Chapter 1: Introduction

Women want easier access to information generally. (Women and Equality Unit, 2001, p. 19)

1.1 Introduction

The notion of women’s libraries is a complex one: what are they, why do they exist and who are they for? Though there are approximately 400 women’s libraries and information centres internationally (International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement, 2005, n. p.) there is very little literature and discussion about them, either within library studies or feminist research. In part this may be connected to their diverse nature, crossing several sectors. For example, they could be considered within the spatial concept of ‘a room of one’s own’. Although Virginia Woolf envisaged a smaller, more personal space for writing and personal development than a women’s library (Woolf, 1928), the notion of women-only space was an issue of particular concern during the second wave of feminism (c. late 1960s-mid 1980s) during which period many women’s libraries were founded.

Women’s libraries could also be considered in relation to the library sector as an extension of the concept of ‘special’ libraries. There is also scope for studying women’s libraries from within the field of women’s information needs as they contain diverse collections of material that might meet a range of these needs. In addition, as many of the women’s libraries also contain extensive archives and ephemera, they could also be analysed from an archival perspective.

Women’s libraries represent a different way of looking at information collection, dissemination and preservation. They use the additional criterion of sex to determine the focus of their collections. It has been noted that libraries and librarians play important roles in the access to information – they can be seen as ‘gatekeepers’

1 Throughout this thesis the term ‘women’s libraries’ is used. It is taken to include women’s resource centres and women’s archive projects. For definition purposes a women’s resource centre usually has broader functions and services, offering facilities not commonly associated with libraries such as counselling, training, health sessions etc. They may also be a ‘centre’ for other uses (Edwards & Fisher, 2002, p. xi).
Women’s libraries, with their different perspectives, act therefore, as counter gatekeepers and preservers of women’s history.

Despite the varied approaches to the notion of women’s libraries, there does not appear to be significant mainstream or specialist consideration of women’s libraries, either nationally or internationally, from any of these different viewpoints. Are women’s libraries, which collect and disseminate information about, by and for women, effective in improving women's access to information?

1.2 Aims & objectives

This thesis addressed this gap in relation to women’s libraries in the British Isles. It looked at existing organisations and explored the situation in Wales where there is, at time of writing, no physical women’s library. The interest in the research topic arose following developments at two existing women’s libraries: a proposal from Glasgow Women’s Library to be Women’s Library of Scotland (Patrick, 2000, p. 15), and the re-naming and re-positioning of the Fawcett Library in London to become the National Library for Women (Library Association, 1998, p. 341; Purvis, 1998, n. p.). The implications of these shifts could suggest that Wales may wish to develop its own collection of material so as to offer a commensurate service to women in Wales. This is especially so after the process of political devolution of central British Government powers in the late 1990s, which increased political and legal autonomy in both Scotland and Wales. As constituent countries of Great Britain, there are broadly similar policies e.g. regarding health, education, law and

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2 Information needs are the needs of an individual to make a decision or answer a question (Davies & Bath, 2002, p. 303). A woman’s information needs could cover things such as equal opportunities information, health information or educational information.

3 Geographically and politically Great Britain equates to England, Scotland and Wales; the United Kingdom is England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, its official name being the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the British Isles is England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and other small islands e.g. Guernsey, Isle of Man (The Minster Guide to English Usage, 1979, p. 297; Chambers, 1998, p. 703 & p. 1829). This research includes a project based in the Republic of Ireland, thus the term British Isles is used throughout.

4 The term ‘physical women’s library’ is taken to mean a collection of material that is available in one building.
order across England, Scotland and Wales. Broadly similar provision for specialist library services between these three countries could therefore be expected. Thus the ambitions of women’s libraries in both England and Scotland to become ‘national’ institutions has political implications; this is especially so given the successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid by the Women’s Library in London for £4.2 million, from a national i.e. UK-wide source. As a result of this high profile redevelopment of the Women’s Library, the provision of women’s information, archives and libraries in Wales needs attention.

The central aim and research question of the thesis is thus:

- Is there potential for a women’s library in Wales?

Specifically, the objectives were to investigate:

- What are the roles and nature of current women’s libraries in the British Isles?
- What is the place of women’s libraries within librarianship?
- What is the place of women’s libraries within feminism?
- What models of women’s libraries exist, and which, if any, could be applicable to Wales?

1.3 Rationale for the study

There has been an amazing and widespread growth in the interest shown in women’s lives in times past and this has been accompanied by a great demand for information... . (Beddoe, 1993, p. vii)

The issue of and demand for, provision of information to women has important international, social and economic dimensions. Women’s information needs can affect the whole family unit and require particular attention. The United Nations (UN) believes that disseminating information to the women in a household is most effective in achieving their desired development aims (United Nations, 2000, p. xiv;

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5 Although it was subsequently re-named the Women’s Library, see Section 3.10.
Wang, 1999, p. 2) as information ‘trickles down’ via the women to the rest of the family members. In many less developed countries where the UN operates development programmes, dissemination of important information to women is often achieved via women’s resource centres, particularly in rural areas, or via specific radio programmes targeted at women (Corral & Ransom, 2001). Whilst the women’s libraries in the British Isles do not necessarily fall into the category of world development, they are part of an international network that is concerned with how women access information, how information about women is collated, stored and disseminated, and also the preservation of documents that record and reveal information about women’s lives in the past. Women’s libraries therefore have a central role to play in the library and archive professions, as well as within broader women’s networks for social and economic development.

Given their diverse backgrounds, connections and the rise in awareness of women’s issues over the last four decades, it is understandable how “[t]here has been a mushrooming of women’s information/documentation centres worldwide in the last two decades” (Vyas, 1993, p. 151). This has partly come from the rise in the quantity and nature of the information produced by the women’s movement of the late 1960s onwards. Kramarae & Spender note that women’s publishers were central in communicating the messages of the women’s movement and contributed to the resulting “knowledge explosion” (Kramarae & Spender, 1992, p. 17). The output of formal and informal women’s groups and women's publishers needed a sympathetic home, and women’s libraries were therefore essential in providing an appropriate space for such material.

This increase in information coincided with worldwide recognition of women’s rights. Since the International Year for Women in 1975, the UN Decade for Women 1975-1985 and four UN World Conferences on Women (Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1995) there has been an enormous increase in the number and types of women’s organisations and networks around the
world, in conjunction with a recognition that women’s issues are important. This has led to a rise in the need for comprehensive and reliable data on women and their concerns (Valk, Van Dam & Cummings, 1999, p. 26) culminating in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that affirmed that women’s rights were human rights, and a determination to “advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity” (United Nations, 1995, p. 1). The UN saw collecting and creating disaggregated gender data as one way of achieving such equality. Vyas argues that mainstream libraries were unable to cope with the increase in this new area of information and thus women’s organisations, resource centres and libraries were established to fulfil this need (Vyas, 1993, p. 151). Yet despite this rise in women’s information centres, Vyas asks:

why is it that a common feeling expressed at all women’s studies forums is that there is a lack of information? Is it the lack of information itself or of access to it, or both? Is there a lack of dialogue between those who want information and those who provide and handle information? Are our present information sources and services inadequate? Have we also been elitist in our approach to information and left out a majority of the users – the women at the grassroots level – unserved? (Vyas, 1993, p. 154)

Taking Vyas’ concerns, it is pertinent to consider whether separate women’s libraries are able to overcome this perception of lack of information. Do they disseminate information more effectively than other libraries? Do they reach a diverse range of women or is there a lack of dialogue between the information seekers and information disseminators? How exactly do they meet the variety of women’s information needs? These questions will be addressed in the literature review (Chapter 2) and in the results chapters (Chapters 4 & 5).

1.4 The emergence and history of women’s libraries

Women have collected, disseminated and exchanged knowledge and information since the beginning of history but it is only in this century that

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6 Various pressure groups are currently campaigning for a fifth UN World Conference on Women, but the UN has so far said they have no plans to hold another conference (Millionth Circle Initiative, 5
centres have been set up for the specific purpose of collecting and documenting what has come to be known as women’s information. (Valk, Van Dam & Cummings, 1999, p. 27)

The emergence of new thinking around women’s issues in the 1960s and early 1970s gave rise to alternative sources of information. Feminist activists started to employ the use of alternative forms of communication, such as magazines, pamphlets, performances, audiovisual, puppetry shows, radio, dance, books, comic strips, street theatre, video and slides. These various forms of alternative media were used to inform and educate each other, and to create links between feminists in different parts of a country, and eventually regions and globally (George, 2003, p. 2).

Women have been collectors of books and communicators of information for centuries, and several texts examine the history of the private collections of particular women (e.g. Legaré, 1996). Women’s libraries that are open to the public have a more recent history, with the oldest of these dating from the turn of the twentieth century e.g. The Library of the London and National Society for Women’s Service, 1926 (now the Women’s Library); the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris, 1931; and the International Archives for the Women’s Movement (IAV), Amsterdam, 1935 (now the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women’s Movement –IIAV). Both the Paris and Dutch libraries were founded on the basis of personal libraries of women who had played significant roles in their contemporary women’s movements. Similarly, the London library was founded on the basis of collections of the former London Society for Women’s Suffrage. In America, women’s libraries and archives were founded in the 1940s after several campaigns to create a women’s history archive (Hildenbrand, 1986b, p. 3; Moseley, 1973, p. 218).

Kramer locates the development of women’s libraries and archives in Europe within three chronological phases: the early movement, often connected to suffrage
campaigns or private collections of prominent feminists; the second wave of women’s liberation (c. late 1960s – mid 1980s) which saw a rapid rise in the production of information for, about and by women; and a third phase of ‘state feminism’ from the 1980s onwards where centres were founded with government or agency backing, often connected to policy, equity and development initiatives (Kramer, 1993, p. 213; Jensen & Nielsen, 1995, p 97-98; Davaz-Mardin, 2000, pp. 448-449). Kramer notes that at the time of her survey which led to her chronological categorisation, the first generation women’s libraries were often professionally run, sometimes publicly funded and with large collections. In contrast, the libraries from the second wave were short of funding, reliant upon volunteers, and often had a subject focus or specialisation. Third generation libraries, often set up by public bodies and national organisations for equity reasons in the 1980s, were frequently “planned, professional, and computerised” (Kramer, 1993, p. 213.) From the descriptions of the women’s libraries visited for this thesis (see Section 3.10 in Chapter 3), we can see that Kramer’s descriptions of the libraries’ characteristics are still applicable over ten years later.

The international women’s movement over the last 40 years, combined with an increased awareness of women’s information as an internationally relevant issue, and the growing number of women’s libraries and women’s resource centres around the world has led to a recognition of information services for and about women (Wahhab, 1980, p. 13). This attention can be seen in the development in the 1990s of global conferences on women’s libraries, formalising and raising the profile of this discipline.

In October 1991 the First International Symposium of Women’s Libraries was held and hosted by the Women’s Library in Turkey. The conference was attended by a “small group of European and American women library professionals” along with women from the Turkish women’s library (Greening, 2000, p. 467). Having just been established, the staff were keen to develop links with, and enhance their knowledge of, other existing women’s libraries.
The Turkish symposium inspired the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Radcliffe College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA to offer to host a subsequent conference. The conference *Women, Information and the Future: collecting and sharing resources world-wide* was held in 1994, attended by women from over 50 different countries (Karelse & Radloff, 1995b, p. 49). This conference aimed to “share ideas about documenting and networking women’s experiences internationally” and to “build closer communication and co-operation to improve women’s access to information” (Karelse & Radloff, 1995b, p. 49). Since then, subsequent international conferences have been held in the Netherlands in 1998 – the *Know How Conference on the World of Women’s Information* which was attended by 300 women from 83 countries (Vriend, 2001, n. p.) – and in Uganda in 2002 which was attended by 263 delegates from 48 countries (Know How Conference, n. d. p. 8). The next conference will be held in Mexico in 2006 on the theme: ‘*Weaving the information society: a gender and multicultural perspective*’. Its objectives are:

- To establish strategies that will promote the use of women’s information to improve women’s lives.
- To develop a strategic plan aimed at narrowing the information/digital gap for women.
- To share strategies that address the accessibility and availability of information for indigenous, excluded and rural women.
- To found a Latin American Network of Information Centers and Libraries on Women’s and Gender Studies (from mailing list KNOWHOWCONF@NIC.SURFNET.NL, Nov 19, 2005)

Since 1998, the IIAV have helped support and organise the conferences. The 1998 conference was able to turn some of the issues arising from the Fourth World Conference on Women into reality.

“*[E]very country that endorsed the Platform for Action [at the 4th World Conference] had agreed, in doing so, to support, consult, and provide women-specific information.*” (Vriend, 2001, n. p.)
Women’s libraries and information centres were thus well placed to capitalise on this gendered-perspective for information and to look for international approval for their aims and objectives.

The 1998 conference was particularly influential as the organisers had begun collecting material for a directory of women’s libraries. The resulting *Mapping the World* database was presented at the conference and has subsequently grown significantly in size, scope and format and is now available as a book, a free searchable online database and it was planned to release it on CD-ROM7 (Vriend, 2001, n. p.). The IIAV regards the database not only as useful for women’s organisations and libraries but also as a useful tool for the media, policy makers and researchers (Vriend, 2001, n. p.). Indeed, it proved to be an essential research tool for this PhD research (see Chapter 3, Section 3.6.1).

The conferences as a whole have enabled practitioners in the field of women’s information to share their ideas and expertise and also to develop useful connections.

### 1.5 Types of women’s libraries

Given the chronological phasing and different reasons for the establishment of women’s libraries, it is possible to outline different ‘types’ of women’s libraries. Dickel outlines three reasons for the establishment of women’s libraries in Germany (Dickel, 1995, p. 114). Vyas identifies three types of women’s information centres in India (Vyas, 1995, p. 75) whilst Cummings, Valk & Van Dam identify six types of women’s centres that can be applied identified internationally (Cummings, Valk & Van Dam, 1999, p. 23). Based on these classifications, I have identified the classification of women’s libraries in Britain within the following three categories:

(a) collections connected to women’s organisations e.g. Women’s Institute, Women’s Aid

7 The CD version does not yet appear to be available. See IIAV website.
(b) special collections, particularly of archives, in academic institutions e.g. where women’s studies courses exists, or material in the British Library
(c) women's centres, libraries and archives whose sole remit is to collect and disseminate information for and about women e.g. Feminist Archive (South) or Glasgow Women’s Library

This thesis is interested in centres that fall into this last category as they are open to the public, operate along library principles, are separate physical units rather than collections within institutions that have other interests, and their prime concerns are to collect and provide information on a range of women’s issues. In addition, the emphasis of these women’s libraries or centres is not just on their collections, but on their significance as separate women’s libraries or archive institutions. Despite focusing on just one category of women’s libraries, the thesis reveals the existence of three different models of women’s libraries in the British Isles within this one type (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6.).

As is evident from the literature review (Chapter 2), there is a dearth of research on any of the three variants of women’s libraries outlined above. These organisations, whilst necessary (one assumes) to researchers of women’s history and women’s studies, have not become the focus of research in themselves. Likewise, whilst they emulate other libraries and archives in their services and collections, they are not the focus of a body of literature, certainly not critical or evaluative research. In terms of the British Isles, there is no comparative study of the various women’s libraries in existence; this creates potential for this thesis, in examining the potential for the development of a women’s library in Wales, and for placing it within the broader context of women’s libraries in the British Isles.

1.6 The situation for women in Wales

It has been argued that “Welsh women are culturally invisible” (Beddoe, 1986, p. 227) even though they form the majority of the population in Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2005, n. p.). It is also argued that women in Britain are socially
and economically disadvantaged (Equal Opportunities Commission 2003; Welsh Office 1998). The following statistics reveal the situation for women in Wales. (The data are from the Introduction section of Statistical Focus on Wales: Women (1998) unless otherwise indicated.)

- A much higher proportion of women than men are in households of 1 adult with dependent children.
- More than 3 out of every 5 carers are women.
- Nearly 1/3 of women in Wales have no formal qualifications compared with less than 1/4 of men.
- Women account for 85% of people in part-time employment (p. 21).
- 49% of women in employment work part-time. In comparison only 8% of men in employment work part-time (p. 31).
- 53% of women working full-time earn less than £250 per week compared to 29% of men (p. 42).
- Female employees earn on average 13% less than the average male f/t employee (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003, p. 1).
- In only 1 in 12 couples where both partners work full-time does the woman earn significantly more than the man (p. 42).
- On average, a lower proportion of women’s income is derived from wages and salaries, compared with men, and a higher proportion from social security benefits (p. 42).

But, on the other hand,

- Women tend to have healthier lifestyles than men.
- Average life expectancy for females is 5 years longer than for males.
- Females are much less likely than males to commit crime.
- Girls tend to perform better in school examinations than boys (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003, p. 1).
- Women form the majority of full-time students in higher education and are more likely than men to participate in further education.
• in 1996, 63% of women of working age in Wales were in employment, 33% were economically inactive (i.e. not seeking work) and 4% were unemployed (p. 30).
• Political representatives in the National Assembly for Wales are equally split between 50% men and 50% women, the only government in the world to have achieved parity of the sexes.

Access to information is determined by social and economic conditions such as education, costs, transport, occupation etc (Women of Europe, 1996, p. 21). Given the economic and social differences highlighted in the above statistics, might women in Wales face inequality in terms of information access and provision and could a women’s library in Wales overcome such inequality? The UN has acknowledged the value of targeting information services directly to women in order to improve their social, economic and cultural lives (United Nations, 1995, n. p.). Would this targeting, in the format of a women’s library, be relevant in Wales? Do women’s libraries offer a beneficial model for disseminating information to, and preserving information about, women?

1.7 Methods

In order to establish whether a women’s library would be appropriate or possible in Wales, it is necessary to examine the current situation in the rest of the British Isles. The Mapping the World online database (on the IIAV website) presented the researcher with a list of 11 women’s libraries and information centres in the UK. The most general and all-encompassing centres were selected for interviews and visits. (See Chapter 3 for a full discussion on the selection process.) They were (in alphabetical order):

• Feminist Archive (South) (Bristol)
• Feminist Library (London)
• Glasgow Women’s Library

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8 The initial list of 11 was correct as of Autumn 2002. In Autumn 2005, the Mapping the World database contained a list of 13 such organisations for the UK.
In addition to these visits, a telephone interview was conducted with the Director of the Women’s History Project, which is an online database of women’s archives in Ireland. The findings from this phase of the fieldwork revealed a tri-model situation of women’s libraries:

- archive-based research institutions
- socially-orientated community-based resource centres
- virtual archive collections

In Wales there is no women’s library that fits the description of a publicly accessible collection of material collated specifically for and about women, as identified in Section 1.5. Instead, there are various organisations working in the different fields of women’s information, archives and contemporary needs. Thus interviews were conducted with these key stakeholders who are:

- Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive of Wales (AMC/WAW)
- Women in Jazz (formerly Women’s Jazz Archive, Swansea)
- Swansea Women’s Centre (which is the only remaining women’s centre in Wales) (Rolph, 2001, p. 91).

In total, eight site visits were made across the UK, 14 women were interviewed with a total of 12 interviews, 11 of which were recorded and fully transcribed. Extensive field notes were made during the site visits and were enhanced with reference to the existing literature (see Section 1.9). It should be established at this point that the aim of this thesis was not to conduct a comprehensive survey of women’s libraries in the British Isles, but rather to use evidence from a range of the current women’s libraries in the British Isles to inform a position as to what would be appropriate for Wales. The women’s libraries that were surveyed can be seen as different models, and each model was considered in terms of its suitability or adaptability to Wales (see Chapter 6). Key themes that were considered during the analysis included: identity,
1.8 Theoretical perspective of the thesis

Feminist theories use gender as a prism through which to examine the social, political and economic world in the same way that Marxists use class as a prism (Farganis, 1994, p. 8). For this thesis, a feminist perspective determined the subject matter, epistemology and ontology. It is necessary to remember that:

[f]eminism is not a static or fully articulated doctrine. It is an evolving, self-critical theoretical and activist enterprise which has changed radically. (Code, 1995, p. xiii)

There are different approaches to feminism and multiple feminist epistemologies. Harding argues that there are three key methods of research: listening to people, observing, and examining evidence or documents. Feminists use all three methods, as do other researchers. The difference lies in how the methods are carried out (Harding, 1987b, p. 2). The deployment of feminist epistemologies influences the research questions, data collection methods and processes of analysis and interpretation of the findings. It can also affect the representation of results e.g. how the results are communicated and to whom (Cope, 2002, pp. 49-52). A feminist approach may also seek to give something back to participants - for example, I devised a prize draw for participants as a thank-you for their time. Summary findings from the thesis will be presented to the contributing institutions and women. It is also hoped that summary findings will be presented in a range of journals, including newsletters of the women’s libraries and other related organisations, thus widening the traditional audience of an academic thesis.

Feminism can also be considered to illuminate previously invisible issues and can alter not only what is looked at but also the way of looking at an issue (Farganis, 1994, p. 9). By approaching women’s libraries from the angle of librarianship, this thesis has a feminist perspective in that it is investigating something that has traditionally been relatively invisible (women’s libraries) from a new perspective.
1.9 Existing research

Although women’s libraries have diverse backgrounds and are applicable to many disciplines, there is a paucity of material on women’s libraries, nationally and internationally. When searching using key terms such as ‘women’ and ‘libraries’, the majority of the material falls into the categories of female librarians, the feminisation of the profession, status and stereotypes. Although these are important areas, they do not cover the issue of women’s libraries themselves. In addition, there is a reasonably large amount of literature on women’s information needs. This literature is international in context and diverse in scope. It is an important sub-component of the research into women’s libraries because the women’s libraries operate in ways akin to public or academic libraries and seek to meet the information needs of their community. However, much of this literature on women’s information needs concludes that women in general do not use libraries in order to find information; little attention is given within this literature to the position of women’s libraries themselves in respect of meeting women’s information needs.

The literature on women’s libraries and women’s resource centres has three main characteristics. It primarily consists of histories of various women’s libraries across the world. These descriptive narrative accounts are interesting for the level of detail they provide and the broad context they present, but they lack theoretical and critical analysis and there is also a lack of comparative studies. Few of the papers discuss in any depth the reasons for the existence of women’s libraries, other than perhaps outlining the historical origins of the library under consideration.

Another characteristic of the literature on women’s libraries is that the authors of the accounts are often workers at such institutions, or former workers, or other women closely associated with the library. Whilst this perhaps enables a greater degree of insight unavailable to an external researcher, it can also lead to a degree of partiality,
perhaps creating a less critical description of the library. This factor, combined with
the first point, suggest that some of the literature has arisen out of a desire for
profile-raising. As is discussed in this thesis, many women’s libraries have low
profiles and are not known outside of small interested circles. These papers offer the
libraries a chance to inform a wider community about their existence and their work.
These two characteristics of the literature are therefore not entirely unexpected,
given the situation of women’s libraries.

Thirdly, and a more positive point, the literature is international in its nature as all
continents are included, reflecting the global existence of women’s libraries and
resource centres. This facilitates a greater comparative understanding of the issues,
and reveals that there are common problems, solutions and ideas for women’s
libraries across the world.

Of particular relevance for this thesis are two pieces of work by Rosie Ilett (Ilett,
2002; Ilett, 2003). Her earlier work focuses on the feminist, or otherwise, nature of
women’s health centres in the UK. She found that there were “minimal linkages”
between librarianship and feminist thinking, leaving women’s health information
centres isolated from both feminism and librarianship (Ilett, 2002, p. 33). Her PhD
thesis considers what she describes as a crisis in librarianship in the UK, and
discusses the extent it exists in, and is overcome by, women’s libraries. If
librarianship is a female-dominated profession (at least at the lower levels of
hierarchy), is there evidence of feminism having an influence on professional
practices? Again, she found little evidence of feminism in librarianship. One section
of her thesis comprises of case-study research into three women’s libraries in Great
Britain, analysing the extent to which they have rejected male-orientated library
processes and could be considered to be new gendered spaces.

Ilett’s work forms a basic model on which this work is constructed. This thesis
expands her case study approach to cover nine institutions; it also uses the concepts
of engagement with the professions and with feminism as an indicator of the degree
of isolation faced by women’s libraries in the British Isles.
The literature on women’s libraries, archives and resource centres, whilst international in scope, is lacking in analytical discussion, comparative research and direct application to current situations in libraries. This thesis is therefore well placed to contribute to the literature on women’s libraries and archives in the British Isles, and specifically to examine the situation in Wales.

1.10 Engagement with librarianship

Women’s libraries have inherent links with the library and archive professions. In terms of the professionalism of the libraries, issues such as adhering to basic standards, employment of qualified personnel, and classification are analysed in the thesis, to discover the degree to which the women’s libraries are engaged with the profession. In relation to their commitments to both feminism and librarianship, as outlined by Ilett, are they, as women’s libraries, finding different ways of organising and disseminating knowledge that is more appropriate for women’s information needs?

The engagement with the profession is a two-way process, and whilst some of the women’s libraries appear not to be heavily engaged with the profession, it is also evident that the library and archive professions are not extensively engaged with women’s libraries and archives. This can be seen in the lack of literature on women’s libraries within library journals, and the (anecdotal) lack of awareness of the existence of women’s libraries by current library professionals. This may lead the women’s libraries to exist in isolated communities, reliant upon their own networks, rather than being incorporated into an extensive and national library network.

The existence of women's libraries also has relevance to the field of ‘special’ libraries. Their focus on a particular group (women) is replicated in other special

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9 When talking about my thesis with colleagues within the library profession it was apparent that very few had heard of women’s libraries.
libraries e.g. business, charity and religious libraries. Other special libraries display similar characteristics and face similar problems as women’s libraries. For example, the Working Class Movement Library (WCML) in Salford, is currently undergoing major changes, partly due to the withdrawal of financial support from Salford City Council (who had provided a grant since 1987). In June 2005 the WCML was awarded a Project Planning Grant of £48,700 by the Heritage Lottery Fund which will facilitate the assessment of cataloguing and conservation needs and also develop an audience development plan. The WCML states that:

> Despite financial uncertainties and restrictions our ever growing band of volunteers continues to bring some level of order and openness to the uncatalogued mass of donations and acquisitions which keep arriving at our door. (WCML, 2005, n. p.)

This appears to be similar to the situation of many of the women’s libraries: uncertain funding, reliance upon volunteers and slightly disorganised collections and stock (see Chapter 4).

Yet despite similarities in structure, women’s libraries (and other libraries that focus on a ‘cause’ or campaign) tend to be ignored within the literature on special libraries. For example, several national and international directories of special libraries do not list many (or any) of the women’s libraries in Great Britain. A directory of rare book and special collections in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland lists the Fawcett Library, which, it states “is the only major British library specialising in works by and about women and the feminist movement” (Bloomfield, 1997, p. 212). With at least 10 other women’s libraries in the British Isles, this statement is inaccurate. No other women's library is mentioned by Bloomfield. Likewise, the 2002 edition of the ASLIB Directory of Information Sources in the United Kingdom contains entries for the Women’s Library, and the Feminist Library Resource and Information Centre, but not for other women's libraries in Great Britain (ASLIB, 2002). And the Directory of Special Collections in Western Europe has only one entry for a Women’s History Collection in Denmark, with nothing in Great Britain at all (Gallico, 1993).
This omission from directories is replicated in the literature on special libraries and may be due to the (sometimes loose) definitions of ‘special libraries’. An early definition was that special libraries served a specialist clientele working for a common purpose and their collections were not normally directly available to the public. Special libraries could be commercial, governmental, industrial, medical, scientific, technical, research or belong to a professional society (Astall, 1966, p. 9). More recently, special libraries have been defined as “information units that are part of parent organisations, and that specialise in certain topics” (Eastwood and Tompson, 2001, p. 1), including

those information organisations sponsored by private companies, government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, or professional associations. Subject-speciality units in public and academic libraries are usually labelled special libraries as well. (Mount, 1995, p. 2)

Whilst women’s libraries are frequently not-for-profit organisations and thus could be included in this definition, they are rarely mentioned in the texts or provided as examples; case studies are in general sourced from business, government and charities (Mount, 1995, pp. 231-257). Eastwood and Tompson also argue that special libraries have a mission to provide focused information to a defined user group to further the goals of the parent organisation, and, in the UK are often known as ‘workplace libraries’ (Eastwood & Tompson, 2001, p. 1). Whilst the first part of this definition can be true for women’s libraries, the notion of workplace libraries is more closely associated with commerce rather than a library dedicated to a cause or social campaign.

Furthermore, although there is a Special Libraries Association in America, there is no similar organisation in Great Britain. (Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has a special interest group for ‘industrial and commercial’ libraries, along with other types of libraries e.g. prison, health.) Staff working in the women’s libraries may feel that their work is unlike that of an academic, public or special library, which may lead to disengagement with librarianship. This may be increased when one considers their omission from a recent key CILIP publication: An Investment in Knowledge: Library and
Information Services in the United Kingdom 2002. The ‘Communities’ section which covers public, academic and national libraries, library and information services for schools, further education and higher education, and a section on ‘workplace libraries’ which covers government libraries, research councils, professional bodies and medical and health care libraries (Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals, 2002, p. 2). Although this publication could not be expected to mention every single type of special library, one section referring to some of the other library and information services that do not fit the traditional categories could have been included. Thus, the disengagement between women’s libraries and the profession is apparent from both sides.

Women’s libraries, whilst revealing similarities to, and potential links with academic, public and special libraries, can also be linked to the idea of ‘virtual’ libraries. As with special libraries, there is debate over the exact terms and definitions of virtual libraries, with further confusion due to the additional names of ‘digital library’, ‘library without walls’, ‘electronic library’, ‘hybrid library’ and ‘gateway library’ (Muir, 2001, p. 499). Muir’s definitions are that a digital library is a space, either physical, virtual or both, where a significant proportion of the resources exist only in digital form; a virtual library is a collection of web resources; and a hybrid library is part of the continuum from conventional library to full digital library, with seamless resource discovery for the end user (Muir, 2001, pp. 499-500).

From these definitions, we can see that some of the women’s libraries could be classed as hybrid libraries in that they provide some electronic resources. Eastwood & Tompson state that a “digital library links users with resources electronically” whilst a virtual library provides all services electronically rather than in a building (2001, pp. 2-3). Whilst the Women’s History Project is a virtual library in the sense that it does not have a physical space, the collections are not available electronically, and is perhaps best described as a portal or gateway, as it points the user to resources, all of which are in hard-copy. The other women’s library without physical
space is AMC/WAW. However, AMC/WAW is also neither a digital or virtual library, as the collections are not accessible in electronic format.

From this discussion we can see that the women’s libraries that do not have a physical space do not easily match the broad definitions of virtual or digital libraries. They are however, similar to electronic directories and mapping projects. *Genesis*, the mapping project coordinated by the Women’s Library, is an important example and along with the projects in Ireland and Wales, is part of a wider recognised network of mapping projects such as those operated by the National Archives (National Archives, n. d., n. p.)

Women's libraries and archive services do not need to be thought of as being completely isolated from the library and archive profession, despite the difficulty in placing them within recognised models of libraries. Their multiple roles, aims and services also link them to resource centres and Citizens’ Advice Bureaux. For example, some of the libraries visited offer free advice sessions (counselling, financial, etc), run training programmes and reading groups, have volunteer schemes, and seek to empower women to change their lives where necessary.

Women’s libraries therefore, whilst perhaps seemingly isolated from the professional library and archive community in their practice, have parallels with a number of related library, archive and information-orientated developments. As a consequence, the potential for developing a women’s library in Wales is not only related to current circumstances for women’s libraries in the rest of the British Isles, but is also dependent upon what type or model of women's library might be most appropriate (if any), and to which element(s) of the information profession they feel most aligned.

**1.11 Engagement with feminism**

Women’s libraries are historically rooted in the history of feminism and the various campaigns for women’s equality and empowerment that have taken place in the
previous 150 years. (For a detailed description of the history of the women’s libraries explored by this thesis see section 3.10 in Chapter 3). They exist in order to assist women in finding information to help in their contemporary lives, to document and preserve previous lives and experiences of women and to facilitate research into women’s lives. Despite their existence and principles being directly relevant to both women’s studies and women’s history, there has been little research on women’s libraries themselves from these multi-disciplinary fields (see Chapter 2). Whilst some women’s studies scholars may refer to, or acknowledge various women’s libraries that they have used in the process of writing their books (e.g. Beddoe, 1993, p. 13; Rowbotham, 1999, p. xiii), as institutions in themselves they appear to have been overlooked as a research subject.

It is possible to argue that there is a slight disengagement within women’s studies between the theoretical field of women’s studies and the practice of women’s libraries. After investigating the current situation of women’s libraries in the British Isles, it is also possible to see that the reverse is true (see Section 5.6 in Chapter 5).

Pritchard argues that librarianship is concerned with utilising the best structures for organising knowledge and information and, that feminist thought questions the concepts of knowledge. Therefore, feminist thought can be used to question the accepted structures and institutions that are built around knowledge i.e. questioning library structures (Pritchard, 1995, p. 15). Consequently, given the historical and theoretical motives for the creation of women’s libraries, it could be expected that they too challenge traditional ways of knowing. This could perhaps be seen in using feminist classification systems, or approaching the provision of information from a different perspective. This thesis seeks to explore the degree to which women’s libraries are therefore engaged with feminism in terms of their practices, structures and approaches.

1.11.1 Women-only spaces

Although women’s libraries do not appear to have a high profile within women’s studies, their existence contributes to a key debate within feminism and women’s
studies: that of separate spheres or mainstream integration. Whilst some women believe that only by creating separate spheres and agencies for women will women’s rights be achieved, others believe that in order to change society, women’s issues need to be integrated into the mainstream and to do otherwise is to create a ghetto of ‘women’s things’ (Russ, 1984, p. 53). For example, should Women’s Studies be taught as a separate subject at universities, or be incorporated across all disciplines so that all students become aware of the issues? Spender believes that separatism can lead to a ghetto, whilst integration can add valuable insight into previously closed areas (Spender, 1985, p. 20). A differing view is that “both [approaches] have value and because neither one is effective on its own” there remains a need to maintain a focus on separate women’s issues, as well as integrating it into all disciplines (Pritchard, 1995, p. 22). With regard to women’s libraries, the approach could therefore be that it remains necessary to maintain separate women’s libraries and archives until women feel that public, academic and national libraries, public record offices and Citizen Advice Bureaux contain the contemporary documents and archives that meet their needs.

The separatist vs. mainstream debate surrounding women's libraries highlights other divisions within feminism e.g. activism vs. theory, grassroots campaigning vs. academic women's studies, and radical vs. liberal feminists. According to these debates, there are two possible routes for women’s libraries to follow: appealing to theorists (by providing documents, archives etc) or appealing to grassroots activists (by providing resource material, courses to change women’s lives etc). This division is revealed in the findings of this thesis in the existence of different models of women’s libraries and in the slight degree of antagonism between the different approaches, each seeing their methods as the most appropriate (see Section 4.10 in Chapter 4). Moss asks whether the contribution of feminism is to not only provide an understanding of the world (theory), but also to change it (activism) (Moss, 2002, p. 13). I would argue that both elements are important and the different models of women’s libraries not only serve different needs, but combined they seek to improve the lives of women, whether it is through theory or practice. As was mentioned above, a dual approach may be the most effective method.
1.11.2 History of feminism

It is important to understand the history of feminism in order to place women’s libraries in an appropriate context. In the British Isles it is possible to distinguish three different ‘waves’ of feminism, with different outlooks and perspectives. Feminist theories arose initially out of a desire for equity and developed during the early human rights movements e.g. women’s suffrage, which began in America and Britain in the 1850s (Watkins, Rueda & Rodriguez, 1992, p. 63). This ‘first wave’ of feminism was principally concerned with suffrage, social reform, temperance movements and equity for women (Moss, 2002, p. 4). Equity and equal rights were (and still are) generally modelled in terms of being equal with men’s standards. The period after women achieved suffrage in the UK (1918 and 1928) until after World War II is considered to be a quiet period in terms of feminist activity (Legates, 2001, p. 341), and Carter notes that government propaganda to encourage women back into their homes after World War I had been so successful that there was enforced conscription of some women during World War II (Carter, 1988, p. 11). After their extensive war effort in World War II, women were again persuaded that their intended roles were in the home, and it was not until the 1960s that women’s issues became prominent again.

The ‘second wave’ of feminism (often referred to as the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM)) occurred from c.late 1960s - mid1980s, with a shift in focus to the different nature of women, emphasising women’s standpoints, experiences and perspectives. A number of key publications by women contributed to the discussion surrounding women’s lives e.g. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963 (published 1968 in the UK); Eva Figes’ *Patriarchal Attitudes*, 1970; Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: the case for feminist revolution*, 1970; Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, 1970; Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, 1970; Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful*, 1970 and Juliet Mitchell’s *Women’s Estate*, 1971. In terms of magazines, the UK feminist magazine *Spare Rib* (1972-1993) had a circulation of 21,000 by 1979 (Carter, 1988, p. 56). In the USA by 1971 there were over 100 journals and newspapers dedicated to women’s issues (Schneir, 1995, pp.
This primary source material forms a natural foundation for collections within women’s libraries and, as will be seen later, was the impetus for the establishment of some of the women’s libraries.

The late 1960s and the 1970s were a period of protest movements, counter-culture and participatory democracy. Protests surrounding peace, the Vietnam war and civil rights were prominent particularly during 1968-70. There were riots in Paris in the spring of 1968, protests at the Miss World beauty contest in 1969, and women textile machinists in Ford’s Dagenham plant in the UK went on strike in 1968 for equal pay and for a reappraisal of their jobs. The second wave of feminism has sometimes therefore been regarded as having socialist and Marxist origins (Rowbotham, 1972, p. 95; Watkins, Rueda & Rodriguez, 1992, p. 117). Despite this connection with working class campaigns, the feminist movement in the UK can also be seen to have academic roots as some of the early groups were connected to universities (Rowbotham, 1972, p. 95) and the first National Liberation Conference in the UK was held at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970. Over 400 women (and some men) attended the conference, which was subsequently held annually until 1978, which was the last WLM conference (Ross, Bearse & Bogle, 1996, p. 32).

During these WLM conferences specific demands were made. Initially there were four demands: equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour childcare, and free contraception with abortion on demand (Carter, 1988, p. 55). These demands were subsequently increased to seven at the 1978 WLM conference:

- Equal pay for equal work
- Equal education and job opportunities
- Free contraception and abortion on demand
- Free 24-hour community-controlled childcare
- Legal and financial independence for women
- An end to discrimination against lesbians

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10 Carter states that the idea for the first conference came from the Ruskin History Workshop which had Socialist and working class perspectives (Carter, 1988, p. 54)
- Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of male violence. (Fairbains et al, 2002, n. p.)

The late 1960s and the 1970s were also important for women in terms of legislation that sought to improve their lives e.g. the Abortion Act 1967, the Divorce Reform Act 1969, the Equal Pay Act 1970 (in full force December 1975), the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970, the Guardianship Act 1973, the Social Security Pensions Act 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 including the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Domestic Violence Act 1976. Some of the demands were therefore covered by legislation, although as the statistics in Section 1.6 revealed, legislation does not always ensure the conditions are met.

The growth in legislation, published literature, women’s centres and women’s libraries and the growing consciousness of women’s issues, all coincided with an expansion in the number of female students at university, and the subsequent development of women’s studies as a discipline in higher education establishments (Evans, 2005, p. 16). The first MA in women’s studies was in 1980 at the University of Kent at Canterbury (Evans, 1990, p. 26).

Despite these various achievements and activities, and the seven core demands, Carter notes that there was no homogenous WLM:

> [there] are problems in identifying precisely what is meant by the Women’s Liberation Movement, because it never had a centralised organisation or clear ideology. (Carter, 1988, p. 51)

The advantages of this were that it could appeal to a broad range of women; the danger was that women with very different ideologies would not always be able to work together for a common cause. Splits began to appear in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when different approaches to feminism became evident. The main splits were between liberal feminists (aligning themselves with the first wave), socialist feminists (who saw class as the oppressing force), and radical feminists (who saw patriarchy as the main cause of women’s oppression). This is a vastly oversimplified division, and within these types there are further sub-types (see Tong,
1988, for a comprehensive review). The importance of the different types of feminism is that these ideologies had a direct impact on the organisations that were established at the time e.g. the Feminist Library in 1975.

The women’s movement of the 1970s “fragmented into much smaller often single-issue groups, and it is far less in evidence” (Beddoe, 1998, p. 7). Many internal debates centred on pornography, with pro- and anti- groups creating deep divisions within the movement. Critiques of the WLM also came from women themselves. These women represented groups that did not feel part of the generic WLM which, they argued, was white, educated, middle-class and Western in outlook and assumptions. Thus Asian, black, lesbian and older women exposed the WLM as falling into the same trap as the traditions that they were trying to escape – that of labelling all women the same, or imposing their own power and authority over minorities. As the movement fractured, it coincided with the Thatcher years of government (1979-1990), which were notable for public service cuts and unpopular policies, which often had a greater impact on women as they tend to be more dependent upon public services such as health and transport. The mid-late 1980s also saw the rise of what is referred to as a ‘backlash’ against women’s rights and the notion of ‘post-feminism’.

Whilst Susan Faludi’s book *Backlash* is based on the situation in America, its findings are also applicable to the UK. She details the numerous ways that men (and women), society, the media, employers and the Government were creating a backlash against women. The 1980s were also a time where there was:

>a general retreat of all radical agendas in the face of global economic recessing and the associated policy reaction of conservative and social democratic governments, but also of internal fractures around issues of race, sexuality and class. (Scott, 1998, p. 276)

This retreat has lasted over twenty years, and has led to the situation whereby:

>one of the many paradoxes of thinking about gender in 2005 is that the new scepticism about the importance of gender comes from within feminism itself. (Evans, 2005, p. 16)
The backlash against feminism, from society and among feminists, coincided with the notion of post-feminism, connected to postmodernism. Such a stance argues that there cannot be one universal category of ‘woman’ as this ignores individual differences. Postmodernism rejects universalism and instead celebrates difference. The aforementioned critique of the WLM by a variety of ‘different’ women can thus be seen from this perspective e.g. black women, women from developing countries. But Strickland contends that the postmodern fascination for difference can oversimplify issues and actually gloss over differences – in saying ‘we’re all different’ the differences are actually ignored, with a lack of overall context and a danger of fragmentation (Strickland, 1994, p. 269).

The term post-feminism is problematic for semantic reasons. The media have tended to use the term not in its original philosophical sense, but in the sense that we are now living in a post-feminist society, thus regarding the feminist era as over.

A glance at the seven demands of the WLM and current statistics on women show that this is not the case. Kramarae & Spender argue that as feminism is not a stage or an event, it is not possible to have post-feminism (Kramarae & Spender, 1992, p. 6). They argue that it is a way of living and thinking. Using the term post-feminism disguises this key element of feminism and instead has the intention of signalling the end of the second-wave of feminism, and to some extent, to cut off this period of women’s liberation from any future developments. This denying of history is a classic example of how women’s voices from the past are silenced and left for a new generation to discover (Spender, 1982), and is one reason why women’s history has been seen as important. Rosenfelt & Stacey contend that the use of the term post-feminism:

demarcates an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by Second Wave feminism. (1987, p. 77)

That is, not only does the term imply the death of the women’s movement, but it also revises the previous movement. This can be seen particularly in the related term.
of ‘third wave’ feminism. This term appeared slightly after the term post-feminism, with some dating it to the mid 1980s (Orr, 1997, p. 30) and to the ‘riot grrrl’ music scene in America in 1990/1991 (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p 13; Orr, 1997, p. 38). These bands, and other young women, began to publish their own newsletters and created their own interpretations of what it was to be a feminist. Many see these printed magazines (known as ‘zines’) and more recently web pages (webzines) as the primary sources of third wave feminism. Zines are fanzines and magazines written by enthusiasts; they have various forms but are typically self-published, designed, written or edited by a single person. The British Library is building up its collections of zines, as is the Women’s Library (British Library, n. d., feminist; Women’s Library, 2005, zines). See two examples below - Grrrl Zine Network and Bunnies on Strike.

Figure 1: Grrrl Zine Network screenshot
Third wave feminism is disputed by some writers who claim that it seeks not only to disassociate itself with the previous waves, but also to dismiss previous preoccupations (Bailey, 1997, p. 19; Orr, 1997;) and is critical of their achievements.

The main problem with the third wave is that they are not rebelling against the reality of feminism, but a false image constructed by the media throughout the second wave and particularly the conservative backlash era of the 1980s. (Schriefer, n. d., n. p.)

The key reason for this rejection can be seen in the combination of third wave feminism, post-feminism and the backlash movement. These forces have subtly created a single unified stereotype of a second wave feminist that is ridiculed and derided. The stereotype is thus frequently presented as a bra-burning\(^\text{11}\), un-shaved, dungaree-wearing, man-hating lesbian, unable to have fun, who rejects all elements

\(^{11}\) The notion of ‘bra-burning’ is a misnomer. In 1968 a group of 200 women demonstrated at the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The women set up a ‘freedom trash can’ into which they threw items of female oppression e.g. girdles, high heeled shoes and bras. This raised considerable media attention and they were inaccurately labelled as ‘bra-burners’ (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 13; Schneir, 1995, p. 125).
of femininity, believes that ‘all men are rapists’\textsuperscript{12} and is anti-pornography and pro-abortion. However, as the previous description of the women’s movement has shown, there were diverse elements to all the campaigns, and the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s was far from unified (Bailey, 1997, p. 23). In fact, differences on sexuality, pornography and abortion were all catalysts in the division and demise of the second wave of feminism of the 1980s.

If the third wave does not identify with the politics of the second wave of feminism, what is its identity and its issues of concern? One of the key identifiers appears to be age – third wave feminists tend to be in their 20s or 30s, i.e. at the time of Alfonso & Trigilio’s and Orr’s articles, those born in the late 1960s or in the 1970s (sometimes referred to as Generation X) (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 9; Orr, 1997, p. 29). For today, third-wave women would be made up of those born c.1970-1985. Yet it was often young women in their 20s and 30s who were involved in the feminist movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Is it really a distinct different wave, or just differing generational standpoints (Orr, 1997, p. 29)? That is, is it a case of women of a certain age creating their own movements?

Third wave feminists also claim to celebrate ‘difference’, engaging with the ideas of feminists of colour, queer theory and other differences, widening the traditional image of feminists as white and middle-class. They encourage individualism, and “everyone to identify with their own issues based on their experiences” (Schriefer, n. d., n. p.). Yet, during the second wave, the mantra ‘the personal is political’ was a key slogan, and although this generally referred to the fact that ‘personal’ issues were political issues (e.g. domestic violence) it can also be extended to the examples of consciousness-raising groups whereby each woman’s experiences were discussed as her awareness of feminist issues grew.

Another contentious issue is that the two waves are very close together, with little time for considered reflection or theorising, and that it is only possible to determine

\textsuperscript{12} The statement ‘all men are rapists’ has been ascribed to both Catherine A McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and although both were known for their anti-pornography stances, neither actually said this.
the timing, content and style of a new wave *afterwards*, not during it (Bailey, 1997, p. 18). Conversely, the first and second waves were marked by lengthy distinct movements of activism (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 8). The third wave, in comparison, does not identify with any single unifying cause or campaign. Indeed, Alfonso & Trigilio argue that the third wave seems more “of an academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodernist critiques of second wave feminism” than a distinct movement in its own right (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 8). Thus there are fears, particularly of second wave feminists, that it is not closely associated with the social and political problems of ordinary women. This could be true, if it is also accepted that many third wavers have come to feminism from academic institutions or women’s studies (or more often gender studies) courses. This is in contrast to those who became feminists during the second wave through activism or consciousness-raising groups (Siegel, 1997, p. 62). The difference in the different waves and their different identities can be seen in the different models of women's libraries in the British Isles. And thus the current state of feminism in society has implications for the potential for developments in Wales.

1.11.3 Feminism in Wales

It is essential to understand the current social, economic and political situation in Wales in order to assess the potential for a women’s library in Wales, and it is also necessary to understand the development of feminism in Wales, as distinct from England and Scotland.

Women’s emancipation has rarely featured in the ‘traditional’ history books of Wales (Rolph, 2001, p. 87) although recent publications such as *Our Mothers’ Land* (1991), *Parachutes and Petticoats: Welsh women writing on the Second World War* (1992), *Our Sisters’ Land* (1994), *Struggle or Starve: Women’s lives in the south Wales valleys between the two World Wars* (1998), *Out of the Shadows: A history of women in twentieth-century Wales* (2000), *Changing Times: Welsh women writings on the 1950s and 1960s* (2003) and *Women in Welsh History* (2004) have sought to

(Moorcock & Dworkin, 1995, n. p.).
remedy this situation. What is noticeable about all these publications however is that their sole concern is with women’s history. They are part of the women’s history movement, which has been driven by Deirdre Beddoe, who was appointed as the first Professor of Women’s History in the UK (at the University of Glamorgan). Her guest lecture at the annual lecture of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales in 2004 discussed the paucity of research on women from Wales who were involved in national politics, and made reference to the lack of remaining evidence of the papers of Welsh branches of women’s suffrage groups (Beddoe, 2004). The more recent past is also often neglected, which has unfortunate consequences for researchers concerned with the impact of events from the late 1960s onwards.

As well as being involved with suffrage campaigns and war efforts, women in Wales also formed their own organisations. The Women’s Institute (WI) for example, was founded in Wales in 1915, in Anglesey, North Wales. Whilst not ‘feminist’ in the radical sense, the WI still created a female-only space for women to discuss matters of concern to them. (The Welsh-language equivalent, Merched y Wawr, was founded in 1967, near Bala, North Wales, after the WI refused to let local branches conduct their meetings in Welsh).

There is little formal or published documentation on the second wave of the women’s liberation movement in Wales. Indeed, it is even argued that “the role of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Wales during the 1970s … is being overlooked” (Rolph, 2001, p. 87; Rolph, 2003, pp. 43-44). However, recent ambitious projects have focused not only on oral history (see the Women in Wales 1920-1960 Oral History Project by Merched y Wawr, in Welsh) but also on documenting - in the form of reference guides – details of the known items relating to the WLM in South Wales (see the South Wales Feminist History And Archive Project).

Some have argued that the Welsh language movement was of prime importance to women in Wales during the late 1960s and the 1970s, and thus their campaigning
energy was not directed towards feminist ideals. Or that feminism in Wales has not had the same level of prominence as it has had in England and exists at on a smaller scale. This may be partly because “feminism is still frequently viewed with suspicion by Welsh-identified communities as an alien and divisive Anglo-American phenomenon” (Aaron, 1994, p. 183). Similarly, Lloyd-Morgan has argued that because feminist ideas were brought in from England and the USA and remodelled for Wales they tended to generate first in the English-language and urban areas of Wales (Lloyd-Morgan, 1993, pp. 23-24) which excluded rural and Welsh-speaking women.

Yet, a 1984 directory of women’s groups in Wales lists a women’s section of the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru and various bilingual or Welsh-language women’s groups in Bangor, Caernarfon and Llanidloes (Women’s Enterprise Bureau, 1984, pp. 10, 11, 15, 40.) In addition, in 1986 a group of four women drew attention to women’s issues in Welsh by editing a special edition of Y Traethodydd (The Essayist) and Rolph argues that there is evidence that some of the earlier consciousness-raising groups were in Welsh only (Rolph, 2001, p. 88). Also, Honno Gwasg Menywod Cymru/ Honno Welsh Women’s Press (established 1986) was founded by a group of Welsh-speaking women who met at the national annual (Welsh language) Eisteddfod.

It is claimed that:

[I]t is only in the 1990s that we have seen at last a small trickle of feminist theory and feminist literary criticism in Welsh, much of it covering ground now somewhat passé in European terms. (Lloyd-Morgan, 1993, p. 23)

Subsequently, she argues that Wales has moved from pre- to post-feminism in one step, without experiencing the movement itself. Yet the evidence below, of the formation of women’s groups and all-Wales conferences in the early 1970s would suggest that women in Wales were aware of the feminist movement and were active in the 1970s and 1980s. Lloyd-Morgan’s quote therefore highlights the ever present divide between grassroots activism and academic theory.
As in England, the WLM in Wales can be seen to date from 1970, when a group of women met at Cardiff University. The Cardiff Women’s Action Group campaigned on a variety of issues including health, education, contraception and abortion, nursery provision and employment rights. The group was also instrumental in the area of domestic violence, establishing the first refuge in Wales in 1975 (in Cardiff) and founding Welsh Women’s Aid which opened its first office in January 1978 (Rolph, 2001, pp. 89-90). (The first refuge in the UK for battered women – the term used in the 1970s – was established in 1972 in Chiswick.) In addition, the Women’s Rights Committee for Wales was founded in 1974. This group had a formal committee structure and attracted many older women who campaigned for equal rights issues (Rolph, 2001, p. 92).

Outside of Cardiff, the Swansea Women’s Group was established in 1972 and they produced their own newsletter *Women Come Together* along with practical handbooks (Rolph, 2001, p. 90). They were constituted from two slightly different groups – one based at the university and one in the working class areas of East Swansea (Draisey, 2004, p. 180). They also worked closely with the group in Cardiff, and established a refuge in Swansea in 1978 and a separate women’s space in the form of Swansea Women’s Centre in 1979. Although other women’s centres were founded across Wales e.g. Bangor, Cardiff and Gwent Women’s Resource Centre (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 43), Swansea is the only remaining women’s centre in Wales (Rolph, 2001, p. 91; Rolph, 2003, p. 55). It has been argued that these women’s resource centres were essential “practical responses to one of the major problems – access to information” (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 42). Swansea was also the host of the first All-Wales Women’s Liberation Conference in July 1974 (Rolph, 2001, p. 91), and Aberystwyth hosted Welsh National Women’s Liberation Conference in 1975 (Ross, Bearse & Bogle, 1996, p. 19).

In terms of literature that may form the basis for a collection on the women’s movement in Wales, there is little surviving evidence or research. In 1977 *Rhiannon: a paper for women in Wales*, a bilingual feminist magazine was founded (and ran until 1979, Rolph, 2003, p. 53). Apart from rare one-sentence mentions in
monographs, there is no further information about this publication. Other women’s magazines or newspapers had short life-spans and have not had a sufficient history to afford them attention in research papers or monographs e.g. Electra magazine founded in South Wales in 1984 which only had one issue (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 45-46). Other writing projects included WomenWrite Press, founded as a community publisher, and Honno Welsh Women’s Press which published its first two books in February 1987. In the area of research and women’s history, Swansea Women’s History Group was founded in 1983 by Ursula Masson, Gail Allen and Jen Wilson (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 58). Also in the arts there were two female film companies: Red Flannel Films which was formed in 1985 in Pontypridd (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 76) and Boadicea (Rolph, 2001, p. 94).

A number of women’s groups continued to be established during the 1980s, building on the developments of the 1970s. For example, Wales Assembly of Women was founded in 1984 in preparation for the Nairobi round of the United Nations Conference on Women in 1985. This group is still in existence today and in many respects, represents a ‘liberal’ approach to feminism. Women’s organisations such as Chwarae Teg and South Glamorgan Women’s Workshops were founded in the early 1980s, and the first MA course in women’s studies in Wales was established at University College Cardiff in 1988 (Draisey, 2004, p. 186). A more recent development, reflecting the third wave of feminism, was the creation in 1993 of MEWN Cymru, the Minority Ethnic Women’s Network Wales. Initially based in Cardiff, it now has branches in Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and North Wales (MEWN Cymru, 2005, n. p.).

The mid 1980s were also fairly active in terms of women in local politics. South Glamorgan established Wales’s first (and only) local authority Women’s Committee in 1985; prominent current Assembly Members such as Jane Hutt were involved

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13 It is not held by the National Library of Wales. The Periodical Holdings of the Feminist Archive North lists Rhiannon: Paper for Women in Wales among its holdings, but no dates are provided (Feminist Archive North, n. d.)
Other initiatives in cultural and social activities included the first International Women’s Day event in Cardiff (March 8th 1985) – an event which still takes place today; and Women in Wales/Merched yng Nghymru Week 12-18th September 1983 (Dee & Keineg, 1987, p. 40). The 1980s also saw the significant involvement of women in Wales in the peace movement. A woman from Wales, Ann Pettitt, conceived the idea of a march from Cardiff to Greenham Common in response to the siting of American nuclear Cruise Missiles at the American military base near Newbury. The march took place in August and September 1981 and was initially made up of women, men and children. However, after disputes and tensions at the base, the camp became women only in 1982. The camp was known as Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp and in 1982 over 30,000 women attended an ‘Embrace the Base’ vigil. The last cruise missile left in 1991, and in 1994 the camps were finally dismantled. Greenham Common has become a key period in protest history, and a testament to the vision and determination of women. There is now a plaque there to commemorate the protest period (Geograph British Isles, 2005, n. p.)

Perhaps, like the earlier suffrage campaigns, it has come to symbolise women campaigning during a particular period, with the result that there are many books and discussions of its impact and the importance of it being a women-only camp.

Women in Wales were also heavily involved in the national miners strike of 1984-1985 but despite being active in these campaigns, there have been few Welsh women MPs in Parliament. There were no Welsh women MPs in Wales from 1970-1984, and from 1984-1997 there was only one (Ann Clwyd, Labour). When Labour won the election of 1997 the number of women MPs from Wales increased to four.

Jane Hutt is currently Minister for Health and Social Services and a Labour Assembly Member. She was a director of Chwarae Teg and non-executive director of the Cardiff Community Health Care Trust. She is a President of the Vale Housing Federation and a Trustee of the Vale Youth Forum. She is also Honorary Fellow of the University of Wales Institute Cardiff (Hutt, 2005, n. d.)

The only woman to die at the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp was Helen Thomas from Newcastle Emlyn in Wales. She was killed by a truck on August 5th 1989 and was 22 years old. Helen would have set an historical precedent on August 18th when she would have been the first
It was not until the National Assembly for Wales elections of 1999 that there has been greater parity between the sexes of politically elected members. In the first election a total of 24 of the Assembly Members (AMs) were women (out of 60), but in 2003, the balance became 30 female and 30 male AMs, thus making Wales the first seat of government in the world to have as many women as men elected representatives.

Women’s position in Wales has changed during the century, and it can be seen that first, second and third waves of feminism have left their various impressions on society. The statistics provided in section 1.6 however, show that women do not necessarily have equal lives when compared to men and the Equal Opportunities Commission in Wales, whilst celebrating the successes of the last 30 years, state there is still much to be done to achieve equality (Anon, 2005, p. 5). Women’s weaker social, economic and cultural positions may be improved by improved access to information – about their contemporary lives and the lives of their predecessors.

1.12 Summary of Findings

As recognition of women’s issues has grown, both domestically and worldwide, so has the need for comprehensive and reliable data on women and their concerns. Unfortunately, accessing well-organized information on women has not been easy ... information is still widely scattered and badly organized ... The value of collecting information specifically about women is still not widely recognized in many countries and the process of collecting, classifying, analyzing and managing women’s information is difficult when organizations and government agencies lack the necessary technical resources and expertise. Also many countries lack an efficient system for distributing women’s information to women’s groups... . (Paik, 1998, p. 111)

person to have been tried in an English court in Welsh, her first language. (Geograph British Isles, 2005, n. p.; West Berkshire Council, 2003, n. p.)
This quote is by a South Korean information worker, yet based on my findings, her words could be applied to Britain, America, Germany or many other countries. This international similarity would suggest that not only are there common findings about women’s libraries across the world, but also that women across the world face common problems. This could be seen as contradicting the postmodern view that there cannot be a single category ‘woman’ as it denies difference and assumes homogeneity. I would contend that it is possible to understand certain women’s issues on a regional, national and international scale, and this is the case with women’s information and women’s libraries. That is not to say that every woman has the same needs, rather, that in general, the issues affecting women’s libraries, archives or resource centres are replicated across the world.

This thesis places Wales in a wider context by investigating a range of issues regarding current women’s libraries in the British Isles. It places the concept of women’s libraries within a broader concept of women’s spaces, and considered their roles in feminist knowledge creation and preservation. It also considers their engagement with the library profession and their relation to different models of libraries. Within the context of existing women’s libraries in the British Isles and literature exploring women’s information needs in Wales, the potential for the scope and viability of a women’s library in Wales is discussed.

This thesis presents new findings on women’s libraries based on empirical data from in-depth interviews and visits to nine women’s libraries in the British Isles. The findings are critically examined within the context of the current circumstances of women's libraries in the British Isles, and the question of whether there is potential to develop a women's library in Wales is considered. The thesis addresses the paucity of material in this field and seeks to provide evidence that will contribute to other fields of librarianship and feminist research.

It was found that there are three models of women’s libraries in Britain, each with their own positive and negative elements. These three models are:

- archive-based research institutions
• socially-orientated community-based resource centres
• virtual archive collections

In turning to Wales it is wise to consider what is most practical and appropriate, *at this moment in time*, rather than what might happen in an ideal world. Whilst it is stated as being a ‘dream’ of many involved in this discipline to have a building dedicated to women’s information and archives in Wales, it may be that the time for this model has passed. Thus, it may be more appropriate to conclude that a distributed approach, combined with a mapping of women’s resources in Wales, and improved networks particularly within women’s spheres would be most beneficial for women in Wales. Thus, elements of third wave feminism such as difference, diversity and engagement with popular culture (Gillis & Munford, 2003) would be deployed, whilst engagement with current professional practices and technological opportunities would be utilised to their maximum advantage.

The thesis also highlights potential areas for further research e.g.

• mapping of women’s resources and archives in Wales
• mapping of women’s organisations in Wales and creation of a directory
• a survey of information needs of women in Wales – leading to improving services for women in public libraries, if necessary, and assessing the potential usage of a women’s library/centre
• research into the actual use made of women’s libraries in Britain – user needs analysis.

**1.13 Structure of thesis**

The thesis continues with a detailed analysis of the literature in the field of women’s libraries, and the related area of women’s information needs. This provides an international context for the remainder of the investigation. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology of the thesis, outlining the overarching epistemology, what methods were chosen and why, how the sample was chosen, the procedures for the interviews and other relevant issues. It also includes detailed descriptions of the nine
institutions that comprise the evidence of the thesis i.e. the libraries and archive projects. The descriptions cover matters such as origins, development, staffing levels, collections etc, and provide useful background information so that a reader can place the findings and analysis in a specific context. Chapter 4 presents the reader with the findings from the fieldwork, from the site visits and interviews. The findings are structured within core themes of: identities, structures, engagement with librarianship, engagement with feminism and physical space. This facilitated comparisons to be made between the various women’s libraries and archives. The notion of three different models of women’s libraries became apparent in the analysis of the findings. Chapter 5 consists of in-depth analysis of the findings, and Chapter 6 builds on this by focusing specifically on Wales. It considers the various options for Wales, in light of the three different models of women’s libraries across the British Isles. It seeks to answer the research question as to whether there is potential for a women’s library in Wales. Chapter 7 forms the Conclusion and draws together the findings, analysis and options for Wales.

1.14 Reflections on the development of the research topic

As women’s libraries appear to be an unusual and little studied research area, it may be relevant to provide background information as to how I came into this field. With a history in librarianship (both practical and through qualifications) and a background interest in women’s literature, over time I developed an interest in women’s publishing, women’s bookshops and women’s organisations. I worked part-time for two years at Honno Welsh Women’s Press, which contributed to my interest in this field. I also undertook research into the information needs of women artists in Wales (Tyler, 2002a), a topic which arose out of a women’s artists conference where I was running a workshop on behalf of Honno. During the conference plenary, many of the delegates said they felt there was a lack of information and know-how. During that research I became aware of women’s libraries as a research topic, although I had come across them earlier e.g. in 1998/1999 after seeing an advert for Glasgow Women’s Library in a now-defunct
(1998-1999) feminist magazine *Sibyl*. My research into a specific area of women’s information needs then developed into the field of women’s libraries.

Feminist researchers recognise the importance of the researcher within the research, and therefore whilst remaining impartial throughout, it is sometimes important to note one’s background or assumptions. I am a white, middle-class British female, and I also had, for example, perhaps naively expected the women's libraries to co-exist in a flourishing, active and close network. On not finding a large amount of evidence to support this I was surprised. If I had no assumptions about women’s libraries, then the lack of networking or active co-operation may not have seemed as significant. What also may be relevant to note is that at the beginning of the research I thought the answer to ‘should/could Wales have a women’s library?’ was ‘yes’, but over time I began to realise that the issue was more complex. This thesis therefore, represents an academic and yet also slightly personal response to the situation in Britain and specifically Wales.