across the coalfields. Perhaps the most well-documented of these women (through her autobiography and political writings) was Elizabeth Andrews, a miner’s wife and the Labour Party’s first women’s organiser for Wales from 1919-1948, who roused many coalfield women into action by addressing meetings and writing the women’s page for the Colliery Workers’ Magazine. According to Glenys Kinnock, ‘her socialism ran through everything she said and did and was always linked to the reality of women’s lives’.

Fundraising was centrally coordinated in London by the Women’s Committee for the Relief of Miners’ Wives and Children (WCRMWC), which was organised by Labour women and headed by Marion Phillips. According to Hannam, Phillips ‘never doubted the capacity of working-class married women to take

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68 White and Williams, Struggle or Starve, p.21.
69 Andrews, A Woman’s Work is Never Done.
71 Glenys Kinnock, Foreword to Andrews, A Woman’s Work, p. xiii.
action to achieve change’, and this is evident in the response from Co-operative Women’s Guilds and other associations and Sisterhoods that came together to form relief committees. 73

Following fundraising campaigns by the WCRMWC, women’s committees within south Wales were able to organise food vouchers and parcels, medical supplies, blankets and clothing for the most destitute mothers and children, and according to Phillips ‘the majority of the voluntary workers were themselves miners’ wives, often as badly off as those they helped.’ 74 When it became clear that the dispute would be prolonged, Phillips and the WCRMWC organised a temporary adoption scheme that took over eight hundred of the poorest Welsh children to stay with families in London and Birmingham. 75 Elizabeth Andrews was responsible for coordinating the initiative within Wales and her memoirs provide a very positive account of the scheme:

‘Lasting friendships were formed between the children, their parents and their hosts, who were by now ‘Aunts and Uncles’ to them all. Many a motherless child found a permanent home.’ 76

Marion Phillips also recalled that:

‘Many of the youngsters when they arrived home and were met by their mothers at the stations had so improved that they did not recognize them. We have one letter which says:

‘She looked like a little princess when she came back.’’ 77

It is of course important to recognise the biased nature of such accounts, and the complexities of the individual experience amongst those involved; however the scheme was deemed ‘invaluable’ by the Rhondda Urban District Council who made a public recognition of gratitude the following year. 78

Another major initiative was to provide and repair boots for those in desperate need, particularly as it had become evident that without adequate footwear, children could not get to school and receive their vital daily meal, and women’s committees played an important role in fundraising and coordinating this work, including the use of emotive images such as that in Phillips’ The Labour Woman magazine. (Figure 3) Furthermore, boot repair schemes provided unemployed colliers with voluntary work who, according to Phillips, welcomed the chance to do ‘something substantial to

75 Andrews, A Woman’s Work, p.35.
76 Andrews, A Woman’s Work, p.36.
77 Dr Marion Phillips, ‘Women and the Miners’ Lock Out’, p.266.
78 Education Committee Minutes, RUDC, 9 January 1927, GRO in Bruley, The Women and Men of 1926, p.84.
help’, 79 and Bruley has suggested that such activity helped to maintain masculine status in the absence of a family wage. 80

Figure 3: ‘Boots of a miner’s child’: Fundraising appeal in The Labour Woman dated November 1926 edited by Dr Marion Phillips. 81

Despite the success of these female-led campaigns, they could not match the scale of the problem, and the majority of fundraising efforts were coordinated by distress committees affiliated with miners’ institutes. Nevertheless, activities often involved both men and women, and Bruley considers this ‘evidence of increased gender alignment’ during this period. 82 Records from the Merthyr Express during the lockout suggest, both directly and unwittingly, a wealth of female participation in fund-raising competitions and entertainments. For example: on 29th May a Miss Marjorie Lewis performed ‘soprano solos’ in a concert, whilst ‘members of the Mother’s Union’ provided refreshments for a charity whist drive; and carnivals, sports days and local Eisteddfods

80 Bruley, ‘The Politics of Food’, p.76.
would perhaps inevitably have involved the whole family, thereby involving women in public life. Furthermore, whilst miners’ institutes continued to be male dominated, some women began to act as stewards during such entertainments, ‘policing the doors and stairs at busy times’, which Bruley argues ‘would have given them authority over men’.

The majority of funds raised at these events were reserved for feeding locked-out miners, and by late May a network of soup kitchens had sprung up across the valleys. Numbers were large and funding was tight, and when it was suggested by some that miners’ wives should also be fed, this was declined due to the ‘financial situation’. However Bruley suggests that removing the need for meal preparation within the home would have ‘implied a fundamental challenge to the existing sexual division of labour’ and one which was ‘too radical a step’ at this time. Nevertheless, unemployed miners were enthusiastic about running the soup kitchens, often drawing on the experience they had gained as cooks during the war, and as women without preschool children now had more time to assist alongside them, both sexes were able to work together in the public sphere as never before. (Figure 4 shows a group of men and women from the Ferndale Soup Kitchen posing for a photograph, whilst appearing relaxed in each other’s company) Furthermore, Bruley suggests that many men displayed a nurturing characteristic in their new roles which was ‘very distinct from the hard, conventionally ‘masculine’ image of the miner’, and this is perhaps further evidence of increased gender alignment during this period.

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Figure 4: ‘Staff at the Ferndale Soup Kitchen during the General Strike of 1926.’

For all of their efforts, and despite the fact that soup kitchens may have enabled miners to hold out for longer in the valleys, the communities of the south Wales coalfields were inevitably forced to accept defeat and return to work, as levels of deprivation and debt increased during the autumn of 1926. To make matters worse, with little negotiating power they were forced to work longer hours for almost half the pay that they had received in 1921, and miners’ wives who had either starved themselves to feed their families or supported the strike through community action faced deepening deprivation as the interwar depression took hold.

Nevertheless, the extent to which the strike challenged the ideology of separate spheres, albeit temporarily, has become the subject of recent historiographical debate, and as John has noted, the impact of the strike on gender roles ‘can be viewed in several ways with differing though not less serious implications for the two sexes’. Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter have argued that the suffering endured by coalfield women ‘strengthened the sense of a common purpose and for some inspired a greater political awareness’, and this is evident in the level of female support for politically inspired relief campaigns in which women found a new role and identity. Furthermore, whilst John

90 Bruley, ‘Politics of Food’, p.75.
91 Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, p.85.
92 John, ‘A Miner Struggle?’, p.82.
suggests that the disruption caused by male unemployment ‘could result in minor adjustments in power relationships within marriage’, 94 Bruley goes further, arguing that within the context of an ‘alternative society’ brought about by brutal class conflict, ‘the material basis of the sexual division of labour was undermined’ and that, freed from the burden of caring for the miner in work, some women were able to engage in public life, with the potential to ‘make real challenges to the power of men’. 95 However, it seems that any gains made during this period were merely temporary, as solidarity with the cause took precedence over gender politics and ultimately, the everyday challenges of running the home and keeping the family fed fell once more to miners’ wives during the long economic depression that followed.

94 John, ‘A Miner Struggle?’; p.82.
The role of women in welfare movements is also evident in the drawn-out campaign for pithead baths; an issue which was of great concern to many coalfield women during the early twentieth century, and one which highlighted the damage they suffered in the never-ending fight against coal dust. However, this was a period in which the very existence of the miners’ wife was tied up with the needs of her husband, who depended on her full-time status in the home in order to maintain his masculine identity within the separate spheres ideology. Therefore, whilst many women campaigned vigorously for pithead baths, it was to take two World Wars and a programme of industrial nationalisation to bring about a significant change in attitudes.

The mining towns of south Wales lay under clouds of fine, ‘silicotic’ coal dust, and houses were often built as close as possible to the pits, meaning that women faced the almost impossible task of maintaining a clean and healthy home. To make matters worse, miners’ houses lacked the most basic amenities, with very few being connected to electricity until the late 1920s, no modern sanitation and only an outside tap for a water supply. (According to Dot Jones, only 2.4% of working-class homes in the Rhondda had baths by 1920) Therefore when miners came home black with coal dust, women had the onerous task of heating the water on an open fire for their baths.

Edith Davies recalls:

‘Every terraced house lacked that essential requirement, a bathroom, and pithead baths were, as yet, many light years away. As the miners came off shift large iron kettles were put on the fire to boil while the huge zinc bath was carried in and set before the hearth.’

This heavy round of domestic chores, which was exacerbated by the introduction of the seven-hour day/three shift system in 1919, was at great cost to the health and welfare of coalfield women and their children. Men brought dust and cockroaches in on their pit clothes, which one commentator recalled ‘invade the rooms whenever the light is switched off’, and on wet days damp washing steamed before the fire ‘all day and night’ in overcrowded rooms. Miner’s wives aged prematurely and suffered from severe ailments, premature births and a high

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97 Russell Davies, Sex, Sects and Society ‘Pain and Pleasure’: A Social History of Wales and the Welsh 1870-1945 (Cardiff, 2018), p.43.
99 Jones, ‘Counting the Cost of Coal’, p.117.
100 Edith Davies, ‘The Innocent Years’, in Struggle or Starve, p.51.
maternal deathrate as a result of exertions with heavy tubs and boilers, and furthermore it was recorded in 1922 that:

‘Many deaths of children occur by their falling into tubs and being scalded while the mother is preparing for the worker’s bath. One of the coroners in south Wales has said ‘Every winter I hold more inquests on miners’ children who die from scalds or burns than I do on miners who are killed underground.’

Further contemporary concerns included the morality of men bathing naked in front of their children, and the many diseases that miners suffered as a result of travelling home from work in wet pit clothes. Under such trying circumstances, it is hardly surprising that pithead baths became a priority for many miners’ wives; however it was now the coal owners and wider public that needed to be convinced.

An early movement for pithead baths surfaced at the turn of the century in response to the impressive provision of baths in continental Europe; a stimulus to action, Evans and Jones argue, that was common of many welfare measures at this time. Thanks to the tireless advocacy of Labour politician Robert Smillie, the issue emerged strongly from the 1906-8 Royal Commission, however it only became enshrined in the Coal Mines Act of 1911 as a voluntary principle and ultimately the failure of the act to enforce baths meant that any progress depended on voluntary provision by the coal owners. Therefore it was necessary to mount a public propaganda campaign during the pre-war years, and women adopted this role with enthusiasm; often employing the organisational capacity of the Women’s Labour League to produce pamphlets, hold meetings and lecture tours, and utilise the socialist press; and the columns of the Labour newspaper Llais Llafur are testimony to this effort. In May 1914, one of the leaders of the women’s campaign, Mrs. W Brace stated:

‘The provision of pit-head baths at the collieries would mark the beginning of a new era in the homes of thousands of miners – a charter for the women, relieving them of much

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103 J.A. Lovat-Fraser, ‘Pithead Baths’, Welsh Housing and Development Association Yearbook (1922), cited in Davies, Sex, Sects and Society, p.43.
106 Evans and Jones, ‘A Blessing for the Miner’s Wife’, p.11.
drudgery, and enabling them to devote more time to more congenial and more necessary domestic duties. Home life would be made more pleasant and healthful.’

Further *Llais Llafur* articles during this period emphasised women’s importance in the campaign, with one suggesting that delegates for miners’ wives visit the new baths being built at Treharris for the Ocean Coal Company and established pithead baths across Britain to ‘talk to the housewives as to the effect upon the comfort and amenities of the home’ that such facilities provide. However, just as the campaign was gathering steam, war was declared in July 1914, and whilst Wales did witness the opening of the Treharris baths in 1916, it would take until war’s end for agitations to re-emerge.

By 1919, Elizabeth Andrews was at the forefront of the movement, and as one of three miners’ wives giving evidence before the Sankey Commission, she stressed the vital role that coalfield women played in promoting the cause, and the mixed reactions that such reform often met ‘owing to the fact that it would bring a change in customs, and naturally would meet with prejudice’. Hannam argues that this was evident in the hostility shown by many trade unionists and ordinary miners and their wives during the pre-war campaigns, and it seems that any future success would depend upon addressing physical, moral and practical concerns. It was feared, for example that miners would catch colds or diseases from bathing together in hot baths, or that constantly washing the back could weaken the spine. Further objections concerned the exposure of large numbers of mature men to younger miners, perhaps suggesting an underlying fear of homosexuality, whilst others believed that it should still be the woman’s duty to bathe their husbands and launder their clothes, and this appealed to many miners as it avoided any risk of having their belongings stolen.

There were also conflicting attitudes over the dirty appearance of returning miners, and whilst many considered this as honourably come by, others believed that it made them social pariahs and victims of an ‘ugly and dirty industrial system’. Stephanie Ward has argued that male bathing represented a ‘return to individuality’ and an expression of manliness: ‘real men were clean men.’ Subsequently, propaganda for pithead baths needed to provide reassurances for those who feared

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111 Hannam, ‘Women as Paid Organizers’, p.79.


change, and descriptions of new shower facilities with cubicles allayed some objections based around disease, time and morality, including an article in Llais Llafur which described the washing and drying facilities at Treharris in great detail: (See also Figure 5)

‘There is no pond or anything in the form of an ordinary bath, but there is a separate chamber for every miner, so that he may undress and enjoy the luxury of a shower bath at a small cost and in perfect privacy ... The wet dirty clothes are wound up by means of a chain and pulley to the top of the spacious building, where ... the clothes are quickly dried’. 115

Figure 5: ‘Interior of the Deep Navigation Baths, Treharris, 1916.’ 116

During 1919, Andrews arranged for Labour and Co-operative women to visit the baths at Treharris, before continuing her propaganda campaign in a series of slide shows and speeches that covered ‘all the mining areas of South Wales’. 117 Hannam argues that through her campaigns, Andrews

117 Andrews, A Woman’s Work is Never Done, p.27.
attempted to develop a ‘politics of everyday life’, in which the home was recognised as a workplace and therefore ‘conditions in which women worked should ... be improved by legislation’, and she urged women to support the measure not just for reasons of health, but for the time that would be freed up for ‘local and national affairs that affected her life’. 118 This message differs from Mrs Brace’s pre-war emphasis on domestic duty and perhaps reflects changing female attitudes in light of war’s opportunities, and it appears that her tactics were successful. Andrews’ address before the Sankey Commission later that year provides enlightening evidence of the scale of female support:

‘I have been organising among the miners’ wives for five years, and have during that period been in touch with thousands of miners’ wives in South Wales, and at various meetings and conferences the women have very strongly expressed their desire for better conditions.’ 119

Whilst the Sankey Commission failed to make direct recommendations for pithead baths, the movement became part of the official programme of the miners’ union during the 1920s, and therefore women were no longer as central to the campaign. Nevertheless they still played their part from the side-lines, and contemporary sources show Andrews calling for women to ‘Agitate, Educate and Organise’ in 1923, 120 and Labour member Winifred Griffiths co-ordinating propaganda to convince the older generation in 1927:

‘When the first pithead bath was opened at Cwmparc Colliery in the Rhondda valley, we organised a trip for our members to see for themselves how it worked. Even so some of them were not won over to the idea, being afraid that their men’s clothes would not be dried properly, and that they would get pneumonia coming home after a shower! But the younger ones hailed the idea with delight as a means of banishing at last the dirt of the pit from their homes.’ 121

It was perhaps inevitable that the economic difficulties of the interwar years interfered with the progress of the pithead bath movement, nevertheless Evans and Jones argue that it had already been won by the ‘short sharp propaganda campaign, in which women had played such a prominent part, in the troubled decade of 1910-20’. 122 However, whilst commentators in the 1930s were beginning to describe the benefits from the growing number of installations, prejudice still existed, and despite the Secretary for Mines, Captain Crookshank, arguing in 1938 that ‘there could be few

119 Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, Second Stage, Reports and Evidence, cited in White and Williams, Struggle or Starve, pp.34-35.
120 Andrews, A Woman’s Work is Never Done, p.67.
121 Winifred Griffiths, ‘One Woman’s Story’, in Struggle or Starve, p.277.
greater advantages brought to a colliery village than a pithead bath’, funding was still a stumbling block, and it was only when baths became a charge on the industry under post-war nationalisation that a rapid building programme was promised.  

The heterogeneity of coalfield women’s experiences during the interwar period and a lack of statistical evidence complicates any evaluation of the impact of pithead baths on the separate spheres ideology. On a positive note, many miners’ wives were encouraged to take an active role in the campaign by political women such as Elizabeth Andrews, thereby bringing them into the public and political domain; and for those few areas where baths were installed, commentators have celebrated the ‘real improvement’ that they brought to their lives. However caution is required around any assumptions that pithead baths freed up time for women to pursue new careers or political activities, even during the post-war years when their use was more widespread. It seems that any benefits were often outweighed by the demands of higher living standards and employment limitations within the coalfield, and it was only with the collapse of the coal industry during the 1960s that female employment became more widespread.


Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to interrogate historiological assumptions that the miners’ wives of the south Wales coalfields were passive victims of circumstance throughout the difficult interwar years, and that they lived their lives within the boundaries of a deeply ingrained ideology of separate spheres and its constructions of masculinity and femininity. In order to achieve this, it has been necessary to explore the unique nature of Welsh coalfield society in conjunction with the devastating impact of war, economic depression and strike action on women’s lives, and to consider to what extent these factors were a catalyst for change.

Chapter one has focussed on women’s occupation within both the domestic and public realm and has argued that whilst World War One provided opportunities for many women to reimagine their lives; peacetime and a protracted economic slump meant that many were reassigned to a life of hard and unwaged labour in the home. To a large extent this aligns with Beddoe’s claim that a lack of employment opportunities, compounded by an ‘entrenched domestic ideology’ kept married women at home. However, it has been shown that they developed a range of survival strategies, including casual paid work and ritualistic behaviour around the maintenance of their households, and whilst this often left no time for a public life, miners’ wives should not be considered passive victims and as Bruley suggests, should be recognised as ‘historical agents in their own right, capable of creating historical change.’

Chapters two and three have explored the ways in which coalfield women coordinated in an effort to mitigate suffering within their communities, whilst attempting to evaluate how such action impacted on established gender roles. During the 1926 General Strike and Lockout women came together to form a variety of relief committees, often under the leadership of politically active women such as Marion Phillips and Elizabeth Andrews, and through their involvement in community welfare schemes were able to work alongside men in the public sphere as never before. Newspaper records and images from the period support Bruley’s argument that, temporarily at least, ‘the material basis of the sexual division of labour was undermined’, and it seems that many found a new role and identity through politically inspired action. This was also true for those women who became active in the campaign for pithead baths, and whilst aspirations of occupational and political engagement were largely unfulfilled, the campaign succeeded in shining a light on the damage that

women suffered in their struggle to keep a clean and healthy home. The uptake of pithead baths was slow and inadequate during the interwar period, and even during the post-war years coalfield women faced the same pressures of domesticity and lack of employment opportunities within this mono-industrial landscape.

In summary, it seems that coalfield women were beginning to become aware of their value within the public sphere during the interwar years. They now had the vote, and many had confidence that they could do the jobs traditionally held by men. Political women were an inspiration for many, and a huge number responded by joining campaigns and welfare committees. Whist Bruley has argued that such women’s focus on small-scale reforms such as pithead baths, could be ‘depicted as a form of ‘separate spheres’’, it could also be viewed positively as a ‘locally based, practical form of socialist-feminism’, and in many ways their activism introduced them to the public domain like never before. However, the long economic depression meant that community solidarity and survival had to take precedence over any challenges to traditional gender identities, and therefore the doctrine of separate spheres remained almost intact during the interwar years.

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