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Lone Motherhood in England, 1945– 1990: Economy, Agency and Identity

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Abstract

This thesis examines the history of lone motherhood in England between 1945 and 1990. Most studies of lone motherhood after 1945 have focused on unmarried women, but this study looks at all routes into lone motherhood: pre-marital pregnancy, separation, divorce and widowhood. Existing research on post-1945 history has tended to prioritise the role of the state in determining demographic trends in family life and behaviour. This thesis uses oral history evidence to demonstrate how women's agency shaped routes into lone motherhood as well as their management of female-headed household economies and their sense of identity within the post-war welfare state. A sample of fifty oral history interviews, primarily selected from the Millennium Memory Bank at the National Sound Archive forms the basis of the thesis. Interviewees are predominantly working-class and from urban locations across all regions of England. The sample is divided into five generational cohorts, which span the immediate post-war period, 1950s, 1960s 1970s and 1980s. Childhood, adolescent and marital experiences are analysed within each cohort in order to understand changes and continuities in women's entrance into lone motherhood. In addition, contemporary sociological sources are discussed alongside the oral histories in order to understand the relationship between the sociological construction of lone motherhood and lone mothers' developing social identities in the post-war period. Three categories of analysis in relation to the experience of lone motherhood feature: 'Accommodation and Housing,' 'Maternal Economy' and 'Social Membership and Identity.' The study concludes that women's greater entrance into lone motherhood after 1970 was driven by their rejection of an untenable social and economic division of labour in marriage, which remained consistent across our period. The development of sociological classification in relation to one parent families in the 1960s is demonstrated to have been taken-up by women from the 1970s onwards to legitimize their entitlement to state assistance and housing. This entitlement is also argued to have rested on an inter-generational maternal identity that understood the importance of maternity and the false demarcation between waged and domestic labour, which working-class women, inside and outside of marriage, confronted across the twentieth-century.

Abbreviations

DES	Department for Education and Science
DHS	Department of Health and Social Security
DSS	Department for Social Security
FPA	Family Planning Association
FIS	Family Income Support
GMA	Guaranteed Maintenance Allowance
IS	Income Support
NA	National Assistance
NAB	National Assistance Board
NCOPF	National Council for One-parent Families
NCUMC	National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Child
RAF	Royal Air Force
SB	Supplementary Benefit
SBC	Supplementary Benefit Commission
WWA	War Widows Association
WMA	Widowed Mother's Allowance
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WRAF	Women's Royal Air Force
WRNS	Women's Royal Navy Service
WWP	War Widow's Pension
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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1. Distribution of lone-mother families with dependent children according to marital status, 1971-94

Chapter One

Introduction

And I do think it's time to address a problem that for too long has gone unspoken: the number of children having children. For it cannot be right, for a girl of sixteen, to get pregnant, be given the keys to a council flat and be left on her own. From now on all 16 and 17 year old parents who get support from the taxpayer will be placed in a network of supervised homes. These shared homes will offer not just a roof over their heads, but a new start in life where they learn responsibility and how to raise their children properly. That's better for them, better for their babies and better for us all in the long run.¹

British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, 2009

I. Historiography and Purpose

The British Prime Minister and Labour Party Leader, Gordon Brown, when addressing the Labour Party's annual conference in September 2009, emphasised teenage single motherhood as a pressing social problem amidst the beginnings of what has been seen as the most severe global economic recession in post-war history.² The Prime Minister's objection to the capacity for young single mothers to house themselves independently in the twenty-first century through public assistance was voiced by other political figures in the last decades of the century, following the rise from the 1970s onwards in the numbers of one-parent families accessing public funds for housing and income. Since the late 1980s, successive New Right and New Labour governments viewed young single mothers, in particular, as social deviants whose sexual and reproductive behaviour was produced by an excessive welfare state.³ The increase in the numbers of single mothers

¹ Gordon Brown, Labour Party's Annual Conference, 2009: <http://www.labour.org.uk/gordon-brown-speech-conference>. The New Labour government, from 1997 onwards, made teenage pregnancy an important policy area. The subject of 'teenage' motherhood will be discussed in chapters Five and Six. For a discussion of teenage pregnancy in England at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century, see Lisa Arai, 'Low expectations, sexual attitudes and knowledge: explaining teenage pregnancy and fertility in English communities: Insights from qualitative research,' *The Sociological Review*, The Editorial Board, (2003), pp. 199-217.

² OECD Editorial, 'Nearing the Bottom,' *OECD Economic Outlook* 2009, Issue 1, pp. 5-7.

³ For a discussion of state policy and public debate in relation to lone mothers in the 1990s see chapters in Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva (ed.), *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist Perspectives on Lone Motherhood* (London; New York, 1996) and Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, 'Single Mothers in Britain: Unsupported Workers or Mothers?' in Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards

occupying council housing was facilitated by the passing of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act in 1977, which obligated local authorities to prioritise the housing of women with dependent children, and along with other policy developments in the 1970s and 1980s, provided targeted social assistance for one-parent families.⁴ As this study will demonstrate, these policies, which aided single mothers to maintain themselves and their children and to claim from the state ‘a roof over their heads,’ marked a historical shift in the state’s relationship with lone mothers. For the first time in the history of social welfare provision since the beginnings of the poor law in the seventeenth century, she acquired the social right to be housed as an independent unit (instead of being institutionalised or left dependent on kin) and to claim modest social benefits which recognised the economic risks of one-parent families as legitimating a higher level of public assistance than two-parent families, regardless of the cause of single parenthood.⁵ However, although this study will trace how the single mother moved from exclusion from social citizenship under the 1945 welfare settlement, to bearer of social rights from the 1970s onwards, it does not seek to tell a simple story of progression with the triumph of social democracy in relation to its subject. Looking beyond the time frame of this study, under the New Labour government in 1998, One-parent Benefit and Lone-parent Premium in Income Support were abolished in the context of international welfare state retrenchment. Gordon Brown’s 2009 policy suggestion that the state resuscitate the institutionalisation of young single mothers in order both to morally correct and limit the cost of female-headed households to the public, is indicative of the shifting history of state policy-making and the cyclical nature of concerns about certain social groups, which historical enquiry can help illuminate.⁶ As Lynn Hollen Lees argues in her exploration of the ebb and flow of English welfare provision from the inception of the poor laws in the seventeenth century through to the post-1945 settlement: ‘The welfare story [...] is not a Whiggish saga of progress toward the sunny land of egalitarian social citizenship. To the contrary it is a tale shaped by the shifting winds of particular economic and social

(eds.), *Single Mothers in an International Context: Mothers or Workers?* (London; Pennsylvania, 1997) pp. 45-79, pp. 56-57.

⁴ In 1976/1977, the ‘Child Benefit Interim’ for one-parent families was introduced under the 1975 Child Benefit Act renamed ‘One-parent Benefit’ in 1981; in 1986, under the Social Security Act, ‘Lone-parent Premium in Income Support’ was introduced. See Hilary Land, ‘Social Security and Lone Mothers’ in Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 171-197.

⁶ Anne Digby, *British Welfare Policy: Workhouse to Workfare* (London, 1989) p. 1.

worlds.⁷ The state's relationship with lone mothers has gone through a series of cyclical responses, which can be traced back to the evolution of the poor law:

The image of women producing multiple bastards for profit haunted the commissioners, witnesses before the Poor law Commission pictured single women as willing to exploit their sexuality in order to live well on the public purse. They feared that once a pregnant female discovered that she could live and eat well in the workhouse at the parish expense, she would continue to do so.⁸

However, the period from the late-1960s through to the end of the 1980s did mark an important shift in the relationship between the state and the lone mother, the historical circumstances of which this study seeks to explore. Hollen Lees study of poor relief draws specifically on the individual experiences of the poor, moving beyond the administrative focus of much of the historiography of the English poor laws in order to understand how people's agency in relation to welfare systems shaped a notion of social rights. This study, in telling the story of how single mothers came to hold social rights in the last decades of the twentieth century, aims to bring the single mother as agent of change into the historiography of the post-1945 welfare state.

Very little has been written on the history of women who managed homes and raised children without husbands or partners in the second half of the twentieth century.⁹ Historical writing on the family in the post-war period has thus far concentrated on the significance of the married family unit, concluding investigations at the doorstep of 1970, the decade where the coherence of marriage and the nuclear family as prevailing institutions began to waver.¹⁰ Jane Lewis has written extensively on social policies

⁷ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor laws and the People: 1700 – 1948*, Cambridge, 1998), p. 353.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹ Janet Fink, 'Condemned or Condoned? Investigating the Problem of Unmarried Motherhood in England, 1945-1960' (PhD thesis, University of Essex, 1997); Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, 'Pictures from the Margins of Marriage: Representations of Spinsters and Single Mothers in the Mid-Victorian Novel, Inter-War Hollywood Melodrama and British Film of the 1950s and 1960s', *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (1999), pp. 245-51; Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*; Martine Spensky, 'Producers of illegitimacy: Homes for unmarried mothers in the 1950s,' in Carol Smart, (ed.) *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality*, (London, 1992).

¹⁰ Penny Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945: Companionate Marriage and the Double Burden,' in James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds.), *Understanding Post-war British Society* (London; New York, 1994); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford, 1995); Pat Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Postwar Britain,' in Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (eds.) *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, Cambridge: 2003); Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Post-War Britain' *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005), pp. 341-62; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher,

towards the family as well as lone mothers in the post 1945 period, often from an internationally comparative perspective, and with Kathleen Kiernan and Hilary Land wrote *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*.¹¹ Such studies have explored the rise in lone mother families since the 1970s, relating demographic shifts in family formation in the last decades of the twentieth-century to welfare state policies and changes in the law concerning divorce, the family and female reproductive rights. Emanating from the discipline of social policy, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain* focuses primarily on the impact of the welfare state's creation in the post-1945 period. It builds on a body of work established by feminist academics in this field, demonstrating how the post-war welfare state was based on a 'male breadwinner model,' which assumed men had primary responsibility for earning and women for caring, in the process inscribing female dependency through marriage and necessitating that divorced and unmarried women with children were anomalies.¹² Kiernan et al chart how this aspect of the post-war welfare state altered because public law came to recognise married women as 'individuals' and the social security system extended welfare benefits to all lone mothers regardless of marital status.¹³ Charting the legislative and policy developments surrounding divorce and welfare provision for lone mothers across the twentieth-century, Kiernan et al also discuss cultural representations of lone mothers (although their analysis privileges the unmarried mother) within the printed and visual media as well as political debate.¹⁴ Here they find that constructions of unmarried motherhood recurred across the period. The most frequent representation was one of abnormality and moral deviance in the 1950s, 1960s, 1980s and 1990s, with abatement in the 1970s when the unmarried mother was constructed more as a victim of deprivation.¹⁵ The insights provided by *Lone Motherhood*

'Love and Authority in Mid-twentieth Century Marriages: Sharing and Caring,' in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills (eds.), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009) pp. 132-54.

¹¹ Such studies include: Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan, 'The Boundaries Between Marriage, Non-marriage and Parenthood: Changes in Behaviour and Policy in Postwar Britain,' *Journal of Family History* 21, (1996), pp. 372-387; Jane Lewis, 'The Problem of Lone-Mother Families in Twentieth-Century Britain' *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 20, no. 3, (1998) pp. 251-84; Jane Lewis (ed.), *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes: Shifting Policy Logics* (London, 1997); Jane Lewis 'Family Change and Lone-parents as a Social Problem,' in Margaret May, Robert Page and Edward Brundson (eds.) *Understanding Social Problems: Issues in Social Policy* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 37-54.

¹² Jane Lewis, 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes' *Journal of European Social Policy* 2, no. 3, (1992) pp. 159-73.

¹³ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 277.

¹⁴ One chapter is dedicated to 'Constructions of Unmarried Motherhood in the Post-War Period.' Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 98-124.

¹⁵ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 122-123.

in *Twentieth-Century Britain* in terms of developments in state policy-making provide an essential backdrop to this study, but its limitations also define the scope of the proceeding discussion. In surveying the historiography of the post-war period, Abigail Wills states that: ‘Much of the history of post-war Britain is biased towards the value and significance of government and its practices.’¹⁶ In the same vein, Kiernan et al focus on how in relation to lone motherhood ‘ideas and attitudes changed from above.’ They adopt the approach that the state directs behaviour and thus determines the history of social groups, as the following extract implies: ‘It seems to us that [...] changes in ideas as to what the powers-that-be consider acceptable and the kind of construction they have placed upon phenomena such as never-married motherhood provide an extremely important set of parameters within which people make their decisions.’¹⁷ Such a perspective obscures the relational nature of the connection between state and individual and portrays the social subject – in this case, the lone mother – as passive recipient.

Janet Fink’s PhD thesis entitled, ‘Condemned or Condoned? Investigating the Problem of Unmarried Motherhood in England, 1945-1960,’¹⁸ provides a detailed exploration of the role of the voluntary sector, state social policies, social research and writers of fiction in relation to unmarried motherhood in the immediate post-war decades. Fink’s thesis is particularly important in charting the voluntary sector’s contact with unmarried mothers and their treatment in the post-war years, demonstrating the continued importance of voluntary relief for those who fell outside the scope of the supposedly comprehensive 1945 welfare state. Despite conducting a few preliminary interviews with women who became unmarried mothers during the period 1945-1960, Fink decided that, in light of the diversity of experiences her interviewees recalled, she would overlook the experiential aspect of her subject: ‘I chose to focus, therefore, in this thesis not upon the experiential aspect of unmarried motherhood but upon how the category and problem of unmarried motherhood was conceptualised at the institutional and representational level within society.’¹⁹ Fink has since written on the cultural representation of unmarried mothers in film and fiction, in one instance with Katherine

¹⁶ Abigail Wills, ‘Juvenile Delinquency, Residential Institutions and the Permissive Shift, England: 1950 – 1970,’ (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006), p. 14.

¹⁷ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Janet Fink, ‘Condemned or Condoned?’

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Holden.²⁰ Martine Spensky's more concise, local study of Mother and Baby Homes in London during the 1950s provides a useful overview of these institutions and the condition of illegitimacy in the mid-twentieth century. However, both Fink and Spensky's studies lack personal testimony from women who entered institutions and neglect the experiences of the majority of unmarried mothers who were accommodated by kin.²¹ In Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher's recent study of sexual relations between men and women in the period 1918–1963, the authors suggest existing literature on premarital pregnancy and unmarried parenthood has tended to focus on the institutionalisation and 'tragic misfortunes' of unmarried mothers, but broader social histories of unmarried parenthood are lacking: 'We simply do not know much about the diverse experiences of most of those who became premaritally pregnant or became unmarried parents.'²² Fink, Kiernan et al and Spensky concentrate on never-married motherhood, but there is also very little literature on the subjective experience of divorce in the post-war period.²³ Most studies of divorce tend to focus on long-term evolution of moral values governing marriage and legislative developments in divorce law.²⁴ Furthermore, surprisingly little has been written on the experience of widowed motherhood in the aftermath of the Second World War. Pat Thane has noted the elusiveness of the effects of the Second World War on widowed partners as well as children of men killed in the conflict.²⁵ Ida Blom claims historians have neglected widowhood, compared with other aspects of the life cycle, particularly after 1945: 'The question of how widowhood was affected by the growth of the welfare society is another major area awaiting further studies.'²⁶ Consequently, a social history of lone motherhood is absent from the historiography of the post-war period.

²⁰ Janet Fink, 'For Better or for Worse? The Dilemmas of Unmarried Motherhood in Mid-Twentieth-Century Popular British Film and Fiction', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1, (February 2011), pp. 145-160; Fink and Holden, 'Pictures from the Margins of Marriage'.

²¹ Spensky, 'Producers of Illegitimacy,'

²² Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 156.

²³ Exceptions are: Jacqueline Burgoyne, Roger Ormond and Martin Richards, *Divorce Matters* (Harmondsworth, 1987); Eleanor Harper, "Sharing Intimacies: Men's Stories of Love and the Divorce Reform Debates in Mid-Twentieth-Century England" (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2004).

²⁴ Roderick Phillips, *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge, 1991); Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce, 1530-1987* (Oxford, 1990).

²⁵ Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Post-war British Culture,' p. 194.

²⁶ Ida Blom, 'The History of Widowhood: A Bibliographic Overview,' *Journal of Family History* 16 (1991), pp. 191-210, p. 203.

Blom suggests research into widowhood after 1945 should utilise sources which expose subjective experience, in order to understand how the welfare state was experienced at a personal level.²⁷ In response, this study seeks to explore the experiences of lone mothers using oral history, so as to uncover the meanings women themselves attached to their experiences in the post-war period. It takes an ‘interpretivist’ approach to allow for an appreciation of how individuals and social groups are active in interpreting and negotiating the economic, political and social structures which they lived through, as opposed to being passively constructed by them.²⁸ James Vernon’s recent work on a history of hunger also looks at how adults’ memories of the ‘hungry thirties’ in the post-war period held together a social democratic consensus that claimed the relief of hunger was a public responsibility.²⁹ It provides a model for the following discussion of how systems of welfare operate *relationally* between individual, state and society. Carolyn Steedman has written about how her childhood in the post-1945 era differed from that of her mother who grew-up as a child in the 1930s, articulating this difference partially around her relationship with the state, which provided ‘tides of free milk and orange juice’ demonstrating that political economy is absorbed at the subjective level.³⁰ This study aims to contribute to a history of how public welfare was experienced through the standpoint of lone mothers, who in the 1970s came to identify as a class of claimants and were thus key to the post-1945 welfare state’s evolving character. The term ‘lone mother’ is used to refer to all women raising children without a partner, either as a result of widowhood, divorce or childbirth outside of marriage. The term ‘single mother’ was avoided, as it tends to be associated in the latter decades of the twentieth-century with never-married motherhood. Lone mothers’ adoption of sociological categories forms an important aspect of the discussion surrounding identity and exclusion or inclusion within the post-war welfare settlement throughout this study. The inclusion of sociological sources will be discussed in Section II.

Across the twentieth century, death rates for men and women significantly improved, with the probability of men dying at an age when they were most likely to

²⁷ ‘Sources such as diaries, letters and autobiographies should be studied with a view to knowledge of service support as well as of social and emotional support.’ Blom, ‘The History of Widowhood’, pp. 203-4.

²⁸ Stephen Kalberg describes Weber’s interpretivist method as follows: ‘At the core of Weber’s sociology stands the attempt by sociologists to “understand interpretively” (*verstehen*) the ways in which persons view their own “social action.” (Weber, 1968, pp. 22-4).’ Stephen Kalberg, ‘Max Weber’ in George Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*, Oxford, 2003), p. 142.

²⁹ James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (London, 2007), p. 238.

³⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London, 1986).

have dependent children markedly reduced. Thus widowhood declined as a route into lone motherhood during our period. Nevertheless, Chapter Two looks at the experiences of war widows along with divorced lone mothers in order to account for the importance of the Second World War in shaping lone motherhood in the early years of the welfare state. Demographically, divorce has driven the increase in lone motherhood during our period. Although some have argued never-married motherhood became the largest demographic at the end of the twentieth-century, this is only the case if ‘separated’ and ‘divorced’ women are disaggregated, when in fact both groups constitute the same demographic in taking a route into lone motherhood via marriage (see Table 1.)³¹

Table 1. Distribution of lone-mother families with dependent children according to marital status, 1971-94 (percentage of all families with dependent children)

	1971	1974	1981	1984	1991	1994
Single lone mothers	1.2	1.0	2.3	3.0	6.4	8.0
Separated lone mothers	2.5	2.0	2.3	2.0	3.6	5.0
Divorced lone mothers	1.9	2.0	4.4	6.0	6.3	7.0
Widowed lone mothers	1.9	2.0	1.7	1.0	1.2	1.0
All lone mothers	7.5	7.0	10.7	12.0	17.5	21.0

Note: Estimates are based on three-year averages except 1994.

Sources: Haskey, J., ‘Trends in the Numbers of One-parent Families in Great Britain,’ *Population Trends* 71 (1993), pp. 26-33; OPCS, *Living in Britain* (London: HMSO, 1996), Table 4.³²

The demographic increase in lone mother families from the 1970s onwards (as illustrated by Table 1.) has been the spur for sociological and political assertions about the exceptionalism of late-twentieth century patterns of marriage, reproduction and child rearing. As Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan assert:

There have been two major changes during the postwar period [...] First, there was a widespread separation of sex and marriage. Sexual activity amongst the young increased dramatically during the 1960s [...] The second major shift has been more recent and arguably more radical, involving as it has the separation of marriage and parenthood. The proportion of births outside of marriage increased from 5 per cent in 1960 to 28 per cent in 1990, while the divorce rate

³¹ For a discussion of the contention surrounding the analysis and interpretation on the statistics of lone motherhood since 1970 see, Lydia Morris, ‘Work, Gender and Unemployment’ in Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds.), *The Contemporary British Reader* (Cambridge; Oxford, 2001), pp. 108-117, p. 113.

³² Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 22.

rose more than sixfold over the same period; from 2 per 1,000 to 13 per 1,000 of the married population.³³

Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain, although attentive to the longer-term historical condition of lone motherhood and the legacy of the poor laws in the treatment of lone mother families, nevertheless leaves an impression of the post 1945 period as being marked by a dramatic historical exceptionalism through its focus on increased numbers of lone mothers from the 1970s onwards who were divorced or never-married. Kiernan et al acknowledge the work of Michael Anderson, who has demonstrated the numbers of lone mothers in 1880 stood at the same level as the 1980s, the distinction being that widowhood, as opposed to divorce in the late twentieth-century, was the principle cause of a family losing a male breadwinner,³⁴ but quite rightly argue the shift in the 'routes into' lone motherhood at the end of the twentieth-century from death of a spouse to divorce and never-married motherhood make this period distinct in important ways compared to previous centuries because of changes in divorce law and sexual morality. However, this focus on the exceptionalism of lone motherhood from the 1970s onwards obscures within their analysis an appreciation of the continuities with the condition of lone motherhood in previous epochs. The focus in Kiernan et al on the unmarried mother also obscures, somewhat, the divorced lone mother who, as this study will argue, was a vital actor in the post-war period in terms of driving the increase in lone motherhood. Sociological studies of lone mother families since the 1990s have tended (like governments over the same period) to be preoccupied with the condition of never-married motherhood. Not only is the divorced lone mother demographically more significant during our period (see Table 1.), but her social history is also deserving of more critical attention.

Although divorce rates certainly increased as a result of legislative changes during our period and although values concerning sexual behaviour and reproduction underwent a shift when compared to earlier generations, the emphasis on the exceptional nature of family formation during our period is questionable. By stressing the idea of a fundamental separation between sex and marriage/marriage and parenthood in the last decades of the twentieth-century, Lewis and Kiernan overlook how common it was, prior to this period, for people to have sex before marriage and for women to parent

³³ Lewis and Kiernan, 'The Boundaries between Marriage, Nonmarriage, and Parenthood', p. 373.

³⁴ Michael Anderson, *British Population History: From the Black Death to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1996).

alone as a result of marital break-up. Furthermore, Lewis and Kiernan's assertion about an increase in sexual behaviour outside of marriage from the 1960s onwards, although widely accepted, obscures the fact that it is very difficult to be certain about patterns of sexual behaviour in the past given the hidden nature of such experiences. Assumptions about a rise in pre-marital sex after the 1960s could be due to greater openness about sexual matters as much as behavioural change. Lone motherhood has a far longer history than one associated with the post-1960s, as suggested by long-term population studies, such as those of Michael Anderson.³⁵ Keith Snell and Jane Millar's study of lone-parent families pre and post-1945 actually suggests lone mother families were a more common household type prior to 1945.³⁶ Recently, Pat Thane has suggested that historians take note of how the mid-twentieth century is often regarded as a yard-stick for family normality, when in fact this period was abnormal in being a 'golden age' of stable, enduring marriage: 'The 1930s to the 1950s was the golden age, indeed the only age, of the near universal, stable, long-lasting marriage, often considered the normality from which we have since departed.'³⁷ When we consider sexual reproduction and family life in longer term historical perspective, Thane alerts us to the following points: pre-marital sex was a part of courtship prior to 1960 for most of the population and accounts for the recurrence of illegitimacy across past centuries; high rates of lone motherhood and step-family formation were common in the past due to significant death rates amongst young men; high rates of unmarried cohabitation existed over many centuries because divorce was difficult to obtain; high rates of marriage break-up were common in the past due to domestic violence and desertion.³⁸ A recent special issue of the journal, *Women's History Review*, was dedicated to the subject of modern lone motherhood, with contributions from a cross-national perspective.³⁹ As editors of this collection, Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, place the rise in marital dissolution and one-parent families in the late-twentieth-century in broader historical context and question its exceptionalism: 'In fact, since the 1970s we have seen a return to much older norms of serial partnerships, complex families and late marriage ages, though in a different mortality regime and legal and

³⁵ Anderson, *British Population History*, p. 401.

³⁶ Keith Snell and Jane Millar, 'Lone-parent families and the Welfare State: past and present', *Continuity and Change* 2, no. 3, (1987), pp. 387-422.

³⁷ Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Postwar British Culture', p. 198.

³⁸ Pat Thane, 'Happy Families?' *History and Policy*, 2001, p. 1:
<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-107.html>.

³⁹ Tanya Evans and Pat Thane (eds.), Special Issue: 'Lone Mothers', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1, (2011).

cultural context from that of earlier periods.⁴⁰ This study hopes to contribute to such endeavours to place the history of post-1945 lone motherhood in longer-term historical perspective.

The 'broken home' was often a consequence of the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation as societies transitioned into the modern period.⁴¹ Tanya Evans' research on eighteenth-century London demonstrates how war, migration and industrial poverty shaped the intimate lives of couples and left women raising children as lone mothers.⁴² Anna Clark has written about the 'sexual crisis' of plebeian culture between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, when illegitimacy, bigamy and wife desertion increased as a consequence of labour mobility and the social changes of industrialisation.⁴³ Jane Humphries has coined the phrase 'breadwinner frailty' to describe how during the industrial revolution women were frequently left to head households (and children often compelled to work) because male-breadwinning was much more vulnerable than has been assumed as a result of male unemployment, irregular work, war, death and a father's desertion.⁴⁴ Studies of the twentieth century have also challenged assumptions about the rigidity of marriage and the nuclear family, uncovering tolerance for 'irregular marriages' amongst the working class in the inter-war years and the prevalence of 'illicit unions' up to the 1960s.⁴⁵ This study hopes to extend such observations and unsettle the centrality given to the nuclear family in the post 1945 period.

II. Methodology

This study is primarily based on evidence from a sample of fifty oral histories from women who became lone mothers between 1945 and 1990 due to widowhood, divorce and never-married motherhood. The sample was constructed using archived oral history

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹ Manon van der Heijden, Ariadne Schmidt, Richard Wall, Editorial, 'Broken Families: Economic resources and social networks of women who head families', *History of the Family* 12, (2007), pp. 223-232.

⁴² Tanya Evans, *'Unfortunate Objects': Lone Motherhood in Eighteenth-Century London* (Basingstoke, 2005).

⁴³ Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995), p. 6.

⁴⁴ Jane Humphries, 'Childhood and Child Labour in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Society*, Tawney Lecture, 2010: <http://www.ehs.org.uk/ehs/podcasts/tawney2010.asp>.

⁴⁵ Joanne Klein, 'Unorthodox Working-Class Domestic Life in Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester, 1900-1939', *Journal of Family History* 30, no. 2, (2005), pp. 210-229; Tanya Evans, 'The Other Woman and her Child: extra-marital affairs and illegitimacy in twentieth-century Britain', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1, (February 2011), pp. 47-65.

material. Initially, it was intended interviews would be conducted by the author, but attempts to recruit interviewees proved difficult. In 2008, I contacted my local branch of Age Concern in Lambeth, South London to reach potential interviewees through pensioner social clubs in the area and ‘reminiscence groups,’ who would be familiar with the practice of life history documentation.⁴⁶ I was put in touch with co-coordinators of pensioner social clubs in the South London area and was asked to attend meetings and speak about my research project in the hope of attracting women who had been lone mothers in the decades following the Second World War to take part in interviews. However, I discovered the subject of lone motherhood was a very sensitive one amongst these groups and there was a high degree of reluctance amongst female pensioners to come forward and talk about their experiences. The stigma of unmarried motherhood was clearly evident as those who had been war widows were keen to pronounce their distinction from unmarried or divorced mothers; such a finding was important in alerting me to the historical legacy of distinctions between lone mothers. In light of this difficulty in recruiting participants, I decided to turn to oral history archives.

Internationally there is now a mass of archived interview data, as well as digitised virtual archives on the worldwide web which are under utilized by researchers.⁴⁷ The ‘re-use’ of qualitative data has been most frequently discussed by sociologists, but recently historians have begun to turn to archived qualitative data in order to understand the post-1945 period, and further debates have emerged about the merits and pitfalls of this method.⁴⁸ Mike Savage’s research on class and identity in the post-1945 period has

⁴⁶ Faith Gibson, *Reminiscence and Recall: A Practical Guide to Reminiscence Work*, Third Edition, (London, 2006) pp. 16-17.

⁴⁷ Joanna Bornat, ‘A second take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose’, *Oral History* (31), No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 47-53, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Libby Bishop, ‘Protecting respondents and enabling data sharing: reply to Parry and Mauthner’, *Sociology*, (39), No. 2 (2005), pp. 333-336; Joanna Bornat, ‘A Second Take’; Natasha Mauthner, Odette Parry and Kathryn Milburn, ‘The data are out there, or are they? Implications for archiving qualitative data’, *Sociology* (32), No. 4 (1998), pp. 733-745; Niamh Moore, ‘(Re)using qualitative data?’, *Sociological Research Online* (12), No.3 (May 2007): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/1.html>; Odette Parry and Natasha Mauthner, ‘Whose data are they anyway? Practical, legal and ethical issues in archiving qualitative data’, *Sociology* (38), No. 1 (2004), pp. 139-152; Odette Parry and Natasha Mauthner, ‘Back to basics: who re-uses qualitative data and why?’, *Sociology* (39), No. 2 (2005), pp. 337-342; Mike Savage, ‘Using Archived Qualitative Data: Researching Socio-Cultural Change’ in Jennifer Mason and Angela Dale (eds.), *Understanding Social Research: Thinking Creatively about Method*, Los Angeles, London: Sage, (2011), pp. 169-180; Linda Shopes, ‘Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes and Possibilities’ *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2, History and September 11: A Special Issue (Sep., 2002), pp. 588-598; Paul Thompson, ‘Re-using qualitative research data: a personal account’, *Qualitative Social Research* 1, No. 3, (2000): [www.http://qualitative-research.net/fqs](http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs).

pioneered the use of archived qualitative data for historical analysis and Savage has urged researchers interested in the post-war period to make more use of the abundance of such source material.⁴⁹ Niamh Moore's discussion of the 're-use' of qualitative archived data challenges social scientific scepticism about the objectivity of this method, and even suggests that 're-use' is a deficient concept.⁵⁰ Niamh calls into question the 'newness' of re-using qualitative data and objects to the view that researchers who return to archived qualitative data with a different purpose, are not sufficiently reflective about its original context.⁵¹ Both Niamh and Savage conclude that it is preferable to move away from the concept of 're-use' and suggest that archived qualitative sources, such as oral histories, should be construed in the same way that a historian approaches disparate sources, by attending to provenance and triangulating research methods, whilst also being pragmatic about the availability of such data: 'Rather than worry unduly about the specific issue of 're-using' qualitative archived data, we might instead learn from historians who are much more concerned to get their hands dirty and work with whatever material is available.'⁵² My difficulties recruiting participants for first-hand interview were countered by the wealth of archived interview data I was able to access in the UK, which provided a rich base from which to construct a sample. In addition to the interview data, contemporary sociological surveys have also been included in this study to strengthen empirical evidence. In the following discussion, the original context in which the archived interviews were conducted for the Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) will be outlined, along with the limitations and benefits of using this collection.

The MMB, held at the British Library's National Sound Archive (NSA) is one of the largest oral history collections in Europe, formed out of a partnership between the British Library and BBC Radio. It produced 5429 life history interviews with people of all ages across the UK in 1999 and no geographical area in the UK was unrepresented. There is very little contextual data for the MMB collection to assist the researcher wishing to attend to the original purpose behind the project, its sampling methods, interview process and outcomes. Aside from a brief summary of the MMB on the British Library's catalogue, there is one journal article which provides a very good

⁴⁹ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010); Mike Savage, 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post-War Britain: Perspectives from Mass Observation', *Sociological Research Online* 12, No. 3, (May 2007): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/6.html>; Mike Savage, 'Working class identities in the 1960s: revisiting the affluent worker study', *Sociology*, 39, No. 5 (2005) pp. 929–46.

⁵⁰ Moore, '(Re)Using Qualitative Data.'

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Savage, 'Using Archived Qualitative Data', pp. 177–178.

account of the project's aims, interview and archival process, but for an oral history project of such unprecedented scope it is surprising that this is the extent of the literature.⁵³ Trained interviewers at regional radio stations in the UK conducted the interviews; they vary in length, structure and quality. The majority of interviewees gave consent for their real names to be retained and pseudonyms were created when this was not the case. The interviews were then used to produce *The Century Speaks*, a radio series that went on air in the last months of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ The obvious limitation when returning to archived interview data is that one may find one's own specific theoretical interests or research questions are negated. Two obvious examples here are with an MMB interviewer who did not attend to an interviewee's geographical location and another where an interviewee who had divorced and remarried was only questioned about married life and not about single parenthood. The aim of the MMB was to encourage 'reflection about change within living memory at a community level.'⁵⁵ The organisers aimed to 'address known gaps in existing oral archives in the UK, which meant de-emphasising well-trodden topics.'⁵⁶ Topics which were deemed to be already well covered by existing oral history archives were 'work, or the war or women,' a conclusion which seems highly questionable.⁵⁷ The departure from obvious sociological categories within the interview process such as 'class' and 'occupation', in some ways made the MMB archive difficult to search for the purposes of social history and reflects the theoretical bias in the 1990s towards post-structuralist and cultural categories of analysis within social research. Furthermore, insufficient funding of the MMB project meant that not all the interviews were accessible in audio format and the catalogue has limited functions.⁵⁸ However, the MMB archive holds a wealth of material out of which, forty-two interviews were gathered. Additionally two interviews were included from the

⁵³ Rob Perks, 'The Century Speaks: A Public History Partnership', *Oral History* (Autumn 2001), pp. 95-105.

⁵⁴ 'In the final months of the last millennium as many as 9.8 million people from every corner of the UK tuned into their local BBC radio station to hear 640 half-hour oral history radio documentaries. This was *The Century Speaks*, the most ambitious radio series ever mounted in Britain, drawn from some 6,000 oral history interviews, reflecting change over the twentieth century told by those who witnessed it.' *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁶ 'The themes [...] were also designed to work as entertaining programme topics, starting with the topographical (Where We Live) and moving onto the locational (House and Home), then identity (Who We Are and Belonging) through the personal (Living Together, Crime and the Law, Growing Up, Getting Older), to the more specific (Technology, Eating and Drinking, Money, Leisure, Going Places, Life and Death, Beliefs and Fears) and finally the speculative (What's Next?).' *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Imperial War Museum's (IWM) oral history collection, one from the Museum of London's oral history collection (MOL), one from the Mental Health Testimony Archive (MHTA) and one from the National Life Story Award's (NLSA). A further three were from a documentary made in 1996 entitled 'Love Child' broadcast by the BBC and held at the NSA. The documentary involved interviews with women who became unmarried mothers in the 1960s. Testimonies from unmarried mothers have been the most difficult to locate throughout the study. Although not generated for the purposes of life history or oral history recording, this documentary source offered further access to first-hand testimony. I constructed a sample of fifty women in total who had become lone mothers across five generational cohorts: the initial post-war years, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s. I then spent a year both summarising and transcribing each audio recording, producing over 200,000 words of transcribed interview material, analysed in the proceeding chapters.

In the following discussion the characteristics of the sample, its representativeness and the interviewees' shared historical context will be outlined. A summary of the key characteristics of the interviewees can be found in the Appendix. Those women who became lone mothers in the post-war years were the eldest at the time of interview in 1999, born between 1910 and 1919; those in the 1950s cohort were born between 1911 and 1939; those in the 1960s cohort were born between 1914 and 1946; those in the 1970s cohort were born between 1927 and 1960 and those in the 1980s cohort were born between 1943 and 1971. The sample covers a variety of regional locations across England. The interviewees in this study all experienced lone motherhood within an urban environment; rural life histories have not been included. Recent oral histories have paid pertinent attention to the importance of regional difference and geographical locale in shaping historical experience, a dimension which is lacking in this study and could be further developed.⁵⁹ The majority of the interviewees came from working-class backgrounds, despite efforts to include more middle-class interviewees. The latter proved more difficult to locate in the MMB archive, a finding that may be indicative of the tendency of social research to fixate on the working

⁵⁹ Angela Davis, "So it wasn't a brilliant education, not really I don't think": Class, gender and locality. Women's accounts of school in rural Oxfordshire, c. 1930-1960', *History of Education Researcher* 78, (2006), pp. 72-83; Angela Davis, 'To what extent were women's experiences of maternity influenced by locality? Benson, Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970', *Family and Community History* 8, (2005), pp. 21-34; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*.

classes.⁶⁰ The importance of class as an analytical category will be discussed in Section III. The experiences of migrant women are underrepresented in this study, although a small number of first and second-generation migrant women's testimonies feature in later chapters. Previous oral histories such as Elizabeth Roberts' *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940* and *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940–1970*, endeavoured to meet social scientific standards of representativeness, constructing large qualitative samples, but in recent years there has also been a turn towards the use of a small number of cases in oral history and life history research, sometimes involving a psychoanalytical approach to interpretation.⁶¹ Although our sample is not formally representative, this study adopts a sociological approach to evidence in an attempt to contribute to discussions about historical change and continuity. The proceeding discussion investigates individual biography in detail whilst placing the oral histories alongside contemporary surveys, sociological literature and broader historiographical evidence, in order to mitigate bias and make more general arguments. It does not adopt a psychoanalytical model in relation to personal testimony, but looks at these sources as evidence of the individual as social actor, whose identity can be understood as being responsive to historically specific socio-economic structures. The lives of the women in this study spanned the twentieth century. Although this study focuses on their experiences of lone motherhood in the post-1945 period, the approach outlined above means the oral testimonies are set within a historical context which saw the first three cohorts mostly experience childhood and young adulthood at the time of the Great War, the Great Depression, the Second World War and the early welfare state. The fourth cohort mostly experienced childhood and young adulthood in the post-war period, recalling the impact of the Second World War, but the sixth cohort was the only generation not to have remembered childhoods and young adulthoods which were affected by conflict. Instead, the fifth cohort experienced childhood and young adulthood within the context of the established welfare state and the 'permissive' shifts

⁶⁰ The MMB found that a large proportion of their participants were teachers, but the remaining largest occupational groups were from backgrounds which can be classified as working-class; *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶¹ Alastair Thompson, *Moving Stories, Women's Lives* (Manchester, 2011); James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010); Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Judy Giles 'Narratives of Gender, Class and Modernity in Women's Memories of Mid-Twentieth Century Britain' *Signs* 28, (2002) pp. 21 – 41.

of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus all the interviewees entered adulthood with the right to vote, brought about by the 1928 Representation of the People Act and whether as children or as adults experienced the coming of the welfare state; all the interviewees lived through the second wave feminist movement of the late 1960s and landmark legislative changes such as the 1967 Abortion Act and the 1969 Divorce Reform Act. Reflected in the histories of women from the early to the late decades of the twentieth century are social and economic developments which feature in the historiography of the period: the fall in the birth rate, a rise in overall living standards and social mobility, increased educational opportunities, increased female rates of employment, a decline in religious worship and changing attitudes and policy towards marriage, divorce and sexual morality.

Furthermore, as pioneering oral history projects of the past and more recent oral histories have demonstrated, this method is particularly rewarding when 'hidden' experiences are being investigated, such as family poverty and illicit behaviour, or when the 'black box' of sexual and economic relations within the household is explored.⁶² In terms of answering the call of Sheila Rowbotham that women, 'hidden from history,' be brought into historical writing, the use of oral history is a productive method in accessing the lives of ordinary women within the home. As Paul Thompson has argued in relation to the history of the family, demographic histories of population change have offered a 'lop-sided, empty frame,' which the utilisation of oral history as a primary source has been critical in re-aligning:

Perhaps the most striking feature of all, however, is the transforming impact of oral history upon the history of the family. Without its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships. The roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of girls and boys, emotional and material conflicts and dependence, the struggle of youth for independence, courtship, sexual behaviour within and outside marriage, contraception and abortion – all these were effectively secret areas.⁶³

⁶² Examples include: Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London, 1975); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Roberts, *Women and Families*; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England: 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005); Lucinda McCray Beier, "'We Were as Green as Grass': Learning About Sex and Reproduction in Three Working-Class Lancashire Communities, 1900-1970" *Social History of Medicine* 16, no. 3 (2003), pp. 461-80; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*.

⁶³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Second Edition (Oxford, 1988).

Thane and Evans note how contributors to the *Women's History Review* issue on lone motherhood found it difficult to learn about the experiences of unmarried mothers because of their invisibility amongst sources.⁶⁴ Thane has discussed the problem of using census data to understand the lives of unmarried mothers and their children living with kin because it recorded the relationship of family members to the head of household, not to each other.⁶⁵ Although official statistics had recorded the number of illegitimate births since 1837, statistical data on unmarried mothers who kept their children did not become available until the mid-1970s.⁶⁶ The presence of the lone mother in sociological research from the 1960s onwards will be discussed in the proceeding chapters, but oral history like autobiography, illuminates the survival strategies and social relationships of lone mothers during our period. As Alessandro Portelli states:

Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the nonhegemonic classes [...] Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts.'⁶⁷

Women's life histories can be argued to offer an alternate narrative to the traditional male biographical form.⁶⁸ In relation to the twentieth century, some autobiographies written by men have been criticised for offering nostalgic and 'rose-tinted' views of working-class life in the inter-war period and the 1950s. Examples of women's autobiography such as Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* have offered counter-narratives which expose more ambivalent and subversive pictures of family life and women's lives during these eras.⁶⁹ As Theodore Zeldin suggests in *An Intimate History of Humanity*, women's secondary social status throughout much of history has meant their autobiographies can offer the historian counter-narratives and insights into shifting structures of oppression:

Women seem to me to be looking at life with fresh eyes, and their autobiographies, in various forms, are the most original part of contemporary

⁶⁴ Tanya Evans and Pat Thane, 'Introduction: Lone Mothers', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1, (2011), pp. 3-9, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Pat Thane, 'Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1, (February 2011), pp. 11-29, p. 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in Robert Perks and Alastair Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998) p. 67.

⁶⁸ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*; Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood: A Memoir* (London, 2000).

literature. Their clash with old mentalities is the impasse which dwarfs all other impasses.⁷⁰

Interviewees in this study often comment on how life was ‘then’ and ‘now’, a reflexive process which offers insights into debates about continuity and change and assumptions about the stability of the nuclear family before 1970, as the following extract illustrates. Ellen O’Brien was born in 1911 and worked as a midwife from the 1930s to the 1960s; she became a divorced mother in the 1950s:

Well this is 1936 and you see now when people talk about, ‘isn’t it terrible,’ I think back to those days because we weren’t really exceptional. There was far more women/girls, getting married while they were pregnant than people realise and some of them in sheer ignorance. In fact, you know, there’s quite a lot one could talk about concerning that because apropos my private nursing experiences, I know maids were often accosted by the master or the elder son of the house, and had no choice. If people think there were no single mums in 1934, 1935, 36 and those years, I could tell them different. I mean it was really very sad.⁷¹

Oral history is by nature reflexive as it relies on people’s memories to produce a record of the past. The potentially distorting effect of memory and generational distance from past events can be seen as a problem for the use of life history interviews in historical writing and one certainly needs to be aware of the effect of how contemporary contexts shape interviewees perception of the past. Furthermore, the silences and absences in oral history interviews are important to attend to. For example, references to the impact and importance of the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s are scarce amongst our sample. When references to the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) are made they are often tempered and even contrite in tone, as the following quote from one interviewee illustrates:

I can remember him saying that he couldn’t let me have a temporary loan. I had to have a male guarantor to give me this loan [...] Ever since then I’ve really – I’m not sort of into *aggressive* women’s lib’ – but I’m very much in favour of fair treatment for females.⁷²

Such statements need to be considered in light of popular associations of the feminist movement in the 1980s and 1990s with anti-femininity and militancy. Such discourses

⁷⁰ Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London, 1994), p. 19.

⁷¹ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O’Brien.

⁷² MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

may have restrained the interviewees in 1999, from recalling their identification with and responsiveness to the aims of the WLM. However, the fact that interviewees reflect on the past with hindsight and generational distance can offer important contributions to our understanding of the past. It offers a way of understanding the shifting meanings people attach to their experiences and the changing nature of social identities in different historical contexts.

Two aspects of this study's methodological approach are important to outline: locating the experience of lone motherhood within the life-cycle of the individual and attention to intergenerational change and continuity. As regards the former, sociological studies over the last fifty years have tended to produce single generational studies of lone motherhood or 'snapshots' of the lone mother at one point in time, instead of a longitudinal picture of this social group.⁷³ This study has chosen to look at five generations of lone mothers between 1945 and 1990 (as outlined above) in order to investigate how routes into lone motherhood altered across the period as well as address issues of change and continuity in relation to the condition of lone motherhood and the identity of lone mothers. The experience of lone motherhood is not treated in isolation from the rest of the life-course, rather the interviewees' childhoods and young adulthoods are included. For widows and divorcees the experience of marriage is discussed, and for divorcees the process of divorce. For unmarried mothers, the circumstances of pre-marital sexual relations are analysed as well as reasons for not entering marriage or remaining with the father of a child. Such an approach allows for various 'routes into' lone motherhood to be explored and for questions about the nature of pre-marital sexual behaviour, marriage and marital conflict to be explored. Late-modern sociological theories have suggested that heterosexual relationships in the second-half of the twentieth century became more democratic and informed by increased individualism.⁷⁴ In addition, it has been argued the decline of marriage as an institution was replaced by the idea of marriage as companionship, with particular emphasis on the importance of intimacy and equality.⁷⁵ Jeffrey Weeks has claimed that a revolution in intimacy took place at the end of the twentieth century, partly facilitated by

⁷³ Graham Allan and Graham Crow make this point in relation to marriage and divorce: Graham Allan and Graham Crow, *Families, Households and Society* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 125.

⁷⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, 1992); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge UK and Cambridge MA, 1995).

⁷⁵ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003).

the advent of the pill and women's and gay liberation.⁷⁶ Hera Cook has placed the pill at the centre of the sexual revolution, in transforming women's capacity to control their fertility.⁷⁷ Notions of 'choice' in relation to partnership, sexual behaviour and reproduction have informed statements about women 'choosing' single parenthood in the late-twentieth century. These assertions will be explored through the oral histories presented in the following chapters.

Furthermore, where interviewees cohabited, married or remarried following a period of time as lone mother, this life event is included in the proceeding discussion. Remarriage rates increased after the 1969 Divorce Reform Act⁷⁸ and cohabitation from the 1970s onwards. Lone motherhood in the late twentieth-century was a transitory experience for many women, lasting on average three and a half years, before they re-partnered.⁷⁹ By positioning lone motherhood as a phase within the life-course, this study hopes to challenge the presentation of lone motherhood in contemporary sociological studies and public debate as a 'static' condition, a misconception that seems to be a by-product of the fixation on lone motherhood as an exceptional and endemic aspect of late-twentieth century society. In truncating interviewees' life histories into different stages and relationship statuses, problems arise about the complexity of people's relationships and their narration of them within an interview. The problem of boundary definition in relation to when marriage ends and separation begins, or when lone motherhood ends and a cohabiting relationship begins, presents a challenge for the researcher.⁸⁰ However, such ambiguities have been attended to and drawn-out where possible in the proceeding chapters.

Secondly, inter-generational relationships between parents and the young and more specifically mothers and daughters, are a key aspect of the analysis of the oral

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London; New York, 2007), p. i.

⁷⁷ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷⁸ 'The proportion of all marriages which are remarriages for one or both parties has increased steadily since the 1969 Divorce Reform Act came into effect in 1971. In 1981 over 33 per cent of all marriages included at least one remarried partner.' Jacqueline Burgoyne and David Clark, *Making a go of it: A study of stepfamilies in Sheffield* (London; Boston, 1984), p. 17.

⁷⁹ 'The fact that lone motherhood in the late twentieth century is for many women a transitory status, lasting on average three and a half years is rarely mentioned.' Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ See Graham Crow and Michael Hardey for a discussion of the ambiguities surrounding definitions of lone-parent households: Graham Crow and Michael Hardey, 'Diversity and Ambiguity Among Lone-parent Households in Modern Britain' in Graham Allan (ed.) *The Sociology of the Family*, (Oxford; Massachusetts, 1999), pp. 232-246.

histories. Elizabeth Roberts' research on working-class women and families engages directly with the shape of continuity and change across generations as well as exploring intergenerational relationships between parents and children. The mother-daughter relationship assumed a central position in such seminal sociological studies as Peter Wilmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*.⁸¹ More recently, oral history based texts have continued to view the mother-daughter dyad as a prominent intergenerational relationship in shaping women's historical development, with Penny Summerfield's treatment of women's life stories of the Second World War and Selina Todd's study of young women's rise as economic actors in the first half of the twentieth century.⁸² Thus in looking at the childhoods of the women in this study – which span the early decades of the twentieth-century through to the 1970s – the memories which interviewees recall of their own mothers and their role with the family will be given critical attention. In so doing, questions about the changing nature of daughters' relationships with parents and their place within the family, as well as the changing nature of maternity and maternal identity, will be drawn out.

In addition to oral history sources, contemporary sociological sources are also included in this study. Mike Savage has drawn attention to the neglect of social scientific sources by historians and has suggested that these be more frequently treated as primary material in understanding post-war social change.⁸³ Selina Todd has taken this approach in her recent writing on working-class living standards and identity in the North of England.⁸⁴ Todd alerts us to the role played by sociologists in constructing a notion of the affluent working-class in the 1950s and 1960s and the gap between working-class experiences of post-war poverty and sociological narratives. Sociological literature from the 1960s is given particular attention in our study. It was during this decade with the discipline coming to prominence that the lone mother appeared as an important subject of social scientific research. Contemporary surveys of one-parent families across the post-war period provide insights into the living conditions of lone mothers, but their methods and forms of classification can also be understood as an important aspect of the social and political reception of lone mothers and their changing social identities. Interviewees' accounts of lone motherhood will thus be related to contemporary

⁸¹ Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1957).

⁸² Penny Summerfield, *Restructuring Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998); Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*.

⁸³ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. vii.

⁸⁴ Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class' *Contemporary British History* 22, no. 4, (December 2008), pp. 501-518.

sociological narratives. How did women respond to sociological language and in what ways did the relationship between social scientific categorisation and women's agency impact on the welfare state? In asking such a question it is hoped that this study can contribute to developing a historical sociology of the social sciences.

III. Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach adopted by this study prioritises questions of a socio-economic nature. As Thane has recently argued, the long-term history of the family demonstrates that:

Poorer people have had, and continue to have, the most unstable family lives: most prone to break-up due to death, desertion, violence or stress due to unemployment and poverty. Thus the tendency to blame family break-up for social problems, such as educational under-achievement and crime, may divert attention from another major cause both of these problems and of family instability: socio-economic inequality.⁸⁵

Thus the material aspects of the interviewees' lives and the class-based implications of lone motherhood are given particular attention in the preceding chapters. As mentioned above, the interviewees in this study have been categorised as predominantly working-class. Assigning social class statuses to interviewees was not an unproblematic process. Writers such as Savage have drawn particular attention to the limitations of objective measures of social class and the importance of subjective notions of class identity.⁸⁶ Todd's research on young women's work in the first-half of the twentieth century has emphasised how occupation alone was not sufficient to understand young women's class, rather occupation and family circumstance shaped class identity and life experience.⁸⁷ As discussed above, the MMB initiative did not prioritise questions of social class and interviewees were rarely asked to talk about their sense of class identity. I assigned class status to interviewees according to the occupation of the head of household in which they grew-up and whether or not employment was manual or non-manual. In the case of two-parent families, mothers' occupations were most difficult to classify. Sometimes interviewees referred to mothers as 'housewives' whilst simultaneously mentioning their employment in casual, part-time work. In such instances, the occupation of 'housewife' and labour market occupation have been jointly entered in the Appendix and taken into account when analysing the role of mothers in

⁸⁵ Thane, 'Happy Families?'

⁸⁶ For example: Savage, 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post-War Britain.'

⁸⁷ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, pp. 9-10.

working-class homes. Such ambiguities illuminate the historical problem of the under-recording of women's labour market participation and the importance of women's dual experience of domestic and paid labour, a theme which will be highlighted in the following chapters. In addition to social class, interviewees reveal how their experiences across the decades of the twentieth century involved the interconnection of class, gender and generational differences, and therefore attention has been given to how these aspects of lived experience and identity intersect, as recent social histories have demonstrated.⁸⁸

Despite a general turning away from the category of social class in historical enquiry and political proclamations at the end of the twentieth-century about the 'death of class,' social class structure and the inequalities it produces has remained a consistent feature of industrial Britain's history. The middle class expanded in the second-half of the twentieth century as a result of manual jobs declining within manufacturing, the rise of a service sector economy and a greater number of people entering further and higher education. Despite a decline in the numbers of people working in traditional manual occupations, the majority of the adult population in the last decades of the twentieth-century defined themselves as 'working class.'⁸⁹ At the end of the twentieth century non-manual workers had a significant advantage over manual workers in terms of life chances. They were likely to enjoy higher standards of health, to have a longer life expectancy, were less likely to be convicted of a criminal offence and were more likely to own a house and a variety of consumer goods.⁹⁰ Social investigations at the end of the nineteenth century, such as that of Seebohm Rowntree, are a stark indicator of the incomparable degree of poverty affecting working-class families in the Victorian era compared with the second-half of the twentieth-century. When Victorian children were young, most working-class families lived on below-subsistence level incomes.⁹¹ Average living standards and average real incomes have dramatically improved since 1900, including incomes derived from state welfare payments, which have risen across most of

⁸⁸ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*; Claire Langhammer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920–1960* (Manchester, 2000); Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham, 1992).

⁸⁹ 'The 'working class' (conventionally defined) declined sharply as a proportion of the total population during the twentieth century, from perhaps 80 per cent at the outbreak of the first world war, to barely 45 per cent by the 1980s. However, throughout the 1980s, enquiries into 'self-ascribed class' showed that approximately two-thirds of the adult population consistently chose 'working-class' as the label that best described their class position.' Jon Lawrence, 'The British Sense of Class,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, No. 2 (2000), pp. 307-18.

⁹⁰ Ivan Reid, *Social Class Differences in Britain: Life-Chances and Life-Styles*, Third Edition (Glasgow, 1989).

⁹¹ Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, (London, 1901).

the century in line with average net earnings.⁹² However references to these averages mask the underlying distribution of income between rich and poor which has not followed a path of steady reduction in disparity across the century.⁹³ Between 1945 and 1970 the gap between the wealthiest in Britain and the poorest narrowed, but it widened out again from the 1980s to the end of the twentieth-century.⁹⁴ Furthermore, certain social groups, including pensioners, the unemployed and single parents, although benefiting overall from the rise in real income during the twentieth-century, had considerably lower incomes than the average household across the century.⁹⁵ The economic disparity affecting these social groups reveals the structural workings of industrial capitalism whereby one's economic security and share in prosperity is highly dependent upon the capacity to enter and sustain waged labour. Despite the post-1945 welfare state's attempt to compensate 'decommodification' in the form of social rights for individuals removed from the market economy, those who are unable or restricted in selling their labour power have remained vulnerable to material hardship, as the British liberal state has historically retained the contribution-based element of most welfare benefits and kept payments low to preserve the work incentive in line with the poor law principle of 'less eligibility.'⁹⁶ However, there is also an important gendered dimension as regards the capacity for decommodification, and it is to the subject of how women and the lone mother are specifically placed within the socio-economic structure of industrial capitalism and the post-war welfare state that we now turn.

The work of Wally Secombe has been used here to theorise the position of women in relation to their reproductive and productive roles with the shift from pre-industrialised to industrialised society. Secombe argues against the influential view that pre- and post-industrial family forms were broadly similar (the claim made by the Cambridge population group⁹⁷) and instead demonstrates how family form has changed

⁹² Paul Johnson, 'Introduction: Britain, 1900-1990,' in Paul Johnson (ed.) *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (Essex, 1994) pp.1-18, pp. 6-7.

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 6-7.

⁹⁴ Pat Thane (ed.) *Unequal Britain: Equalities in Britain since 1945* (London; New York, 2010), p. 4.

⁹⁵ 'Some households, of course, continue to have very low incomes; a single pensioner wholly dependent on the state pension in 1991 had a weekly income of only £52, and in 1987 25 per cent of pensioner households, 58 per cent of single parent households and 59 per cent of unemployed households had incomes less than half of average household disposable income.' Johnson, 'Introduction: Britain, 1900-1990,' p. 7

⁹⁶ The term 'decommodification' originated with Karl Polanyi, but was developed by Gosta Esping-Andersen in his theorisation of welfare states in advanced western societies. Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge; Oxford, 1990) pp. 42-43.

⁹⁷ Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (London, 1993), p. 4.

according to historical shifts in socio-economic structure. Up until the beginning of the twentieth-century, Seccombe argues households were 'partly proletarian,' taking-up seasonal employment, but also continuing with domestic forms of production. By 1914, this had changed, and the vast majority of households were resident in urban conurbations and dependent almost exclusively on income from waged labour.⁹⁸ Seccombe states that capitalism deterred the formation of multi-generational family units once adolescents could seek jobs on their own initiative and the family life cycle became discontinuous due to lack of property inheritance amongst the working-class (although he notes that bonds of familial obligation between adult children and their parents have nevertheless shown themselves to be tenacious throughout the modern period). Furthermore, with the separation of residence from workplace, women's attachment to the labour market was subordinated to their domestic role and the distinct dyad emerged of male-breadwinner and housewife. Seccombe's study focuses particularly on gender and the conflict which arises for women under an industrial capitalist system, between their productive and reproductive capacities. He argues that the separation of residence from workplace made mothering more difficult for women:

With the separation of residence from workplace, it became much more difficult and dangerous to combine employment with the care of infants and young children. This was not only because workplaces were at a distance from residences, but perhaps more importantly because capitalist work discipline made it practically impossible for mothers to halt work on an impromptu basis to care for infants.⁹⁹

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, feminist theorists and historians have traced how the male-breadwinner/housewife model under-pinned the design of the welfare state in 1945. The 1942 Beveridge Plan, which looked to create a comprehensive welfare system to eradicate poverty in the post-war era, was in many ways reactive to the reality of most adult women's pre-war lives (as described by Seccombe) whereby husbands were primarily breadwinners and women primarily responsible for domestic work.¹⁰⁰ William Beveridge was concerned to attend to the problem of women's interrupted earnings as unpaid workers in the home and how to insure women against the impoverishment long associated with separation and divorce, but under the

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State in the Post-War Years* (Oxford; Cambridge, 1992) p. 93.

new plans women's social security continued to be attached to their marital status.¹⁰¹ The essential benefits of the post-1945 welfare settlement (like its predecessor policies in the early part of the century) continued to be based on full-time wage-earning and as a result women were second-class citizens in a system that privileged full-time employment, only able to gain a foot-hold in the contributory social insurance scheme through a husband's contributions or as single, economically active individuals. Women who had children outside of the marriage or who were divorced mothers were left to claim National Assistance (NA) benefits, a residual safety net for those who fell outside the contribution-based scheme. As Anne Digby succinctly states: 'Beveridgean reforms gave first place to marital security and only second place to social security.'¹⁰² Furthermore, although the Beveridge plan was responsive to the predominance of the traditional sexualised division of labour within the nuclear family in the first-half of the twentieth-century, it was also normative in re-inscribing this social model and in continuing the liberal tradition of overlooking the risk befalling women of caring for dependent non-workers, within a system where male-breadwinning was faltering.¹⁰³

Susan Pederson's comparison of the British and French welfare state is amongst those feminist critiques of the post-1945 welfare state which has brought gender into the analysis of welfare state development. Pederson argues that T.H. Marshall's famous characterization of citizenship as comprising three stages – political, civil and social – reflected the class-biased approach to much welfare state theorisation, whereby the realisation of social citizenship in the twentieth-century was seen as a universal victory for societies based on social class divisions. But this interpretation left women out of the picture.¹⁰⁴ When gender was taken into account, women were found to be lacking in full citizenship rights.¹⁰⁵ Although women who lost a male-breadwinner came to be recognised as needing social assistance in the first decades of the twentieth century under 'separation allowances' paid to the wives of servicemen during the First World War and through the creation of the Widows Pension in 1925, these benefits were not the 'entitlements' of wives and widows. Rather, they were seen by the state as its debt to the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰² Digby, *British Welfare Policy*, p.62.

¹⁰³ Susan Pederson, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France: 1914-1945* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Humphrey Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950).

¹⁰⁵ Pederson, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, pp. 5-6.

male citizen worker and soldier.¹⁰⁶ These were the seeds of a liberal ‘male breadwinner logic’, which continued into the post-1945 settlement. Pederson’s analysis of Family Allowances, introduced in 1945, demonstrates how despite the worth of this benefit in providing small transfers to families with children, it was not intended to remunerate women for mothering (as contemporary feminists would have desired) or to adequately collectivise the cost of children to individual men and women.¹⁰⁷ Like many other services and benefits that were of assistance to women in the era of extended state welfare provision, these policies grew out of a concern, more often than not for children’s welfare, not women’s.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, a morally prescriptive element was built into the Family Allowances policy which like policies before it, rewarded married womanhood. Family Allowances were not available for the first child, a way of clearly encouraging families to have more children in the context of the post-war ‘rebuilding of the family,’ but also as way of not encouraging or rewarding women who had given birth to an illegitimate child outside of marriage.

Lone mothers’ vulnerability to poverty throughout the industrial period has been well recorded by historians and social researchers.¹⁰⁹ We know that single women with dependents have been prominent amongst the industrial poor and that the majority of poor relief claimants were female.¹¹⁰ This study aims to look longitudinally at how lone mothers managed poverty and the social meanings they attached to poverty across our period. Mary Daly suggests that research on poverty has produced an overwhelmingly empirical picture of poverty, whereby the poor have been given a very limited role within research on poverty and the personal and social meanings of poverty have been given little scope.¹¹¹ Furthermore, sociological studies of poverty – as recent historical work on the post-war period has demonstrated – have tended to produce ‘static’ pictures which

¹⁰⁶ On ‘separation allowances’ during the First World War, Carole Pateman writes: ‘In effect, the welfare state replaced the husband as ‘breadwinner’ while he was absent making another kind of contribution. As one MP commented, the allowance was “paid by the state as part of the wage of the soldier”; it was not the entitlement of his wife.’ Carole Pateman, ‘Equality, difference, subordination: the politics of motherhood and women’s citizenship,’ in Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds.) *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity* (London; New York, 1992), pp. 17-31, p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ Pederson, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*; Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*; Pat Thane, ‘Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England,’ *History Workshop Journal* 6, (1978) pp. 29-51.

¹¹⁰ Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 196-7; Thane, ‘Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England,’ p. 29.

¹¹¹ Mary Daly, ‘Europe’s Poor Women? Gender in Research on Poverty’ *European Sociological Review* 8, no. 1, (May 1992), pp. 1-12, p. 1.

obscure the dynamic nature of poverty across the life-cycle and underestimate both how shifts in socio-economic conditions and individual agency have shaped working-class life in the post-war period.¹¹² Discrepancies between aggregate data and small-scale life-history based research such as ours help shed light on subjective definitions of what it means to be materially and socially secure.

Another aspect of research into poverty has been the attempt to establish a scientific poverty-line and the merits of an absolute versus relative measure of poverty – such definitions are used in this study – but there are problems with the poverty-line approach which relies on using income as a proxy for poverty/non-poverty.¹¹³ As Daly argues, income is not straightforwardly converted into standard of living, especially when gender is taken into account. Income is a market resource, thus poverty measurements based on this resource neglect domestic, informal spheres of exchange and labour: ‘First of all income is a market resource and relying on it alone ignores the fact that there are other markets e.g. home production, gift exchange, services in kind; and there are other resources which are important in themselves but which also affect how income is or can be converted into a standard of living.’¹¹⁴ Daly goes on to outline how the resource of non-market time is utilised by women (who have traditionally taken responsibility for the domestic sphere) to meet certain standards of living within the family. Thus activities in the home such as cooking, cleaning and childcare, which demand non-market time, tend to be lost in analyses of poverty.

Studies of working-class household economies prior to 1945 provide useful models of analysis in looking at how women mitigated the effects of poverty on family life by accessing formal and informal resources and bridging the separation between home and work.¹¹⁵ In the proceeding chapters, the topic of ‘Maternal Economy’ addresses how interviewees managed the dilemma of mothering and generating income and explores the various resources they drew upon to sustain female-headed families.

¹¹² [The sociologists’] methods – the questionnaire and, increasingly, the use of in-depth interviews – neglected change over time. As a result, they underestimated the importance of economic developments in shaping working-class life – as well as working-class people’s contribution to these changes.’ Todd, ‘Affluence, Class and Crown Street’, p. 502.

¹¹³ Daly, ‘Europe’s Poor Women?’ p. 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ For example: ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century England’ in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (New York, 1995); Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*; Roberts, *Women and Families*; Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, 1992); Ross, *Love and Toil*; Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit* (Bristol; London, 1983).

Access to formal and informal sources of childcare will be analysed and the concept of the ‘income package’ adopted to illustrate how lone mothers pooled income from multiple sources.¹¹⁶ Welfare authorities since the creation of the poor law in the sixteenth-century have found it difficult to obtain maintenance from absent fathers for the support of their children.¹¹⁷ As well as packaging income from poor relief, lone mothers in the nineteenth century gathered income from wages and had higher rates of participation in the labour market than married women.¹¹⁸ The contribution of state assistance and wages to lone mothers’ income will be investigated in respect of the increase in the numbers of lone mothers claiming state benefits from the 1970s onwards and the decrease in their participation in the labour market compared to the 1950s and 1960s.¹¹⁹ Lone mothers’ relationship to the labour market and state forms of assistance involves questions about political economy and women’s sense of identity in relation to class and social membership. This introduces our next topic: ‘Social Membership and Identity.’

Thane has documented how those administering poor relief in Victorian and Edwardian England distinguished between ‘deserving’ lone mothers who were eligible for outdoor relief, and ‘undeserving’ lone mothers, who were sent to the workhouse.¹²⁰ Widows more often received outdoor relief than unmarried mothers, who were frequently sent to the workhouse and singled-out for unfavourable treatment for their moral transgressions.¹²¹ Such distinctions of entitlement will be explored amongst widowed, divorced and unmarried mothers in our period. Historians such as Lyn Hollen Lees, Elizabeth Roberts and Paul Thompson have described the fear and hatred associated with the workhouse in the first half of the twentieth century and the shame associated with poor relief and the household means test.¹²² After 1945, those claiming means-tested assistance (NA) were no longer required to register for work and the pre-

¹¹⁶ Lewis, *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes*, p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Tanya Evans, ‘Is it futile to try and get non-resident fathers to maintain their children?’ *History and Policy*, 2006: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-48.html>; Thomas Nutt, ‘The Child Support Agency and the Old Poor law’ *History and Policy*, 2006: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-47.html>

¹¹⁸ Jane Humphries, ‘Female-headed households in early industrial Britain: the vanguard of the proletariat?’ *Labour History Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp 31-65 p. 37.

¹¹⁹ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Thane, ‘Women and the Poor law in Victorian and Edwardian England.’

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹²² Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*; Roberts, *A Woman’s Place* and *Women and Families*; Thompson, *The Edwardians*.

war household means test was abolished.¹²³ Lone mothers could therefore claim benefits independently if living with parents. Interviewees' perceptions of NA (later Supplementary Benefit (SB) and Income Support (IS)) will be explored in the proceeding chapters. Did the stigma of poor relief and the means test still affect this post-war generation of women? The increased take-up of state assistance from the 1970s onwards will be considered in light of changes and continuities in the social identities and social membership of lone mothers after 1945. The relationship between social movements, such as the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and lone mothers' identities will be examined, alongside the impact of the burgeoning social sciences and the anti-poverty lobby in the 1960s. Savage has argued that the proliferation of social scientific knowledge after 1945 profoundly shaped people's sense of identity, imparting an awareness of the politics of classification and a more reflexive notion of class identity: 'In the post-war years the social sciences came to claim control over the social, circumscribing the role of literature and the humanities so that they could not speak so centrally to these concerns.'¹²⁴ This assertion will be considered in light of the oral history sources and their resonance with social studies of lone motherhood.

Our final topic of discussion is 'Accommodation and Housing.' The institutionalisation of lone mothers has been documented prior to 1945. As noted above, unmarried mothers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were frequently sent to the workhouse instead of being offered relief to remain in their own homes. Furthermore, in the inter-war years, some unmarried mothers in receipt of poor relief were incarcerated in mental asylums as 'mental defectives.'¹²⁵ Prostitutes and women who were considered sexually promiscuous had for centuries been placed in reformatories and penitentiaries. Jane Lewis and John Welshman discuss the initial influence of the Moral Welfare Association (MWA), a church-run voluntary organisation in the early twentieth-century in providing rehabilitative hostels for unmarried mothers.¹²⁶ As discussed in Section I, Janet Fink and Martine Spensky have written about the continued role of such voluntary homes in the 1950s and 1960s. However, there has been very little inclusion of personal testimony in historical accounts of the institutionalisation of lone mothers for

¹²³ Thane, 'Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England', p. 21.

¹²⁴ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 243.

¹²⁵ 'The Poor law authorities took 'repeaters' and from 1927 had sweeping powers to detain girls who were classified as mentally defective and who were in receipt of poor relief at the time of their child's birth.' Ibid., 406.

¹²⁶ Jane Lewis and John Welshman, 'The Issue of Never-Married Motherhood in Britain, 1920-70,' *The Society for the Social History of Medicine* 10, no. 3, (1997), pp. 401-418, p. 405.

our period. This study will look at the institutionalisation of lone mothers in Britain after 1945, through the life histories of women who entered Mother and Baby Homes as well as contemporary social surveys of such homes.

Shelter is of course essential for physical safety and survival, but Seccombe argues that within a capitalist economy, a private place of residence also ensures that labour power can be sold effectively.¹²⁷ This statement is problematic when one considers the history of women's employment as live-in domestic servants, where privacy of domicile was suspended, as residence and work were one and the same. The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Child (NCUMC) which was set-up in 1918 to campaign for the improvement of the political and social rights of the illegitimate child and unmarried mother, frequently found residential domestic posts were the most obtainable means of securing housing and employment for unmarried mothers in the first-half of the twentieth century.¹²⁸ Although the NCUMC reported that with the general decline in residential domestic service after the Second World War such a destination for lone mothers became outmoded, Lucy Delap's recent study of the persistence of domestic service after 1945 includes reference to the domestic residence of lone mothers.¹²⁹ Such continuities in the domestic residence of lone mothers amongst our sample will be drawn out in the proceeding chapters. However, throughout the modern period the majority of unmarried mothers were housed by kin. This study will explore both the multi-generational households, which many lone mothers after 1945 continued to live in (usually with parents) and the nature of such living arrangements, as well as accounts from homeless lone mothers and those who were institutionalised. Women have had a subordinate relationship to housing historically. In 1910, a publication by the National Association for Women's Lodging Homes, detailed the homelessness of the woman worker.¹³⁰ The authors noted the high numbers of illegitimate births in workhouses in the early twentieth century, but were also keen to emphasise it was not only young single women or unmarried mothers who were vulnerable to homelessness and institutionalisation:

¹²⁷ 'A private domicile is a prerequisite of a stable proletarian existence.' Seccombe, *Weathering the Storm*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Sue Graham-Dixon, *Never Darken my Door: Working for Single Parents and their Children, 1918-1978*, National Council for One-parent Families (London, 1981), p. 14.

¹²⁹ Lucy Delap, *Knowing their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011).

¹³⁰ Mary Higgs and Edward Hayward, *Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker*, The National Association for Women's Lodging-Homes, (London, 1910).

In this connection it might perhaps be well to draw attention to the fact that while the young girl is likely to figure largely in the popular imagination, there are, as a matter of fact, women of all ages in just as dire need [...] the early death of industrial men in many occupations leaves widows, with or without children. A woman with even one child, earning small wages, is much put to it to find accommodation, and frequently has to change lodgings, or pay out of all proportion to her earnings. There is also the 'separated wife,' alas! Only too common. These have to live somewhere.¹³¹

The housing situation for separated and divorced lone mothers will be drawn out in this study. The problems of housing for women exiting marriage with children have been underexplored for our period when compared to the existing historiography on unmarried motherhood. Furthermore, the rise in the number of separated and divorced mothers living in council housing after the passing of the 1977 Homeless Person's Act will be given particular attention. The capacity of lone mothers to form and maintain independent households in the post-war period will be placed in the context of national housing policy and changes in divorce legislation, but also the economic agency and social identities of divorced women after 1970.

IV. Structure of Thesis

The chapters in this study cover five time periods: the immediate post-war years (1945-1950), the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Although the decision to organise the chapters by decade was partly based on the organisation of the oral history material into distinct generational cohorts which could then be compared in terms of change and continuity, this structure also allows for engagement with historiographical debates associated with the post-war decades. Twentieth-century British history appears to have been distinctly conceptualised in terms of 'decade-ism' when compared with other periods of history.¹³² Despite the potential for history written in terms of 'decade-ism' to encourage an artificial narrative of short demarcations in historical time, the chapters in this study attempt to interact with some of the historiographical constructions of character associated with the post-war decades.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 128.

¹³² Ian Jack uses the phrase 'decade-ism' in his discussion of twentieth-century British history by decade: Ian Jack, 'Downhill from Here', *London Review of Books*, 31, no. 16 (August 2009), pp. 7-10. Recent publications on post-war British history which adopt such periodisation include: Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2010); David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-51* (London; New York, 2007); David Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951-1957* (London; New York, 2009); Dominic Sandbrook, *Never had it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005); Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London, 2006).

Chapter Two, “War and the ‘Broken-Home’: the Post-War Years” looks at the experience of war widows and divorcees in the aftermath of the Second World War. Here the nature of the ‘broken home’ will be explored in the context of political efforts to ‘rebuild the family’ and the beginnings of the welfare state. The impact of the conflict on women, a subject of historical deliberation, will be discussed in light of the oral history evidence. Chapter Three, ‘Divorce and Illegitimacy in the Golden Age: the 1950s’ includes oral histories from divorced and unmarried mothers. These interviews include the experiences of women who were sent to Mother and Baby Homes and had their children adopted. The interviews with divorced women expose the process of separation and divorce prior to the 1969 Divorce Act. The 1950s are associated with social conservatism, austerity (up until the end of rationing in 1954) and the beginnings of affluence. The solidity of the nuclear family occupies centre stage in historical constructions of the period, the oral histories will therefore tell an alternative story of women outside this social and cultural norm. Chapter Four, ‘Poverty Rediscovered and the One-parent Family: the 1960s’ looks again at the testimonies of divorced and unmarried mothers. This chapter engages with historiographical debate about permissiveness and the sexual revolution. The experience of pre-marital pregnancy, the continued institutionalisation of unmarried mothers and the homelessness of women exiting marriage offer a counter-narrative to the ‘swinging sixties.’ The reverberations of the WLM and social science literature will be considered in relation to the oral history sources. Chapter Five “Rights and ‘a roof over our heads’: the 1970s” sets the experiences of unmarried and divorced mothers against the backdrop of economic downturn and social and cultural shifts which began at the end of the 1960s. The escalation in divorce rates and the increase in the numbers of lone mothers entering council housing and claiming state benefits is seen to mark a new relationship of legitimacy between the ‘single mother’ and the state. Chapter Six “The Limits and Resilience of Entitlement: the 1980s’ continues this theme, but highlights the limits of lone mothers’ entitlement. In the context of a new political economy which marked a break with the welfare state of the post-war generations, issues of late modernity such as individualism and state retrenchment are discussed in relation to interviews with divorced and never-married mothers. Chapter Seven offers the conclusion to this study.

Chapter 2

War and the ‘Broken Home’: the Post-war Years

She was thoughtless and easy-going, ignorant of the responsibilities she was undertaking, undismayed by her husband’s unemployment. She now has five children who know their father only as an occasional visitor. Her income is irregular. She has only one bed and very little bedding. The house itself is derelict and almost unfurnished. She is in debt and her spending is hopelessly muddled. As time goes on she becomes more and more harassed and unkempt, the children uncared for and out of hand, the home more disordered and squalid.¹

National Secretary, Family Service Units, Early 1950s

I. Introduction

The epigraph to this chapter is an extract from an article written by David Jones, National Secretary of the Family Service Units (FSU) in the early 1950s. The purpose of the article was to explain the work of the FSU, a voluntary social work agency, in helping ‘problem families’ in post-war society. At the forefront of the article is this portrait of a mother who stands-in to represent the problem families which the FSU assisted. A survey of the FSU’s annual reports and casenotes in the 1940s and 1950s reveals how, as Pat Starkey has argued, the term ‘problem family’ really denotes ‘problem mother,’ a mother who was more often than not, a lone mother: ‘[I]n spite of the use of the term ‘problem family’, what was really meant was ‘problem mother.’ The description which appeared to embrace all members of the family was used to mask a profoundly critical attitude towards poor, working-class women.² In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War there was a strong emphasis on the rebuilding of the family as part of the reconstruction of society. In 1945, Lord Horder’s *Rebuilding family life in post-war Britain* emphasized how families had been ‘shattered’ and ‘broken’ as a consequence of war.³ ‘Broken’ homes did indeed pervade society at the end of the conflict, with three quarter of a million houses destroyed or severely damaged, thousands of men injured or killed as

¹ Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MRC), Trades Union Congress collection, MSS/292/805/2. (Date unspecified).

² Records of the FSU are held at the University of Liverpool’s Special Collections and Archives (ULSCA), ref. D495. Pat Starkey, ‘The Feckless Mother: women, poverty and social workers in wartime and post-war England’, *Women’s History Review* 9, No. 3, (2000), pp. 539-557, p. 544.

³ Lord Horder, ‘Introduction’ in James Marchant (ed.) *Rebuilding Family Life in the Post-War World* (London, 1945).

a result of warfare and families separated through service and evacuation, most people experienced in some way the breaking-up of their 'normal' family life.⁴ The task of reconstructing the broken home was made clear to be the responsibility of the married wife and mother, whose place was in the home, although women's continuation in paid work was accepted as necessary in the post-war economy as long as it did not override domestic responsibilities.⁵ The re-establishment of what was regarded as normal family life in post-war Britain meant a family with a small number of children, headed by a male breadwinner and a housewife (central to the Beveridge plan), but as Thane argues this family unit was in many ways new rather than 'traditional' although it came to be quickly promoted as traditional and aspirational.⁶ The family in post-war society was modeled on the idea of a middle-class or respectable working-class family with steady male-breadwinner, and wife whose attachment to the labour market was subsidiary to her role as homemaker. This template passed over the historical susceptibility of working-class families to the loss of a male-breadwinner through unemployment, migration, war, disability, death and desertion, as well as the need of many working-class women to engage in paid work to buffer industrial poverty. As Selina Todd has demonstrated, post-war social research depicted the normality of the working class in contrast to social investigations of the 1920s and 1930s, which perceived the working class as a problem group.⁷ In this context, the problem family/problem mother threatened to undermine a desirable norm which the working class as well as the middle class were seen to have realized. David Jones' description of the problem family evokes a home out-of-step with the post-war model: the absent male-breadwinner, an ill-equipped home, lack of modern standards of hygiene and numerous children, qualities associated with a pre-war world, its continuing presence in the post-war world, the responsibility of an inadequate mother. As Starkey argues, such critiques ignored the continuing poverty, which families had to survive in the post-war period.⁸ Furthermore, the emphasis on the role of the mother as re-builder of family stability was given added emphasis in the post-war years by the cultural prominence of psychoanalytical theories of maternal deprivation which partly sprung from concern about the damaging effects of evacuation and the

⁴ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London; New York, 2007).

⁵ See Wendy Webster for a detailed discussion of the place of women in the rebuilding of family life in post-war Britain: Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (Oxford; New York, 1998), pp. 6-15.

⁶ Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Postwar Britain,' p.198.

⁷ Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street', p. 503.

⁸ Pat Starkey, *Families and Social Workers: The Work of Family Service Units, 1940-1985* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 52-53.

institutionalisation of children during the war.⁹ Eli Zaretsky has argued that the shadow of war bore a new focus on attachment and loss within psychoanalysis, which went hand-in-hand with the flourishing of a paternalist welfare system and state-led capitalism.¹⁰ The ‘neglectful mother’ at the heart of the problem family was thus the antithesis of economic and social reconstruction. But what were the concerns of ordinary families and women looking on to the post-war world?

Recent historical interest in the social history of the immediate post-war period has produced publications which make use of the life history and oral history method (particularly Mass Observation) to reveal the experiences of ordinary people adjusting to peacetime and managing austerity.¹¹ These studies reveal the material and emotional barriers which people faced in trying to return to a normal life after the disturbances of war. The problem of housing stands out as particularly pressing, with a severe shortage of houses, a lack of building materials, long waiting lists and inflated house prices.¹² For the many who had experienced sub-standard housing and shortages in the 1930s, this was all too familiar a problem, but as Clare Langhammer claims, the seeds had been sown in the inter-war period to make the desire for a home of one’s own a cross-class aspiration: ‘In a number of ways it was dreams and aspirations first formulated in the 1930s which were realized in the 1950s.’¹³ Furthermore, the stress and displacement of war increased desires for the refuge of home. In Joyce Storey’s autobiography, the importance of securing a home of one’s own dominates her life story; in the post-war years her acquisition of a prefab as a married woman with children meant: ‘We were a proper family now.’¹⁴ The effects of war also meant that relationships between family members had to be re-established. In many recent publications of post-war social

⁹ For a discussion of the gendered implications of psychoanalysis and the impact of John Bowlby’s theory of attachment on post-war society, see Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London, 1983) and Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London, 1974).

¹⁰ Eli Zaretsky published via article: Eli Zaretsky ‘“One Large Secure, Solid Background”: Melanie Klein and the Origins of the British Welfare State’, *History and Psychoanalysis* 1, no. 2 (1999), pp. 136-51.

¹¹ Allan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home after World War Two* (New Haven, 2009); Simon Garfield *Our Hidden Lives: The Remarkable Diaries of Post-war Britain* (London: Ebury Press, 2005); James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford; New York, 2010); Patricia and Robert Malcolmson, *Nella Last’s Peace: The post-war diaries of Housewife 49*, (London, 2008); Dorothy Sheridan, *Wartime Women: A Mass Observation Anthology, 1937-45* (London, 2002); Julie Summers, *Stranger in the House: Women’s Stories of men Returning from the Second World War* (London; New York, 2008).

¹² ‘Tough Going These Days: BBC Advice Programme on Finding Somewhere to Live, 1945’ Barry Turner and Tony Rennell, *When Daddy Came Home: How Family Life Changed Forever in 1945* (London, 1995), pp. 195-205.

¹³ Langhammer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’, p. 342.

¹⁴ Joyce Storey and Pat Thorne, *The House in South Road: An Autobiography*, (London, 2004), p. 297.

histories the effects of separation on marriage has been highlighted as well as the consequence of extra-marital affairs, war trauma and the death of a spouse. Frequently, the re-entrance of fathers into the home after demobilization was unsettling, with children and wives describing fathers and husbands as ‘strangers.’¹⁵ The life histories of women who were outside the ‘proper family,’ being widowed and divorced mothers as a consequence of the war, are the subject of this chapter.

The decrease in widowed lone motherhood in the post-war period was noted by Michael Young and Peter Willmott in the 1950s as marking a distinct difference between twentieth-century households and earlier generations: “There has been a fall in the number of broken homes almost entirely as a result of the drop in the death-rate, whose importance quite dwarfs the divorces and separations.”¹⁶ The two World Wars, however, obviously produced episodic increases in the number of young widows with children. Peter Marris wrote the first sociological study of widowhood in 1958.¹⁷ Marris conducted semi-structured interviews with seventy-two widows who lost their husbands during youth or middle age, in the early 1950s. None of the widows in Marris’ sample were war widows, an omission which appears surprising in the context of post-war society. Marris’ research is therefore of limited use to this study. His research focus is mainly on the psycho-social effects of bereavement, perhaps reflecting the cultural preoccupation in post-war society with psychological explanations of behaviour.

Divorce rates increased after both the First and Second World Wars, but it was not until 1946 that rates really began to show a marked increase. Two policy developments assisted the capacity for men and women from all social classes to petition for divorce after the war: in 1937, although the fault-based grounds for divorce were upheld in law, reasons were extended to include desertion, cruelty and insanity; and free legal aid was made available in 1946. This latter development, in particular, meant divorce petitions began to be advanced across all social classes. Divorce became a particular cause of public concern after the war as although illegitimacy and divorce rates both rose during the conflict, it was the divorce rate which continued to rise steeply afterwards. The proportion of marriages terminated by divorce had risen from 1.6 per cent in 1937 to 7.1

¹⁵ Julie Summers, *Stranger in the House* includes many descriptions of fathers and husbands returning as ‘strangers’ to their families.

¹⁶ Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Peter Marris, *Widows and Their Families* (London, 1958).

per cent in 1950.¹⁸ Particularly high rates of divorce in the years 1946-47 led the government to express concerns about an approaching ‘tidal wave’ of divorce.¹⁹

Reasons for the rise in wartime and post-war divorce have been largely attributed by historians to the changes in legislation mentioned above. Alongside these policy developments, the disruptions of war to relationships in terms of ‘separations’ and ‘new experiences’ has been noted by Thane, but the relationship between women’s wartime experiences and the increase in divorce in the post-war decades has not been fully explored.²⁰ This chapter hopes to illuminate such lived experience and the possible impact on women’s willingness to initiate divorce as well as their capacity to survive it.

II. Oral Histories from Widowed Mothers

Out of the six testimonies discussed here, two are from the IWM oral history collection and the remaining four from the MMB. It is significant to note the testimonies from the IWM are the only interviews with war widows for the Second World War within the museum’s entire collection. Janis Lomas has analysed a large sample of the eight thousand letters written by war widows from the First and Second World Wars in the War Widows Archive.²¹ Some of the testimonies from her study will be referred to in the following discussion, alongside some of the oral and written testimonies which have informed recent publications on post-war British society, referred to above. The interviewees were born between 1910 and 1918 and resided as lone mothers in the Midlands, North and South of England, in the following locations: Birmingham, Bristol, Gloucestershire, Kent and Yorkshire.

II.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Apart from Marjorie Hamilton, the only middle-class interviewee in this cohort of widows whose mother is not described as engaged in either housework or paid work, the remaining working-class women recall their mothers as powerful, directive figures within the home, who were at the forefront of mitigating the impact of material hardship on family members. The experience of growing-up in a household with fathers, who were

¹⁸ Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, ‘Social reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59,’ in David Clark (ed.) *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944-88)* (London, 1991).

¹⁹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England: 1918 – 1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 303.

²⁰ Pat Thane, ‘Family Life and “Normality” in Post-war British Culture,’ p. 198.

²¹ Janis Lomas, “‘So I married again’: Letters from British Widows of the First and Second World Wars’ *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp. 218-227.

either partially or permanently absent during the inter-war years, is one that touches the early lives of half of these interviewees. Renee Kingston grew-up with an unemployed father who is recalled as a marginal figure in her childhood, when compared to her mother. Renee's mother is described as both a strong domestic manager and an efficient businesswoman who ran the family's pawn-broking business, sustaining the family's capacity to maintain itself, despite persistent poverty:

My mother built-up the business, to such an extent that we all had a good education [...] so in spite of the fact that we weren't, well, we were quite poor really, we lived well because my mother knew how to handle the situation.²²

Apart from Marjorie Hamilton, whose middle-class upbringing did not necessitate her finding employment as an adolescent, the contribution of a young woman's wages to the family economy was a recurrent experience amongst the cohort, made particularly urgent for those women whose families only had one parent. The significance of working-class daughters' wages to the family economy in the first half of the twentieth century has been recently highlighted, and in those households without a male breadwinner, their economic contribution was particularly important: 'Daughters' economic responsibilities were increased by paternal unemployment and death following the First World War, male unemployment in the 1930s, and paternal absence during and after the Second World War.'²³ Marjorie Swales recalls the impact of the death of her father in the 1920s: 'Unfortunately we lost my father, when we were schoolgirls, so mother had to struggle on her own to bring two schoolgirls up.'²⁴ The family's loss of its principle breadwinner prompted her to find employment instead of completing further education: 'I went on to an art school, but my course would have been years and I knew when I was fifteen that mother couldn't manage any longer.'²⁵ Betty Spring's mother died when she was fourteen in 1928. She adopts the contemporary language of the 'broken home' to describe how the family's loss of a mother, meant that 'home' as she had known it, became lost to her during adolescence, signifying the importance of the maternal role to the functioning of the family unit: 'Home broke-up, more or less and I had to go into service.'²⁶ Betty left school at fourteen and went straight into employment as a domestic servant in 1928

²² MMB, C900/18509, Renee Kingston.

²³ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, p. 84.

²⁴ IWM, tape ref. 19997 R01, Marjorie Swales.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ MMB, C900/04601, Betty Spring.

which she describes as ‘slavery,’ working from six in the morning until eleven at night, with one free day a week. Margaret Weston-Burland, Hilda Guy and Marjorie Swales also promptly entered paid work on leaving school. The interviewees were all in employment when they met their future husbands, occupying jobs typical for young women in the 1920s and 1930s such as domestic service, clerical and retail work, whilst living in the parental home. Marjorie Hamilton is the only widow in this cohort who did not enter employment before marriage. Educated by a governess, she hoped to go to Cambridge University (which had been admitting female students since the late-nineteenth century) but her father did not approve of women undergraduates and thus denied her the opportunity of a higher education. Such experience demonstrates how despite advantages of class background, in terms of access to widening educational opportunities, gender distinctions imposed restrictions on young women’s capacity for autonomy.

There is a general silence amongst this cohort of women concerning sexual knowledge and experience prior to marriage. The interviewees do not offer insights into this subject and the interviewers appear to have avoided directly questioning this age group on matters of a sexual nature when compared to younger interviewees from the MMB archive, suggesting an inter-generational perception that participants in their seventies and eighties have a distinct passivity and sensitivity in relation to such matters compared with later cohorts. Elizabeth Roberts, in her study of working-class women’s lives between 1890 and 1940, found there was ‘very considerable reticence on the subject’ amongst the women she interviewed during the 1970s when they were asked to reflect on sexual knowledge and pre-marital sex during their youth.²⁷ Existing historiography on the subject has revealed how ignorance and shame prevailed in relation to sexual knowledge and experience prior to marriage in the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁸ Sally Alexander suggests the burden of multiple pregnancies and births for women during this period informed the innocence of daughters whose mothers’ reticence was borne out of psychological foreboding.²⁹ Lucinda McCray Beier’s analysis of working-class oral testimony from this period argues parental silence about sexual matters was normative, and fear of sexual knowledge and behaviour was very much related to understandings of

²⁷ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, p. 75.

²⁸ McCray Beier, “‘We were Green as Grass’”; Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*; Steve Humphries, *A Secret World of Sex: Forbidden Fruit, the British Experience, 1900-1950* (London, 1988); Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*; Margaret Williamson, “‘Getting off at Lotus’: Sex and the Working-Class Woman, 1920–1960”, *Family and Community History* 3, No. 1. (2000), pp. 5-18.

²⁹ Sally Alexander, ‘The mysteries and secrets of women’s bodies: Sexual knowledge in the first half of the twentieth century’ in Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (eds.), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (London, 1996) p. 164.

social respectability.³⁰ This finding is confirmed by the recent research of Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter who argue that a general public and ‘intergenerational silence’ existed in the first decades of the twentieth-century in relation to sex.³¹ Seventy-four per cent of the interviewees in their sample did not have sex before marriage. Fisher and Szreter’s analysis strengthens the link between sexual ignorance and social respectability by demonstrating how, unlike men, who saw their ignorance as something to overcome, women actively guarded their ignorance in order to maintain an attractive and respectable femininity.³²

II.ii Marriage and Widowhood

The average age of first marriage amongst this cohort was 22.75 years of age, slightly younger than the national average in the 1930s of 25.4 years.³³ All their husbands went into the armed forces, five joining the Royal Air Force (RAF) and one, the Navy. An overriding theme across the testimonies is that the Second World War had a profound and lasting impact upon these women’s lives. It had become typical in the 1930s and 1940s for many working-class wives along with their middle-class counter-parts to give up paid work and look after the home if affordable.³⁴ Such an expectation shaped Betty’s idea of married life: ‘Well, I just wanted to stop, stay home.’³⁵ The onset of war in the early days of married life meant the interviewees’ expectations of their role as wives and mothers were in many ways altered. Marjorie Hamilton’s relationship with paid work changed after she married as a consequence of war. Instead of becoming a housewife she took part in the war effort as a lorry driver: ‘the first paid job I’d ever had.’³⁶ Whilst their husbands were serving abroad, Margaret and Marjorie Swales ceased being employed in the occupations they had entered as single women and took-up war work, Margaret becoming an ambulance driver and Marjorie a munitions factory worker.

All six women experienced long periods of separation from their husbands during the war, prior to being widowed. Betty, whose husband was in the navy before war broke-

³⁰ McCray Beier, “‘We were Green as Grass’”.

³¹ Fisher and Szreter, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 74-75.

³² [M]others and daughters – continued consciously to invest in the idea of female ignorance as a deliberate strategy to maintain the moral core of their female attractiveness as respectable ‘innocents.’ Fisher and Szreter, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution* pp. 90-91.

³³ The median age of first marriage for women in 1931 was 25.4 years. See Jane Lewis, ‘Marriage’ in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.) *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), pp. 69-85, p. 721.

³⁴ Pat Thane ‘Family Life and Normality in Postwar Britain,’ p. 209.

³⁵ MMB, C900/04601, Betty Spring.

³⁶ IWM, tape ref. 19942 R01, Marjorie Hamilton.

out and served during the conflict, reflects on a particularly long history of separation during her married life:

Well, put it this way, we'd been married thirteen years when he died and I don't think, in those thirteen years, I don't think we spent two years together. In counting when he came home ill, the leaves, I don't think we spent two years together. Couldn't have been. A few weekends, look. He was home a year before he died.³⁷

The war therefore left these women managing homes alone whilst husbands were absent and making a contribution to the war effort. The wartime demand for female workers and the opening of public day nurseries to facilitate married women's employment meant that expectations of full-time motherhood were suspended for many women. Betty stopped working as a domestic servant just before the outbreak of war in order to have her first child and become a full-time mother: 'Well, I worked up until I could, until I had the boy, look, and when I had the boy, well I stayed home and look after him.'³⁸ Marjorie Swales also shared this social aspiration to leave her job at the munitions factory and prepare for the birth of her first child and her role as a mother: 'I was four and a half months pregnant and I said to the firm, that I would be leaving, that Joe didn't want me to continue he was hoping that we'd be able to manage.'³⁹ However, this expectation was thwarted by the consequences of war:

I would leave on that Friday in June, Friday 26th and that was when the telegram was there to say: 'Missing, Presumed Killed.' And I'd just given the job up and I was just numb and thought, 'what on earth am I going to do?'⁴⁰

Like Marjorie, three other women in the cohort lost their husbands while they were expecting their first child. The disillusionment of being widowed at this point in a marriage, when a first child was due to be born, was strongly communicated during the course of the interviews. Marjorie Swales' recollection of the telegram she received about her husband's death breaks-up as she is overcome by memories. Hilda defies the normal convention of the interview schedule, by opening her life-story with the defining event of losing her husband as an expectant mother:

³⁷ MMB, C900/04601, Betty Spring.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ IWM, tape ref. 19997 R01, Marjorie Swales.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Interviewer: OK, right, so first of all just tell me a little bit about yourself. Can you just tell me your name and where you live and so on?

Hilda: Well, Hilda May Guy. I was Hilda Peppard, and then I married in 1939

Interviewer: Oh, hang on a sec

Hilda: And we were married just five years

Interviewer: Yeah?

Hilda: And I lost him just a month before my baby was born.⁴¹

When Betty was widowed at the end of the war, she was left with an infant and a son of primary school age. Marjorie Hamilton was the eldest widow in this cohort, losing her husband in an RAF training accident at the age of forty-three, in the early 1950s. She was left with three teenage sons.

II.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

In the post-war years, as outlined above, the housing shortage was a widespread problem and lone mothers were even less likely than two-parent families to obtain local authority housing. In the context of social reconstruction, 'home' was conceived as the principle place of the nuclear family. Widows were not considered any more eligible than other lone mothers for council housing and in some cases even had to vacate local authority houses to make way for other families in the post-war period.⁴² By the mid-1950s, the demotion of lone mother families within local housing procedure had come to the attention of policy-makers. The Central Housing Advisory Committee published a report which drew attention to, 'one special group of families':

These are the families which consist of unsupported mothers with children: the mothers may be widowed, divorced or separated from their husbands or deserted by them, or they may be unmarried. Whatever their situation, these

⁴¹ MMB, C900/00524, Hilda Guy.

⁴² 'In the housing shortage after war, the lack of a male breadwinner meant that widows had insufficient 'points' and were at the end of the queue for council housing. As this extract shows: 'I am a war widow since 1941. He was never found, I had to give up my Council House and spend three years in a Rest Centre before I got a one bedroom flat.' Janis Lomas, ' "So I married again": Letters from British Widows of the First and Second World Wars.' p. 222.

women generally have very great difficulty in finding homes for themselves and their children.⁴³

There were a variety of housing arrangements revealed in the testimonies, but none of the interviewees even attempted to gain local authority accommodation. A common scenario, as revealed by Marjorie Swales and Renee, was to move back into the parental home: 'I lived with my mother, yes, yes, all the way along.'⁴⁴ As noted earlier, Marjorie's mother had been widowed when she was a girl and it was when she became a widow herself that she moved back into her mother's home. For Marjorie and Renee, living with their parents was a welcome arrangement, which brought relief from having sole responsibility for rental payments. Living with parents, widowed lone mothers often became carers for elderly or sick parents. If grandmothers were well and active they frequently provided care for grandchildren whilst daughters returned to paid work (such childcare arrangements are discussed below). Julie Summers' collection of testimonies from wives and widows in the Second World War contains many descriptions of matriarchal households where children lived with mother, grandmother and possibly other female relatives.⁴⁵ A longitudinal study of children from 'broken homes' from 1946-1950 entitled, *Children Under Five*, found that according to their own sample and 1951 census statistics, widows and their children were far more likely to be sharing accommodation with kin than families where parents were married.⁴⁶

Alternatively, Hilda continued to privately rent the home she had lived in when her husband was alive. The cost of renting private accommodation as a single woman was a considerable strain for Hilda. As Margaret Wynn in her study *Fatherless Families* demonstrated, widows' annual incomes in the post-war period were generally below the lowest annual income required to pay rent for a two-bedroom house.⁴⁷ The challenge of being able to afford to 'keep a roof' as a single woman with dependents was reiterated throughout Hilda's testimony as both a source of self-worth as well as hardship: 'I was *determined* I would keep a roof over me head...Well it was hard going to keep the roof over my head.'⁴⁸ 'Keeping a roof', however, proved too difficult for many widowed lone

⁴³ Evidence from the 'Central Housing Advisory Committee,' 1955, in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 213.

⁴⁴ IWM, tape ref. 19997 R02, Marjorie Swales.

⁴⁵ Summers, *Stranger in the House*.

⁴⁶ James Douglas, *Children Under Five: The Results of a National Survey* (London, 1958).

⁴⁷ Margaret Wynn, *Fatherless Families: A Study of Families Deprived of a Father by Death, Divorce, Separation or desertion Before or After Marriage* (London, 1964) p. 126.

⁴⁸ MMB, C900/00524, Hilda Guy.

mothers, the consequence being that children were either fostered or placed in institutional homes and orphanages. Thus the separation between mothers and children which many experienced during wartime evacuation, continued into the post-war period:

Like many other war widows I had no capital and my boy went at eight years to a home, as I had no home and had to take domestic type work to get a roof over my head. So I missed all my son's childhood only seeing him at holidays ...the council would not give accommodation as I did not have enough income.⁴⁹

Marjorie Hamilton, the only middle-class woman in this cohort, was left without any accommodation when her husband died. As a senior member of the RAF, Marjorie's husband and the family had never become homeowners. They frequently moved house and rented, according to her husband's posting, so as a widow she: 'was left with three sons, *no house*, because we, of course we had just left the quarter at Midenhall.'⁵⁰ At this point in Marjorie's testimony, she reiterates, in an alarmed tone, the phrase: 'no house,' drawing attention to the position she found herself in as a homeless widow with children, despite her social status as the once wife of a senior ranking military figure: '*no house*, but most amazing how the Almighty takes away with one hand and gives with another, I was offered a house (a little flat in Kent) rent free from extremely nice friends of ours.'⁵¹ Margaret was pregnant when widowed and also describes how she was assisted by kin and friends to acquire housing: 'My sister brought me a house in Bromley, and I had a lot of friends and they all rallied around with this house, turned it into flats, which kept my son and I.'⁵² Taking-in tenants, as Margaret did, to generate income and retain housing was a survival strategy known to have been commonly adopted by widows in previous centuries.⁵³

Maternal Economy

All six widows packaged their income; this involved combining the War Widow's Pension (WWP) with earnings from employment. All the interviewees make a point of detailing the inadequacy of the WWP and their testimonies express frustration, even outrage at the level of their financial entitlement relative to the income of families with two parents.

⁴⁹ Lomas, "So I married again", p. 223.

⁵⁰ IWM, tape ref. 19942 R01, Marjorie Hamilton.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² MMB, C900/09645, Margaret Weston-Burland.

⁵³ Blom, 'A History of Widowhood,' p. 197.

The National Insurance Act of 1946 provided a highly stratified system of benefits for widows. The Widows Pension (WP) was for women widowed over the age of 50. The Widowed Mother's Allowance (WMA) was for those widows with dependent children. Levels of benefit were standardized for each and based on the husband having made adequate contributions. War widows received a separate category of pension, not contribution based, but tiered according to the husband's rank in the armed services. A crucial distinction existed between widowed mothers claiming the WMA and those claiming WWP or Industrial Death benefit: war widow's and widow's whose husbands died due to industrial accident were exempt from the earnings rule, but all other widow's claiming the WMA had their benefits off-set against any wages they earned. Marris highlighted the state's differentiation between widowed mothers, but defended the treatment of war widows as follows: 'We readily accept that if a man gives his life for his country, his family deserve special compensation.'⁵⁴ Both Marris' comment and the rules regarding women's pensions appear to illustrate how a male-soldier/breadwinner logic underlay the post-war benefits system, which meant a widowed mother's capacity to provide for her children depended upon the significance of her husband's death to the state. However, post-war policy did not award the war widow a favorable status, rather it penalized her in comparison with other wartime claimants: the WWP was the only war pension to be taxed, a situation which did not change until 1979 after a long campaign by the War Widows' Association (WWA) to remove the tax on their pensions.⁵⁵ War widows with children were forced into the labour market in order to gain an income and alleviate their impoverishment; indeed next to divorced women, widows had much higher rates of economic activity than married women.⁵⁶

The setting of WWP levels according to a husband's military rank meant there was stratification between war widows, which upheld social class status and is reflected in the diverse pension rates amongst the widows in this cohort. Marjorie Jean Hamilton, whose husband held a very senior position in the RAF, claimed a pension of approximately £12 a week, a vastly greater sum than the other war widows whose husbands were private soldiers. In contrast, Betty received £2 a week. Widows whose husbands had served as private soldiers in the war received a pension of £1 a week in 1943, which increased to

⁵⁴ Marris, *Widows and Their Families*, p. 100.

⁵⁵ The WWA was founded in 1971 and campaigns to improve the conditions of war widows and their dependents.

⁵⁶ The 1951 Census reveals the economic activity rates for widowed and divorced women were much higher than married women. See Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 157.

£1.50 in 1965.⁵⁷ The average family income in 1948 was £7 a week.⁵⁸ The inadequacy of pension rates for war widows are recalled in written testimony of the post-war period: 'I thought I'd probably live on my war widow's pension. You can't. Really, the war widow's pension was a farce [...] I had the choice of keeping warm or eating. I couldn't do both.'⁵⁹ After losing her husband as a consequence of war in 1944, before the creation of the post-war welfare settlement, Hilda applied for parish relief prior to receiving her WWP. Once she received her pension it was significantly reduced in order to pay back the funds she received in poor relief, a financial burden which greatly added to the already emotionally and materially strained conditions she found herself in as an expectant mother:

Because you see, when I was widowed, as I said, there was no social security or anything. For the first few months I had to be given parish relief. Well that had to be paid back. I was only loaned that, so when my pension came through (the hold-up was because Clifford [Hilda's son] was coming) he came exactly a month later, this was what was holding it up, to get the full pension for him and me you see? And so when I went to draw my first lot of pension the Post Mistress said to me, 'well how come you've only got one week to draw?' I said, 'well if you'd like to see the letter, that money is gone back.' That had to be paid back, and it was hard.⁶⁰

Widows in this chapter, like those in Marris' study, frequently described the inability to meet costs such as children's clothes, shoes and glasses and those associated with schooling.⁶¹ In the 1950s, it came to the government's attention that 30 per cent of widows with children were claiming NA on top of their national insurance benefits, they made-up the highest percentage of national insurance beneficiaries claiming NA at the time.⁶² Marjorie Hamilton recollects how the shame of the means-test and not wishing to go 'cap in hand' deterred her from claiming NA. Such associations of stigma and shame in claiming supplementary assistance also feature in Marris' study: 'I feel really degraded. They give you the impression that you're begging.'⁶³ Marjorie eventually appealed to a local charity for financial assistance to supplement her WWP but recalls still having to face a means-test: 'I made one appeal to a sort of local army charity, who had done extremely good work throughout the war years [...] But I'm afraid it was the worse type of means

⁵⁷ Lomas, "So I married again:", p. 219.

⁵⁸ Turner and Rennell, *When Daddy Came Home*, p. 184.

⁵⁹ Mavis Nicholson, *What Did You Do in the War Mummy? Women in World War Two* (London: 1995), pp. 186-187.

⁶⁰ MMB, C900/00525, Hilda Guy.

⁶¹ Marris, *Widows and Their Families*, pp. 118-9.

⁶² Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 155.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

test that one can imagine [...] They just offered to pay Shelagh's music lesson.⁶⁴ The First World War's widows in Lomas' study expressed 'shared feelings of shame and desperation in resorting to parish relief' to supplement their pensions and the testimonies in my study echo such shared feelings in claiming NA in the post-war period.⁶⁵

All six women in this cohort sought employment in order to increase their incomes as lone mothers. When Marjorie Swales was widowed she had just given up her job at the munitions factory in order to prepare for her expected baby, plans which had to be quickly re-thought after widowhood: "I didn't ask anybody's permission or advice. I just said to my mother and my sister, who of course came over to see me (she was living in Leeds), I said, 'oh, well, I'll just go back to work.'"⁶⁶ For those four women expecting babies at the time they were widowed, three continued in employment until very close to the birth and then gave-up their jobs to stay at home and care for their children in their early years, drawing income primarily from their pensions. Short periods of full-time mothering were followed by re-entrance into the labor market, as Betty recalls:

I went to work in the evening part-time. I had to pay tax the same as everybody else. You couldn't get any free meals or free milk for the children, like they do now. Couldn't get any of that, and that's why I went to work.⁶⁷

Hilda went back to work very soon after having her baby. Recalling this fact she seeks to justify her position to the interviewer, perhaps drawing awareness to her particular plight in not being able to care continuously for her infant in the post-war years when such full-time mothering was increasingly normative: 'So this is why I had to work, otherwise I couldn't have kept the roof over me head, you see, coz I was paying rent, see?' As the only widowed lone mother in the cohort who was renting from the private sector, Hilda had the highest weekly housing costs, necessitating high participation in the labour market. At the contrasting end of the social class spectrum, Marjorie Hamilton did not have to enter paid work to 'keep a roof' over her family's head; Marjorie's pension was set at a much higher rate than the working-class women in the cohort. However, Marjorie still sought employment as a teacher. The principle motivation for Marjorie's entrance into the labour market was to sustain the middle-class prospects of her three sons: 'so you can

⁶⁴ IWM, ref. 19942 R01, Marjorie Hamilton.

⁶⁵ Lomas, "So I married again", p. 221.

⁶⁶ IWM, tape ref. 19997 R01, Marjorie Swales.

⁶⁷ MMB, C900/04601, Betty Spring.

imagine the responsibility I felt, would they do their stuff?⁶⁸ The absence of her husband's earnings meant the educational opportunity of her sons was in jeopardy. Her wages paid for their educational fees at public school and university.

Hilda's re-entrance into the labour market shortly after the birth of her son was facilitated by her mother taking care of her son whilst Hilda went out to work: 'So when he was three months old I had to go to work and leave him, dump him on my mum then and get to work.'⁶⁹ Marjorie Swales, who lived with her mother, also had help with the care of her daughter from her mother and other family members:

[M]y mother lived until she was ninety-one so she did give me tremendous support in spite of her infirmities. She was a wonderful person and my sister too. They encouraged Shelagh [Marjorie's daughter] to mix with their girls, their three girls, so that had a family atmosphere.⁷⁰

Other interviewees mention the role of friends in helping with childcare: 'friends, they had young children and babies so we managed that way.'⁷¹ Hilda describes the consistent support of a friend who would combine looking after her own infant with caring for Hilda's son, whilst Hilda went to work in the evenings:

I had a friend that was living in the wood at the time. By the time her baby was born (this was in the July) she'd moved into where I'm living now and do you know, she came every night for three years and she never missed a night?⁷²

The persistence of poverty amongst widowed lone mothers in the post-war period and the lack of childcare facilities meant that neighbours, friends and extended family played a crucial role in assisting widows to bridge the demands of generating income and caring for children, as had been the case in the first half of the twentieth century.

Social Membership and Identity

Alongside extended family, friends and neighbours, post-war widowed mothers referred in their testimonies to employers as important sources of social and financial support and directly contrasted these spheres of market and non-market based support with state provision and the armed forces, which were experienced as distant and neglectful.

⁶⁸ IWM, 19942 R03, Marjorie Hamilton.

⁶⁹ MMB, C900/00524, Hilda Guy.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ IWM, tape ref. 19997 R02, Marjorie Swales.

⁷² MMB, C900/00524, Hilda Guy.

Employers featured in Marjorie Swales' and Renee Kingston's testimonies as supportive figures, offering flexible arrangements for them to combine childcare with paid work. Renee had given-up her full-time job as a secretary when her son was born. She later took-up temporary secretarial work, avoiding a permanent position in order that she could prioritise looking after her son. This situation changed, however, when her previous employer offered Renee her old job back on more flexible and somewhat unconventional terms:

I was in Bennett's Hill [Birmingham] one day when I met and ran into my old boss. He was delighted to see me and asked me what I was doing. He was furious when he knew that I was doing temporary secretarial help, 'why on earth didn't I get in touch with him?' And so, from then on he persuaded me into going back to the office. He said I could work just the hours that I wanted to work. When John was home from school, if I wanted to take him into the office he was very welcome. In other words, he wanted me to be working in the office.⁷³

Throughout Marjorie Swales' testimony she recalls the support she received from the firm where she worked in finding suitable work after she was widowed and in particular when she decided to re-train as a teacher:

Now when I was in [teaching] college, again, the firm were very good. I couldn't afford to have the long college holiday [...] The firm said, 'come into the staff and sit with us and we'll give you some filing to do,' something that was very easy. So I had some money to live, you know, at home for the college holidays. They were very good there.⁷⁴

Both these testimonies suggest support for lone mothers from employers in terms of managing the dual roles of primary breadwinner and mother. Renee's description of her boss and Marjorie's experience of the firm also reflect the paternalism which can be said to have characterised some relationships between employer and employee in these sectors during the first half of the twentieth century.⁷⁵

When asked about their treatment as war widows by the armed forces and the state, the following comment by Marjorie Swales encapsulates the views and experiences of many of the women: 'Well it was just, everything's come to an end. He'd done his duty and we're very sorry and you know that was it, nothing else. As regards moral support,

⁷³ MMB, C900/18509, Renee Kingston.

⁷⁴ IWM, tape ref. 19997, Marjorie Swales.

⁷⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, p. 148.

money support, nothing at all, it came from friends and family.⁷⁶ The inadequacy of the WWP was frequently drawn upon as a measure of the state's disregard for widowed mothers. Even Marjorie Hamilton, the only widow with a husband who occupied a senior post in the RAF and therefore received a substantially greater pension, expressed a personal and collective sense of injustice: 'I only had £50 a month allowance, in those days they didn't pay our RAF widows at all well.'⁷⁷ Statements about a lack of adequate financial support were coupled with disillusionment about the lack of public services available for widowed lone mothers after the war. The women re-constructed their experiences of isolation from state social support through the knowledge that in later decades of the twentieth-century, the state made greater provision for lone mothers and other vulnerable social groups, as Hilda explained:

Of course there was no social security in those days [...] Well, you're on your own [...] You didn't have anyone to sit with you, to talk over your problems. The same with the money situation, you had to watch every penny you spent. Things were hard, I mean coz you didn't have the help in those days, you see?⁷⁸

The importance of non-market derived resources to these women was made clear by the absence they felt in terms of both voluntary and state organized forms of advice and guidance as women bringing-up children on their own:

Then I began to think, well locally, there was nothing. Not from anyone to come and see how you are getting on: 'And how is the baby progressing? And what is going to happen?' I had to do it all myself.⁷⁹

Marjorie Swales further articulates the dual importance of adequate income and non-income derived resources for widowed lone mothers in raising or sustaining their standards of living in the following extract:

Interviewer: How do you feel you were treated as a war widow?

Marjorie: Oh, I think very badly. I shouldn't have had to have the worry, completely on my own. There should have been some supportive group, but there was nothing and I don't think I'm the only one.

Interviewer: Was it financial assistance you were lacking?

⁷⁶ IWM, tape ref. 19997, Marjorie Swales.

⁷⁷ IWM, tape ref. 19942 Marjorie Hamilton.

⁷⁸ MMB, C900/00524, Hilda Guy.

⁷⁹ IWM, tape ref. 19942, Marjorie Hamilton.

Marjorie: Oh, I think so. I'm sure so. Yes, and having to work hard and having to be the father and having sole responsibility for the child. I think there was very poor treatment of the war widows [...] I think there should have been someone from 'groups,' coming along, as one expects a health visitor today.

Interviewer: Did the RAF ever contact you?

Marjorie: No, no connection at all. I was just severed on that night and then no more [...] *Now*, British War Widows do wonderful things.

Marjorie's reference to the example of a health visitor as a model of the kind of public figure she would have appreciated, is grounded in the fact that welfare officials had begun to intervene more in family life in the early decades of the twentieth century, informing expectations of increased formal assistance and a retrospective knowledge that state intervention was commonplace in the later decades of the twentieth century. Marjorie's reference to the absence of 'groups' for widowed lone mothers, like herself, is illustrative of the growth of identity-based support groups, such as the WWA (Marjorie refers to 'British War Widows' a breakaway faction of the WWA), which sprung-up in the 1970s alongside other solidarity movements. Family, friends and to some extent, employers, provided this much needed social support and assistance, but the lack of public services and social recognition experienced by these widows left them with a strong sense of social injustice and marginalization in the post-war period.

II.iv Remarriage

Lomas' study revealed remarriage was often a route out of poverty for war widows in the post-war period: 'As happened after the Great War, some women remarried after the Second World War principally to escape the poverty and isolation of widowhood.'⁸⁰ Four out of the six women who were widowed in our cohort re-married. For most there was a substantial passage of time between becoming a lone mother and re-marrying; in Margaret's case it was seven years before she re-married and in Renee's, sixteen years. They do not appear to have married for material reasons, rather Renee and Hilda reflected on how their experience as lone mothers shaped their attitudes towards their second marriages, emphasizing independence and self-sufficiency as positive and enduring characteristics, which they took into this next stage of their lives:

⁸⁰ Janis Lomas, "So I married again", p. 225.

I'd no desire to re-marry [...] I was very self-sufficient. I suppose I was selfish in a way because I was quite able to take care of myself and I had a very supportive family, very supportive. And so I was able to sort of carry on and be quite happy. I was a widow for sixteen years and then I re-married.⁸¹

III. Oral Histories from Divorced Mothers

The following three testimonies have been selected from the MMB and provide insights into the experience of separation and divorce for three women with children in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, through to the 1950s. The interviewees were all born between 1916 and 1919 and resident as lone mothers in the following locations: Bristol, Cheltenham and Northampton.

III.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Irene Sharrat and Barbara Steele both came from working-class backgrounds. Gwen Griese came from a middle-class family. Irene left school at fourteen in 1925 and went straight into paid work. Barbara and Gwen both went to grammar school and then gained further qualifications in the 1930s at teacher training college and in the civil service. Gwen describes her father, a factory manager, as a distant, 'Victorian' figure. This depiction demonstrates how Gwen saw herself as representative of a new generation, breaking away from outmoded codes of morality and behaviour. Such critiques of parents as 'Victorian' by daughters in the inter-war period were a feature of girls' popular literature during this era.⁸² Barbara's father was also a distant figure due to absence, serving in the army when she was born; it was her mother and other female relatives who provided a strong influence: 'So I was brought up in a rather matriarchal society really, because I'd got several aunts around the place as well.'⁸³ Irene remembers her mother as a directive figure in her childhood, ordering the family around a domestic routine and teaching Irene home-based skills. Irene first found work as a cinema usherette; she then took a job as a factory machinist before the war broke out. Gwen passed her civil service exams and entered employment as a Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) Sergeant at the beginning of the war. It was a decision that damaged Gwen's relationship with her parents who strongly disapproved of her involvement with the WRAF. Penny Summerfield found fathers held the greatest influence over their daughters' role in the war effort.⁸⁴ Gwen recalls joining

⁸¹ MMB, C900/18509, Renee Kingston.

⁸² Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 56.

⁸³ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

⁸⁴ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 57.

the WRAF as a rebellion against her father's 'Victorian' patriarchal authority and as a decisive break into independence:

So a friend and myself went and joined-up. We went in our lunch hour. Her father was a headmaster at Stapleton, there was my father, and we went and joined-up. We went home and told our parents we'd joined-up and our parents both said, 'you've, you know, you've had that, we'll, we'll see to that!' But of course they couldn't because we'd signed the dotted line!⁸⁵

Summerfield's description of women who saw themselves as 'free agents' within the context of wartime meets with both Gwen and Irene's recollections of themselves during the conflict. As Summerfield suggests, Gwen's educational opportunities may well have afforded her a sense of autonomy: 'The identity of the independent and self-sufficient person was available to the relatively well-educated (and academically successful) young woman.'⁸⁶ However, as Summerfield notes, such notions of independence could cut across class difference, with working-class women describing themselves as 'free agents' due to their status as breadwinners in the family.⁸⁷ Irene, who had worked since the age of fourteen in various occupations before the outbreak of war, clearly saw the opportunity to improve her earnings as a result of the demand for women workers during the war: 'I came over to Corby to see if there were any jobs going because I'd heard that there was big money to be made in Corby.'⁸⁸

Like the widowed interviewees, the divorced interviewees who grew up in the inter-war period were largely silent on the subject of sexual knowledge and experience before marriage. The exception was Barbara who describes how she 'kissed and cuddled' boys at school, but was inhibited from further experimentation due to concern about pre-marital pregnancy. As suggested by Fisher and Szreter, fear of parental denouncement, particularly from mothers, who along with daughters were the guardians of sexual propriety in the family, was a strong disincentive for young women to engage in pre-marital sexual activity.⁸⁹ Barbara describes the imagined transgression of an illegitimate pregnancy in her family as a 'horror', and the specter of women who had such experiences befall them was vividly recalled as a reminder not to cross boundaries of sexual propriety:

⁸⁵ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

⁸⁶ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸⁸ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

⁸⁹ Fisher and Szreter, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 100.

Well it would have been the shame to your parents I think. You thought of your parents more than anything. I can't imagine my mother and father sort of feeling anything but horror. In fact, one of my friends did become pregnant when she was seventeen and it really ruined her life. Her father was fine, but her mother was dreadful to her.⁹⁰

Whilst working as a bricklayer's labourer during the war, Irene met and married her first husband, a Canadian serving in the armed forces. Gwen also met and married a Canadian serving in the UK. Barbara Steele had some experience working as teacher before marriage, but this was short lived. She married another teacher, but had to give-up her job due to the 'marriage bar', which was still in operation in 1938.

III.ii Marriage, Separation and Divorce

All three interviewees married at the outbreak of the Second World War at the age of 21, below the national average in 1941 of 24.6 years of age.⁹¹ The coming of war hastened the formalisation of their relationships. Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside in their 1951 study of *Marriage Relationships in the Urban Working Classes*, noted the effects of war on marital relations:

Once the marriage was contracted, the relationship was not built up in a normal way; instead, the couple would be separated for months or years, with occasional brief meetings [...] For the greater part these wartime brides remained at work [...] war wives are like a single girl.⁹²

Slater and Woodside's statement illustrates what 'normal' post-war marriage was assumed to entail, especially for wives: domestic stability, the resignation of employment for women and a distinct difference between pre-marital female behavior and married femininity, whereby a certain degree of youthful social freedom would be left behind. Barbara, Gwen and Irene's testimonies illustrate how they were never able to achieve this 'normality' within their own marriages and that to a large extent, as Slater and Woodside observe, their social experiences and sense of status as women during the conflict, challenged their own expectations of their married femininity.

Marriage rates at the outbreak of the war increased, indicating a tendency for couples to swiftly formalize relationships in the face of conflict; in the aftermath, rates of

⁹⁰ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

⁹¹ The median age of first marriage for women in 1941 was 24.6 years. See Lewis, 'Marriage', p. 721.

⁹² Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside, *Patterns of Marriage: A Study of Marriage Relationships in the Urban Working Classes* (London: 1951) p. 215.

divorce markedly increased, indicating as previous research has noted, the breakdown of wartime unions and the ‘more general disruptive effect of war on marriages.’⁹³ A frequent recollection in the testimonies of marital relations during wartime was the sense of urgency and impending finality, which the conflict placed on forming and consummating romantic ties, whether that be through hasty marriage or illicit affairs whilst husbands were away, as the following comments illustrate:

I know in the war one had a feeling, as I said, bitter-sweet feelings really. You had a lot of fun, but always in the back of your mind you would think, are they going to be there next week?⁹⁴

Girls weren’t going to go on forever without having some affection and love, and eventually, I suppose, the Americans arrived. Life took on a different meaning. You wanted to do things; you wanted to live while you could. Goodness knows you might be dead the next day.⁹⁵

All three women were employed throughout their wartime marriages and returned to work after having children, thwarting pre-war and post-war expectations that women might well cease employment upon marriage, and certainly should do so once becoming mothers. Irene draws attention to the unconventionality of her marriage and to the war’s effect on expectations of gender roles within marriage as the following passage illustrates:

Well, I was put on what they call ‘a gang,’ to start with and we were asked to move some bricks from one place to another so virtually I was a brick-layer’s labourer! Which looks *hilarious* on a wedding certificate! And my husband was Canadian and before he joined-up, a gold miner, so on my first wedding certificate it’s ‘gold miner and brick-layer’s labourer!’⁹⁶

Although Barbara had to leave teaching when she first married due to the marriage bar, she quickly found herself teaching again when the war started and she was instructed to do so due to teaching shortages in schools. Her wartime experience of teaching contrasted with her pre-war experience in that she became a member of an all-female teaching staff and was expected to perform conventionally male tasks in the workplace.

The central role of work during these women’s wartime marriages impacted on their social as well as economic status. As Barbara articulates, being involved in war work meant her ‘social life changed’:

⁹³ Burgoyne et al, *Divorce Matters*, p. 14.

⁹⁴ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

⁹⁵ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

⁹⁶ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

I mean you'd worked hard all the day, you wanted to be able to go out at night and be able to enjoy yourself like the men had always done [...] Responsibility was pushed on you and because you had this responsibility you also felt that you had the right to do something that you wanted to do, that you could have relaxation.⁹⁷

Both Barbara and Gwen refer to their lives during the war as a time of new social experience and autonomy. Gwen repeats the word 'adventure' to describe the time in the WRAF and the phrase 'bitter sweet memories' recurs as a means of capturing the social pleasure and emotional distress that her wartime experiences in the WRAF brought her.⁹⁸ For Barbara, her new found entitlement to leisure time was spent dancing: 'I didn't get to bed 'til about two o'clock because I was out at dances, because I loved dancing, I loved it and it was part of life.'⁹⁹ In all three testimonies, having to manage a home and children whilst separated from husbands, coupled with leading an active social life in exchange for a part in the war effort, meant that Slater and Woodside's model of 'normal' married life was certainly not realized in the case of these interviewees' lives.

At the end of the war, all three women found their marriages were in trouble. For Irene and Gwen, the migration of their Canadian husbands, which had brought them together during wartime, now became the source of their marital breakdown. Irene's husband unexpectedly returned to Canada without her and their son, and she never heard from him again. Eventually, Irene learned that her husband had married a Canadian woman, so she petitioned for divorce on the grounds of bigamy: 'Apparently when he got back, according to my solicitor, he bigamously married somebody else. That was it, so I decided that I would divorce him.'¹⁰⁰ Gwen's husband wanted to return to Canada after the war, but she refused to migrate with him: 'My husband went back to Canada and I decided I didn't want to go back, and, you know, I decided I was a home born lass and wanted to stay home, as simple as that.'¹⁰¹ Barbara's marriage did not recover from the extra-marital affairs, which both Barbara and her husband embarked upon during the war. Barbara did not regret the affair she had during the conflict and refers to it almost as a personal triumph when the interviewer asks if she had an extra-marital relationship: 'Yes, yes, I did and I'm very pleased I did, it was very nice and it went on for two and a half

⁹⁷ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

⁹⁸ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

⁹⁹ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹⁰⁰ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

¹⁰¹ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

years, all the time, this was an American.¹⁰² Claire Langhammer has highlighted the prominence of public concern over adultery and the stability of marriage in the post-war period.¹⁰³ Laurence Stone has argued that exceptional numbers of divorce petitions in 1946, two-thirds of which were initiated by husbands, reflect widespread wifely infidelity.¹⁰⁴ Barbara realized when she first married in 1938 that she had ‘made a great mistake,’ in marrying her husband, but at this point she regarded divorce as out of the question: ‘in those days you just put up with making a great mistake, you didn’t do anything about it.’¹⁰⁵ Contrary to her position on divorce before the war, afterwards she decided to bring an end to the marriage:

When he came back at the end of the war and said he was willing to start again, I said, ‘no,’ and I divorced him then and there, coz I’d had enough. I’d now learnt that there was more in life than, you know, than just, plodding along. I’d learnt that life can be exciting and life can be a challenge and life can be rewarding – it can be lovely – so I didn’t have any intention, so I divorced him.¹⁰⁶

From having to ‘put up’ with an unsatisfactory marriage in the late 1930s, Barbara’s perspective on divorce had drastically changed by the end of the 1940s as this extract shows. Her initiation of divorce reflects a growing sense of agency and self-assertion which she articulated throughout her description of the war years, best summarized in one of her final statements: “[the war] was a relief, a ‘reliever,’ in that it gave you a chance to be a person, instead of being somebody’s wife.”¹⁰⁷

In all three cases, these women initiated divorce (although in Irene’s case she was deserted by her husband and therefore her decision to petition for divorce was as a consequence of a separation that she did not intend). Their testimonies provide a glimpse into how women’s economic and social experiences during the war accelerated their propensity to exit and terminate unsatisfactory marriages in the aftermath of the conflict.

¹⁰² MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹⁰³ Claire Langhammer, ‘Sexual Politics in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain: Adultery in Post-war England’ *History Workshop Journal* 62, (2006), pp. 87-114.

¹⁰⁴ Stone, *Road to Divorce, England 1530-1987*, Oxford.

¹⁰⁵ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

III.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

As earlier noted, many widows with children shared accommodation with kin in the post-war period, and this was even more likely in the case of divorced women. According to *Children Under Five*, sixty per cent of separated and divorced mothers and their children were found to share a home with their parents.¹⁰⁸ The 1951 Census found that separated women were the most likely group to share accommodation with extended family: 22 per cent of married women, ‘enumerated without their husbands’ had to share with kin.¹⁰⁹ Irene had continued living with her parents as a newly-wed; this was not uncommon amongst married couples in the post-war years when lack of affordable and available housing meant independent living was often unobtainable.¹¹⁰ She lived with her parents as a lone mother until she re-married, knowing that she would not have been able to house herself independently: ‘I was still living at home, thank goodness, I would never have been able to manage had I been living in a house by myself.’¹¹¹

Barbara Steele was unusual in being able to acquire a mortgage with a small deposit as a lone mother in the 1950s; professional women with the financial means to acquire mortgages in the 1950s and 1960s frequently found they were refused by building societies who requested a father’s or husband’s signature. Like widowed Margaret Weston-Burland, who had employed the strategy of taking-in lodgers to generate income, Barbara also let rooms to tenants: ‘I took a house [...] and let half of it because I needed the money.’¹¹² Gwen does not refer to housing problems as a lone mother and it looks likely that she remained in the marital home after her husband returned to Canada.

Maternal Economy

Under the 1948 National Assistance Act, the National Assistance Board (NAB) or a lone mother had the right to seek a maintenance or affiliation order against a putative father or husband. However, this right was not unconditional. It depended upon the conduct of the lone mother, a legacy laid down by the poor law, which allowed husbands to refuse liability if a wife had been adulterous or deserting. If obtained, maintenance from the absent father would be offset against the cost of any NA being received by the mother. In

¹⁰⁸ Douglas, *Children Under Five*.

¹⁰⁹ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 126.

¹¹⁰ Langhammer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,’ p. 349.

¹¹¹ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

¹¹² MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

1953, a report for the NAB found their pursuit of absent fathers for maintenance was regularly ineffective. As outlined in Chapter One, the problem of obtaining maintenance from absent fathers was partly due to the inability of men to contribute if they were in low paid work, unemployed or had formed a second family: ‘The amount obtained from husbands is limited first by the difficulty of tracing husbands, and secondly by the inability of many husbands to spare from their resources the full amount necessary for the maintenance of the wives and dependents from whom they are separated.’¹¹³ After her Canadian husband deserted her, although Irene was persistent in pursuing maintenance and was successful in obtaining an order, she never received any financial assistance after separation: ‘I advertised in Canadian papers, the fact that I was going to take him to court for maintenance and I was awarded maintenance of 2/10d a week, but I never, ever got it.’¹¹⁴ Irene draws attention to the resulting discrepancy amongst lone mothers in terms of the financial support they got from individual men and the divisive effect such discrepancy could create amongst them: ‘But what always annoyed me was that my cousin had had a baby by an American, and she used to get maintenance, from him, although she was [later] married to somebody else.’¹¹⁵ Irene relied solely upon her own earnings as a lone mother and expressed resentment at being forced to give priority to her breadwinning role over mothering her son: ‘I couldn’t get a penny and for a time, I was very bitter about it because I had to work damned hard to bring-up my son.’¹¹⁶

All three women relied solely upon their own earnings as a means of generating income; unlike widowed lone mothers they had no recourse to social insurance, being eligible only for NA. None of the interviewees detailed receiving maintenance payments from ex-husbands (neither Gwen nor Barbara mentioned maintenance payments when questioned by the interviewer about material survival). The following exchange between Gwen and her interviewer illustrates how the concept of benefits for the ‘single mother’ is anachronistic in the context of Gwen’s post-war experience:

Interviewer: What help was available for you as a single mother?

Gwen: None. None.

Interviewer: No benefits?

¹¹³ *Report of the National Assistance Board for the year ended December 1953*, cited in Kiernan et al *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 160.

¹¹⁴ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Gwen: No benefits. No, no, you didn't. A first child didn't get an allowance even.¹¹⁷

Gwen's last comment also highlights the Family Allowance rule, which excluded mothers with one child like herself. Only a very small amount of separated or divorced mothers claimed NA in comparison with widows claiming NA to supplement pensions. This was a trend noted by the NAB in 1950: 'Plainly the great majority of separated wives and mothers succeed in keeping independent of assistance, either because they receive a sufficiency from the person liable or (probably more often) because they maintain themselves by their own efforts. The Board must be dealing with exceptional cases.'¹¹⁸ None of the interviewees attempted to claim NA. When questioned about financial support from the state, Barbara comments: 'it never occurred to me because I was the sort that had to do things for myself. I'd been brought-up to look after myself and therefore I didn't have any help in that way.'¹¹⁹ In this statement Barbara draws attention to an intergenerational difference between herself as a post-war lone mother, raised in the early part of the century to follow an ethic of self-help and lone mothers later in the century, who she positions as readily dependent on state assistance. Like widowed Marjorie Hamilton, who made reference to 'going cap in hand,' the connotations of shame which came with claiming NA and facing the means-test in the post-war period are evident for these divorced women even more so than widows, whose much higher levels of NA take-up during the period reflect a greater, if restrained sense of eligibility stemming from their inclusion in the post-war social contract as insured citizens.

Lack of financial assistance from the welfare state meant the interviewees were heavily reliant on wages from employment. In all three instances, the interviewees took advantage of expanding opportunities for women workers in the immediate post-war period in office work, factory work and teaching. Voluntary occupational mobility has been found to be a defining characteristic of young women's lives between the 1920s and 1950s: 'They witnessed greater expansion in their employment opportunities and experienced a greater degree of occupational and social mobility than young men [...] Young women's increasing ability, and propensity to move between jobs was one of the distinguishing features of their lifestyle.'¹²⁰ Irene demonstrated such propensity to seize opportunities for increased wage earning before she married, as a divorcee in the post-war

¹¹⁷ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

¹¹⁸ Cited in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 157.

¹¹⁹ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹²⁰ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*.

period she again moved between jobs in order to gain a good standard of living for herself and her son. Living in Kettering which had an expanding manufacturing sector, Irene found that factory work in the late 1940s offered her a better pay than office work: 'I did work in a solicitor's office for quite a while, but I found out that the money there wasn't as much as it would be if I was in a factory, so I went back into the factory to get more money.'¹²¹ Irene's parents looked after her son, which enabled her to work full-time; the significance of their contribution in providing child care is illustrated by the following statement: 'I had a good relationship with my mother and father, they virtually brought David up.'¹²² Barbara combined full-time employment as a teacher with renting rooms in her house (mainly to student tenants) in order to generate an income great enough to pay a mortgage. Having taught during the war, Barbara believed herself to be 'very experienced' as a teacher and continued working in this sector as a lone mother in the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of childcare, her circumstances as a landlady, combined with neighborhood support, meant she had a network of informal arrangements to enable her participation in the labour market: 'in one of the flats lived a young couple with a baby and if I didn't get back from school in time, or, you know, there was always someone in the house. I knew the lady next door and she was often in there and I took students so that there were always students in the house so it went very well.'¹²³ After working in the WRAF during the war, Gwen moved between a variety of office jobs as a divorcee and appears to have secured a good income, reflecting the relatively well paid and secure conditions of office work for women in the 1940s.¹²⁴ Gwen later trained as a teacher, making use of the emergency training schemes, which were put in place to retrain women after the war. In the following passage, Gwen draws attention to the financial strain that re-training imposed, the short-term loss of income being a significant economic risk for her whilst pursuing long-term security:

I decided I'd have a go at teaching and I think I was about the last person to get in (I left it so late). I went to Redland and did the emergency course and worked very hard, because I'd given up a very good job in order to do this course. It was a great monetary sacrifice. It was: 'one-parent family' – the original! And so I *had* to succeed.

¹²¹ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹²⁴ See Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, pp. 41-42.

Gwen's employment experience is central to her life history; it defines her youth, and her married life in the WRAF and her post-war career in teaching features strongly, in contrast to her identity as a mother which is rather peripheral. The above passage is the only instance whereby Gwen discloses that she was a (lone) mother, borrowing on the terminology of the 1970s to describe herself as a 'one-parent family', demonstrating awareness of the later social scientific categorization of a long-standing social group in her exclamation; 'the original!' The absence of any reference to maternity within Gwen's testimony may well be related to the absence of any reference to her own mother's significance within her life history, but perhaps her latent disclosure of her status as a lone mother is also suggestive of the social stigma attached to divorce in the post-war years.

Social Membership and Identity

Gwen received no financial or social support from her family as a lone mother, as the following passage illustrates:

I was fiercely independent and my parents were still around, but no way would I ever ask for any help from my parents. I was already condemned as far as the family were concerned [...] I mean it was unheard of that one would have a divorce in those days [...] It wasn't done in those days, it's as simple as that. It must have been quite a shock for them. I was always the one who was, you know, a bit... Anyway, I went to college. I enjoyed college, I worked jolly hard I think. I worked harder than most people because I was a bit desperate not to, not to fail.¹²⁵

Gwen's decision to enter the WRAF against the wishes of her parents meant she had already asserted her independence as a young woman and cut ties with her extended family; her wartime experience entering the WRAF further shaped her sense of independence in the post-war years. However, coupled with this sense of autonomy, Gwen experienced social isolation due to the stigma of divorce in the 1940s and 1950s. Gwen's statements about the necessity to succeed disclose her vulnerable position as a socially marginalised woman who had no one other than herself to depend upon. The sphere where Gwen did find support, like many of the widowed interviewees, was the workplace. She refers to her first post-war employer as a significant figure who offered her opportunity and encouragement to pursue a career as a lone mother:

¹²⁵ MMB, C900/00588, Gwen Griese.

I worked as a school secretary [...] with a wonderful woman [...] She was the one who did a great deal for me, really, in encouraging me to do things, and she said: 'If it hadn't have been for the war you probably would have gone to university, but don't let it spoil your life. You know, work on what's here.'¹²⁶

In contrast to Gwen, Irene received a high degree of support from her family reflecting her sustained relationship with her parents throughout her youth and during her marriage. As well as sharing a house with parents who also provided childcare, her family took on a degree of financial responsibility in meeting certain expenses: 'my brother was very good to my son, if he needed anything that I couldn't afford my brother did help me and my mother and father helped.'¹²⁷ Irene describes having an active social life as a divorced mother, something that was facilitated by her mother's preparedness to provide childcare at night as well as in the day. These arrangements between mother and daughter appear to have been mutually agreeable; intergenerational conflict is not a feature of Irene's testimony, unlike Gwen: 'my mother used to stipulate that I could go out any night of the week except Saturdays because that was her night out!'¹²⁸

Barbara's parents were no longer alive by the time she became a lone mother and she does not mention any other family member providing support. Like Gwen, she experienced rejection by a relative (an aunt) because she was a divorcee, but this does not feature as prominently in her testimony as the stigmatization she received from the church which caused her considerable distress, as up until her divorce, the church had been an important sphere of support: 'I had been ostracized, excommunicated from the church because I was divorced [...] I'd always been a good church goer.'¹²⁹ In the post-war period the church situated itself as the defender of the traditional tenets of marriage and recommended greater restrictions on divorce, a position it sustained until the 1960s.¹³⁰

III.iv Remarriage

Like the widows in the previous discussion, remarriage was a potential way out of economic hardship for divorced lone mothers in the post-war years. However, only Irene remarried in 1955 not long after receiving her divorce and she continued to work part-

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ MMB, C900/12103, Irene Sharrat.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ MMB, C900/04507, Barbara Steele.

¹³⁰ For further information on the position of the Church in relation to divorce in the 1950s see Carol Smart, *The Ties that Bind: Law, Marriage and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Relations* (London, 1984) and Jane Lewis, 'The Debate about the Law Affecting marriage and Divorce in Twentieth Century Britain' in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 60-97.

time. Barbara and Gwen never remarried. Their relatively well-paid and successful careers as teachers may well have afforded them a long-term economic security which lessened any imperative to marry for a second time.

IV. Conclusion

The Second World War increased young women's economic responsibilities within the household and their earnings and social freedoms. Historians' emphasis on the attraction of domesticity as safe, secure and comfortable for women in the post-war years has failed to assess the long-term implications of the Second World War on feminine roles.¹³¹

The Second World War had a significant and lasting impact upon the widows and divorced women in this chapter both in terms of their working lives and their marital and maternal experiences. This is not to argue that it acted as an isolated catalyst for change. As Todd has argued, the Second World War accelerated changes in women's lives that had been developing since the end of the First World War, but the War has its own particular significance in the life histories of the women in this study, particularly in relation to employment experience, social freedoms and sexual morality. Hasty marriages, loss of a spouse in the conflict, separation from husbands and sexual transgression were products of war, which left these women outside a safe and secure domesticity. By considering the economic and social aspects of these women's lives one can see how pre-war and wartime experiences impacted upon their capacity to exit marriages and envisage survival in the post-war era, paving the way for subsequent generations of women to voluntarily enter lone motherhood. Returning to David Jones' statement about the work of the FSU with 'problem families,' he states: 'Not until the personal deficiencies which are the main cause of their plight can be overcome will they share in the benefits of the welfare state.'¹³² Here Jones is endorsing a long-held view of the poor which understands poverty to be the result of individual character. Reflecting on the experiences of lone mothers in this chapter, it is clear that they could not benefit from the welfare state because they were not fully included, as one war widow said: 'The government was not interested in the war widows.'¹³³ The interviewees were very much aware of being outside or on the margins of the welfare settlement and tangential to the family-ideal promoted in the aftermath of the conflict.

¹³¹ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, p. 229.

¹³² MRC, Problem Families, THG/JAW, 805/2, Extract from the 'Rotary Service.'

¹³³ Interview with Ena Mitchell in Summers, *Stranger in the House*, p. 105.

Obtaining a home of one's own was even more difficult for lone mothers than other families after the war. It was common for widowed and divorced women to live with their parents during this period. The institutionalization of the children of lone mothers – in this chapter we have discussed how widows had their children placed in orphanages and in children's homes – was the antithesis of the post-war aspiration for the family home and the prerogative shared by politicians and psychoanalysts that children's rightful place was with mother. However, the welfare state was designed in such a way that to mother outside the marital economy of housewife/male-breadwinner meant that women were exposed to poverty, even if able to claim the WWP or NA: incomes were too low to remain free of hardship. Women in this cohort described struggling over the demands of reconciling necessary participation in paid work and caring for their children. However, with regard to the latter, they did not express a sense of ideological pressure to mother their children, rather they strongly desired to do so.

Lack of affordable and accessible childcare facilities meant that family, friends and neighbours were an essential source of support with minding and raising children. Inter-generational relations between mothers and daughters regularly produced mutual systems of support. In inter-war childhood, daughters of working-class families frequently contributed to the household economy, often substantially so when fathers were absent, and in return mothers whose daughters were widowed or divorced in the post-war period provided childcare to facilitate daughters wage earning. Widows were more likely than divorcees to claim NA, but the stigma of such state support and association with poor relief was evident for both groups. The divorced mothers in this cohort were more often in full-time employment. As a result, their incomes were greater and their career trajectories were stronger than among widowed lone mothers. In terms of identity, work featured strongly in the life histories of these women, particularly during the war. As lone mothers, maternal identity and a breadwinning were overlapping. The importance of flexibility in terms of working hours and unconventional arrangements with employers was important for lone mothers trying to reconcile the emotional duties and pleasures of mothering with breadwinning, and the impression given by the testimonies is that employers could be supportive in this regard. In contrast, widows described an absence of state support in the form of services, which made them feel particularly marginalized in terms of public recognition for war sacrifices; divorced lone mothers, by contrast, appeared to have had little expectation of such formal services. Lone mothers fell back on their own personal strategies for managing economic

hardship, often learnt from their own mothers or developed in response to wartime conditions, and the mutual assistance of family, friends and neighbours was also prominent. The highly stratified policies towards widows after 1945, and the disparity between divorced mothers in terms of income from absent fathers, meant that political expressions of solidarity between groups of lone mothers was not apparent. This appears to have developed later in the 1970s with the formation of groups such as the War Widows Association.

Finally, the divorced lone mother of the immediate post-war period emerges as particularly significant in de-stabilising the idea of a return to normal family life and traditional femininity. It is to the 'golden age' of the nuclear family and to its significance, along with never-married mothers, that we now turn.

Chapter 3

Divorce and Illegitimacy in the ‘Golden Age’: the 1950s

*For years I kept quiet and hid my pain.
Did I really give birth or was it all in my brain?
Did he ever exist, that boy in a shawl?
Maybe I was never his mother after all.¹*

Margaret Suter, MMB Interviewee

I. Introduction

Writing in 1958, Richard Titmuss drew attention to the notable increase in marriage during his lifetime, proclaiming:

An increase of nearly one-third between 1911 and 1954 in the proportion of women aged twenty to forty married represents, as the Registrar-General has said, ‘a truly remarkable rise.’ Never before in the history of English vital statistics, has there been such a high proportion of married women in the female population under the age of forty, and even more so, under the age of thirty.²

In the 1950s, illegitimacy rates which had risen during the war, fell back to a low level (but never quite returned to pre-war levels). The high number of divorces witnessed in the immediate post-war years decreased and remained stable until the 1960s, and there was a ‘baby boom.’ Despite such trends indicating the nuclear family had indeed entered a ‘golden age,’ the 1950s was a time of political concern over its survival. The press and voluntary groups continued to highlight cases of ‘broken homes’ and ‘problem families’ throughout the 1950s, and in 1951 *The Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1951-1955* was set-up to respond to concerns about the state of matrimony. Reflecting on the popularity of marriage, Titmuss responded: ‘Such figures as these hardly support the conclusion of the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce that ‘matrimony is not so secure as it was fifty years ago.’³ Interestingly, the Commission identified a shift in women’s status after the war: ‘Women are no longer content to endure the treatment

¹ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

² Richard Titmuss, *Essays on the Welfare State* (Second Edition, Basingstoke, 1963), p. 99.

³ *Ibid.*

which in past times their inferior position obliged them to suffer.⁴ Such an observation meets with the testimonies of interviewees in the previous chapter who described social and economic freedoms as a consequence of war and a resolve to exit unhappy marriages. However despite the Commission's acknowledgement of a change in women's status in post-war society, the Church was particularly influential in curtailing any movement towards divorce reform, even suggesting it should be abolished.⁵ The 1950s was a period of 'near stability in religious life' when Christianity played a prominent role in the nation's cultural identity and the lives of many families on a daily basis.⁶ Thus when the Commission reported in 1956, it retained matrimonial fault as grounds for divorce and placed a greater emphasis on 'marriage guidance' as a solution to marital discord.⁷ Furthermore the opening chapter of the Commission's report set the moral tone of the decade by re-affirming the ideal of the nuclear family and the good of marriage: 'The Western world has recognized that it is in the best interests of all concerned – the community, the parties to a marriage and their children – that marriage should be monogamous and that it should last for life.'⁸ In the field of Sociology, functionalist theories linked the nuclear family type to the successful development of modern, industrial societies, emphasizing the biological purposefulness of the housewife role.⁹ Contrary to government concerns, community studies and social surveys during the 1950s communicated an optimistic message about family life, pointing to more egalitarian models of partnership and the growing affluence of the working-class family.¹⁰ In education, home-making skills and the promotion of marriage as a career to schoolgirls was a defining feature of the period, espoused most emphatically by John Newsom.¹¹ As Penny Tinkler has demonstrated, after both World Wars media aimed at girls and women renewed the vital link between pronounced feminine demeanor and social success: 'The emotional and economic argument that if a girl wanted to get and

⁴ *Report of the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1951-1955* (London, 1956).

⁵ Carol Smart, 'Good wives and moral lives: marriage and divorce, 1937-51' in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds.), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester and New York, 1996), pp. 91-105, p. 97.

⁶ John Wolffe, 'Religion and "Secularization"' in Francesca Carnevali and Julie-Marie Strange (eds.) *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (Harlow, 2007) p. 327.

⁷ Carol Smart, *The Ties that Bind*.

⁸ *The Report of the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1951-1955*.

⁹ Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales (eds.) *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (New York: The Free Press, 1956).

¹⁰ Angela Davis, 'A Critical Perspective on British Social Surveys and Community Studies and their Accounts of Married Life c. 1945-70', *Cultural and Social History* 6, No. 1 (2009), pp. 47-64.

¹¹ John Newsom (1948) *The Education of Girls*, London: Faber.

keep a man, wanted a home and family, she must always appear feminine, was used throughout adverts, articles, fiction, and letter pages in romance magazines.¹²

However, despite the 1950s being a time of reaffirmed conservatism associated historiographically with the oppressive confinement of women in the home, scholarship on women's position in 1950s society particularly in recent years, has advanced a more complex view of the decade in terms of women's history. Instead of emphasizing the oppressive nature of domesticity for women, the creativity and pleasures of post-war domesticity have been highlighted by Judy Giles, Claire Langhammer and Pat Thane, indeed interviewees in this study who grew up in the first half of the twentieth-century, often referred to their desire to (re) make a home in the post-war period which would bring material and personal rewards out of reach during wartime and the inter-war years.¹³ The rise in women's employment, particularly married women's part-time employment is one of the most significant changes in the position of women to occur in the second-half of the twentieth-century, and the 1950s was the decade which saw this trend begin to gather pace.¹⁴ Coupled with the high numbers of young women who were active in the labour market in the 1950s, this trend tells a different story from one of blanket domesticity.¹⁵ Elizabeth Roberts in her study of women's lives between 1940 and 1970 highlights the conflict between domestic ideology and married women's employment, which were simultaneously encouraged by government, leaving her female interviewees with a sense of uncertainty over their purpose:

This conflict of ideologies resulted in contradictory views about the role of women in society. Compared with the earlier study [*A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940*], fewer women expressed a certainty that what they were doing at any point in their lives was the right thing: 'Women today can no longer be certain what is expected of them.'¹⁶

¹² Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing Up in England: 1920-1950*, (London, 1995), pp. 151-182.

¹³ Judy Giles 'A Home of One's Own: Women and Domesticity in England 1918-1950,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16, No. 3, (1993), pp. 239-53; Langhammer 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain'; Pat Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Post-war British Culture'; Pat Thane, 'Women since 1945' in Paul Johnson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (Harlow, 1994), pp. 392-410. See also: Ali Hagget, 'Desperate Housewives and the Environment in Post-war Britain: Individual Perspectives' in *Oral History* 37, No. 1 (2009), pp. 53-60; Angela Davis, 'Motherhood in Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970: a study of attitudes, experiences and ideals' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2007).

¹⁴ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London; New York, 2005) pp. 196-197.

¹⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 20

Similarly Carol Dyhouse has claimed: ‘The 1950s proved to be a decade hallmarked by contradictions for women.’¹⁷ Judy Giles has suggested the first half of the twentieth-century saw ‘women negotiat[ing] ambiguous and ambivalent ways of seeing themselves: sometimes pulled forward as agents of change but at others pushed back as symbolisations of continuity and tradition.’¹⁸

The analysis of testimonies from divorced and unmarried lone mothers in this chapter hopes to explore how such contradictions were lived out in the 1950s among women whose experiences took them outside the norms of womanhood. In an era when ninety-five per cent of young women married, marriage was central to the life histories of the women discussed in this cohort, but as we will see, paid work was also central to adolescence and adulthood, with many women working during marriage and all working as lone mothers.¹⁹ As a backdrop to separation and divorce, the idea of the companionate marriage as a new template for conjugal relations, will be explored in relation to the continuation of material frustrations for working-class couples in the age of affluence. Alongside the experience of divorced motherhood, the life histories of unmarried mothers will expose how women who transgressed standards of sexual and reproductive propriety found themselves on the edge of society.

Thousands of women entered Mother and Baby Homes during the 1950s. Although they were a minority compared to the numbers who were housed by kin, the proceeding interviews with women whose families were unwilling to house an illegitimate child, illustrate the effects of second-class citizenship on women outside the parameters of the welfare settlement and unsupported by the safety-net of family.²⁰ During the Second World War when the government sanctioned services for unmarried mothers, a Ministry of Health circular advised local authorities assisting unmarried mothers that mother and child should be kept together.²¹ Under post-war reconstruction these services were suspended and unmarried mothers became eligible for NA, but were given no tailored form of support or services. The church ran the majority of homes for unmarried mothers in the post-war period attesting to the continued importance of the

¹⁷ Carol Dyhouse, ‘Towards a “Feminine” Curriculum for English Schoolgirls: The Demands of an Ideology’, *Women’s Studies International Quarterly* 1 (1978), pp. 291-311, p. 308.

¹⁸ Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke; New York, 2005).

²⁰ ‘Mother and Baby Homes cater each year for somewhere between 11,000 and 12,000 of the 70,000 women having an extra-marital pregnancy.’ Jill Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes: A Survey of Homes for Unmarried Mothers* (London, 1968) p. 21.

²¹ Lewis and Welshman, ‘The Issue of Never-Married Motherhood in Britain’, pp. 406-407.

voluntary sector after 1945 for those who could not access public provision. Furthermore, the wartime policy to keep mother and child together appears to have weakened under the early welfare state. The proliferation of theories about the psychopathology of the unmarried mother in the 1950s and government emphasis on the significance of the married family unit for national stability, meant that unmarried mothers faced renewed austerity when it came to keeping their illegitimate children.²² As Jenny Keating has claimed, the 1950s and 1960s are notable as two decades of ‘classic adoption’ where efforts to keep unmarried mother and child together were subsumed by a drive to create nuclear families:

Although annual adoption numbers were actually lower during the 1950s than during the late 1940s in many ways the 1949 Act [The Adoption of Children Act 1949] ushered in two decades of ‘classic’ adoption – increasing numbers of adopted children were under two years old, illegitimate, and adopted by childless couples rather than single women.²³

As Keating further outlines, the Adoption of Children Act in 1949, initiated a period of favourable treatment towards adoptive parents over relinquishing mothers, which was to extend well into the 1960s.²⁴ Even the NCUMC, which had been a lone voice lobbying to keep illegitimate children with their mothers since the inter-war years, moderated their central position in the 1950s. In their 1953-4 Annual Report the NCUMC stated: ‘The mother is now encouraged to keep her child only where it is in the best interests of both.’²⁵

The testimonies of Mary Jarvis, Margaret Suter and Sheila Walker who recall the adoption of their children, and a substantial period of time spent in Mother and Baby Homes in the cases of Margaret and Mary, present distinctive and challenging features as oral histories. The impact of being separated from their illegitimate children has been

²² Jane Lewis has written on the circulation of psychological theories about the abnormality of unmarried mothers in the 1950s Kathleen Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain* and with John Welshman, summarises John Bowlby’s theories on unmarried motherhood, as follows: ‘Bowlby labelled these women ‘psychopathic’ and ‘defective’, and suggested further that they had illegitimate children because of problems in their childhood and in their relationship with their parents.’ Welshman and Lewis, ‘The Issue of Never-Married Motherhood in Britain’, p. 409.

²³ Jenny Keating, *A Child for Keeps: The History of Adoption in England, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 194.

²⁴ ‘What the 1949 Adoption of Children Act did do was move the ‘benefit of the doubt’, the favourable treatment, away from the relinquishing mother and over to the adopters.’ Keating, *A Child for Keeps*, p. 190.

²⁵ Graham-Dixon, *Never Darken My Door*, p. 5.

life-long in the case of all three women, defining the way their life histories are narrated. From beginning to end, this event is the centre-point of their testimonies. Thus in recalling their trauma, coherent speech became difficult and their distress is pronounced. Sheila was mentally ill after the adoption of her child. At the time of being interviewed in 1999 she had been having psychological therapy for the first time after contacting the 'Post-Adoption Centre' in London founded in 1986, to help women who have had children adopted. She now runs her own local support group for women like herself who relinquished illegitimate children in the mid-century, and has had many women come forward for help. Margaret had frequent difficulty in recalling the memories of her time in the Mother and Baby Home and her child's adoption during interview: 'I don't remember an awful lot about it, you know, it's sort of, a lot of it's blocked from my memory.'²⁶ At the time of being interviewed in 1999, Margaret was writing about the experience of having her child adopted. An extract from one of Margaret's poems opened this chapter. The poem will be discussed in the proceeding section. Despite the difficulty and distress of recalling the past, both women speak about their intention to provide testimony in order to safeguard against a repeat of such events in the future: 'It was a terrible thing, it should never be allowed to happen again.'²⁷

II. Oral Histories from Unmarried Mothers

Of the five oral testimonies discussed here, four are from the MMB and one from the MOL oral history collection. The interviewees were born between 1929 and 1939; they lived through the Second World War as children and were adolescents in the post-war period. They all found themselves pregnant and unmarried in the 1950s and early 1960s. The interviewees were resident in the North and South of England when they became pregnant outside of marriage, in the following locations: Doncaster, Kendal, Leeds, London and Surrey. All of the interviewees were from working-class backgrounds.

II.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Three of the interviewees spent all or part of their childhoods growing up in lone mother families. Sheila Walker and Doris Grainger had fathers serving in the armed forces, with long periods absent from home. Doris' mother managed the home and worked in a munitions factory throughout the Second World War. Mary Jarvis' mother was separated

²⁶ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

²⁷ Ibid.

from her husband when he was committed to a mental asylum after a nervous breakdown following service in the First World War. She had a son from this marriage and later Mary was born in the early 1930s, the result of an illicit affair. Although Mary does not remember being stigmatised as an illegitimate child, she was profoundly aware of the impact her illegitimacy had on her mother's material and social existence in the 1930s and early 1940s. Mary's mother was exploited as an unpaid housekeeper by an uncle, in exchange for accommodation and food. At a time when unmarried mothers could be placed in residential domestic work through the NCUMC, in the workhouse if destitute, or even in a mental asylum, this proposition was not rejected: 'He could have paid her to be his housekeeper, but no, no, you have to be grateful that I've taken you in and given you a roof over your head because of your position and that sort of thing.'²⁸ Mary remembers her mother primarily as a worker who had little time to spend with her and her brother: 'She just had to keep working all her life, she worked all her life and I remember when I was small she was working seven days a week, I was born in 1933 and she was working seven days a week for 21 shillings.'²⁹ Amongst the remaining two women who grew-up in two-parent households, Margaret Suter's mother was employed during her childhood and Vera spoke of her mother moving in and out of casual employment. Alongside descriptions of their mothers' paid work, the interviewees also recollected the time and effort their mothers invested in housework in the early decades of the twentieth-century: 'Your mothers worked, you know, your mothers worked. Well, my mother did, she worked her fingers to...you know, cleaning-up and that. She were immaculate in the house.'³⁰ Such memories of mothers during childhood demonstrate the significance of both women's paid and unpaid work for working-class communities.

Like the majority of young people in the 1950s who were educated under the post-war tripartite system, the interviewees did not stay in education beyond the minimum leaving age, which had risen to fifteen in 1948.³¹ Parental influence over the education of daughters was a common theme amongst the sample, as it had been in the previous chapter. Mary spoke of her mother's aspiration for her to achieve the grammar school education she was never able to fulfill due to domestic responsibilities earlier in the century:

See, she had passed her scholarship and couldn't go because she was the third

²⁸ MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

³¹ Stephanie Spencer, 'Girls at Risk: Early School-leaving and early marriage in the 1950s' *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 41, No. 2, (May 2009), pp. 179-192, p. 179.

eldest of nine and from a coal mining family. It was just too expensive and she was deprived of her secondary education, so she was determined that when I got my scholarship that I would do better.³²

By contrast, Vera remembers how her parents directed her to see marriage as a career goal and not pursue educational opportunities: “My parents said, ‘it doesn’t matter, you’re a girl, you’re going to get married anyway’ [...] I was the girl of the family and when you got to fifteen, sixteen, you got married to a husband and that was it, they weren’t worried about my education, they were for my three brothers, but the girl didn’t matter.”³³ Stephanie Spencer has argued that despite increased educational opportunities for girls in the 1950s, marriage and domesticity were perceived to be a safer option amongst girls of school-leaving age during this era across the social classes, and that most girls were encouraged by parents and schools to see education as a stop-gap before marriage and motherhood.³⁴ Illustrating this tendency, Sheila recalled how as a young woman: ‘the best move for a lady was to become a wife and mother, that was the only career move, you know, open to us.’³⁵

After leaving school the interviewees continued living with their parents and entered employment. In 1951, 72 per cent of unmarried young women were in paid employment.³⁶ Whereas in the previous chapter domestic service had been a common occupational destination in the inter-war years, none of the interviewees in the late 1940s and 1950s went into domestic service, reflecting its general decline as an occupation.³⁷ The most common job amongst the sample was office work, though Doris worked in a factory. This cohort was amongst those who emerged in the 1950s as the era’s ‘teenagers.’ As historians have demonstrated, the teenager’s status related to their significance as breadwinners and the increased consumer spending which this age group was able to engage in.³⁸ Signifiers of teenage social experience amongst the interviewees included, listening to rock and roll records, reading girls’ magazines, regularly going to dance halls and the cinema and the importance of make-up, hairstyles and clothing. Vera continued the long-term trend of handing over part of her pay to her mother, but also recalls how the clothes she was able to purchase with the remaining part of her wages

³² MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

³³ Museum of London (MOL), 97.68, Vera Blanchard.

³⁴ Spencer, ‘Girls at Risk’.

³⁵ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

³⁶ Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England*, p. 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁸ Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1998); Jon Savage, *The Creation of Youth 1875-1945* (London, 2007).

were 'my pride and joy!'³⁹

II.ii Pre-Marital Sexual Relations and Pregnancy

Knowledge about sexual relations amongst this cohort was not markedly different from the former. Vera thought she was 'bleeding to death' when she started menstruating and remembers a preoccupation with feminine cleanliness at school, but no guidance about reproduction from school or family. The following statement from Doris is illustrative of the degree of ignorance about 'the facts of life' which continued amongst many girls and young women in the 1950s: 'I didn't know the facts of life, you see, them days you didn't know the facts of life, I didn't know, I thought a kiss was what you called having babies.'⁴⁰ Schools had begun to introduce a degree of sex education into the classroom in the post-war period, but this was patchy and provided more often by grammar schools.⁴¹ Kate Fisher's study of birth control practices, 1918–1960, reveals the gendered dynamics of decision-making surrounding contraception during this period, whereby women protected their innocence over such matters and expected men to take the lead.⁴² Fisher's insights into female passivity and male agency over birth control found resonance with the testimonies in this study, as demonstrated by Sheila:

Contraception wasn't talked about in those days, although we did know there was what we called 'the French letter,' but I wouldn't have known where to buy it. Anyway, a girl didn't do that, it was up to the chap, to go and take that responsibility. That's how I saw it anyway.⁴³

Furthermore the impression given by the testimonies as regards circulation of knowledge between female friends over sex and contraceptive methods was that such interactions did not happen, despite the emergence of a teenage youth culture during this period. The following extract illustrates how the interviewer's allusion to young women 'comparing notes' was anachronistic:

Interviewer: Do you think there were a lot of girls doing the same as you?

Sheila Walker: I really don't know, it was not talked about, I really don't know.

³⁹ MOL, 97.68, Vera Blanchard.

⁴⁰ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

⁴¹ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 61.

⁴² Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918 – 1960* (Oxford; New York, 2006) p. 57.

⁴³ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

Interviewer: Amongst your girlfriends? Comparing notes?

Sheila Walker: No, not at all. It was just not mentioned. It was just not discussed. We didn't discuss those kinds of things with our girlfriends in those days, that's how it was.

Such restraint over discussion of sexual matters and women's lack of agency, informed the pre-marital sexual relationships of the interviewees who became pregnant outside of marriage within their first pre-marital sexual relationship, between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Mary was the youngest of the women to become pregnant at fifteen by an older relative; her case is distinct from the rest of the sample in that it was legally non-consensual and incestuous, the father of her child was sent to prison and Mary never saw him again.⁴⁴ For Margaret, Doris, Sheila and Vera, who became pregnant between the ages of eighteen and twenty, an expectation of marriage framed pre-marital sexual relationships in the mid-twentieth century:

I resisted to begin with of course, but I was very much in love with him and I couldn't resist much longer and our relationship did seem as though it was going to go into the long-term. I saw marriage on the horizon with him so I thought that it was probably okay. I was quite safe, and he would take good care of me if anything happened [...] We had talked about marriage and he bought me a ring!⁴⁵

Elizabeth Roberts found that all the women in her 1940–1970 study who engaged in pre-marital sex, did so with men they expected to marry.⁴⁶ Fisher and Szreter found it was at the point of engagement that interviewees often lost their virginities between 1918 and 1963.⁴⁷ As had been the case earlier in the century, pre-marital pregnancies often propelled a rush to the altar. Vera was the only interviewee in this cohort to marry the father of her child. For the remaining interviewees expectations of marriage were never realized. Despite Sheila's understanding that she was engaged, her fiancé broke off their relationship when she discovered she was pregnant: 'I told him I had missed my second period and I'd been to the doctor's and it was confirmed, I was having a child. He just went completely cold on me, he changed and that was it, that was the end.'⁴⁸ Doris and Margaret's parents were well aware of their daughter's courtship and shared her

⁴⁴ Mary describes the relationship as follows: 'I became involved with a man, much older than me, I can't tell you who he is, but he was a blood relative': MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁴⁵ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

⁴⁶ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*, pp. 150-152.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

expectation of marriage. When Doris became pregnant the date of the wedding was brought forward, but her fiancé suddenly broke off their engagement. The father of Margaret's child was a neighbour who she began courting in adolescence. When he left for National Service Margaret discovered she was pregnant. Margaret's parents informed the boy's parents and the relationship went no further due to disapproval from the boy's family on the basis of status difference, despite both families being working class: 'I had to tell mum and dad and they went across to see his mum and dad who said no way could their son be responsible for me being pregnant, coz mum and dad were only caretakers at a church and I think they thought they were better than that. And I've never seen him since the day I got pregnant to this day.'⁴⁹

Elizabeth Roberts found illegitimate pregnancies were a disgrace to most families in her 1940-1970 study: 'Attitudes to promiscuity, illegitimacy, pre-marital sex and pregnancy were not noticeably different in the 1940s and 1950s than in the 1920s and 1930s.'⁵⁰ Women who engaged in sex as a prelude to marriage, were never far from social opprobrium in the 1950s if marriage failed to transpire. Although the interviewees were in paid work when they found themselves pregnant outside of marriage, they depended on parental accommodation and experienced a high degree of parental involvement in decisions about education and employment as well as their interactions with the opposite sex. Dependence on parental assistance as an unmarried mother was reinforced to Sheila by her GP: "I went to my GP and he knew I was unmarried (we were called 'unmarried mothers' in those days) and he said, 'you must go back and tell your parents.' He said: 'they're the only people that are going to help you.'"⁵¹

One of the most memorable aspects of a pre-marital pregnancy, amongst the cohort, was the initial disclosure to parents. Disclosures about pre-marital pregnancies were met with anger and disbelief by parents:

I told my mum and dad. They were absolutely furious and it's really hurtful to me to this day. My dad never swore, but he swore at me. You know, he says, 'you stupid fool,' he said [...] I was just devastated really and I thought, well, where do I go from here, you know, how do I carry on?⁵²

Mary (herself illegitimate) was surprised by the fury of her mother who she expected might be understanding, given that she was unmarried. However, her mother was

⁴⁹ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 63.

⁵¹ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

⁵² Ibid.

resentful at Mary for repeating her own life story and disrupting her grammar school education: ‘Mother went mad and she said, ‘I wanted you to do better than me.’⁵³ In being asked about the stigma attached to pre-marital pregnancy, Mary testified to parental response as a determining source: ‘Terrible, terrible, then again it depended I think on your own family as to how much of a fuss they made about it, coz my mother was dreadful.’⁵⁴ Parental authority determined the outcome of the interviewees’ pre-marital pregnancies. Lack of public provision for unmarried mothers in the 1950s made any degree of autonomy or challenge to parental authority inconceivable, as the following comments illustrate:

How the hell you was supposed to manage I really don’t know, because there wasn’t any grants that I knew of, anybody to give me any help. As I say, living with my mum and dad, it’s a case of what will I do, you know?⁵⁵

I mean you know, you wouldn’t have dreamt of saying, ‘I’m not going there [Mother and Baby Home],’ you know, you were sent there and you did as you were told. I mean, I think even after people were twenty-one, they still did as they were told if they lived at home.⁵⁶

None of the women in the sample could turn to the father of their unborn child for assistance as contact was severed, in all cases, at the point of relationship breakdown. Sheila remembers her fiancé as he broke off their engagement, saying: ‘Well, it’s up to you what you do, you can have an abortion, you can have it adopted. I don’t mind.’⁵⁷ Such a comment illustrates how the idea of an unmarried woman keeping her baby was unthinkable for many people during this period. Doris recalls the methods used by women to try and bring about a termination and her father’s efforts to abort his daughter’s pregnancy:

He thought he might get rid of her you see? That particular time you could buy all sorts of stuff. Get in hot baths, I don’t know. But anyhow, it didn’t happen. He used to come in and go like that across me, to give me a shock (me dad). I can see it, he’d come home from work and I used to think, ‘why’s he doing that?’ But it were to try and see if I could get rid of her you see?⁵⁸

Although abortion was illegal in the 1950s, after abstinence it was the most common

⁵³ MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ MOL, 97.68, Vera Blanchard.

⁵⁶ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

form of birth control, but the operation carried a high risk of physical injury and possible death.⁵⁹ By 1966 illegal abortion was the chief cause of maternal deaths and hospital wards saw many cases of women suffering from post-abortion sepsis after visiting amateur abortionists.⁶⁰ Sheila was aware of the practical difficulties in finding a backstreet abortionist and the risks to her health the procedure could entail:

Of course, in those days, abortion wasn't around. It was backstreet and that was very risky. Of course I lived out in Surrey and I think in those days if you wanted an abortion, a backstreet abortion, you'd have to go to London. Of course there was a terrific risk to your health, in fact, life. You know, it was known, we understood if you did that, you might die. Ordinary doctors, there was just no way.⁶¹

The interviewees' parents were resolute that adoption was the only solution to their daughters' pre-marital pregnancies, and they were not willing to consider accommodating an illegitimate grandchild and unmarried daughter as other parents clearly did during this era.⁶² Thus, parental insistence on adoption determined the outcome of their pre-marital pregnancies for all five women, with the exception of Doris whose father, although resolved about adoption when Doris was pregnant, became emotionally attached to his grandchild after the birth and allowed them to live in the family home. Aside from parental intervention, the interviewees came into contact with Moral Welfare Workers in the early stages of their pregnancy:

The GP arranged for me to see, what was called in those days, 'The Moral Welfare Worker.' They were social workers that dealt with girls like me. So my dad and me went to see this lady and dad said there and then, 'the child, the child is going to be adopted.'⁶³

Well, obviously they were upset and I know they went across, as I've said, to see his mum and dad and then the next thing I knew this Moral Welfare Officer came and I was whisked off to Mount Cross in Leeds – Mother and Baby Home – run by the Salvation Army.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, pp. 56-57.

⁶⁰ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England, 1900-1967* (London, 1988), p. 133; Vivien Seal, *Whose Choice? Working-Class Women and the Control of Fertility* (London, 1990).

⁶¹ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

⁶² For evidence of family tolerance and support of unmarried mothers see Ginger Frost, "'The Black Lamb of the Black Sheep': Illegitimacy in the English Working Class, 1850-1939' *Journal of Social History* 37, No. 2, (2003), pp. 293-322; Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of Gossip in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot, 1995).

⁶³ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Waker.

⁶⁴ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

The Moral Welfare movement emerged alongside Christian charitable work in the nineteenth century and was associated with the Salvation Army and ‘purity’ campaigners, who gave prominence to matters of sexual morality in their voluntary work with the poor. The MWA had been involved in the adoption of illegitimate children since the inter-war years, and the testimonies of women in this cohort describe how they acted as facilitators in arranging a place for the interviewees in Mother and Baby Homes and/or arranging adoption procedures in the 1950s. Three of the women entered a Mother and Baby Home during their pregnancy and confinement. Sheila never entered a home; she attached great fear to the homes. Such associations were prevalent in Jill Nicholson’s post-war study, which noted how the homes were equated with the punitive ethic of the workhouse: “One girl’s grandmother had cried when she heard her granddaughter was going to a Mother and Baby Home. ‘They’re just like the workhouse,’ she told her, ‘you’ll be in the wash-house there.’”⁶⁵ The dread associated with entering Mother and Baby Homes was articulated by Sheila, who was willing to relinquish her baby if her parents allowed her to remain in the family home, during her pregnancy:

I did say to my parents, ‘please don’t send me to a Mother and Baby Home, you know, I just feel so devastated about that’ [...] And mum says, ‘well, you can have the child at home and the child can be born in our house’ (coz in those days home births were the norm) ‘but the child must be adopted.’ So I kind of made a bargain with them.⁶⁶

Sheila and Doris describe having to lead ‘hidden’ lives whilst remaining in their parents’ homes in order that family respectability might be preserved for as long as possible. Doris’ father castigated her through a sustained silence during her pregnancy. Interestingly, Sheila’s parents allowed her to continue working, perhaps in order to preserve a veneer of normality:

Me dad packed me off – me dad wouldn’t talk to me properly then, well nine months he didn’t, he didn’t speak – he packed me off to me sister’s in Weston-Super-Mare and I stayed there six weeks, while he got rid of all the wedding presents and everything. Then I came home and I never went out anywhere. And me dad never spoke to me all the time I were having her.⁶⁷

I was kept under wraps if you like. It was a disgraceful thing, but I carried on working and ‘course nobody knew and I was a very thin girl in those days and

⁶⁵ Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes*, p. 68.

⁶⁶ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

⁶⁷ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

you wore, you know, no one...you could hide it. You could hide it a long, long time.⁶⁸

Once Sheila reached her eighth month she could no longer hide her pregnancy, but she found the opprobrium attached to her condition was not universal. Work colleagues were tolerant of her situation, whereas distant acquaintances were more reproachful: ‘Course, by then everybody around me at work realised that I was an unmarried mother, but I must say, the people I worked with were kind to me, they weren’t unkind to me, it was more like distant acquaintances would scorn you and ignore you and treat you as though you were a slut.’⁶⁹ It was common in the 1950s for women to enter a Mother and Baby Home for their confinement and for a short period following the birth of the child, but amongst our three interviewees Mary entered during the sixth month of her pregnancy and Margaret during her fifth month, because both women’s families wanted them to hide their physical changes; Doris entered just for her confinement.

II.iii Lone Motherhood

Institutionalisation

In the early 1950s, of the 172 Mother and Baby Homes in England, eighty per cent were run by official church bodies.⁷⁰ Jill Nicholson conducted a study of twenty-three Mother and Baby Homes in the 1960s commissioned by the NCUMC, and was keen to stress the distinction between the Reformatories and Penitentiaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the mid-twentieth century Mother and Baby Home. The older institutions received ‘penitent prostitutes’ and made separation from the outside world an absolute, along with atonement through hard work and strict religious training. Such oppressive regimes, Nicholson stressed, needed to be disassociated from the post-war institution: ‘The image of these early Homes still linger, and modern Mother and Baby Homes suffer from their past. Yet as institutions they are fundamentally different in character from their predecessors.’⁷¹ Although the institutions in the post-1945 era were clearly different from their predecessors, Nicholson’s study uncovers definite continuities between the older establishments and the contemporary type. The legacy of a punitive response to unmarried motherhood and a Christian morality which prioritised

⁶⁸ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes*, p. 20.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 18.

repentance through hard work and religious conversion, is observed by Nicholson amongst those homes run by the church: “This causes concern, for inevitably a religious aura persists in the Church Homes, and fears are sometimes expressed that unmarried mothers are asked to ‘pay the price of a pseudo-conversion for the help they receive.’”⁷² Nicholson notes how in the church run homes: ‘the end of the work done in the name of the Church is not merely material assistance or even social rehabilitation, although these may be assumed to be part of it, it is spiritual redemption.’⁷³ Housework was found to be ‘excessive’ and ‘unsuitable’ in at least five of the twenty-three homes that Nicholson visited, leading her to recommend: ‘the Homes should reconsider the policy of using housework as a means of occupation to the extent that they do.’⁷⁴ Such an observation appears to support the fears of the grandmother referred to above who was concerned about her granddaughter’s subjection to a punitive work ethic, similar to the workhouse. Furthermore social isolation and strict prohibition was found to exist in varying degrees in the homes Nicholson surveyed:

Ten Homes would not allow visitors on Sundays, and in some the residents were not allowed out at all except to go to church. Two Homes placed severe restrictions on normal leisure time activities. Cards, games, the record player and the television were prohibited, and in one Home all Sunday newspapers were forbidden and the radio permitted for only an hour in the afternoon.⁷⁵

Nicholson also uncovered an underlying resistance on the part of some church management committees to improve the poor material conditions in the homes, reflecting a punitive attitude towards unmarried mothers:

Such an attitude is associated perhaps with the ‘deterrent’ approach to the care of unmarried mothers [...] and the view that services for them should not be too generous. According to two matrons this view was typified in their management committees. Both committees steadfastly refused to sanction improvements the staff considered necessary, maintaining that anything was good enough for unmarried mothers.⁷⁶

Nicholson’s study was written in 1968 when the professionalisation of social services and social work in England was taking place, as well as the secularization of

⁷² Ibid., p. 20.

⁷³ Ibid., p.123.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.69.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 66.

society.⁷⁷ Nicholson regularly notes a lack of co-ordination between the homes on a national level, reflecting the history of a long-standing voluntary, church-run and geographically patchy form of provision for unmarried mothers, which contrasts with the developing professionalization of social work and centralization of social services about to take place in the late 1960s, of which Nicholson was part.⁷⁸ Nicholson's aspiration as a member of the NCUMC to see the homes provide a 'service of care' for unmarried mothers as institutions within the new social work field is overturned by her investigations, which do not support her original assertion that 'as institutions they are fundamentally different in character from their predecessors.'⁷⁹ Rather, Nicholson's investigation demonstrates the continuation of a punitive ethic towards unmarried mothers and the persistence of a legacy of Victorian, Christian morality towards women's sexuality, right up to the end of the 1960s. First and foremost, as Nicholson herself found, the homes in the 1960s were a place of basic shelter for women cast out by their families, but the punitive work ethic and dislocation from the outside world experienced by the residents in her study and ours, certainly makes the concept of a 'service of care' incongruous.

Both Mary and Margaret went to Mother and Baby Homes run by the church; Mary was in a Church of England home in Cumbria and Margaret in a home run by the Salvation Army in Leeds. Certain aspects of life in the homes are emphasized in both testimonies and reinforce Nicholson's observations about strict routine, domestic duties, religious obligations and dislocation from the outside world. Margaret described the home she was in as 'a prison camp.' She ran away on one occasion with her new born baby, but her parents made her return. Margaret suggested, on reflection, that incarceration in homes of the 1950s was more severe than when Nicholson was writing in the late-1960s:

I did actually run away with him [...] I actually got on a bus. I don't know how I got out of the home, coz I mean, it was more like a prison camp, really. I mean, I think some of the homes, when it got into the sixties, they were let out, you know, to go out to work. You know, from other stories I've heard, but we didn't do anything like that. We had visitors once a week.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ In 1965 the setting-up of the Seebohm Committee led to the reform of local authority social services and the creation of a social services department which formed the modern administrative structure of English social services for the proceeding decades.

⁷⁸ Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸⁰ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

After giving birth in the Home, Margaret describes being cut off from the social conventions of hospital visits and congratulations; instead she was separated from ‘proper mothers’ on the maternity ward and left in isolation:

I mean you didn’t receive any cards, presents. Nobody came to see you. There were actually, what were ‘proper mothers’ as they were called in the same part of the hospital, but we were sort of blocked off from them. You know, they were on one side and we were on the other [...] because you weren’t ‘proper mothers,’ were you? You weren’t married, so, you know, you couldn’t mix with them. You didn’t speak to anybody really.⁸¹

Mary describes a less severe form of social dislocation, but was expected to hide her pregnancy: ‘We could go into town, but we sort of weren’t encouraged an awful lot to go, not before the child was born, because it was obvious you were pregnant.’⁸² Both women describe how domestic work in the Homes was excessive and punitive in intent: ‘We scrubbed the floors with carbolic soap and a big scrubbing brush [...] I was actually in labour when I was scrubbing floors. I was scrubbing floors about half past one and I just said I couldn’t bear it any longer.’⁸³ Along with a corrective work ethic, religious observation for the purpose of redemption was also a prominent feature of life in the homes for both women:

You were tied quite a lot to the Church (Church of England) and we had a vicar come [...] Being in a Church of England Home, as I say, we had regular services in the chapel, attached to the house, and that sort of thing. We were prayed for as much as praying for ourselves.⁸⁴

I know we were made to work and that we had to pray to have our sins forgiven every morning.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁸³ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

⁸⁴ MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁸⁵ MMB, C900/08631, Margaret Suter.

Adoption

Was it Only a Dream?

Was I ever sent away to a house made of stone and oh so grey?
Made to work for my sins to pay, scrubbing floors in so much pain,
Seeing that 'S' on their tunics, again and again.

No one to say, 'you have a boy!'
No one to share in my joy,
Only my son from heaven sent, there again, he was only lent.
Twelve short weeks to love and care, stroking his face, touching his hair.

Papers signed, though I don't recall,
Dressed my baby, wrapped in a shawl.
Told him I loved him with all my heart, but one day we would have to part.

I pushed the door, 'oh please, oh no,'
'If you love your baby, you'll let him go.'
Left in a room, oh so bare, with no one there, no one to care.
'You can go home now and start a new!'
'But how could I live if I didn't have you?'

I got on with my life, did as I was told
I felt angry and sad without you to hold.
'You'll forget in time, you've done what's best,' so I obeyed, like all the rest.

How did I get home? I don't recall, or did I maybe just dream it all?
No baby
No grave
'Don't mention his name, or on your family you'll bring such shame.'

For years I kept quiet and hid my pain.
Did I really give birth or was it all in my brain?
Did he ever exist, that boy in a shawl?
Maybe I was never his mother after all.⁸⁶

Margaret's poem profoundly describes her personal trauma and the pain of recollection whilst providing historical insight into the adoption process in the mid-twentieth century. The poem evokes a punitive work ethic, a religious emphasis on sin and redemption and a strong sense of incarceration in the Salvation Army run home Margaret entered (indicated by the 'S' on the uniforms of the staff). When compared with other interviewee's descriptions of the adoption process, the poem encapsulates key stages, which emerge as common to women who experienced having to part with their illegitimate children during this period. Firstly there was a minimum six-week period after birth, during which the 1949 Adoption of Children Act had specified relinquishing

⁸⁶ Ibid.

mothers should validate their decision to have their illegitimate child adopted.⁸⁷ During this period the women in the homes experienced a 'twilight period' of being able to mother their own children. This was followed by separation at the point of adoption, which was experienced as both trauma and bereavement. Then there was a return to 'normal' life, where institutional figures and parents reinforced denial of the event, as part of a return to social respectability.

Margaret looked after her baby for three months in the Mother and Baby Home, Mary for six and Sheila, who remained with her parents, looked after her baby for four months before adoption. Despite being reminded of their distinction from 'proper mothers' in the homes the interviewees were expected, prior to adoption, to look after their babies in the way that mothers outside would do, feeding (although breastfeeding was largely discouraged due to an awareness of increased bonding), changing clothing, washing and doing extra activities such as knitting baby clothes. Most of the women who went into Mother and Baby Homes in Nicholson's study had their babies adopted before leaving, and although this does not appear to have been the primary purpose of the homes, they clearly did act as facilitators for the adoption of illegitimate babies, characteristic of 'classic' adoption in the 1950s and 1960s. When asked how many women kept their children, Mary makes clear that a minority of women were able to do so in her home because of their capacity for self-support at an older age: "There was one or two older women in there who were capable of earning their own living and things like that and they kept their children, but a lot, I should say, seventy-five per cent went for adoption."⁸⁸ The prospect of adoption hung over the heads of the interviewees and waiting was sometimes marked by a ritual: "There was a table of us and the table was quite full, you know, and as your baby was ready to go you moved along [...] so that if you were at the end of the table you knew your baby was next."⁸⁹ Mary and Margaret describe relations between unmarried mothers in the homes as supportive, particularly once the stage of adoption was reached. In the following passage the priority given to ensuring the anonymity of the adoptive parents is made clear: "They [the Moral Welfare Workers] put you in a room with no windows, so that you couldn't look out to see who was taking your baby, but the other girls used to look out and then they'd come to you and they'd say, oh you know, 'they had a car and they looked really nice.'"⁹⁰ This last

⁸⁷ Keating, *A Child for Keeps*, p. 194.

⁸⁸ MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁸⁹ MMB, C900: 08631, Margaret Suter.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

comment reflects how an illegitimate baby could transition through adoption into a legitimate, 'normal' family of two married adults of respectable status, denoted by the presence of a car, a signifier of cross-class affluence in the 1950s. In this sense, Martine Spensky's suggestion that Mother and Baby Homes functioned to produce 'legitimacy' in the 1950s is pertinent and her assertion that legitimacy denoted not only married parenthood, but also a class-based and racial-based notion of the family, is highlighted by stories of babies who were rejected by prospective parents on the grounds that they were of the wrong social class or not white.⁹¹ Mary's baby was rejected by the adoption society because of the blood tie between herself and the father, so the baby went to a Dr Barnardo's Home instead; below she describes the moment of separation:

I always remember, because you see, Yvonne was six months old. She was sitting-up, taking notice and everything. I can still see her, sat on Miss Hill's [Dr Barnardo's worker] knee in that taxi and waving to me from the window of the taxi. And after that, well, you've heard of banging your head against the wall, I could have quite happily have done that. You really don't know what to do with yourself, physically, because the purpose that I had been living for, up 'til then, for the last six months, had gone. I didn't want to go back to my mother because I didn't feel as though she wanted me back there.⁹²

Mary did return to her mother's home, as she had nowhere else to go. She hoped to resume her education, but instead went into employment because her mother saw her as undeserving of a grammar school place: 'I could have carried on my education and I think, I'm not blowing my own trumpet, but I think I had the brains to do it. I could have caught up on that year, but she would not allow it. I was paying for it in her mind I think for what I had done.'⁹³ Sheila, who was allowed to have her child in her parents' home and look after it until the adoption, went straight back to work after the birth and her mother cared for the child during the day, which unlike mother-daughter arrangements in previous chapters that facilitated daughters to keep their children and generate income, enabled Sheila's return to a respectable trajectory of womanhood. All three women describe how their grief for their relinquished children was constrained by the social expectation that their pre-marital childbearing should be forgotten and a 'normal,' life-course resumed, as if the illicit event had never taken place:

⁹¹ 'Most adoptive parents not only wanted their adopted child to be healthy, but they also wanted it white and if possible from the same social class as themselves.' Spensky, 'Producers of Legitimacy', p. 115.

⁹² MMB, C900/02560, Mary Jarvis.

⁹³ Ibid.

‘Just pull yourself together and get on with it,’ that was what we was told. That’s what my mum told me. You know, we were expected to steel ourselves and get on with our lives. It was like, ‘you’ve got another chance now’ [...] It was a huge kind of loss [...] It was actual grieving, you needed to grieve and I did grieve partly in private when I used to go to bed at night, but I didn’t show anybody that I was grieving [...] As far as my girlfriends were concerned, they would never mention it again. It was sort of like a death.⁹⁴

II.iv Marriage

Three out of the four interviewees married. Mary re-married shortly after leaving the Mother and Baby Home, but was widowed in the late 1950s. Doris married and then became divorced in the 1970s. Both these women therefore experienced lone motherhood for a second time in their lives, but through different routes. Doris’ experience as a divorced lone mother in the 1970s will be discussed in Chapter Five.

III. Oral Histories from Divorced Mothers

Of the five oral testimonies discussed here, four are from the MMB and one from the MOL oral history collection. The interviewees were born between 1911 and 1935; they lived through the Second World War as children and adolescents and married in the post-war years and the 1950s. They all experienced separation and divorce in the 1950s and early 1960s. Geographically the women grew up and experienced unmarried motherhood in locations ranging from Leamington Spa, Coventry, Birmingham, Lincoln and Newcastle. The interviewees were all from working-class backgrounds.

III.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Rose Hellerman and Ellen experienced the absence and loss of their fathers’ growing-up. Rose describes her father as an invalid, and the death of Ellen’s father when she was a teenager thwarted her and her sister’s prospects of going to university. In the remaining two-parent families, information on maternal employment is unclear, but at least two of the interviewees had mothers in paid employment. Three of the interviewees left school at the minimum age. Barbara Shirley won a scholarship to a girls’ grammar school and completed her education at seventeen. Ellen trained as a nurse and then as a midwife, but after leaving elementary education at fifteen, she initially experienced four years of employment. Ellen embarked on an apprenticeship in drapery in the 1930s, but the poor economic prospects of the job and the conditions of the Depression prompted her

⁹⁴ MMB, C900/16008, Sheila Walker.

father to intervene and direct her towards a more secure employment. His is the only parental intervention amongst this generation of interviewees that suggests aspirations towards a career for a daughter: “Dad took me to one side and said, ‘now look, what are you going to do? What do you want to do?’ And I said, ‘well I’d like to be a nurse.’”⁹⁵ Ellen then re-trained as a nurse from the age of nineteen. The other women entered employment straight after leaving school and as with the unmarried mothers in the previous section, office work was typical. Mary Anderson left school as the Second World War broke out and became a member of the WRAF. Barbara and Rose entered the labour market in the 1940s and 1950s. Rose wanted to work in an office as her mother had done and joined the Post Office as a junior clerk; Barbara also worked in the clerical sector, taking various office jobs.

As with the previous cohort, ignorance about sexual relations and birth control was frequently mentioned by the interviewees who grew up in the first half of the twentieth-century. Mary and Ellen were not told about reproduction by their parents or their school. When Ellen first left home to begin training as a nurse in 1930 she was confronted by her lack of knowledge: ‘I was nineteen, first time away from home and I was so ignorant, do you know? This is unbelievable; I still had no idea where babies came from. I don’t think I had any idea where babies came from.’⁹⁶ Rose and Mary both recall shocking incidents of young girls in their communities becoming pregnant during the 1920s and 1930s and the high degree of shame attached to illegitimacy. Ellen O’Brien recalls one unmarried mother in her neighbourhood who miscarried and buried her dead baby in her parents’ garden, in order that a coroner would not uncover its illegitimacy. As with the interviewees in Section I, parents played a key role in decisions about education and employment and were key actors in regulating the sexual knowledge and behaviour of the interviewees as unmarried young women.

III.ii Marriage, Separation and Divorce

The interviewees all married in the mid-1940s and 1950s, some formalizing relationships made during wartime. The average age of first marriage amongst the sample was 23.2 years of age, slightly lower than the national average.⁹⁷ Ellen was unusual in marrying during her thirties as a consequence of her long training as a nurse and midwife, which

⁹⁵ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O’Brien.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ The median age of first marriage for women in 1951 was 24.4 years. See Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 721.

extended into her mid-twenties. Mary married immediately after the war in 1945; her husband was a miner who had been a prisoner of war. As discussed in the previous chapter, obtaining a home of one's own was highly regarded during this period, yet constraints after the war meant it was common for married couples to start-out living with parents or relatives.⁹⁸ Mary and her husband lived with her parents-in-law when they were newlyweds, until they were able to rent their own home. Like Mary, Rose and her husband lived with Rose's grandmother in her bungalow when they first married, and then went to live with Rose's father for the remainder of their marriage. Beatrice Bell married an American Air Force pilot who had been stationed near her family home in Lincoln; they migrated to America after two years of married life in England. Three interviewees remained in employment after marriage, but Rose and Beatrice gave-up work upon marriage to become housewives and soon after, had children. Ellen, Barbara and Mary did not stop wage earning after they had children. Out of economic necessity they managed both child rearing and paid work. Such experiences of married womanhood ran contrary to the social expectation in the 1950s that married women should exit the labour market when raising children. Two principle triggers lay behind marital break-up: economic conflict and infidelity. Economic conflict was also accompanied, in two cases, by domestic violence.

Record low levels of unemployment in the 1950s, along with a rise in average wage levels and the benefits of the welfare state are some of the features associated with the cross-class 'affluence' of the decade. However, historical revisions of the period point to the limitations of such generalized descriptions and highlight the continuation of poverty amongst the working class during this era:

Despite the increase in state welfare provision, and high labour demand, vulnerability to poverty continued to characterize post-war working-class life – in suburban streets as well as within inner cities. This challenges the current orthodoxy that shapes the historiography: 'austerity' followed by 'affluence' disrupted by the 'rediscovery of poverty' by Abel-Smith and Townsend in the mid-1960s.⁹⁹

Mary grew up in a mining community during the Depression. She lived in her grandparents' colliery house, sleeping in a room with her parents and two other siblings. Altogether there were eight people living in the house. Her aspirations as a miner's wife in the 1950s were centred on buying her own home and avoiding the poverty of her

⁹⁸ Langhammer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,' p. 349.

⁹⁹ Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street', p. 502.

childhood. Such an aspiration became feasible given the ‘good wage’ her husband was able to earn combined with her own part-time wage earning, and her careful management of the family finances:

So I was working on the home help. We had no debts so everything we had coming in was income and what I was making, because I had been an agent for clubs [...] What I had coming in was enough to keep us so his money could have been saved. Coz I, we talked it over and I said to him, if he went and he made that kind of money, we could have saved-up in a year, in six months. We could have saved enough to put a deposit on a house.¹⁰⁰

However, in a short space of time, Mary’s husband’s wage-earning became inconsistent: ‘this were fits and starts he used to make, you see?’ and eventually he ceased being the primary bread-winner: ‘Well my man got that he just wouldn’t go to work.’¹⁰¹ Mary discovered her husband had been going to money-lenders and as a result the family was in considerable debt. Barbara and her husband had three young children but contrary to the expectations of the time, her experience of motherhood went hand-in-hand with wage-earning as her husband ‘wouldn’t work, he just slept all the time.’¹⁰² Barbara kept the family going by setting-up a dog-kennel business from home, which she could run alongside her maternal responsibilities. Inverting the assumption that a mother with young children would be a full-time mother, Barbara described herself as ‘a worker’, with responsibility for bread-winning and making the family budget stretch: ‘I was a worker and quite responsible and my husband wasn’t [...] there were a lot of fights about money, really, I think I only ever had £5 a week housekeeping which was to keep us all and petrol for the car, which wasn’t an awful lot in those days.’¹⁰³ Ellen had a baby soon after marrying her husband and aspired to be a housewife: ‘So I thought, well, really, I have given up now and I was happy little housewife, looking after my baby!’¹⁰⁴ As first-time parents, Ellen and her husband found it difficult to acquire permanent housing and frequently had to move. Her husband’s wage as a clerk was not sufficient to meet the rent: ‘But his wage was such that I’d no way we could have met the rent.’¹⁰⁵ Ellen’s use of the emphatic pronoun, ‘*I’d*,’ demonstrates how the responsibility for financial management of the family’s economy fell primarily on her shoulders. In order to increase

¹⁰⁰ MMB, C900/11087, Mary Anderson.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O’Brien.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

their income, Ellen went back to work part-time and found a nursery for her baby. The following extract describes when Ellen realized her earning capacity was to usurp her aspirations towards full-time motherhood and the incompatibility of continued nursing with breadwinning:

So I was sitting feeding baby (I was breast-feeding actually) he, still liked a bit of breast at that time, when a lady doctor walked in [...] and she just pointed to me and said, 'you're going back to work.' I said, 'don't be daft, he's only nine months old!' She said, 'yes, but you really must think of it.'¹⁰⁶

Shortly after returning to midwifery part-time, Ellen's husband lost his job and Ellen became the only breadwinner, working full-time to support the family. These three testimonies illustrate how the post-war welfare state's assumption that male-breadwinning within marriage could facilitate housewifery was not universally realizable.

Furthermore, these testimonies describe the continued importance of women's management of the family economy in the post-war period. Mary, Ellen and Barbara all attest to their crucial role in management of the family's economic resources, in a way very similar to their own mothers earlier in the century. Mary's statement above illustrates how she directed the family's long-term economic aims as well as managing the weekly budget (Mary's husband would hand over his earnings to her at the end of the week in exchange for 'pocket money'). Such experiences also question the resonance of the contemporary ideal of the companionate marriage within actual lived experiences of husbands and wives. The concept was pervasive in sociological studies of the family and marriage in the 1950s and 1960s, in renowned works such as Peter Willmott and Michael Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*. As Angela Davis has argued, the preoccupation with married life and endorsement of companionate, egalitarian marriages in sociological studies of the 1950s and 1960s, reflected a cultural optimism attached to the renewal of family life after the war.¹⁰⁷ There were, however, voices of cynicism amongst sociologists at the time who cast doubt on the companionate marriage being widely met within post-war marriages and Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield have suggested that its ideological value in the 1950s placed greater pressures on women and ignored the continuation of traditional divisions of labour within the home.¹⁰⁸ Amongst

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, 'A Critical Perspective on British Social Surveys and Community Studies.'

¹⁰⁸ For example: Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (London, 1955); Titmuss, *Essays on the Welfare State*. Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social reconstruction and the emergence of

our cohort, the interviewees certainly describe the continuation of a traditional division of labour within the home, similar to that of their childhoods, with women assuming greater responsibility for childcare, the management of the home and the distribution of economic resources. Additionally, these interviewees also recalled a desire on entering marriage for husbands to provide as breadwinners, in order that they were able to relinquish wage-earning responsibilities and enter full-time motherhood or housewifery. Such aspirations, 'traditional' in their implications for gender relations, were thwarted due to the persistence of material frustrations in the 1950s, veiled by the assumption of cross-class affluence. Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher found that amongst their oral history participants from both social classes for the period 1918–1963, the ideals of the companionate marriage were not endorsed. Rather, married couples saw the success of a relationship resting on a balance of 'caring and sharing', expressed through distinct conjugal roles and mutual support:

The oral history evidence indicates that the companionate model was never such a clear class discriminator of behaviour, nor were its ideals clearly endorsed by any of the respondents of either class. Genuinely egalitarian sharing was not in fact an explicit aim of any of the individuals interviewed. All accepted that husbands and wives performed quite distinct roles and neither side found it easy to concede ground and to have their own gendered area of authority and control diminished.¹⁰⁹

Amongst our interviewees, conflict in marriage often arose due to the inability of husbands and wives to fulfill their respective gendered contributions to the marriage relationship.

The other aspect of these marriages, conspicuously absent in studies of marriage in the 1950s and 1960s, was domestic violence. The economic struggles within Mary and Barbara's marriages produced violent confrontations, which eventually led both women to leave their husbands. Barbara and her husband went bankrupt despite her attempts to keep the family afloat. Her husband, in an act of rage and despair, set fire to the house whilst she and her children were asleep. Barbara fortunately escaped with the children and went to her parents' home. Her husband then fled the country. Mary had endured

companionate marriage, 1945-1959' in Clark, *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, pp. 15-31, p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, 'Married love: caring and sharing' in Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*, pp. 196-226, p. 225; Szreter, Simon and Fisher, Kate 'Love and Authority in Mid-twentieth Century Marriages: Sharing and Caring,' in Delap, Lucy, Griffin, Ben, and Wills, Abigail (eds.), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 132-54.

domestic violence during her marriage and when she discovered the debts her husband had accrued she decided to leave him. However on attempting to do so, her husband attacked her and refused to let her take their child. As a result, Mary remained in the marriage for fear of losing her daughter, eventually leaving at her husband's suggestion:

I knew through somebody else at Pegswood, she went away from her man and left her bairns until she got accommodation. But you see, when she come, when the court case come up, she lost the bairns. So I knew if I left that house without my bairn, I wouldn't get her so I hung on and in the end. He noticed that Valerie was terrified of him you see, so he said, 'oh tell your mother to get ready and you can go.'¹¹⁰

Mary's fear of losing her children in the process of leaving her husband was a very real possibility for women in the 1950s. Women who committed adultery or were seen to desert their family could ultimately lose custody of their children in court.¹¹¹ Mary returned with her daughter to her parents' house in Newcastle.

Ellen and Rose both discovered their husbands had been having affairs. Ellen's husband deserted her and Rose left her husband after years of tolerating his infidelity: 'My first husband had an eye for the women and after about eight years, I didn't think he was a very good father for my son so I divorced him.'¹¹² Adultery continued to be the primary reason for divorce in the post-war period as it had been in previous decades, but the greater number of women petitioning for divorce from the 1950s onwards may well suggest women were less willing to tolerate a husband's infidelity at a time when their economic agency was increasing.¹¹³ Claire Langhammer claims there was a hardening of intolerance towards infidelity within marriage in the post-war period, as greater expectations were placed on spouses.¹¹⁴ Beatrice spent the first years of her marriage to an American Air Force pilot in America, but like some of the interviewees in Chapter Two, the migratory aspect of a marriage formed in wartime circumstances, became a problem in peacetime. She found it increasingly difficult to be away from home and coupled with the discovery of her husband's infidelity, she decided to leave him. She returned to live with her mother in Lincoln.

¹¹⁰ MMB, C900/11087, Mary Anderson.

¹¹¹ 'By the 1950s automatic father-right had been abolished but adultery and desertion could still lead to a mother losing custody of her children.' Smart, *The Ties that Bind*, p.43.

¹¹² MMB, C900/04562, Rose Hellerman.

¹¹³ Smart, *The Ties that Bind*, p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Clare Langhammer, 'Sexual Politics in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain,' *History Workshop Journal*, (2006), Issue 62, pp. 87-115.

Separation was thus initiated by four of the women and divorce by all five. Ellen's husband deserted her in 1957 and she initiated divorce some years later: 'I think it was '62 I divorced him.'¹¹⁵ Mary attempted to divorce her husband in the mid-1950s, but was unable to do so because she could not demonstrate adequate grounds on the basis of cruelty, despite having a violent husband: 'Coz, you see, I left him, but I couldn't prove that he'd used me bad enough.'¹¹⁶ She eventually divorced her husband after the 1969 Divorce Act. Mary does not appear to have been granted a separation order by a magistrate's court either, which would have provided her with maintenance. Women like Mary who left their husbands in the 1950s could be told by the courts that their husband did not have a duty to maintain them, unless they were able to demonstrate assault or persistent cruelty. The process of obtaining a separation order or divorce was protracted for Barbara because her husband had fled the country after setting the family home on fire: 'I couldn't get a divorce, because my husband had jumped the high seas, we didn't even know which country he was in.'¹¹⁷

III.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

Rented property in the 1950s was usually held in the husband's name only; the courts had no powers to transfer tenancy to a deserted wife who remained in a property.¹¹⁸ Therefore Barbara and her three children could not remain in the family home after her husband left the country. She was given a week to vacate the property by the landlord because she lacked rights as a tenant. After a short period living in her parents' home, Barbara's mother and father gave her a thousand pounds to set herself up: 'mum and dad said I could have a thousand pounds to do some kind of business.'¹¹⁹ Barbara purchased a derelict house in Leamington Spa, which she made into a family home and guesthouse. Barbara's case was unusual in that she was the only woman in the cohort to own a property as a lone mother, something which she and the other four interviewees had not attained during their first marriages. Acquiring capital through her parents enabled Barbara to buy a property outright, but it did mean she invested everything in a near-

¹¹⁵ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O'Brien.

¹¹⁶ The 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act introduced new grounds for divorce alongside the existing one of adultery; these included 'willful desertion,' 'cruelty' or 'incurable insanity.' Mary could only base her case on the grounds of cruelty, which failed to be upheld.

¹¹⁷ MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹¹⁸ Smart, *The Ties that Bind*, p. 47.

¹¹⁹ MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

uninhabitable home and had no remaining funds to renovate and furnish: 'It was a derelict house, a fifteen-roomed house, tramps had been sleeping in there and there was open wells and we came into this house with no money whatsoever. I think we had ex-army beds, the metal, you know, camp, bunk beds!'¹²⁰ As we will see, Barbara gradually developed the property and her business, but this was a long process, achieved through unconventional means and extreme resourcefulness. Ellen continued renting in the private sector after her separation. As the oldest lone mother in the cohort (Ellen was in her mid-forties when her husband left her in 1957) with an established career as a midwife and had the greatest earning capacity amongst the sample. However, she stressed in her interview the barriers facing single women, despite class position, in being able to obtain credit to facilitate home ownership: 'But it was difficult, very difficult. One of the biggest difficulties was that you could do nothing on your own. If I'd wanted to buy a house [...] a divorced woman on her own (divorced or single) had to have a man somewhere in the background to stand security on her loan, whether it was a gramophone or a house.'¹²¹

Mary, Beatrice and Rose all went to live with their parents as lone mothers. As separated women their housing scenarios met with the national trend described in Chapter Two, whereby the majority of separated and divorced women returned to live in the parental home. Rose had always lived in her parents' house, even during her marriage and spoke of this as a positive arrangement, which protected her from social isolation as a lone mother: 'I've always lived in this house with my father here, so I was never alone.'¹²² Due to her husband's job as an American Air Force pilot, Beatrice had been used to living in various locations abroad and never established a marital home in the UK. Thus, when she returned with her two children, she went to live with her mother in Sheffield. Beatrice's mother became unwell during this time and Beatrice cared for her on a daily basis, illustrating how re-adoption into the parental home could bring added caring responsibilities for lone mothers. Whilst living with her mother, Beatrice met her second husband who provided her with her own home prior to marriage: 'he bought this house and I moved into it, we didn't live together, we just, I lived in the house and he lived with his mother.'¹²³ Such an arrangement reflects the social disapproval towards cohabitation before marriage in the 1950s, as well as the fact that re-marriage was an

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O'Brien.

¹²² MMB, C900/04562, Rose Hellerman.

¹²³ MMB, C900/09521, Beatrice Bell.

enabler of independent housing for separated or divorced women who were having to live with parents. Mary and her daughter lived with her parents when she first separated from her husband, but after some years in steady employment she was able to rent her own home.

Maternal Economy

You see divorce, until very recently, was very difficult, because, take myself, trying to keep a child and me was very, very hard and I was a trained midwife and many, many women would have left their husbands, without any training, they themselves having no training at all, but what were they going to do? They couldn't live on the money they'd earn and the husband was not made to support them.¹²⁴

Entrance to the labour market as we saw in Chapter Two, was key to survival for lone mothers during this period. Divorced women rarely applied for NA in the 1950s and the pursuit of fathers for maintenance payments was often ineffective. Additionally, Ellen, Mary and Rose would not have been eligible for Family Allowance because they only had one child. As Ellen's statement highlights, divorced lone mothers struggled to manage on their own earnings if they lacked relevant training and had little work experience due to early marriage. Furthermore, wage differentials between men and women meant that lone mothers were disadvantaged in the labour market. Ellen initially continued working as a midwife, as she had done in marriage, supplementing her wages by taking-in student lodgers; she does not mention receiving maintenance payments from her ex-husband. However, shift work as a midwife did not reconcile well with being able to care for a young child, a conflict which Ellen found very hard to resolve, moving between jobs to try and lessen this incompatibility:

I struggled. I'll just say this and leave it. If I had known when the marriage broke-up what the next five years was going to have been, I don't think I'd have faced it. But it passed and in it I tried four different jobs before I could settle with Dermot. Because I was looking after him and working as I have previously said, day and night. However, I did it.¹²⁵

Friends eventually gave Ellen a job managing their bookshop in Birmingham. Managing a business gave her a greater degree of autonomy in terms of arranging childcare around

¹²⁴ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O'Brien.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

wage earning. Like Ellen, Barbara also ran a small business, but by turning her own residence into a guest house, she largely alleviated the contrary demands of wage earning and childcare, extending the strategy used by other women in this study who owned their own homes and took in lodgers, by taking-in paying guests: ‘Because you’ve got three children, you’ve got to think about school holidays and things like that so it was either keeping a shop or I could always cater, so bed and breakfast came to mind.’¹²⁶ Barbara first moved herself and her three children into one room in her derelict house and set-up another room to let to guests, making use of ex-army and junk shop furniture. From this she developed her business across many years, employing various strategies to meet the costs of renovating. Guests who came to stay often became lodgers (or ‘family’ as Barbara called them) over longer periods of time and would have their rent subsidized in exchange for building work: ‘There were radiators that leaked, there were windows out, there were ceilings down and we had no money. We painted the floors brown, instead of, you know, we hadn’t got any money for carpets [...] The visitors I had in those days lived as family and they’d, I’d just knock some off their rent and they’d help me.’¹²⁷ Other guests would help with childcare if Barbara had to go out. Once Barbara’s husband was traced abroad, she was eventually paid maintenance, but as she recalls, ‘it wasn’t an awful lot of money for three children and myself.’¹²⁸

Mary and Rose both went into employment. Neither mention receiving maintenance from their ex-husbands. As both women lived with their parents, grandparents were able to provide childcare. Mary went into factory work initially, which she disliked, so she became a bus conductress with help from a friend and ‘loved every minute of it.’¹²⁹ In the early-1960s Mary had an illegitimate child, the circumstances of which she was unwilling to discuss, attesting to the stigma of unmarried motherhood in the early 1960s. However, by this time she was renting a home of her own and was able to afford to pay for a minder to provide childcare whilst she worked. Beatrice did not receive any maintenance from her ex-husband, who remained in America. She was the first divorced woman in our sample to claim NA in the early 1960s. Although Beatrice worked as a waitress after leaving school, she did not work during her marriage, and thus her ability as a lone mother to generate anything other than a basic income was constrained. Sharing a house with her parents, Beatrice’s living costs were significantly

¹²⁶ MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ MMB, C900/11087, Mary Anderson.

reduced and NA provided a residual income, which she could claim independently of her parents after the removal of the household means test in the post-war period. The number of lone mothers claiming NA in the late 1940s and 1950s remained at a similar level, but between 1961 and 1965 the numbers of claimants more than doubled.¹³⁰ This trend will be explored in the next chapter when more women like Beatrice began turning towards the state for income. However, Beatrice did not remain on NA indefinitely. It was adequate for a short period, but living with her parents she was able eventually to consider returning to education: 'I began going to college, thinking, well, I suppose I ought to get myself some qualifications having left school when I was fourteen.'¹³¹ She later worked for the Samaritans. Other than Beatrice who claimed social security as a lone mother and who highlighted the significance of free school meals as an important resource, the other interviewees do not refer to state support.

The interviewees endured periods struggling with poverty as lone mothers in the 1950s and early 1960s: 'I mean sometimes I hadn't got money (before we had free school dinners) I hadn't got the money to give them their school dinner money.'¹³² However, for those who had experienced economic hardship and lived with unemployed husbands during marriage, material circumstances in fact improved when they returned to live with parents as lone mothers. Furthermore, for those interviewees who experienced disproportionate responsibility in marriage for managing economic resources and childcare, and/or domestic violence, such as Barbara and Mary, entering lone motherhood bought them greater personal security, autonomy and support in the form of increased assistance from kin. In many ways, the strategies the interviewees had to adopt during marriage to cope with material constraints were carried over into lone motherhood and strengthened. One aspect of the testimonies for this decade which did not occur in the last, is the recollection of the inability to take an annual holiday, something, which by the 1950s, the vast majority of the people in the UK were able to do.¹³³

I never went on holiday. I mean, I couldn't afford it. I mean, I had the bairnes to keep and by this time I was into a house of my own and I had my rent to pay and everything.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, pp. 163-5.

¹³¹ MMB, C900/09521, Beatrice Bell.

¹³² MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹³³ 'By 1950, 91 per cent of the UK population enjoyed paid holidays of mostly two weeks duration.' Julie-Marie Strange, 'Leisure' in Carnevali and Strange, *Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 206.

¹³⁴ MMB, C900/11087, Mary Anderson.

If we had a tenner, we'd probably go down and camp out on Western-Super-Mare beach for the weekend. But we went on. I don't think they ever realized that they [the children] were poor, really.¹³⁵

Social Membership and Identity

Parents were the primary source of support for divorced interviewees, taking daughters and grandchildren back into their homes, providing childcare and financial assistance. Friends and neighbours were also mentioned as offering support in the form of childcare arrangements and employment prospects. However, compared with the previous generation of divorcees in the immediate aftermath of war, the interviewees in the 1950s recalled a greater degree of social disapproval and a heightened conspicuousness as divorced women in the 'golden age' of the family:

Now divorce in those days was a bit different from today, it was the talk of our lot those days. I remember a colleague coming to me and saying, 'Oh, Mrs O'Brien, it's so humiliating for a woman, isn't it?'"¹³⁶

I went and knocked on the door at the Samaritans and asked if I could volunteer and they took me on. Bit sniffy they were about a divorced woman.¹³⁷

The interviewees referred to the universality of the nuclear family in the 1950s and its cultural significance. Rose felt marginalised when out with her children, particularly on a Sunday, when the two-parent family was commensurate with attending church and being seen in public: 'Well it was hard, especially when you went out on a Sunday and you'd see mum and dad and the children and you were just a mum with a little boy.'¹³⁸ Ellen was one of a group of women in the early 1960s in Birmingham who campaigned to set up out-of-school activities for children to assist all families, but in particular women like herself who were lone mothers and who struggled with the lack of formal childcare provision:

We started (I say 'we,' it was a bunch of women). We were known as, oh, I forget now. We were certainly not communists at the time, but they accused us of being some. The fact that I might have been was nothing to do with what was happening. We started a movement for out of school activity [...] and more than one school in Birmingham opened their playgrounds for children in the holidays.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹³⁶ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O'Brien.

¹³⁷ MMB, C900/09521, Beatrice Bell.

¹³⁸ MMB, C900/04562, Rose Hellerman.

¹³⁹ MMB, 1CDR0005871, Ellen O'Brien.

Ellen's experience of being censured for organizing collective childcare provision points to the normative expectation that daily care of children was best done in the home, and that mothers should be continuously available to their children. Her efforts to collectively organize childcare were part of a wider playgroup movement, which emerged in England in the 1960s.¹⁴⁰

Barbara's testimony provides an example of an alternative household and family type in the mid-twentieth century, which offered a very different model to the political and cultural rhetoric of family in the 1950s. Her home was relied on by local social services as a refuge for those who lived outside the bounds of the traditional family and attests to the importance of informal welfare arrangements provided by women in the post-war period. Barbara adopted two children in the 1960s, becoming a mother of five, after being contacted by Dr Barnardo's. As she recalled:

I got another one from Dr Barnardo's somehow or other. They'd phoned me up one day and said: 'We're having trouble with a lad here, would you like to have him? [...] Would you not like to try and see if he'll grow-up with yours and not be a trouble?'¹⁴¹

She housed, amongst others, former prisoners who needed temporary accommodation as well as two lone mothers. Barbara's poignant description below reveals the story of her historical counterpart, an unmarried mother who vanished after being rejected by her family and finally released in the 1960s as an elderly woman from the institution she had been placed in some forty years before:

When I was in the guesthouse, somebody contacted me from the mental hospital in Malvern to say there were people that had been put into the hospital just because they got pregnant. They had to stay in that hospital because they hadn't got an address to come out to. He said, 'would you mind having her to see if they can live in the community?' I said, 'okay, I'll give them a month's trial.' You know, see how they go sort of thing [...] So we had one lady, we called 'Granny Mary,' she was a sweet lady, wee bit simple, but nothing very bad. She had all these dolls on her bed and she called them all names and she fed them in the morning and she took them out for walks in the town. She'd been put in, I think,

¹⁴⁰ 'In time some of the more middle-class, home-based mothers did take steps to help themselves. The first playgroup movement had emerged in New Zealand, but a British playgroup movement was launched in 1960. By 1965 there were 500 such groups and by 1972 there were 15,266 in England alone.' Vicky Randall, *The Politics of Child Daycare in Britain* (Oxford, 2000), p. 60.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

because she was pregnant when she was, well, a girl in her teens she told me. Her parents wouldn't ever have her out again, which is a shame really, isn't it? So she was stuck in an institution for the whole of her life.¹⁴²

The local council would regularly contact Barbara to ask if she could provide shelter for the homeless; her story is a remarkable example of the agency of an individual and expansion of the concept of family, at a time when the currency of the traditional family was heavily prescriptive: 'I had guests in and to make guests feel homely and welcome they took over my whole house and some of them stayed forever and some of them, well, some of them still call me 'mum' and they lived with me as family.'¹⁴³

III.iv Re-marriage

In 1955, three-quarters of those who divorced went on to re-marry, demonstrating how a 'broken home' often transitioned back into a married unit.¹⁴⁴ Amongst our cohort, Rose and Beatrice remarried; as lone mothers living with parents, marriage offered a route out of dependence on kin. Barbara's status as a home-owner with a successful business, gave her an unusual degree of economic independence as a lone mother in the 1950s and 1960s, and an unusual resistance towards re-marriage: "In the Guest House I always used to say: 'if I talk about getting married, lock me down the cellar until I come to my senses!'"¹⁴⁵

IV. Conclusion

The testimonies in this chapter of both unmarried and divorced lone mothers, have demonstrated how individuals and society invested heavily in securing the 'normality' of the nuclear family in 1950's England, so that to enter lone motherhood was to exist on the margins of society. The idea that the decade was an era 'hallmarked by contradictions for women,' is borne out by the testimonies of women in this chapter. These women aspired to housewifery and full-time motherhood, secured by a national affluence unbeknown to their parents. However, they discovered the persistence of economic insecurities after 1945 meant their earnings were essential to assuaging family poverty. Although the welfare state improved overall living standards when compared to the inter-war period, the interviewees who married in the 1950s found themselves repeating

¹⁴² MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Titmuss, *Essays on the Welfare State*, p. 100.

¹⁴⁵ MMB, C900/18557, Barbara Shirley.

their own mothers work-focused lives, straddling both domestic and employment based spheres of labour and managing the economic safety of the family. Their personal narratives are at odds with cultural assumptions about the value of full-time motherhood and the companionate ideal.

NA was infrequently taken up by lone mothers during this period. It still carried the stigma associated with poor relief and was inadequate in providing an income over a sustained period of time for women with dependents. Social housing was difficult for lone mothers to acquire in the context of a national housing shortage, the ideological preference for nuclear families, and the patriarchal basis of property law and credit acquisition created structural barriers of tenancy and home-ownership. Therefore women's capacity to wage-earn facilitated their survival as lone mothers during this era, along with the support of the extended family. The re-adoption of divorced mothers into the parental home is a neglected aspect of the historiography of lone mothers during the twentieth-century, which has tended to focus on the housing of unmarried mothers by kin.¹⁴⁶ Although women and men aspired to form nuclear families and a 'home of ones own' in the 1950s, the extended family was vital in offering a safety-net when these aspirations failed to ensure a secure base.¹⁴⁷ As well as providing housing, grandparental care of children often facilitated a divorced daughter's employment. The agency demonstrated by women in this chapter who found a way to mitigate economic hardship in marriage, followed them into lone motherhood, where material strictures and the conflict between wage earning and mothering demanded extreme resourcefulness.

For those interviewees in this chapter whose parents would not allow them to keep an illegitimate child, their stories offer insight into what happened to unmarried mothers when the safety-net of family failed. Recollections of exile to charitable homes and parental insistence on adoption highlight the degree of shame attached to illegitimacy in the 1950s and the lengths some families would go to in order to preserve respectability. Ginger Frost argues that illegitimate children posed a threat well into the twentieth century because their presence broke through the myth of the ideal family: 'Illegitimacy was one of the most powerful family secrets, well into the twentieth century. Illegitimacy exposed illicit sexuality, and showed that the family involved was unable to

¹⁴⁶ Frost, "The Black Lamb of the Black Sheep"; Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*.

¹⁴⁷ Claire Langhammer has highlighted the extent to which many people were excluded from the home-centred society, including married couples: 'Even at the end of the 1950s significant sections of the British population remained excluded from the home-centred society: housing need remained a crucial political issue.' Langhammer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,' p. 343.

fit into the 'normal' family pattern.¹⁴⁸ Although under the 1945 welfare settlement, unmarried mothers could no longer be sent to the workhouse, the Mother and Baby Homes of the 1950s carried with them a stigma associated with the pre-war world of poor relief and incarceration, as well as the continuation of a punitive ethic in relation to women's illicit sexuality. The 1950s could be seen as a more austere period for unmarried mothers and their children, compared to the war years when the state endorsed their viability, through moderate provision. As Katherine Holden has highlighted during this period it was paradoxically more acceptable for a single woman to adopt a child rather than keep her own.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the actual rise in overall living standards during the 'golden age,' as well as the promise of cross-class affluence and the 'normality' of the working-class family (hitherto depicted as a problematic group), made illegitimacy for the respectable working-class family even more of social risk than it had been during wartime. Moving into the 1960s, a decade associated with permissiveness, was the risk of lone motherhood to lessen and move the lone mother away from the margins? This is the question to which we now turn.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 309.

¹⁴⁹ Katherine Holden, *In the Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60* (Manchester; New York, 2007), p. 140.

Chapter 4

Poverty Rediscovered and the One-parent Family: the 1960s

*You don't know me, I can hide.
You don't know the person inside.
And I for my part don't know you
For you, if you wish, can hide too.
And listening and looking around
I have found many masks around.
They smile and greet you politely
And then walk by.¹*

Annual Report, Family Service Units, 1967

I. Introduction

This extract from a poem written by a lone mother, features on the opening page of the Family Service Unit's Annual Report in 1967. The inclusion of the poem, which foregrounds the experience of the lone mother as a socially isolated figure ('You don't know me, I can hide') within a society preoccupied with respectable appearance ('I have found many masks around'), is indicative of a shift in the 1960s amongst social investigators, charities and academics towards a more subjective treatment of those in poverty, whereby the 'voices' and feelings of the poor became part of the analysis and construction of the problem of poverty. The report goes on to say:

The writer of these lines is a mother with whom the Bradford Unit has been working. Mrs. A. was deserted by her husband some years ago. Since then she has had to care for her four children alone. [...] The feelings expressed in this poem are shared by many other members of the families F.S.U. is helping.²

As discussed in previous chapters, through charitable support to poor families in England, the FSU often unearthed the link between poverty and the absence of a male-breadwinner, but the economic dilemma of single parenthood was never made explicit as a cause of poverty, rather the (lone) mother featured as a problem character whose personal inadequacies fostered family hardship. The FSU's recognition of the category 'single-parent family' as a significant demographic and the inclusion of personal testimony in the reporting of its activities in the late 1960s, correspond with the

¹ ULSCA, DF495/HQM1/12, 'Annual Report of the Family Services Unit' (1967).

² Ibid.

development of a body of sociological research on lone mother families which was part of the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ in Britain, twenty years after the post-war welfare settlement. Three significant studies of lone mother families appeared in the 1960s: Virginia Wimperis’ *The Unmarried Mother and her Child* (1960), Margaret Wynn’s *Fatherless Families: A Study of Families Deprived of a Father by Death, Divorce, Separation or Desertion, Before or After Marriage* (1964) and Dennis Marsden’s *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family* (1969).³ The latter two studies will be given particular attention in this chapter. All three authors were social researchers and Wynn and Marsden had life-long careers in research and public policy-making. Marsden’s research was part of a wider survey of poverty in the UK initiated by Peter Townsend in the late 1960s; Townsend was encouraged to explore the character of poverty within 1960s society having himself been the child of a lone mother in the 1930s, brought-up by his grandmother whilst his mother did paid work.⁴

Mike Savage has located ‘the moment of sociology’ in the 1960s and argues that it was during this period that the social scientific endeavour really took shape having started in the 1950s.⁵ Savage discusses how sociology during this period became a feature of modernity and a ‘social movement concerned to challenge traditional forms of knowing in the name of a new, rational mode of expertise which embraced science.’⁶ The interview and survey method were the key tools of the social scientist and Savage demonstrates how the sociological interview extended psychoanalytic models of investigation and came to usurp literary narratives as a means of knowing the modern individual.⁷ Marsden, Wimperis and Wynn combined census material, in-depth reviews of benefit entitlements and interviews with lone mothers and social services to produce studies of lone mother families in the 1960s. Marsden, in particular, exploits the interview method and his work has been subsequently highlighted by historians researching lone motherhood in post-1945 society due to its exposition of lone motherhood at the level of first-hand testimony.⁸ Prior to sociological research such as

³ Dennis Marsden, *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family* (Harmondsworth, 1969); Virginia Wimperis, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child* (London, 1960); Margaret Wynn, *Fatherless Families*.

⁴ Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living* (Harmondsworth, 1979).

⁵ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁸ See Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain* and Tanya Evans and Pat Thane, ‘Secondary Analysis of Dennis Marsden, *Mothers Alone*’ *Methodological Innovations Online*, Vo. 1, No 2 (2006), pp. 1-4, p. 2:

http://erdt.plymouth.ac.uk/mionline/public_html/viewarticle.php?id=31&layout=html.

Marsden, Wimperis and Wynn's, psychological theories about the pathology of unmarried mothers and their children had dominated public discussions of lone motherhood, as noted in previous chapters. Publications by voluntary associations such as the FSU had regularly associated problem families with the character failings of 'deficient' mothers or parents. With the new sociological method, the lone mother's subject-position was elevated as a means of developing a relative notion of poverty, allowing personal narrative to expose economic plight as opposed to psychological temperament. Marsden's approach is notable in this regard:

One way of assessing the adequacy of National Assistance at this time is to ask, how poor did the mothers feel? Poor people's feelings about their material standards should be among the factors to be weighed in determining what the state minimum income level should be.⁹

Sociological studies of lone motherhood in the 1960s, along with the campaigning efforts of the NCUMC and the wider anti-poverty lobby, brought a shift in how lone mother families were conceptualized at the level of public and political discourse. They adopted a structural perspective on the problem of poverty and discredited the association of immoral character with the poor, which had been a feature of the 1950s: 'Those in poverty are not poor through their own fault' said Marsden.¹⁰ Looking further back, the association of the poor with individual moral failings has a long history and was a strong feature of the nineteenth century attitudes towards poverty and poor relief, as discussed in relation to the unmarried mother. Marsden and Wynn, in reviewing the condition of lone motherhood were clearly intent on alerting contemporary readers to the continuation of nineteenth-century moral attitudes towards relief under the post-war welfare state. Terms such as 'fatherless family,' and 'unsupported mother,' for the first time homogenized all lone mothers, regardless of the particular 'route into' lone motherhood. Such categorization flattened moral distinctions and identified all single women with dependents as universally vulnerable to poverty and entitled to a share in the new affluence: 'Mothers alone are failing to share fully in the overall rise in living standards.'¹¹

Through sociological investigation and public debate a new language emerged to describe the lone mother, which was to inform language at the colloquial as well as

⁹ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

political level in the decades to come. The phrase 'broken home,' continued to be used by Marsden, Wimperis and Wynn, but the term 'fatherless family' assumed a new currency. As seen in the previous two chapters, the phrase 'unmarried mother' was used in the 1950s (and continued to be used in the 1960s) to describe women with illegitimate children and interviewees recalled it as a label which carried a high degree of stigma. This phrase is negated by the sociologists and in its place 'unsupported mother,' or 'mothers alone,' refigured the lone mother as a subject of social sympathy and responsibility. Wynn's study involved a comparison between British social policy towards lone mothers and that of other European countries, and through such comparisons linguistic differences also emerged: "The 'single mother' is the name given to her in Danish but she may be a deserted, divorced, widowed or unmarried mother."¹² The emergence at the end of the 1960s of the phrase 'one-parent family,' added gender-neutrality in recognition that single parents could be fathers, and in 1973 the NCUMC was renamed 'The National Council for One-parent Families' (NCOPF).

The 1960s has assumed a place in the historiography of the twentieth-century as a watershed of social and cultural change, as the editors of a recent journal dedicated to the study of the era claim: 'Indeed, no recent decade has been so powerfully transformative in much of the world as have the Sixties.'¹³ During the 1960s, rates of divorce and illegitimacy steadily climbed, but this increase was gradual and not like the sudden, steep rise which had occurred after the Second World War. The teenage birth and conception rate rose sharply in the 1960s, but women in general did not give birth to babies outside of marriage, instead greater numbers of young females married on discovering a pre-marital pregnancy: 'In the 1960s there was still a tendency for pregnant women to marry. A majority of births to women younger than 20 years old were conceived outside marriage in the 1960s, but the majority of pre-maritally conceived births took place inside marriage.'¹⁴ Therefore, despite the radicalism of the era's social movements and the undeniable changes to cultural standards of morality, the married family unit was at its most prominent during the decade, with near universal rates of marriage amongst the population, despite an increase in divorce.¹⁵ This chapter will explore the position of the lone mother in relation to historiographical themes associated with the decade in particular: affluence, increased youthful freedom and permissiveness.

¹² Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 145.

¹³ Jeremy Varon, Michael S. Forley and John McMillian, 'Time is an ocean: the past and future of the Sixties' *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 1, No. 1., (June 2008), pp. 1-7.

¹⁴ Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cheltenham, 2001) p. 32.

¹⁵ Lewis, 'Marriage', p. 72.

Furthermore, it will address whether or not the development of new sociological categories impacted on lone mothers' self-identities.

II. Oral Testimonies from Divorced Mothers

The six testimonies in the following section are from women who became lone mothers in the 1960s and early 1970s, following separation and divorce. Most of the interviewees were born in the 1930s; they were therefore children during the Second World War and adolescents in the post-war period, most married in the 1950s. Three of the interviewees were working-class: Anne Barker, Elizabeth and Iris. The other three came from middle-class backgrounds: Ann Hoad, Frances Dodwell and Judy Sleet. The inclusion of women from both social classes in this cohort allows for a more developed analysis of social class than was possible in previous chapters. Geographically, the interviewees resided as lone mothers across the North, the Midlands and South of England, in the following locations: Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Northampton, London, Surrey and Bournemouth. Location could be difficult to ascertain in some cases where women in this cohort experienced homelessness. Both Ann Hoad and Iris are the first interviewees in this study to have become homeless. Their geographical context is often unclear as they frequently move and the emotional distress of recalling homelessness, tended to make their narratives less coherent in places. Judy and Iris were the first women in this study to experience two consecutive periods as lone mothers, following the breakdown of both first and second marriages during their childbearing years. Incidents of homelessness and the break-up of second marriages amongst this cohort, relate to wider trends emerging in the 1960s. Homelessness emerged as a significant problem for large cities during the 1960s, and the high incidence of homelessness caused by family breakdown was brought to public attention in the mid-1960s by social research, and by the founding of the charity 'Shelter.'

Apart from Ann Hoad, the testimonies are from the MMB collection. Ann Hoad's testimony is from the NLSA.¹⁶ The NLSA was the result of a national competition, which took place between 1993 and 1994, to promote the value of life story recording and autobiographical writing. Entrants either wrote or tape-recorded their life stories in their own homes; Ann was one of a thousand entrants who received an award for her tape-recorded entry. This source is therefore more autobiographical in form; it is not dialogic like the MMB and MOL interviews used so far. Ann's life story offers a

¹⁶ The National Life Story Awards (NLSA), C642/89, Ann Hoad.

particularly detailed account of lone motherhood in the 1960s.

II.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Elizabeth and Iris' recollections of working-class childhoods during the 1930's Depression abound with memories of poverty: poor housing, over-crowding and childhood ill-health. Elizabeth's father was a docker in Liverpool who experienced frequent unemployment, leaving her parents and six other siblings in dire poverty – Elizabeth remembers tracing her father's feet around an empty cereal box to make soles to place in his boots. She recalls how the stigma attached to the means-test deterred the family from applying for poor relief: 'We didn't have means-testing, our family – too proud – I would think everybody in our street was fairly proud.'¹⁷ Iris' parents were domestic servants. She and her sister spent early childhood in a 'bug-infested' pre-fab in Yorkshire.¹⁸ Like Elizabeth, Iris describes how her mother kept the family together and maintained the home, using words such as 'industrious,' and 'thrifty.' As in previous chapters and historiographical accounts of this period, the mother as manager of family poverty and also the sacrificial impact of such maternal endeavour are powerfully evoked in the following passage by Elizabeth:

My mother was a very good manager. There may not have been a lot of meat in the scouse [meat stew] but we had scouse. We had a hot meal everyday. She made all our clothes and we had a clean dress every day, all of us. She had one boy and she knitted him what we then called 'buster suits' (little pants and a jumper) she knitted all his buster suits. It's not surprising she died at 41 worn out. We wish we had her now to treasure.¹⁹

Anne Barker grew-up in a one-parent family from the age of eleven after her mother left due to her father's alcoholism in 1947. She describes how she felt 'very shamed' being brought-up in a family without a mother in the post-war years and the rarity of mothers deserting children: 'mothers didn't go and leave children then, it was very unusual.'²⁰

Both Iris and Elizabeth left school at fourteen. Anne Barker went to a grammar school, which she refers to as 'quite an achievement.' She wanted to continue beyond elementary education, but she left at fifteen, identifying her father's lack of encouragement as a deterrent. Elizabeth had aspirations towards further education but was held back by her duties as the eldest sibling: 'I was the eldest with all this family and

¹⁷ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Edwards.

¹⁸ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

¹⁹ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Edwards. Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, Ross, *Love and Toil*.

²⁰ MMB, C900/12072, Anne Barker.

I've always had an over-developed sense of responsibility I think, so I knew I had to leave and go to work.²¹ However, although Elizabeth recalls the restrictive aspect of domestic responsibilities as a girl, she also remembers the social status attached to taking care of infants as a nine-year-old girl:

The mother would take off a huge black shawl and wrap it around you and you would wrap this baby in this shawl. We were like little old ladies, little old grannies! A huge black shawl, three corners on you and a baby wrapped in it and you'd be talking to other little girls of nine who had the same. That was great, you know, it was responsibility and you thought you were clever and you were good to be allowed to look after somebody's baby.²²

This passage is indicative of how maternity regularly shaped girlhood identity in working-class communities, a social process observed by Robert Colls who states that working-class girls were often 'social mothers long before they were biological mothers.'²³ After leaving school as adolescents, domestic responsibilities became twinned with the responsibility of wage-earning as all three interviewees entered office work in the 1940s and 1950s. The rise in young women's earnings over the first half of the twentieth century is reflected in the following statement by Elizabeth: 'And I passed the typing test and from nineteen shillings a week (19 and 5 pence it was) I joined the elite, which was Littlewoods racing and we were regarded as the elite and my wages went up to 34 shillings in one go! I couldn't wait to get home and tell my mother!²⁴

Amongst the middle-class interviewees, two experienced growing up in lone mother families. Ann Hoad's father was serving abroad during the war and his impending return is remembered as confusing: "Well, I didn't really know what a 'dad' was, I had no idea what a 'dad' was really, except that my cousin Reney had a 'dad,' my uncle Burt was at home."²⁵ Ann's father's re-entrance is described as an intrusion into the one-parent family she had become accustomed to during wartime, reflecting the descriptions previously noted in Chapter Two of demobilized fathers and husbands as 'strangers':

I remember this extreme awkwardness. I didn't know what I'd expected in having a father come home, but whatever it was I wasn't ready for it. The shock of having this man – I hadn't thought of a 'dad' as being a man for some reason

²¹ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Mary Edwards.

²² Ibid.

²³ Robert Colls, 'When We Lived in Communities: Working-class Culture and its Critics' in Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (eds.) *Cities of Ideas: Governance and Citizenship in Urban Britain: 1800-2000* (Aldershot, 2005) p. 5.

²⁴ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Mary Edwards.

²⁵ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

– having this man suddenly gate-crashing into our family of three was something I didn't know how to handle at all.²⁶

Frances' mother became an unmarried mother in the 1930s. During the war years Frances was looked after by her grandmother, which enabled her mother to work. Asked about the stigma of illegitimacy during her interview, Frances points to the exceptional circumstances of war when the abnormality of being raised in a one-parent family was overturned:

During wartime I don't think it made that much difference, because most people's husbands were away fighting anyway [...] I mean yes, my mother was away, but then so many other people had fathers away. As my father was never mentioned, just to have one-parent not there didn't seem to be any different to anybody else.²⁷

In contrast to the working-class interviewees, material hardship in childhood does not feature in the middle-class testimonies and educational trajectories were less constrained. Ann Hoad and Judy both went to grammar schools and Frances attended a boarding school. On leaving school at seventeen, Ann embarked on midwifery training and Frances spent a year working as an au pair abroad, before returning to the UK to join the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS). Judy gained a place to study at university, but then met her future husband and chose to marry at eighteen, doing a secretarial course instead. This illustrates how, even with educational prospects, the chance of marriage was considered by many women as a more secure route into independence in the 1950s.²⁸

Wage-earning often facilitated adolescent leisure activities and a degree of social freedom within the cohort: visits to dance halls were common and Elizabeth's parents agreed to her visiting Butlins with female friends, aged seventeen. Both Ann and Frances experienced a passage of time away from the parental home, working and training, before they married. However, for all six women, parental authority keenly shaped their movements as young women prior to marriage, regardless of their social class. As has been noted in previous chapters, fear of parental reprimand shaped relationships with the opposite sex in the 1950s. The following comment by Judy highlights the generational relationship experienced by interviewees: 'You see, teenagers in those days, they didn't question their parents so much as I think they do nowadays. I mean you just went along

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ MMB, C900/16408, Frances Dodwell.

²⁸ Spencer, 'Girls at Risk: Early School-leaving and early marriage in the 1950s.'

with this sort of, almost this two-dimensional life.²⁹ The word ‘innocence’ was frequently used to describe relationships with boys and the lack of sex education by parents or schools was a consistent experience across this cohort, as it had been for interviewees in the previous chapter:

I was so innocent. I thought babies were born under bushes, I did, and I was sixteen. My mother never told me the facts of life [...] When I started my periods, my monthly periods, I thought I was dying, you know, because nobody told me. Even my friends never mentioned it.³⁰

Iris recalls the taboo of pregnancy outside of marriage in the mid-twentieth century and the commonality of hasty marriages: ‘I mean if someone got pregnant, as soon as they found out they were whipped into church and got married [...] You had to get married, whether you wanted to or not.’³¹ Judy had pre-marital sex with her fiancé in 1955, aged eighteen. The shame of finding she was pregnant on her honeymoon and of being discovered by her parents was apparent even after marriage:

I then discovered on my honeymoon that I was pregnant, which was a terrible shock. I’d had a white wedding. You know, in those days it was a great disgrace to be pregnant. I didn’t dare, well, I wasn’t going to tell my parents.³²

II.ii Marriage, Separation and Divorce

The average age of first marriage amongst the sample was 21. Age at first marriage was lower in the 1950s than it had been in previous decades; the national average was 24.4 in 1951 and 23.1 by 1961.³³ Most of the interviewees married between the mid and late 1950s. Elizabeth’s marriage in 1949 to a bricklayer meant she and her husband were particularly vulnerable to the post-war housing shortage when they became newly-weds. The young couple, along with their first baby, lived in Elizabeth’s parents’ house, in one room: ‘I had this new baby and I was trying to look after the family, we were living in my mother and father’s parlour then.’³⁴ Elizabeth’s mother died shortly after she had her first child and she found herself looking after her widowed father and six younger siblings as well as her new family in very cramped and impoverished conditions, reminiscent of her 1930s childhood. To make matters worse, she also fell ill with tuberculosis during this

²⁹ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

³⁰ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

³¹ Ibid.

³² MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

³³ See Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 71.

³⁴ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Edwards.

time. Elizabeth's experience of housing starkly contrasted with post-war expectations, a disappointment, which she took into her own hands. The following anecdote attests to the strength of the post-war social contract in the public imagination and the worth of council housing for working-class families:

I wrote to Mr Attlee and to the Duke of Edinburgh and said: 'My husband had served in the Royal Navy [...] he was promised a 'home fit for heroes' and we were living in one room and conditions were so bad that I'd got TB.' I had a letter back from Downing Street and a letter back from Buckingham Palace, saying the Duke of Edinburgh couldn't intervene personally, but he would pass my letter on to somebody, which was more or less what Clement Attlee said. Whether it was ever done or not, I came out to a council house in Croxteth, which was then in its infancy and was just lovely! It was a dream to all of us, you know. I just loved it there.³⁵

The majority of the interviewees continued in employment as married women up until the birth of their first child; Ann Hoad, Iris and Judy went back into employment when their children were all still quite young, due to economic necessity. In the previous chapter, infidelity and economic hardship, sometimes accompanied by domestic violence, were the two key reasons for marital break-up. In this cohort, economic difficulties feature as a major cause of marital breakdown, infidelity less so. Domestic violence features in two of the testimonies.

Economic frustrations in marriage centred on poor income due to the insufficiency of a husband's breadwinning or over-spending by husbands. Ann Hoad married a church minister in the early 1960s. Although Ann's husband was opposed to her working, she became the main breadwinner early on in their marriage, whilst they lived in her parents-in-law's house and he sought employment. Once her husband gained a position as a minister in London, Ann stopped working and subsequently had two children. She describes the difficulty of managing a home on £4 a week housekeeping and the luxury of a can of beans, due to a small stipend received by her husband and the difference that her lack of wage-earning made to the family economy. Elizabeth, who had been used to her father's bouts of unemployment in the 1930s, discovered her husband (a bricklayer) was also vulnerable to periods of unemployment in the 1950s, which put considerable strain on their relationship and their family of four children. Across the social classes in this cohort, over-spending and the incurring of debts by husbands for personal items and drinking was recalled by Anne Barker, Elizabeth, Judy

³⁵ Ibid.

and Iris as a source of marital conflict. Such descriptions of marriage in the 1950s and 1960s certainly depart from the ideal of the companionate marriage. Szreter and Fisher's argument about the importance of caring/sharing within mid-century marriages, discussed in the previous chapter, carries over into this cohort. The breakdown of male-breadwinning and female housekeeping understood as dual-caring roles, coupled with the lack of sharing exhibited in husbands' over-spending or exclusive leisure time, led to marriage failure amongst the interviewees.³⁶ However, interviewees described an additional frustration, which suggests questioning by women in this cohort over the fixity of gender roles within their marriages and the limits placed on their autonomy by husbands. Such frustrations are perhaps indicative of the wider social questioning of gender roles by the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in the 1960s. Judy recalled her frustration at being over-burdened with domestic responsibilities, including those she thought were the domain of her husband, at the same time as going back into employment after having children: 'It was the old, still the old idea, that the woman did all the work and all the washing and all the ironing and all the cooking and I even did some of the gardening and cleaning the cars and everything else as well, so it's a good job I was young.'³⁷ Ann Hoad became increasingly dissatisfied with having sole responsibility for domestic duties and an absent husband: 'I never really saw him, at all, except when he came in for meals, I suppose I was a skivvy, really.'³⁸ Elizabeth, who remained with her husband for two decades, describes her marriage as 'twenty-one years of hard labour' to a husband whose authoritarianism led to Elizabeth leaving with her teenage children in the late 1960s: "One of his favourite sayings was, 'a wife is subject to her husband' and one of his favourite words was 'allow' – 'I can't 'allow' you to do that.'"³⁹

Iris and Judy experienced domestic violence within marriage. For both women, such violence was privately endured in the late 1950s and 1960s. Judy describes how the public construction of romance and happy family life in the 1950s and 1960s – epitomized by the Hollywood movie – was an impenetrable veneer that did not allow for cruelty or violence within the private sphere to surface:

I always say it was 'Doris Day time,' you know, that everything was two-dimensional. [...] All this suffering went on in the name of this lovely

³⁶ Szreter and Fisher, 'Married Love' and 'Love and Authority in Mid-Twentieth-Century Marriages'.

³⁷ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

³⁸ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

³⁹ MMB, C900/10050, Elizabeth Edwards.

‘innocence’ and this sort of cosy little surface on life. [...] It’s the violence and the cruelty that was covered-up that I really resent.⁴⁰

Iris describes herself as a ‘battered wife’ in the 1960s and sings the lyrics of a late nineteenth century music-hall song to articulate the difficult memories of physical abuse: ‘I had ‘Two Lovely [Luvverly] Black Eyes!’⁴¹ Like other women experiencing domestic violence during the 1950s and 1960s, there were no social agencies for Iris to turn to. In the end she left her husband with her children and became homeless: ‘Course there was no help for battered wives in those days, you had to help yourself, so we’re on the run again, hiding out in pokey little damp rooms, dragging my kids around.’⁴² ‘Wife torture’ had been identified as a social problem in the late nineteenth century by social reformers, but in the post-war period the issue of domestic violence received little public or academic attention, only resurfacing in the mid-1970s.⁴³ The sociological literature surveyed in this chapter makes scarce reference to the issue of domestic violence in marriage as a cause of divorce. Marsden includes a brief discussion of the topic, but his treatment of interview data exposing physical abuse by husbands is revealing of how his response as a researcher was shaped by the wider social ambivalence towards women who spoke out about domestic violence in the 1960s. Marsden questioned the sociological validity of first-hand testimony more than at any point in his study when nearly half of his participants described domestic violence in marriage:

We are here given only the wives’ one-sided accounts of marriage breakdown, and especially complaints against the husbands which can seldom be objectively validated [...] Wives who left or evicted their husbands nearly always blamed them for offensive or intolerable behaviour, almost half complaining of physical violence or sexual assaults.⁴⁴

Interviewees who spoke of abuse were suspected by Marsden as tending towards ‘exaggeration’ and their claims are curtailed by his suggestion that husbands may be justifiably provoked: ‘Even quite brutal behaviour on the husband’s part may be a reaction to subtle provocation by the wife.’⁴⁵ This statement needs to be understood in the context of sociological practice in the 1960s and within the context of gender

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945*, pp. 104-107.

⁴⁴ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 80.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

relations prior to their re-aligning after the sexual revolution. Mike Savage has demonstrated how a hyper-masculinity was present in research conducted by male interviewers in the developing sociology of the post-war period: 'The masculinity of this new breed of male interviewers was fundamental to the deployment of story-like accounts which could be used in popular sociology.'⁴⁶ Savage includes an illuminating passage from an interview with Marsden reflecting on the politics of the interview method:

I was a bit miffed later on when the Women's Movement started, in the early seventies, claiming that only women could interview women, and all that Feminist bollocks. [...] I mean, I'd had women in writing and saying, 'You've absolutely caught my story.' You know, that *Mothers Alone* had illuminated their life.⁴⁷

Coupled with Marsden's response to domestic violence amongst his sample, this comment reveals the limits of his research, which despite worthily and effectively bringing public attention to the plight of lone mothers, excludes a crucial aspect of 'the story' in the form of violence experienced by married and partnered women in the 1960s. Although sociologists such as Marsden were creating a public space for discussion of the legitimate existence and support of parenthood outside of marriage, the subject of domestic violence as a catalyst for relationship breakdown remained unexplored.

Apart from Frances (who was deserted by her husband) all the interviewees initiated separation from their husbands prior to the 1969 Divorce Act. Ann Hoad had a distant relationship with her parents and no financial means of her own. She became increasingly mentally unwell and contemplated taking her own life and those of her children before she eventually left her husband in 1967. She recalls how women's refuges were not in existence in the mid-1960s, making separation inconceivable at first:

At this time (it would have been 1967) there were no women's refuges, or certainly none that I knew of. I had no money, I had no family that I could go to, so leaving my husband was a very difficult thing to do – virtually impossible – but it became apparent to me that that was the only possible solution.⁴⁸

Judy started a 'married women's teacher training course' after having her fourth child, a

⁴⁶ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 180.

⁴⁷ Life story interview with Dennis Marsden conducted by Paul Thompson (2002) cited in Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, pp. 183-184.

⁴⁸ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

decision motivated by the desire to gain the means to leave her husband:

I was quite determined to do something where I could leave him and I had a chance, they started doing a married women's training course at the local training college [...] I didn't think so much of divorce, I thought of how I could leave and take the children and give them a good standard of living.⁴⁹

Anne Barker left her husband in the mid-1960s, taking her two teenage children with her, a decision which she remembers placed her outside the normative conditions of the era: 'It was only just being done, I was one of the first, and people were horrified.'⁵⁰

II.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

Four Sleep in One Bed, Five Children, Mrs G., Birmingham

[...] Mrs G is about 40, but looks 60. She pays £2. 15. 0d. for their accommodation and they share a lavatory and bathroom with two others. There is no hot water supply. Mrs G is described as suffering from 'amazing apathy.' Asked why she only applied for a council house two years ago, she replied that she did not think she 'deserved one' but then applied 'for the children's sake.'⁵¹

This description of a lone mother and her five children living in temporary accommodation is from a report by 'Shelter', in 1969. References to the personality traits of the mother share a likeness with reports by the FSU discussed in Chapter Two, in their association of character failings with poverty. The passage also serves to illustrate the continued moral scale applied to housing acquisition in this era. Mrs G's confession that she did not apply for council housing out of a sense of being undeserving, reveals a rational response to a public housing system in the 1960s where entitlement was based upon approximation to the 'respectability' of the married family unit, as had been the case in the 1950s. In the early 1960s, social researchers were citing homelessness as a cause of marital breakdown, as opposed to a consequence faced by a growing number of women leaving their husbands.⁵² Margaret Wynn's study of 'fatherless families' was the first to draw attention to the specific vulnerability of divorced and never-married lone

⁴⁹ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

⁵⁰ MMB, C900/12072, Anne Barker.

⁵¹ Des Wilson, *Who are the Homeless? Face the Facts: A Shelter Report* (Bury St Edmunds, 1969), p. 22.

⁵² See Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth century Britain*, pp. 217-219.

mothers to homelessness, within the wider context of a national housing policy: 'No one in the community finds it harder to find a home than the unsupported mother with low earning power and dependent children. They are at the end of the queue.'⁵³ She argued that national housing policy since the war had focused too heavily on the needs of the elderly and that lone mothers needed to assume greater priority amongst housing associations.⁵⁴ Marsden also presented evidence of councils being reluctant to house lone mothers and their children in the late 1960s.⁵⁵ Ann Hoad, Elizabeth and Iris all experienced periods of homelessness as lone mothers. Judy experienced frequent changes of home and Anne Barker acquired residency as a housekeeper before buying a derelict house after her divorce settlement. Frances was an unusual case in being supported by her husband to buy a house after separation.

In previous chapters, the majority of separated or divorced women lived with parents. However, amongst this cohort, none of the interviewees returned to live with parents as lone mothers. Iris and Ann Hoad describe their relationship with parents as conflicted after entering marriage and Judy 'never contemplated' returning to her parents' home when separating from her husband. The extended length of some of the marriages (Judy was married for seventeen years and Elizabeth for twenty) played a part in making a return to the parental home less conceivable, as well as the death of parents in the case of Elizabeth and Iris. The absence of parental support in providing accommodation clearly made these women more vulnerable to homelessness, an observation made by Marsden in relation to those homeless mothers amongst his sample: 'Families lacking help from kin had experienced the worst problems.'⁵⁶ The ramifications of women's disadvantage in relation to property and the housing market may have become more pronounced with the growing numbers of divorcing women during the 1960s and the increasing number of those amongst the homeless population. Legally, the position of women leaving the marital home during this decade was still one in which a husband's property rights as the signatory home owner or tenant would usurp a wife's ability to remain, as Anne Barker put it: 'the house was lovely, but the husband went with it.'⁵⁷ If a woman obtained a divorce before exiting the property, the courts were more likely to facilitate a mother and her children remaining in the marital property, but by willingly separating from a husband, as most of the women in this sample did, women lost houses

⁵³ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 125.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128

⁵⁵ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 174.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵⁷ MMB, C900/12072, Anne Barker.

bought during marriage as well as rented dwellings.⁵⁸ This situation effectively held women captive within marriage as we saw above, with many of the women remaining in abusive and unhappy marriages for long periods of time.

When Ann Hoad left her husband she packed a suitcase and with £20 in her purse, travelled from London to a boarding house in Bournemouth, run by acquaintances. She and her children lived in bed and breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation for eighteen months before being allocated council housing. Ann described the obstacles which faced her during this time: 'I looked for a flat – for accommodation – then I discovered that you had to have a deposit for accommodation and you had to have a job and children were not welcome anyway.'⁵⁹ Despite Ann's middle-class background, she recalls being absorbed into the classification of 'disreputable families' by landlords and housing associations. Marsden found that in both the northern and southern cities he surveyed, housing policy employed a moral scale, which segregated 'problem families' from 'normal families.'⁶⁰ Thus the alignment of lone motherhood with the concept of the 'problem family' highlighted in previous decades, persisted into the late 1960s. Iris experienced a period of homelessness whilst being married to her second husband, but as a lone mother her homelessness became acute:

Sometimes we had nowhere to live, sometimes we didn't have a roof over our heads and we walked the streets of Manchester. We were taken-in by people. We never had much food. We lived in damp houses.⁶¹

Marsden found that council housing provided lone mothers with the most secure and equipped housing in the 1960s, if they could acquire it. Judy obtained council housing in Telford New Town shortly after leaving her husband. She describes how the property exceeded her expectations: 'It was a luxurious home really. It was a four-bedroom council house with a study and central heating.'⁶² Eventually Judy had to leave

⁵⁸ 'A further risk to the family broken by separation or divorce is that they may lose their home. If the father owns the house or is the tenant, the mother may have to find a new home for herself and the children [...] Magistrates Courts are unable to prevent a separated wife losing her home if the husband is the owner or tenant.' Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 70.

⁵⁹ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

⁶⁰ 'The housing policy of both Northborough and Seaston was to place rougher and problem families together, and among these the fatherless families appeared to be classed.' Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 175.

'Northborough' and 'Seaston' are pseudonyms used by Marsden to describe the two cities he surveyed in Essex (Colchester) and West Yorkshire (Huddersfield) in *Mothers Alone*.

⁶¹ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

⁶² MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

her council house and move into a private rental property to be nearer work, which compared very unfavorably: ‘The damp was in all the walls and the wallpaper was hanging off with mould and there was no central heating.’⁶³ When Ann Hoad acquired a council house, at first, she had no furniture: ‘When we had the house, we had no furniture and I didn’t know we could get a grant for furniture.’⁶⁴ In time Ann acquired items of furniture from the council and a local charity, but she lived outside normal standards of the equipped home in the 1960s: ‘We had three cups, three plates, three knives, three forks, three spoons. If anything got broken it couldn’t be replaced.’⁶⁵ Marsden found that a high proportion of the lone mother households in his sample lacked the standard amenities listed in the 1961 census.⁶⁶ Anne Barker was able to purchase a property after her divorce settlement, but the house was derelict: ‘When we first moved in we hadn’t got gas, electricity, plaster, water – we’d got water on a standpipe and we had to have floors put under us.’⁶⁷

Maternal Economy

As previously noted, the number of lone mothers claiming NA (or SB from 1966) increased in the 1960s.⁶⁸ As rates increased, evidence suggests the NAB became more vigilant in investigating false claims and substantially increased the number of NAB investigators looking into the circumstances of lone mother claimants during the 1960s.⁶⁹ Marsden reported how most of the women in his sample claiming NA approached the board with apprehension. Despite more lone mothers claiming state support during this decade, many women were still unaware of the benefits they were entitled to claim in the 1960s. As Judy recalls: ‘It never occurred to me to claim benefit. In fact I’m not even sure what benefits were available in terms of single mothers.’⁷⁰ For lone mothers who did claim NA and were in receipt of family allowances both Wynn and Marsden’s surveys demonstrate the continued inadequacy of the income derived from such benefits; their

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ ‘Forty-six of the families interviewed (40 per cent) did not have the exclusive use of cold and hot water taps, W.C., and fixed bath (the four standard amenities checked in the census), a proportion slightly higher than that for the two regions studied and the average for the whole country.’ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ MMB, C900/12072, Anne Baker.

⁶⁸ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 163.

⁶⁹ ‘By [1965] the NAB was employing 97 special investigators concerned primarily with suspected abuse, compared with 16 in 1954 when the first such appointments were made.’ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 164.

⁷⁰ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

findings were often framed in terms of the scandalous rediscovery of the ethic of poor relief within an assumed socially democratic system.⁷¹

Employment was the principle means of income for the interviewees, other than Frances, who received an adequate level of maintenance from her husband. Iris and Ann Hoad moved between social security and employment. The employment experiences of the interviewees were shaped by their class and educational backgrounds. As Anne Barker reflected: ‘Having no qualifications, which I gravely regret, you’re at the bottom of the money pile and so you get the minimum wages and so you have to be careful and frugal to get by.’⁷² Anne was a cook/housekeeper in the late 1960s and 1970s. Her testimony demonstrates the continuation of domestic service as an occupation for working-class women in the post-1945 period.⁷³ This position enabled Anne to get around the dual-dilemma of finding housing and employment: ‘I had a little detached, *almost* detached cottage, joined by one door to her [Lady Asquith’s] ancestral home.’⁷⁴ By working in the place she lived Anne bridged the conflict between childcare and wage-earning, but her relationship with her employer became conflicted as Anne transgressed class boundaries: ‘The guests used to come in the kitchen and help me! But Lady Asquith didn’t like that, she didn’t like the fact they socialised with me, you could tell she was very angry.’⁷⁵ Eventually Anne had a nervous breakdown, due to her working conditions: ‘Well, I just ground to a halt and couldn’t do anything, couldn’t even read a sentence.’⁷⁶ Her story is a reminder of the continued strictures facing women in an era associated with liberation. NA was never intended to provide an income for the long-term unemployed and Iris’ experience claiming NA in the 1960s attests to its insufficiency in providing an income for lone mothers with young children. In order to get around the conflict of income generation and childcare, Iris resolved to work as a cleaner. This occupation, like Anne’s housekeeping, meant Iris could earn whilst minding her child. Iris packaged an income from NA and employment, a strategy that nevertheless barely kept her out of poverty; remaining in low paid and arduous work, she followed a similar path to her mother, who was a domestic servant in the 1930s:

⁷¹ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 36.

⁷² MMB, C900/12072, Anne Barker.

⁷³ As discussed in Chapter One, Lucy Delap’s work on domestic service in the twentieth-century charts the recurrence of domestic service as an occupation for women after 1945: Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place*.

⁷⁴ MMB, C900/12072, Anne Barker.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

As for social security money! I used to take them with me and scrub people's floors. That's what I used to have to do to earn three and sixpence to feed them [...] Always worked, always scrubbed floors, did something. When I couldn't do anything else I scrubbed floors, coz those days you had to get down on your hands and knees with a scrubbing brush.⁷⁷

Amongst the middle-class interviewees, Judy continued teaching as she had done during her marriage, earning a good income and eventually becoming head of a department. However Ann Hoad, despite training as a midwife, was driven to consider unconventional means of feeding her family whilst homeless and unemployed, demonstrating how class-background did not necessarily buffer women establishing a living after separation: 'I did consider prostitution as a means of income, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.'⁷⁸ Once in employment, Ann still faced the problem of reconciling childcare with wage earning. She lacked informal assistance with childcare having been homeless and had no support from family. In the 1960s, the numbers of registered child-minders and private nurseries sharply increased due to the greater number of married mothers entering employment.⁷⁹ However, the costs of formal childcare were prohibitive for lone mothers such as Ann:

With shift work, I didn't have anybody to look after the children. I couldn't afford – there weren't any nursery facilities. At one stage I worked at a hospital where there was a crèche, but I couldn't afford the bus fare to take the children to the crèche and I would have had to pay for the facilities and I couldn't afford those either.⁸⁰

Eventually Ann decided the problems facing her in terms of managing earning and childcare were too difficult to overcome, especially as she lacked any support from extended family, so she ceased working as a midwife. Ann claimed SB for a period of time and attempted to try other forms of employment. Her experience of moving between SB and employment points to the shifting means by which lone mothers managed their economies in order to deliver care. Ann also became a foster mother, looking after the babies of unmarried mothers. This aspect of Ann's life history intriguingly points to the continued barriers facing unmarried mothers in the 1960s in raising their own children as well as the continued role of the foster mother in aiding unmarried mothers in the post-1945 period. In Ann's case, fostering illegitimate children

⁷⁷ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

⁷⁸ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

⁷⁹ Randall, *The Politics of Daycare in Britain*, p. 56.

⁸⁰ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

served an alternative purpose to most foster arrangements in the first-half of the twentieth century: Ann specifically looked after children for the limited period that unmarried mothers had to decide on whether or not to have their children adopted (a post-war policy referred to in Chapter Three). However, her experience attests to the importance of the voluntary sector, and in particular the importance of women volunteers in the care of children from lone mother families in the post-war period:

I did foster babies. I had been working as a midwife and I was appalled babies were being literally snatched away from their mothers. Girls, unmarried girls, were being told they couldn't keep their children and should have them adopted. I found the Church of England's Children's Society would place the babies for six weeks with a foster mother while the unmarried mother had time to make-up her mind about what she really wanted to do. I became a foster mother for these babies for six weeks, while their mothers made their minds up about their future. That helped me a little bit financially. I didn't really get paid for it, but I got the keep for the baby and perhaps a pound pocket money.⁸¹

For those interviewees who became lone mothers when their children were of school age, the problem of reconciling employment and childcare was reduced, as children were in school and less dependent. This was the case for Anne Barker, Elizabeth, Frances and Judy. Marsden and Wynn's studies drew attention to how the age of a lone mother's dependents was crucial in determining poverty levels. Wynn in particular highlighted how it was the lone mother with pre-school children who missed out on the social service of compulsory schooling, with no such universal provision available for infants. This highlights the importance of non cash-based resources for lone mothers.⁸²

Contributions from fathers were generally absent or inconsistent amongst this cohort. Judy's experience was typical:

I did have maintenance payments for the children, but again, it was very much a cat and mouse game. He would not pay and then it would get to me having to go to the solicitor to get a court order and then just before the court order, he would pay-up. Then I had to pay the solicitor for his time preparing for the court order and we would go on like that, so I learnt never to rely on his money. We were very hard-up.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² 'Thus at the age of 5 the state suddenly intervenes with the provision of schooling. The child is educated and also looked after from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. five days a week and is provided with an inexpensive or in some cases free school meal.' Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 84.

⁸³ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

The violence present in Iris' marriage followed her into court as she tried to divorce her husband on the grounds of cruelty: "He said, 'make no mistake about it, you claim maintenance off me and I will hunt you down and kill you,' and he kept smiling all the time."⁸⁴ Although the sociological surveys of lone motherhood in the 1960s highlight the absence of fathers' contributions, they do not adequately address the issue of consistency between the behaviour of husbands prior to separation/divorce and their behaviour afterwards. This point relates to the issue of lone motherhood being treated in isolation to the longer-term life histories of women in social research, discussed in the introduction to this chapter. As was the case with the two previous generations of interviewees, fathers' unemployment, inconsistent breadwinning, low pay, familial neglect or violence were aspects of marriage which shaped paternal contributions after separation/divorce and left the interviewees, as they had been during marriage, solely generating and managing income.

Interviewees described varying, but at times severe degrees of poverty during the 1960s. Marsden highlighted the poor diets of lone mother families, which like the diets of the poor in the early twentieth century were conspicuous in their absence of basic foodstuffs relative to the 1960s – the luxury of eggs and a cooked meal.⁸⁵ He found that children fared better in having their basic needs met than most lone mothers, who would regularly deny themselves food and other necessities: 'One in ten mothers maintained, in spite of detailed questioning, that they had eaten literally no solid food on the day before the interview.'⁸⁶ Despite alternative social class backgrounds, both Ann Hoad and Iris, recollected not being able to afford food and persistent hunger: 'I did consider stealing actually on occasions; we were so hungry, the thing I was most tempted to steal was milk bottles from people's door-steps.'⁸⁷ Recollections of maternal self-sacrifice were also present amongst our interviewees: 'We managed, but I mean there was certainly no money left over for me. I mean by the time I'd bought their shoes, my shoes never seemed to happen.'⁸⁸ For women like Iris, such poverty and self-deprivation as a lone mothers in the 1960s, demonstrates inter-generational continuity with their own mothers: Iris 'wore herself out' for her children. The social histories of Anna Davin and Ellen Ross foreground such maternal self-sacrifice in the face of family hardship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the many autobiographical accounts of

⁸⁴ MMB, C900/05044, Iris Gooderham.

⁸⁵ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, pp. 42-44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁷ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

⁸⁸ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

working-class childhoods during these periods include descriptions of what James Vernon has termed ‘sacrificial maternal economies.’⁸⁹ Vernon’s work on the modern history of hunger argues hunger was given a ‘human face’ in the twentieth-century through testimonial accounts of poverty by social investigators. These testimonies, by evoking memories of under-nourishment thought to have been surpassed, prompted social democratic responses to poverty.⁹⁰ Marsden’s first-hand accounts of lone mothers’ hunger and sacrificial maternal economies can therefore be seen as a crucial aspect of the rediscovery of post-war deprivation. Additionally, such accounts of absolute poverty amongst lone mothers in the 1960s unsettle historiographical demarcations between austerity and affluence, the latter epoch having become associated with relative poverty, as absolute definitions were consigned to the former epoch.⁹¹ Nevertheless, alongside descriptions of absolute poverty, interviewees in this cohort recounted (as others had already done in the 1950s) the relative deprivation of not being able to afford a holiday or a trip away. Tourism was further opening-up to the working class in the 1960s, with increased access to package holidays and self-catering.⁹² Interviewees also recalled not being able to meet the demands of teenagers for consumer goods, illustrating the rise of a youth market and the growing importance of shopping amongst the young during the 1960s.⁹³ Some interviewees, with the economic means to eventually enter the affluent society, found themselves unable to acquire credit or rent household items due to their illegitimate status as unmarried women within the marketplace: ‘I had a steady salary, in quite a respectable job and yet they wouldn’t let me rent a television unless I had a male – a *male* – guarantor.’⁹⁴ Eventually, Judy was able to rent a television with her brother’s assistance; he acted as a guarantor despite being an unemployed student.

Social Membership and Identity

Marsden and Wynn both noted the contribution of parents and extended family to the welfare of all lone mothers. However, Marsden found help from parents was most

⁸⁹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London, 1996); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil*. James Vernon: ‘This sacrificial maternal economy was most evident at the table, where mothers are always remembered as eating last, if at all.’ James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge Massachusetts; London, 2007), p. 268.

⁹⁰ Vernon, *Hunger*, p. 238.

⁹¹ Shinobu Majima and Mike Savage, ‘Contesting Affluence: An Introduction’ *Contemporary British History* 22, No. 4, (December 2008), pp. 448-449.

⁹² John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London, New York, 1994), p. 104.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 168.

⁹⁴ MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

common amongst young lone mothers, particularly the never-married mother.⁹⁵ Wynn raised concern about the sustainability of kinship support networks with geographical mobility and separation from extended family in advanced industrial societies.⁹⁶ Such concerns were being raised by other sociologists in the 1960s, notably Peter Willmott and Michael Young, whose work suggested mutual support networks within working-class communities could be eroded by an increasingly interventionist welfare state.⁹⁷ The interviewees in this cohort describe less support from kin compared with the previous two generations. Although these recollections are not representative, the interviewees' experiences illuminate the vulnerability of separated or divorced mothers from both social classes when the safety-net of family became absent in the 1960s and the part played by family in stigmatisation and social isolation. The significance of (absent) kin to older married women in the process of separating or following divorce is understated in the contemporary studies of lone motherhood and current historiography, which tend to foreground the never-married mother as facing greatest social dislocation.

Accounts of homelessness by Ann Hoad, Elizabeth and Iris were the consequence of an absence of parental re-adoption, which in previous chapters we saw buffer divorced mothers against homelessness. Anne Barker, Frances and Judy's testimonies also make little reference to help from parents. As already noted, the age of these women at the time of becoming lone mothers may well have impacted on the minimal levels of support from kin (with parents being too elderly to provide support or no longer being alive), but conflict between parents and daughters, often originating in marital decisions made by daughters in young adulthood (as in the case of Ann Hoad and Iris) could also lead to an absence of parental support as could the stigma of a failed marriage. Interviewees whose families had rejected them after separation/divorce, recalled being told: 'you've made your bed.' Iris' family disapproved of her marriage and as the marriage broke down, she was ostracized by most of her family. The following statement from Iris, with its incessant listing of duties, is indicative of the degree of self-reliance she had to sustain in the face of a lack of informal and formal support: 'Something must have kept me going: look after the kids, got to get them to school, got to get them dressed, got to look after them, got to feed 'em, got to clothe 'em, got to get a job, got to...'⁹⁸ The inability of separated or divorced mothers in the 1960s to house and

⁹⁵ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 121.

⁹⁶ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 94.

⁹⁷ Willmott and Young, *Family and Kinship in East London*.

⁹⁸ MMB, C900/0544, Iris Gooderham.

adequately provide for their children meant children could be taken into care or placed with foster parents. The following extract from a letter to Margaret Wynn by a woman in the early 1960s, illustrates how housing problems for the divorced mother could result in separation from their child:

[John] had four homes last year and he's only two and a half now [...] My parents are old and my father's ill and they couldn't stand two children and me in a tiny house. The Children's Officer was very helpful once I said I wanted a foster home and agreed to let John go.⁹⁹

The school where Ann Hoad sent her sons became concerned about the impermanence of her housing arrangements and the effects of the 'broken home' on her children. In a similar way to unmarried mothers who had their children adopted, Ann was told that 'if she really cared', she would agree to being parted from her sons by agreeing to boarding arrangements:

It was decided by the doctor and in consultation with the primary school that my eldest son was quite disturbed by all this and that he should go to boarding school. I was totally against this, but the doctor and the school told me that if I really cared about what was going to happen to my children, and if I really cared about their best interests, I would allow them to go to boarding school.¹⁰⁰

In comparison with previous chapters, the interviewees in the 1960s describe a greater degree of contact with social services, mainly through social housing allocation and NA/SB claims. Ann Hoad recalls the constructive assistance of a social worker in finding employment and eventually acquiring council housing. However, she also describes the stigma accompanying an application for SB, something which her middle-class demeanor did not protect her from (in fact it legitimated remarks about the loss of respectable status):

I found out how badly one is treated by the social security people. It was called 'social security' in those days it's changed its name now. One of these young women who came to visit me told me, 'I'd come down a peg or two and had to realize that my life was going to have to change.'¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 155.

¹⁰⁰ NLSA, C642/89, Ann Hoad.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

II.iv Remarriage

The only interviewee to remarry amongst this cohort was Judy Sleet. As a divorced woman in the 1960s, she felt stigmatized, and married life was attractive in offering a solution: 'I wanted respectability, I was tired with being the 'femme fatale' on my own.'¹⁰² However, Judy's second marriage was short-lived as she discovered her husband was abusing her daughters. Just as women in this cohort spoke of the taboo of domestic violence, Judy recalled the shame she felt in revealing the child abuse within her second marriage.

III. Oral Histories from Unmarried Mothers

The six testimonies in this section include three from the MMB and three from a documentary made in 1996 entitled, 'Love Child' broadcast by the BBC. The eldest of the six interviewees was born in 1936, the other five were born during or shortly after the war; their childhoods were thus shaped by war and post-war conditions, with adolescence and young adulthood spanning the 1950s through to the 1960s. These women all became pregnant outside of marriage in the 1960s. The interviewees are all from working-class backgrounds. Geographically they resided across a range of locations as unmarried mothers, including Cornwall, London, Cheltenham, Manchester, Leeds and Bradford.

III.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Two of the interviewees experienced parents separating in the 1950s. Beryl Steadman and her mother lived with her grandparents for ten years until her mother was able to buy a house following a divorce settlement. She describes sharing a cramped flat with her grandparents, made up of two bed-sitting rooms. Beryl's mother worked as an upholsterer, teaching her daughter upholstery in the process. These skills were to become very important to Beryl's own survival as a lone mother a decade later. She described upholstery as: 'An absolute boon to me.'¹⁰³ Ann D'Arcy and her five siblings grew up in Glasgow; her mother was a domestic servant, her father a labourer. Ann's mother separated from her father when she was an adolescent and Ann went to live with her mother in Cornwall.

The average school leaving age amongst the sample was fifteen. Three of the

¹⁰² MMB, C900/04596, Judy Sleet.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

interviewees went into further education; Ann French trained as a secretary, Lesley Swire trained as teacher and Doreen Ward as a nurse. Beryl and Ann D’Arcy went into employment after finishing school and continued to live with their mothers. Beryl remembers earning a good wage as an office worker in the 1950s; she gave some of her earnings to her mother for housekeeping and was able eventually to buy her own car. Ann D’Arcy had various jobs in retail after finishing school and in 1963, at the age of twenty, went to America to work as an au pair. She recalls this time, unbounded by familial duties and being in a foreign country, as very exciting. Both these testimonies attest to the economic and social significance of young, working-class women’s wage-earning in the 1950s and 1960s. Along with Beryl’s description of buying her first car, Ann D’Arcy’s memories of her teenage years are replete with signifiers of youthful independence: buying ‘Beatles’ records and becoming one of the growing numbers of teenage tourists in the 1960s, when taking a trip with girlfriends to New York.¹⁰⁴ However, for other interviewees, teenage social agency during the 1960s was strongly curtailed by the persistence of conventionality and parental supervision:

I think the most exciting thing I can remember doing was going to the youth club and that was run by the church, know what I mean? I don’t remember going to any wild parties or discos. If you went to the dance, you went on a Saturday afternoon.¹⁰⁵

Ann French recalls how her father instructed her towards specific employment at odds with her own aspirations towards a career, instead suggesting a job that could act as a stop-gap before marriage:

When I was fourteen my father said to me, ‘I think we’d better train you up as a secretary.’ Coz I mean in those days, I mean it was really what your parents wanted you to do, you didn’t really have much say in it. I mean I would really preferred to have been a vet.¹⁰⁶

III.ii Pre-Marital Sexual Relations and Pregnancy

There were nearly 50,000 illegitimate births in 1961. The combination of these babies and the pill was able to force a new openness on many people and by the

¹⁰⁴ ‘It was also in the 1960s that teenagers, like tourists generally, began to travel abroad in significant numbers.’ Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁵ National Sound Archive (NSA), ‘Love Child’: V3795/4, Sue Marples.

¹⁰⁶ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

end of the 1960s this had resulted in public acceptance of a hitherto hidden and stigmatized private sexual activity.¹⁰⁷

The location of an unprecedented turn towards sexual permissiveness and a shift in cultural mores within the 1960s is grounded in the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1967), abortion (1967) and the reform of divorce (1969), the introduction of the pill and of course the emergence of a student movement – fostered by a newly autonomous youth – and the women’s movement, which brought about a sexual revolution. Although this chapter does not want to deny such a revolution in the boundaries governing gendered/sexual/reproductive did take place in British society in the final decades of the twentieth century, it does question the pace of the change and its embeddedness within the 1960s. Instead it offers the argument that for many women, the 1960s was a time of frustrated freedoms and social diversity – mediated by locale, class and parental temperament – whereby lived experiences could be sharply at odds with discourses of sexual and youthful freedom. The quote above from Hera Cook’s *The Long Sexual Revolution*, suggests the increased numbers of illegitimate births during the decade combined with the pill, brought about a transformation in the shame and stigma associated with pre-marital sex and parenthood, but the life histories in this chapter demonstrate the opposite – a continuation of such shame and stigma. Furthermore, the number of illegitimate babies being adopted reached a peak in the 1960s, suggesting that, far from there being a relaxation of attitudes towards illegitimacy, the drive to legitimate the unmarried mother’s offspring was resolute during this decade.¹⁰⁸ Recent historians such as Kate Fisher have challenged Cook’s thesis that the contraceptive pill was the catalyst for a transformation in women’s lives.¹⁰⁹ Fisher argues the introduction of this new method of birth control should not be interpreted as bringing about a direct and unambiguous change in behaviour: ‘While new methods such as the pill certainly gave women the option of taking their fertility into their own hands, we should not assume that they necessarily did.’¹¹⁰ The testimonies discussed below illustrate the restrictions which prevented women in the 1960s ‘taking their fertility into their own hands.’ In particular they probe the other side of reproductive autonomy, which historiography on

¹⁰⁷ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, pp. 282-283.

¹⁰⁸ ‘The number of abortions rose to a peak of 24,861 in 1968.’ Thane, ‘Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England,’ p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The shift towards appliance methods of birth control in the twentieth-century, and especially the eventual incorporation of the Pill into practice, is frequently presented as one of the developments of twentieth-century history that can retain a Whiggish narrative of progress.’ Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain*, Oxford, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

the 1960s has thus far tended to down-play: how able were women in the 1960s to go ahead with an unplanned pregnancy and mother their child?

All six interviewees engaged in sexual relations before marriage in the mid-1960s. However, such activity took place amidst general ignorance in relation to reproduction and birth control as well as moral disapproval, as Sue Marples recalls:

I don't even know that I connected sex with having babies anyway, to be honest, which sounds a bit naïve. I mean, I was never told about contraception [...] it was just something that you didn't talk about. You know, I don't even remember talking about it at school to anybody. It was something that was wrong.¹¹¹

Sex education in schools in the 1960s was inadequate and controversial according to James Hampshire and Jane Lewis, who point to the government's reluctance during the decade to increase the role of schools in delivering sex education, due to public concern about the sexual behaviour of young people.¹¹² Angela Davis' oral history of women in Oxfordshire has found that the silence between the generations over matters of sex continued into the 1960s.¹¹³ Ann French was more knowledgeable about reproduction and birth control in the 1960s, but like other single women during the decade, she was unable to get access to the pill:

I mean you couldn't go as an unmarried person to a Family Planning Clinic. It seems a bit silly now, but of course, looking back that was the sort of moral attitude of the time. Anyway, our method was withdrawal and I think that was quite, I think that was of course, the most common.¹¹⁴

Up until 1968, the Family Planning Association (FPA) would only give the pill to married women with the permission of a doctor.¹¹⁵ As was the case with earlier generations, it was common for interviewees to defer to their boyfriends over contraceptive decision-making and the most frequently mentioned method was withdrawal: 'You were totally reliant on your boyfriend and the usual method was coitus interruptus.'¹¹⁶ Ann French's story in many ways epitomizes the idea of the new woman of the 1960s. She had 'lots of

¹¹¹ NSA, 'Love Child' V3795/4, Sue Marples.

¹¹² James Hampshire and Jane Lewis "The Ravages of Permissiveness": Sex Education and the Permissive Society, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2004, pp. 290–312, p. 298.

¹¹³ Angela Davis, 'Oh nothing, we didn't learn anything': sex education and the preparation of girls for motherhood, c. 1930–1970' *History of Education* 37, No. 5, (2008), pp. 661–677, p. 676.

¹¹⁴ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹¹⁵ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p. 279.

¹¹⁶ NSA, 'Love Child' V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

boyfriends' as a teenager and at the age of twenty-four, embarked on a 'holiday romance' whilst in Corsica. Ann makes clear that in becoming sexually intimate during this relationship, she had no expectations of marriage, something which distinguishes her testimony from interviewees in previous cohorts. However, the limits of Ann's autonomy were made clear when her mother (who routinely did Ann's washing along with the rest of the family's) became aware of the absence of her daughter's menstruation: 'My mother was doing my washing and noticing that I wasn't having any periods and she sort of came out with it and asked me if I was pregnant.'¹¹⁷ At this point, still living at home with her parents, Ann's father insisted she have the child adopted. Like Ann's parents, other interviewees' parents reacted with shock and outrage. Sue and her boyfriend were both eighteen when she became pregnant in 1967 and hoped to get married, but on confronting Sue's parents about her pregnancy her mother forbade the marriage and insisted on adoption: "She said, 'you're not getting married, you can have this baby adopted.'"¹¹⁸ Beryl's uncle's views on her illegitimate pregnancy attest to the perception of adoption as a kind of default birth control, which could re-instate a young woman's respectability:

My uncle, he said, 'oh,' he said, 'well,' he said, 'of course the best thing is to just have the child adopted. If you've never seen it, you won't miss it and then you can move away and nobody would be any the wiser.'¹¹⁹

Ann French, Doreen, Lesley and Sue were not consulted, but rather told that adoption was the only solution to their pre-marital pregnancies and entered Mother and Baby Homes in the 1960s for this purpose. Callum Brown locates the catalyst for secularization in Britain in the sexual revolution of the 1960s, claiming that: 'The loss of domestic ideology to youth culture from c. 1958 meant that piety 'lost' its discursive home within femininity.'¹²⁰ However, the experiences of women in this chapter demonstrate the degree to which parents and communities were very much invested in the idea that respectability and piety were realized through specific feminine behaviours. As Ann D'Arcy says, despite being sexually active as a young, single woman in the 1960s: 'Girls were brought up to believe we should be virgins until we were married.'¹²¹ The price paid by some women for straying from this norm, was still severe.

¹¹⁷ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹¹⁸ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Sue Marples.

¹¹⁹ MMB, C900/04575, Beryl Steadman.

¹²⁰ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 179.

¹²¹ Mental Health Testimony Archive (MHTA), C905/41, Ann D'Arcy.

In her late twenties, Beryl found herself pregnant in 1968 after a relationship with a married man who eventually went back to his wife. Unlike other interviewees, the support she received from her mother – most crucially in being able to remain in the parental home – enabled her to keep her child:

It took a bit of time to pluck-up courage, but anyway, I managed to tell her and she was fine about it. She said, ‘I can’t say I’m pleased,’ but she said, ‘I kind of expected that this might be what the problem was,’ and she said, ‘you’ve got a home.’¹²²

Despite decriminalisation and the father of her child pressurizing her to do so, Beryl was unprepared to consider abortion on moral grounds, and affirmative about having an illegitimate baby:

He said, ‘oh, can’t you go and act-up a bit?’ you know to the doctor [...] I can honour other people that want to terminate, but I just couldn’t, for me it was so totally wrong. In those days it was not easy to get a termination, it was just about coming in [...] I decided to go ahead with the pregnancy, because at that age, I’d always wanted a baby.¹²³

Ann D’Arcy was the only interviewee not living at home when she became pregnant aged twenty-four in 1967; she was sharing a ‘garden shed outside the hotel’ where she worked with another female employee and therefore did not have to immediately defer to parents. Ann had previously suffered a nervous breakdown and medical professionals immediately assumed she should have a termination: “[The psychiatrist] was very angry and ‘oh’ he said, ‘you’re a very silly girl,’ you know, and my GP offered me an abortion straight away.”¹²⁴ However, Ann chose to go ahead with her pregnancy and like Beryl, made an affirmative decision to become a mother independently of marriage: ‘I wouldn’t consider [abortion] coz I’d always liked children, in fact, I was quite delighted that I was having one of my own.’¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

III.iii Lone Motherhood

Institutionalisation

In the mid-1960s the majority of Mother and Baby Homes were still run by church organisations (as found in Jill Nicholson's survey, discussed in Chapter Three). Doreen, Lesley and Sue went to homes in the North of England; Ann French went to a home in London. They were all run by the Church of England. There is very little change between the testimonies of the interviewees who entered Mother and Baby Homes in the 1950s and those who entered them in the 1960s. The continued religious administration of most of the homes during the period meant that common aspects, which emerged for the 1950s cohort, were reinforced for this period: social dislocation, domestic work and religious observance. Key words used by interviewees to describe the homes were 'prison,' and 'workhouse.' However, Ann French, who spent a shorter period of time in a home compared with the other interviewees, does recall the home providing her with a service despite its religious and work-based ethic:

They were quite helpful there. The only thing was because it was run by the Church, you had the Church rammed down your throat and you had to go to the services in the morning. Also, you had to work; I had to work in the laundry.¹²⁶

Ann's more appreciative view of the Mother and Baby Home she attended may have been partially influenced by the fact she did not have her baby adopted. Doreen, who stayed in a home in Manchester, recalls enduring the condescension of being a recipient of charity: 'We were treated as if we should be grateful for having been taken-in off the street almost and being given a roof over our heads.'¹²⁷ Ann and Doreen continued in employment throughout their pregnancies, Ann whilst living with her parents and Doreen whilst living in the Mother and Baby Home. Both were told by staff on entering the homes to wear wedding rings and refer to themselves as 'Mrs': 'You were expected to go out to work everyday and we'd all go into Manchester together wearing our Woolworth wedding rings which we'd polished the night before.'¹²⁸ Other interviewees did domestic work within the homes, such as Lesley:

¹²⁶ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹²⁷ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Doreen Ward.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

We were allocated duties and we did the same things every day and my job was to do the back stairs [...] These stairs were never walked on hardly, they never got dirty, it was just, you know, the ritual. That's what I remember about the place most, just the ritual.¹²⁹

Lesley recalls being 'churched' after giving birth in the home. The 'thanksgiving' of women after childbirth is commonly called the 'Churching of Women' and is a rite of the Church of England, which features in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The ceremony would take place after childbirth, even if a baby died or was unbaptised, in order to purify the mother. The churching of never-married mothers such as Lesley was instructive in their redemption and return to respectable life:

When we first came back from hospital, the first thing that happened was that we had to go to chapel and be 'churched.' The churching of women was symbolic of the wiping away of sin and our dirtiness really and preparing us to be nice, clean girls again, ready for the outside world.¹³⁰

Lesley's recollection of this practice demonstrates the hold such religious values had over women's sexual and reproductive agency within a society simultaneously undergoing major shifts in religious morality. Callum Brown's assertion that religious piety was divorced from femininity in the 1960s is strongly challenged by Lesley's experience.¹³¹

Adoption

As in the previous chapter, the homes which Doreen, Lesley and Sue entered in the 1960s, acted as facilitators for adoption. During Lesley's stay in a home in Bradford, she witnessed the majority of women entering the home leaving without their babies, a process which she saw as class determined:

We all fitted around one big table. I guess about fourteen and with hindsight of course, it's quite obvious we were all working-class girls and we were working-class girls' giving-up our babies to middle-class families.¹³²

Ann D'Arcy reluctantly had her second child adopted after being told by medical professionals that her history of mental illness meant she was unfit to raise a second

¹²⁹ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*. 'As well as feminising piety, evangelism pietised femininity. Femininity became sacred *and nothing but sacred*. The two became inextricably intertwined, creating a mutual enslavement in which each was the discursive "space of exteriority" for the other. Each would endure for as long as the other did.' p. 59.

¹³² NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

child. The association of adoption with middle-class propriety and the social mobility of an illegitimate child was reinforced by Ann's sister: 'I remember my sister came up and she held Anthony and she says, 'Oh well, you won't be poor, you'll be a posh little baby.'¹³³ Doreen recalls the distinction between herself as an unmarried working-class mother and the adoptive parents of her child as resting on the moral superiority of the married family unit: 'The main thing about them was that they were good people because they were married and I was a bad person because I wasn't.'¹³⁴

Although Ann French saw many unmarried mothers leaving without their babies, she also witnessed efforts to keep mothers and children together in the home: 'At that time the home actually was trying to get flats because they were encouraging girls if they could, to keep their babies.'¹³⁵ However, for Doreen, Lesley and Sue, their experience of the adoption process was much like that of women in the previous chapter. One distinction is the increased reference to the 'social worker' as an agent involved in the adoption process: "The social worker took me home in her car and she said to me mother, 'she's been a very brave girl.'¹³⁶ The Moral Welfare Worker who had been a more prominent figure in the 1950s, was becoming less significant with the professionalization of social work in the 1960s. Continuities with the 1950s persist in the reiteration of some of the procedures interviewees went through when having their children adopted, such as being seated in such a way as to denote an impending adoption or being shown into a room without windows:

When we arrived as pregnant girls we had a place at the table and as we got nearer to leaving we got further around the table. The girl who was head of the table was, you know, the head mother and the one whose baby was next to be given away.¹³⁷

There were four of us that day who were having our babies adopted. I don't have much recollection of going into central hall, but I can remember a staircase, and I can remember going down a long corridor and being shown into a room that had no windows.¹³⁸

Memories of rooms without windows, recalled by women in this study undergoing the adoption of their children would have functioned to protect the anonymity of the

¹³³ MHTA, C905/41, Ann D'Arcy.

¹³⁴ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Doreen Ward.

¹³⁵ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹³⁶ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Sue Marples.

¹³⁷ NSA, 'Love Child': V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

¹³⁸ NSA, 'Love Child': V3795/4, Doreen Ward.

adoptive parents. Secrecy and anonymity were key aspects of the 1949 Adoption of Children Act, according to Jenny Keating.¹³⁹ The symbolic significance of these rooms for the unmarried mother was to reinforce her literal invisibility as a social actor.

Ann French expected to have her child adopted, but her father's intervention changed the course of events: 'Father grudgingly said, I could go back home again, but to tell the home that I was still going to *probably* have the baby adopted.'¹⁴⁰ Doreen and Lesley returned to their parents' home after having their babies adopted and were then expected, as were the interviewees in the 1950s, to resume their lives without mention of their ordeal: 'I went home on the bus with my mum and it was never, never to be mentioned again. In fact nobody mentioned it again in the family for years.'¹⁴¹ Despite Sue and her fiancé's engagement whilst she was in the home, their baby was adopted. They went on to marry and have another child.

Accommodation and Housing

Ann French's return to her parents' home resulted in her keeping her illegitimate baby; her father became emotionally attached to his grandchild and agreed to them remaining. Like Ann, Beryl also lived in her mother's house and both women managed income generation and childcare with the support of their mothers, as will be discussed shortly. For Ann D'Arcy however, housing was a constant and distressing problem as a lone mother, epitomized by the repeated phrase during her interview: 'no permanent home.' Although Ann went to live with her mother when she had her first baby, difficulties arose when her brother married and moved in with his wife: 'Things got difficult because the rest of the family moved in as well because they couldn't get accommodation so we were all living in this place and things were difficult.'¹⁴² Both Marsden and Wynn observed overcrowding within households accommodating lone mothers and the conflict which could ensue between generations as a result: 'There had been great inconvenience to relatives in overcrowding [...] There were also instances where the birth of an illegitimate child to one of the daughters made worse the conditions of overcrowding already existing.'¹⁴³ Overcrowding was a key aspect of poverty more generally highlighted by the national survey of Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend in the 1960s.¹⁴⁴ Ann left

¹³⁹ Keating, *A Child for Keeps*, p. 193.

¹⁴⁰ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹⁴¹ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

¹⁴² MHTA, C905/41, Ann D'Arcy.

¹⁴³ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest* (London, 1965).

her mother's house with her son and became homeless, eventually renting a flat on a short-term tenancy. She describes the landlady as 'open-minded' for accommodating her as an unmarried mother, attesting to the continued discrimination against lone mothers in the rental market in the late 1960s:

It was during the winter of '69. It was quite good fun coz there was all sorts of people coming and going [...] She was quite an open-minded woman, that's why she gave me the flat with Stephen. Not many people would take in unmarried mothers without a father and a child, but she did take us in – we paid her – I think I used to get £9 a week from the state and the rent was about £4 something a week, so there wasn't much left.¹⁴⁵

The high proportion of income spent by Ann on housing costs is reflective of a more general trend, which was that lone mothers in private rental accommodation paid double the national average in the 1960s.¹⁴⁶ After 'turning out time' in such temporary accommodation, Ann then became an unpaid housekeeper in order to secure housing for herself and her son:

I was very fortunate in that I got a place at an old man's place as a housekeeper [...] There wasn't any wages attached to it. You got this flat if you done the housekeeping, you had to do his cooking and all that and look after him. He didn't mind me having a child there.¹⁴⁷

Ann's reference to being 'fortunate' as an unpaid domestic servant highlights the vulnerability of women to exploitation in the desperate search for housing, and the persistence of residential paid and unpaid work as a solution to lone motherhood into the late 1960s and 1970s. During this time Ann became pregnant with her second child:

I thought, I'm going to have to leave here coz it's going to show and he won't like it. I don't think he would have been too bad actually, but I felt so ashamed that this had happened again.¹⁴⁸

Ann's shame at her second illegitimate pregnancy and her perception that if discovered, she would be evicted, reveals her alertness to the condemnation of unmarried mothers who repeated the offence of illegitimacy. Prior to 1945, unmarried mothers had been unlikely to be re-admitted to the workhouse if they repeated their transgression, and

¹⁴⁵ MHTA, C905/41, Ann D'Arcy.

¹⁴⁶ 'The average housing costs were just over £2, which as a proportion of the mother's income was more than double the national average.' Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁴⁷ MHTA, C905/41, Ann D'Arcy.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Mother and Baby Homes in the post-war period were reluctant to accommodate women who had more than one illegitimate child.

Ann's recurrent mental illness appears linked with her persistent homelessness and poverty, which led to frequent institutionalization throughout her life. Following her return to Cornwall after the adoption of her second child, she and her first son went to live with Ann's sister temporarily: 'I was staying with my sister and her husband and their family with Stephen, until I could find somewhere for myself and Stephen.'¹⁴⁹ During this time, sharing again with relatives, Ann became mentally unwell and was detained for treatment under the 1959 Mental Health Act.

Maternal Economy

Beryl and Ann D'Arcy both claimed state benefits as lone mothers in the late 1960s and 1970s. At this point, SB had replaced NA, and other policy changes had resulted in a marginal increase in the financial assistance available to lone mothers. The Labour government's 1966 Ministry of Social Security Act attempted to reduce the distinction between contributory and means-tested benefits by bringing the administration of social insurance and assistance together and providing additional, long-term income to pensioners, widows and other women with dependent children. Furthermore, the Conservative government in 1970 introduced Family Income Supplement (FIS), a benefit aimed at supplementing low-income families where a breadwinner was in full-time work; with this new scheme, the breadwinner could be man or a single woman. FIS was the first means-tested benefit in Britain to introduce parity between one-parent and nuclear families.¹⁵⁰ Beryl made a distinction between NA, which she associated with pauperism, and the benefits she was receiving in the early 1970s, claiming the latter facilitated her decision not to have a termination or have her baby adopted:

I can remember, they used to have the old National Assistance and very few people got National Assistance, you had to be absolutely destitute to get that – no savings, no income, nothing – and then I don't know if it kept food on the table [...] It would have been much worse if I'd done it ten years before. I probably wouldn't have kept her then [...] I used to get some kind of benefit, it wasn't the dole, but it was some kind of benefit.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ For a description of these policy changes, including the introduction of FIS, see Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, pp. 168 – 172.

¹⁵¹ MMB, C900/04575, Beryl Steadman.

Ann D’Arcy however, who received SB in the late 1960s recalls the process of claiming state benefits as arduous and humiliating, especially when she became pregnant with her second illegitimate child: ‘The DHSS weren’t forthcoming with payments and I didn’t fancy telling them I was going to have another child and go through all the carry on of having to get him supported if I couldn’t find work.’¹⁵² Marsden noted how unmarried mothers who had more than one illegitimate pregnancy avoided taking-up their full benefit entitlements for fear of being reprimanded by the NAB. This trend further testifies to the continued stigmatisation and disqualification of women who had more than one illegitimate pregnancy from formal support. In the early 1970s, Family Allowance (FA) was still only available for families with two or more children, which meant that many unmarried mothers like Ann French and Beryl were illegible. The long-standing exclusion of unmarried mothers with one child from Family Allowance in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s attests to the invisibility of non-nuclear families within ‘family’ policy throughout most of the twentieth century.

Ann D’Arcy, Ann French and Beryl received no contribution to their income from the fathers of their children. In the case of Ann D’Arcy, Ann French and Beryl the fathers of their children are almost entirely absent from their descriptions of lone motherhood. Although the NAB had a statutory duty to recoup state assistance from fathers, Marsden found that mothers often avoided obtaining affiliation orders, fearing the court experience would be humiliating.¹⁵³ When asked about the lack of support from the father of her child, Beryl’s response reveals an alternative reason for not obtaining financial support from the father of her child, than was suggested by contemporary sociological reports:

Don’t know what happened to him, he doesn’t even know he’s got a daughter [...] Never had a penny from him. But the way I looked at it in those days, was – and I would still look at it now – at least I’m not stuck with parental visits and somebody saying, ‘I don’t want her to go to this school and she’s not gonna do this, that and the other,’ you know. I bought my daughter up the way I wanted to bring her up and to the best of *my* ability and I don’t owe anything to anybody.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² MHTA, C905/41, Ann D’Arcy.

¹⁵³ Marsden found that less than a third of the unmarried mothers in his sample were covered by an affiliation order and that nationally, only a quarter of unmarried mothers had established affiliation orders. Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 197.

¹⁵⁴ MMB, C900/04575, Beryl Steadman.

Beryl's assertion that she actively avoided contact with the father of her child in order to be self-determining casts an alternative light on the issue of paternal contributions. It suggests she saw her maternal role as independent of male-breadwinning or paternity and as something that she valued as an aspect of autonomous self-identity. Beryl's circumstances as a lone mother, whereby she was in steady employment and juggled childcare with her mother, provided her with the means to circumvent dependence on an individual man or the state, circumstances which she describes as 'lucky,' but which were due to her own economic strategizing and grand-maternal support.

Both Ann French and Beryl reconciled wage earning and childcare in tandem with their mothers. Beryl and her mother devised a way of conflating the division between public and private spheres, by making curtains from home:

I used to take in curtain work from what used to be 'Watsons' [...] and so did my mum. We used to have just piles of curtains in here (just machine made ones) and we used to have a machine at each end of the table and be zipping through these darn things, while Karen was having her sleep.¹⁵⁵

Beryl reflects on this aspect of her maternal economy: 'I was lucky that I had a roof over my head. I was lucky that I had several strings to my bow in order to be able to earn money, that even if I couldn't get out to work, I could work from home.'¹⁵⁶ Her reference to having 'a roof' highlights the inseparable link between secure housing and wage generation and the phrase 'I had several strings to my bow,' illustrates how breadwinning could often mean combining, or moving between means of income packaging. Beryl's mother taught upholstery in the evening, which eventually facilitated her daughter's return to office work in the day:

Then gradually, as time went on, I took part-time employment and Karen went to play-school just along the road. Mum was able to drop her off for me, come back and make her curtains, collect Karen, and then I could come home.¹⁵⁷

Sometimes, grand-maternal support meant that grandmothers actually gave-up their own jobs in order to facilitate daughter's employment, as in the case of Ann French: 'mother

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

said she would give up her job.¹⁵⁸ Ann returned to the office where she worked before becoming pregnant.

In the case of Ann D’Arcy, limited support from family meant she had to devise ways of combining childcare with paid work, taking-up housekeeping and low-paid cleaning jobs when her first child was an infant: ‘Looking after Stephen I had a little domestic job for teachers, I cleaned their house and I took Stephen with me when he was younger.’¹⁵⁹ Contemplating the problem of how to care for a second child, Ann describes how poverty limited her capacity to clothe her children adequately, which in turn affected her capacity to integrate them into child-minding services. Affirming the currency of the problem family and maternal neglect, Ann spoke of the difficulties arranging formal childcare when she could not meet respectable standards: ‘I thought, well I could leave Stephen with someone, but it would be difficult to leave two children with someone – you’d have to buy two pairs of shoes.’¹⁶⁰

Social Membership and Identity

The stigma experienced by the unmarried mothers in this cohort demonstrates continuity with the testimonies of the 1950s, particularly in relation to a loss of respectability. Interviewees recalled having to hide their pregnancies whilst living with parents, being ignored by neighbours and casting a shadow over their family:

I mean there were people in the street who stopped speaking to my parents and things like that [...] When it became obvious, some people stopped talking to me [...] My father used to go nightly for a drink to the pub next door but one to our house, and he stopped going. You know, he did feel the shame.¹⁶¹

Doreen felt completely divorced from normal social relations as an unmarried mother in the 1960s:

I felt as if I’d committed some sort of sin, yes. I was now different to everybody else around me because I was having a child and I wasn’t married. That in itself was such a sense of shame that I couldn’t feel at ease with myself or anybody else.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ MMB, C900/18583, Ann French.

¹⁵⁹ MHTA, C905/41, Ann D’Arcy.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ MMB, C900/188583, Ann French.

¹⁶² NSA, ‘Love Child’, V3795/4, Doreen Ward.

Use of the language of 'sin' and 'shame' by interviewees highlights the persistence of religious notions of sexual morality throughout the decade, an observation made by Marsden who discovered that some of the unmarried mothers amongst his sample viewed their pregnancies as a punishment for sexual sins.¹⁶³ Ann French recalls the stigma of being categorized as an 'unmarried mother' compared to the homogenization of all lone mothers by the later gender-neutral term, 'single parents.' The interviewees adopted the former term to refer to themselves in the 1960s:

I mean nobody bats an eyelid now about 'unmarried mothers.' I mean now they're all 'single parents,' which sounds better, I think. I mean 'unmarried mothers' is a bit sort of clumsy, but that's what we were known as.¹⁶⁴

As the poem at the opening of this chapter suggests, being an unmarried mother in the 1960s meant potentially having to go to great lengths to 'hide,' and when exposed, be identified as a subnormal – abnormality meant not being married. Nevertheless, there were some signs amongst the cohort that cultural change was impacting on some women's sense of identity as lone mothers. The following passage from Beryl's interview is illuminating:

I was sitting watching television with my mum and we were watching *The L-Shaped Room*, which was about a girl who gets pregnant and she's not married. She suddenly opens this bottle and takes a whole handful of tablets and I just broke, I went into hysterics. I was identifying too much with the character, you know? And of course it gave my mum a terrible shock coz we were just sitting there watching this film. She had no idea what was bubbling-up inside me, so she marched me out to the kitchen and put my hands under cold water and got me back again and said: 'Now what's the problem?' and I said: 'well...when she took those tablets,' I said, 'she,' I said, 'I don't know if I should have the baby.' And she said, 'well, why?' and I sort of went through, I said, 'well you know, there's the father, and the effect it's having on you.' I went through all this and she said: 'well look, hold on a minute,' she said, 'you've talked about everybody else, but' she said, 'what do *you* want?' And I said, 'I want the baby.'¹⁶⁵

The television broadcasting of Lynne Reid Banks' *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) in the 1960s attests to the cultural significance of women's writing and the permeation of the women's movement. Novels such as *The L-Shaped Room* and Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) construct female protagonists who encounter the barriers to unmarried

¹⁶³ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 112.

¹⁶⁴ MMB, C900/188583, Ann French.

¹⁶⁵ MMB, C900/04575, Beryl Steadman.

motherhood, but overcome these and positively embrace motherhood.¹⁶⁶ Such depictions of post-war womanhood unsettled conventional social assumptions and legitimized never-married motherhood, nevertheless their protagonists' autonomy relied on a material base: Drabble's heroine has no housing costs, living in a London flat provided by parents living abroad, and Lynne Reid Banks' heroine inherits a house and private income from a terminally ill aunt. Such material advantages in housing and wealth mark out these fictional portraits from the testimonies in this chapter, where the inaccessibility of independent housing made it impossible for most of the interviewees to keep their children. Beryl's reaction to *The L-Shaped Room* demonstrates how she both identified with the character whilst also perceiving her distance from a story of wish-fulfillment. Beryl's mother's insistence that her daughter prioritise her own self-interest does suggest an endorsement of female autonomy, absent in previous chapters. However, despite Beryl's assertiveness over her decision to become a lone mother, she recalls how when she moved from London to Gloucestershire in the 1970s she referred to herself as 'Mrs Steadman,' in the hope that people would think she was divorced or widowed, rather than never-married. This demonstrates how important locale was to self-identity: in moving to a new area, respectability could not be taken for granted. Despite sociological efforts to homogenize lone mothers, moral hierarchies as regards the 'route into' lone motherhood were still keenly felt.

In previous chapters and amongst divorced mothers, descriptions of social support from employers were not uncommon and this was also the case amongst unmarried interviewees in the 1960s. Both Ann French and Beryl continued in their office jobs during and after their pregnancies. Beryl went to the Citizen's Advice Bureau when she became pregnant and was advised not to give up her job, but to stay and resist stigmatization:

I saw a man who said – we talked about it – and he said: 'well, why are you leaving work?' I said, 'well, because I don't want them all to know,' so he said, 'well, they're going to find out, they'll talk about you, but they can't talk about you behind your back if you're there.'¹⁶⁷

Beryl was later approached by her employer and recalls being offered working hours on a time basis in keeping with caring for her child: "There was a knock at the door and it was

¹⁶⁶ Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone* (London, 1965); Lynne Reid Banks, *The L-Shaped Room* (London, 1960).

¹⁶⁷ MMB, C900/04575, Beryl Steadman.

my ex-boss and he said: ‘would I like to go back to work for them on a time basis to suit myself?’¹⁶⁸ However, diversity of experience characterized unmarried mothers’ social interactions. For every story of social support there was also one of exclusion. Lesley and Doreen were both dismissed from their training courses when they revealed their pre-marital pregnancies, an experience which was widespread amongst students in the 1960s.¹⁶⁹ As Carol Dyhouse highlights, the age of majority was set at twenty-one until 1969, when under the Family Reform Act, it was lowered to eighteen. Universities regarded themselves in loco parentis as the age of majority was not reached until most students had graduated.¹⁷⁰ Thus university authorities exercised a strong sense of duty in regulating young women’s sexual behaviour throughout the 1960s. Lesley’s college principal told her father she would only be able to return to a career in teaching if her respectability was reinstated:

I remember my dad asking the principal at college when they came to take me home if I would still be able to be a teacher and the principal saying: ‘well, I don’t know, she’ll have to prove her respectability’ and me dad saying: ‘thank you very much sir, we’ll take her away now.’¹⁷¹

III.iv Marriage

Two of the interviewees went on to marry, Sue Marples and Ann French. Sue’s mother saw no prospect of her daughter marrying, having had an illegitimate child: “Mother always used to keep saying to me, ‘oh so and so is getting married, you’ll never get married,’ she said, sort of more or less, ‘who’ll want you?’ But of course, somebody did.”¹⁷²

IV. Conclusion

Pat Thane argues in relation to the condition of unmarried motherhood in the 1960s: ‘In the 1960s real cultural changes co-existed with strong continuities.’¹⁷³ This chapter has drawn attention to such changes in terms of youthful economic agency, sexual experimentation outside of marriage and the arrival of the pill, permissive legislation, increased numbers of women leaving unsatisfactory marriages, the greater willingness of

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London, 2006), p. 105.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁷¹ NSA, ‘Love Child’, V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

¹⁷² NSA, ‘Love Child’, V3795/4, Sue Marples.

¹⁷³ Thane, ‘Unmarried Motherhood in the Twentieth Century,’ p. 24.

lone mothers to claim social security benefits and sociology's discovery of the impoverished 'one-parent family.' However, this chapter has been more emphatic as regards continuity and keen to stress how change at one level of society did not necessarily translate across region, class and gender. The continuities faced by both unmarried and divorced mothers are perhaps more striking than the changes: the endurance of working-class poverty and the mutability of male-breadwinning, the dependence of young people on parental influence, the ideological power of marriage and legacy of Christian notions of sexual morality, the shame associated with unmarried and divorced motherhood and the application of such shame by charitable and state-run systems of assistance, which made the safety-net of family and neighbourhood support still vital to the lone mother. Such continuities contribute to wider historiographical themes.

In relation to the topic of affluence, the marriages discussed in this chapter illustrate the continued fragility of working-class incomes in the 1960s and the reliance of families on a wife's earnings to achieve a share in rising standards of living. The companionate marriage rested on a material base, often out of reach. For these interviewees, the economic challenge of providing adequate housing and a reliable income whilst administering care, often placed irreparable strain on marriage. The exposure of absolute as well as relative poverty amongst this cohort of interviewees and in the sociological surveys of the period, disrupts post-war demarcations between 'austerity' and 'affluence' and demonstrates the distance appearing between those with a share in consumerism and higher standards of living, and those remaining shut out. Furthermore, the sociological studies of lone motherhood discussed in this chapter, due to their cross-sectional approach, underplay the traditional nature of some of the strategies used by lone mothers in the 1960s to tackle poverty or destitution. Beryl Steedman's maternal economy based on shared wage-earning and childcare responsibilities between daughter and mother, and the persistence of domestic service, are examples of strategies which stretch far back historically in the story of the lone mother and industrial society.

In terms of sexual permissiveness and youthful freedom, the assertions of Hera Cook, in relation to the pill, and of Callum Brown, as regards secularization and feminine values, have been questioned. Among this cohort of single women, the persistence of a lack of knowledge over sexual reproduction and contraception and the inaccessibility of the pill, qualify the association of the pill with a transformation in women's lives. Instead,

the 'long Victorian era' can be said to have persisted well into the 1960s. Callum Brown's reference to the Beatle's song 'She's Leaving Home' (1967) as symbolic of female rebellion within the new society has been shown by the interviewees in this chapter to tell a half-truth.¹⁷⁴ Women experiencing pre-marital pregnancy were often highly dependent on parents and the family home if they were to keep their child. The limits of sexual freedom lay at the door of the family home and when this was closed, entrance into a Mother and Baby Home confirmed the degree to which femininity was still invested with pious values, challenging Brown's claim of the 1960s:

The discursive shift was swift and dramatic. The fifties construction of the 'respectable' woman of homely virtues, the last widespread vestige of nineteenth-century female piety, was for the bulk of young people abruptly dissolved.¹⁷⁵

The historiographical focus on youthful revolution during the 1960s and the greater emphasis given to unmarried motherhood as opposed to divorced motherhood within the secondary literature, has also evaded the dependence of the older, divorced lone mother on parental accommodation and family support during this decade. The examples of homelessness amongst divorced women in this chapter, their inferior status in relation to property and the shame attached to divorce, alert us to the limits on freedom and security experienced by women leaving marriage in the 1960s. 'Respectability' was highly prized within 1960s society, as it had been in previous decades, a subject which takes us back to the poem at the beginning of this chapter: 'And listening and looking around, I have found many masks around.' The interviewees in this cohort have made clear respectability was denoted by 'feminine' behaviour as well as class status. Marriage was the arena in which feminine respectability was validated and thus to mother outside of marriage was to transgress social respectability. As Doreen said: 'The main thing about them was that they were good people because they were married and I was a bad person because I wasn't.'¹⁷⁶ Lucinda Beier's assertion that respectability declined in importance as a social value during the 1960s, as a result of increasing prosperity and decreasing mutual aid amongst the working class, is questionable given the evidence presented in this chapter of the limits of prosperity, the crucial role of informal support for lone mothers and the investment of families and

¹⁷⁴ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 179.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

¹⁷⁶ NSA, 'Love Child', V3795/4, Doreen Ward.

parents in the respectability of their daughters.¹⁷⁷ For all of Marsden's efforts to rid the lone mother of the moral associations which made her undeserving of adequate state support, he too, in notes made alongside interviewing, wrote of the lone mother as beyond the respectable working-class, a member instead of an 'underclass':

It was a curious experience sitting there, in this substratum of life talking about it as though it was everyday life, and on every side their lives were enclosed by some sort of boundary which cut them off from normal working class life.¹⁷⁸

The research of sociologists during the 1960s which changed how the lone mother was conceptualized and the language used to describe her, were part of a wider anti-poverty lobby made-up of charities campaigning for the rights of the poor in the 1960s and the growth of social movements which centred on identity politics, often headed by the individuals they championed.¹⁷⁹ From the small sample of lone mothers in this chapter who lived through the beginnings of this development, the adoption of these new categories by way of identification was as yet unapparent. As Lesley said of the 1960s as an unmarried mother: 'It wasn't actually happening, it was about to happen. I think, it was like, you know, the '60s liberation – the explosion – was about to occur.'¹⁸⁰ It is to the 1970s, where the shifts and movements of the 1960s were to be felt, that we now turn.

¹⁷⁷ McCray Beier, "We were as green as grass", p. 479.

¹⁷⁸ Cited in Evans and Thane, 'Secondary Analysis of Dennis Marsden Mothers Alone', p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ In the Preface to *British Social Movements since 1945*, Peter Catterall suggests that social movements in post-1945 Britain were distinct from those of earlier generations in being concerned with identity issues and were often run by the social groups they claimed to represent. Peter Catterall, General Editor's Preface in Adam Lent, *British Social Movements: Sex Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke; New York, 2001), p. ix.

¹⁸⁰ NSA, 'Love Child': V3795/4, Lesley Swire.

Chapter 5

Rights and ‘a roof over our heads’: the 1970s

The welfare state’s a good thing and council housing is a good thing. Before council housing people lived in worse accommodation than we lived in and it was only down to the council clearing the slums that decent accommodation became available. Basically, yeah, the welfare state is a good thing.¹

Sue Long, MMB Interviewee

I. Introduction

Chapter Four argued there was much continuity in the condition of lone motherhood in the 1960s, contrary to associations of the decade with permissiveness and revolution. This chapter puts greater emphasis on change, and places the divorced mother at centre stage. More than any other decade, it was difficult to locate oral testimonies for the unmarried mother of the 1970s. The scarcity of material can be partly explained by the fertility demographics of the period, whereby the number of extramarital births along with marital births, declined between 1968 and 1977.² Whereas teenage conception and birth rates had risen during the 1960s, in the 1970s both fell.³ This decline in fertility inside and outside of marriage has been associated with developments in birth control and the 1967 Abortion Act.⁴ The divorce rate accelerated during the 1970s and was consequently the primary driver of lone motherhood during this decade. The steep rise in divorce after 1971 was a direct result of the implementation of the 1969 Divorce Act, when many separated couples came forward to seek divorce. The 1970s has been called ‘the divorce decade.’⁵ Subsequently, oral history material for divorcees in the MMB was not difficult to find. Another important development during this era was the rise in cohabitation. Compared to the second-half of the 1960s, when only 6 per cent of people lived together before their first marriage, by the mid-1970s this figure had significantly increased to 33 per cent.⁶ As Jane Lewis has said: ‘Living together as a prelude to

¹ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

² Kathleen Kiernan, ‘The Changing Demography of Lone Motherhood’ in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 21-59, p. 28.

³ ‘Teenage birth and conception rates rose sharply in both the 1960s and the 1980s, but fell during the 1970s.’ Peter Selman, ‘Teenage motherhood then and now: A comparison of the pattern and outcomes of teenage pregnancy in England and Wales in the 1960s & 1980s,’ in Helen Jones and Jane Millar (eds.), *The Politics of the Family* (Aldershot 1996), pp. 103-128, p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵ Lorraine Fox Harding, *Family, State and Social Policy* (London, 1996), p. 64.

⁶ Jane Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 73.

marriage began in the 1970s.⁷ Thus, cohabitation began to feature as a route into lone motherhood from the 1970s onwards. Amongst the 1970s and 1980s cohorts, life stories of lone motherhood are consequently more complex to trace with interviewees exiting cohabiting relationships, the boundaries of which are more difficult to define. Multiple periods of lone motherhood across the life course become more common via non-cohabiting pregnancy or cohabiting pregnancy, followed by marriage ending in separation and divorce. For example, Carolyn Maynard features in this chapter as a lone mother after the breakdown of a cohabiting relationship and again in Chapter Six as a divorcee. The distinctive aspect of these life histories is the degree to which women exercised their agency to parent beyond the convention of marriage and moral sanctions surrounding pre-marital sexual activity. Divorce became far less pronounced within the testimonies as will be demonstrated. Historiographically, the 1970s are understood to mark a watershed in post-1945 history, when the post-war political consensus and the 'golden age' of economic growth came to an end. The economic and social context of the decade is therefore important to understand in relation to our subject, principally in terms of gender and employment and the advancement of the WLM.

This study has demonstrated the continuity in working-class women's employment across the twentieth-century, inside and outside of marriage, but from the early 1970s, women's employment and particularly married women's employment accelerated, growing at a faster rate than male employment.⁸ The process of 'deindustrialisation' and growth of the service sector increased the rates of part-time employment amongst women and decreased industrial employment amongst men. Nevertheless, women's unemployment grew at a faster rate than men's during the era.⁹ The overall rise in women's employment did not equate to economic 'self-sufficiency' as is sometimes asserted, although women's greater participation in the labour market certainly increased women's economic agency and the greater involvement of married women in wage earning from the 1970s saw the beginnings of the decline of the normative power of the 'male-breadwinner' model. However, the paradox of continued high levels of poverty amongst women, despite their increased labour market participation can be explained by the feminised nature of 'proletarianised' service work in

⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

⁸ Philip Armstrong, Andrew Gyn, John Harrison, *Capitalism since 1945* (Oxford, 1991). pp. 247-248

⁹ Ibid.

the last decades of the twentieth-century.¹⁰ Women's concentration in casual, part-time, and low-waged work is borne out by the life histories of working-class women in this cohort. For those middle-class women who accessed higher education and professional training, economic fortune was more within reach. Nevertheless, the gender pay gap in the 1970s demonstrates how, regardless of social class, gender placed women at a severe disadvantage: in 1970 women's wages stood at 63.1 per cent of men's. The WLM gained momentum by the 1970s and issues which have surfaced throughout this study, became key demands of the movement, articulated most famously through four basic demands made at the Ruskin women's conference in Oxford in 1970: equal pay, equal education and opportunity; twenty-four hour nurseries; and free contraception and abortion on demand.¹¹ The passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1970 was the result of pressure from the WLM, after which there was a narrowing of the gap, but the difference still remained significant at 73 per cent in 1979.¹² The formation of women's liberation groups across the country during the decade saw local campaigning taking place on issues such as nursery provision and domestic violence.¹³ Women's entrapment in violent relationships and their secondary relationship in the labour market due to their unequal responsibility for childcare and domestic work, which have recurred throughout the life histories in this study, became politicized. Sheila Rowbotham recalls of the WLM: 'The contradictory situation of the mother with small children, expected to care and yet denied an environment in which this was possible, was one of the factors that brought many women into the movement.'¹⁴ Domestic violence moved from being a taboo subject for generations to one of public legitimacy: 'The indifference and even antagonism that has too often characterised institutional responses to women assaulted by their husbands was dramatically altered during the early 1970s.'¹⁵ By 1975 there were 25 women's refuges

¹⁰ 'The rise in employment in the service sector confuses the division between manual and non-manual workers anyway, and it is possible to argue that many of the most extreme forms of 'proletarianisation' – in the sense of poor wages, irregular employment, and bad working conditions – are found amongst service workers.' Mike Savage, 'The Condition of the Contemporary Middle Classes' in Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds.), *The Contemporary British Society Reader* (Cambridge; Oxford, 2001) pp. 80-88, pp. 81-82.

¹¹ Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900*, (Basingstoke, 1999) p. 149.

¹² 'Women's wages as a percentage of males, 1970-82' in Craig R. Littler and Graeme Salaman, *Class at Work: The Design, Allocation and Control of Jobs*, (London, 1984), p. 17.

¹³ 'As well as consciousness-raising, WLM groups became involved in local campaigns – for nurseries, accessible health care, assisting lone mothers to make social security claims, refuges for battered women, etc.' Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900*, p. 50.

¹⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (London, 1990), p. 129.

¹⁵ Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy*, (London, 1980), p. 223.

and by 1980, 150.¹⁶ The impact of the WLM on the testimonies for this decade will be explored in the proceeding discussion.

The 1970s also saw the culmination of the anti-poverty lobby, which had begun in the 1960s. The Finer Committee on One-parent Families was set-up in response to an acknowledgement of the high levels of poverty endured by one-parent families evidenced by sociological studies of the 1960s. Hilary Land notes how the debate which took place at this time over how children of two-parent and one-parent families could be raised out of poverty was the first of its kind since the welfare state introduced Family Allowances after the Second World War.¹⁷ When the Finer Committee reported in 1974, it recommended a 'Guaranteed Maintenance Allowance' (GMA) for one-parent families, which would provide a universal income for all lone-parents, overturning the historical treatment of lone mothers according to their proximity to marriage and a male-breadwinner: 'At present the legal rights of a mother and her children to support depend, however, primarily upon the reasons for the father's absence and not upon the needs of the fatherless family.'¹⁸ The government rejected the proposal for a GMA in the context of the broader economic downturn in the mid 1970s. Nevertheless, the decade saw the creation of policies targeted at assisting one-parent families and finally social housing became an accessible social right, which lone mother's took-up without refrain.

II. Oral Histories from Divorced Mothers

The six testimonies in the following section are from women who became lone mothers in the 1970s, following separation and divorce. Four interviewees were born in the 1940s; the eldest divorcees in the sample, Doris Grainger and Audrey Hughes were born in the late 1920s and therefore grew up in the 1930s and 1940s. The majority of the women in this cohort, however, were children in the post-war period and adolescents in the 1950s and early 1960s. Violet Ellis grew-up in Jamaica. The interviewees married in the 1950s and 1960s. Four of the interviewees had working-class backgrounds: Doris Grainger, Violet Ellis, Sue Long and Sue Townsend. The remaining two were middle-class: Cindy Clark and Audrey Hughes. Violet Ellis is the first black woman in the study so far; she migrated to England from Jamaica in the 1960s as a married woman. As already noted, this study focuses mainly on the experience of white-working and middle-class women, but Violet's experience, although not representative, adds a new dimension in terms of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Land, 'Social Security and Lone Mothers', pp. 167-168.

¹⁸ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 17.

ethnicity and immigration. Geographically the interviewees resided across a range of locations as lone mothers, including: Doncaster, Birmingham, Gloucester, Leicester, Manchester and North Yorkshire.

II.i. Childhood and Young Adulthood

In terms of the conditions of childhood a distinction appears in the sample according to social class. Doris Grainger is included here as a divorcee, but also featured as an unmarried mother in Chapter Three. Looking back at her childhood in the 1930s she recalls: 'I seemed to have a hard life.'¹⁹ In contrast to working-class interviewees like Doris who grew up in poverty during the inter-war years, Audrey was aware of her family's relative affluence during the 1930s: 'I always think I'm lucky, because you read and you hear of how badly off people were in the Depression and I don't remember feeling any constriction at all.'²⁰ Such material security was to alter during Audrey's adolescence when her father and mother separated, as we will see. Cindy, whose father was a chiropodist, does not mention material impoverishment as a child in the 1950s. Sue Long and Sue Townsend both grew up in families with fathers who were employed in semi-skilled-manual work, but whose mothers also worked when they were children. Sue Long describes her mother as moving between various jobs in factories and retail: 'anything really that enabled her to earn money.'²¹ Sue Townsend's father died when she was eight and her mother struggled to raise the family on a widow's pension. As a child, Sue remembers the exclusion of her family from general living standards in the mid-1950s (like widows in Chapter Two) and her mother's compulsion to find employment:

My mum had to go out to work and it was a very small widow's pension in those days. I don't think it was possible to live on it. I mean, I think you could just about survive on it. I don't think you could buy the jam. You might be able to buy the bread, but not the jam.²²

Sue Long's mother had also been widowed during the war, but she remarried shortly after and had Sue and her sister. As a result there were five children in the family, three from her mother's previous marriage. This number of children in a family was unusual for the post-war period; the remaining interviewees had on average one other sibling, reflecting the decline in family size compared to the earlier childhoods of interviewees in

¹⁹ MMB: C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

²² MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

the 1920s and 1930s. Sue Long's family were vulnerable to poverty and overcrowding due to the number of children in the family, an issue which was highlighted by the sociological literature on poverty in the 1960s. Her memory of being 'hard-up' in the 1950s recalls the social exclusion arising from not having the appropriate clothes for 'Sunday Best':

I can remember being hard-up. When I was young on Sundays you wore your 'Sunday Best' and when I was about eight or nine for a while I can remember not having a 'Sunday Best,' perhaps coz I'd grown out of it. On a Sunday, once I came home from mass in the morning, I stayed in the house. When my friends came for me, I just said: 'I wasn't going out.' Coz you couldn't go out to play in the clothes you'd worn all the week.²³

The persistence of poor housing provision in the 1950s is borne out in Sue Long's testimony where she describes the 'back-to-back house' her family of seven initially lived in Birmingham. Like Sue, fifty per cent of the population in England and Wales lacked amenities in their homes in the early 1950s, such as indoor washing facilities and toilets.²⁴ Despite growing up in housing that was later demolished for development, Sue responds with some indignation when the interviewer refers to her growing-up in 'the slums,' with its connotations of unrespectability and goes on to defend the 'friendly' community of the back-to-back housing estate: "I probably did live in the 'slums,' but we didn't consider it to be the 'slums.' It was always an inner city area but we personally, I suppose, we didn't consider ourselves 'slum-dwellers!'"²⁵

Compared to childhoods of the inter-war period, the testimonies of 1950s childhoods offer less severe recollections of deprivation and illness in the era of the welfare state, but Sue Long and Sue Townsend's testimonies do reflect the persistence of poverty and the memorable nature of such austerity in childhood. Notably, there is an absence of childhood memories of the war (apart from Audrey) and its disruptive effect on 'normal' family life, memories which featured strongly in preceding chapters. As discussed, the war was often the context in which interviewees in the first-half of the century found themselves growing-up in lone mother households, either because of an

²³ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

²⁴ 'In 1951 the Census General Report for England and Wales proudly announced that over half the households in England and Wales had exclusive use of piped water, a cooking stove, kitchen, sink and fixed bath. The report failed to comment on the lack of amenities available for the remaining 50 per cent of the population despite the fact that it estimated that 1.4 million households did not have exclusive use of kitchen sink and toilet.' Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 15.

²⁵ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

absent father or the loss of one. Doris' father served abroad throughout the conflict. The incidence of lone mother households persists for interviewees in the 1950s, but not as a result of wartime circumstance. As mentioned, Sue Townsend grew up in a lone mother household, as did Violet, whose father died when she was a baby growing up in Jamaica. Audrey's mother became a lone mother when Audrey was fourteen. Audrey's case is interesting as it further demonstrates how middle-class prosperity could easily be lost through a father's desertion. Audrey's father sold the family house and moved abroad alone in the 1940s. As a result of being made homeless, Audrey was suddenly compelled to find work to support herself and her mother: 'My mother and I had no home to go to, obviously, so the first thing to do was get a job [...] Somebody offered me a job in Liverpool so I went to Liverpool with my mother and we lived in digs.'²⁶ Cindy lost her mother when she was twelve and subsequently stepped into her mothers' shoes, looking after her younger sister and father at home. Such 'social mothering' by daughters has been a continuous theme throughout this study and as seen before took on particular significance if a parent was absent or dead. Cindy describes how such domestic responsibilities as a girl in the 1950s were bolstered by her training as a nursery nurse, and the subsequent sense of a strong maternal identity in adulthood, which she articulates as the result of both circumstance and agency:

I guess I sort of started to take on some sort of maternal instinct or something around there. I don't know, but I feel that for me, I mean, my teenage years were very much around sort of trying to ensure that we had – my dad was able to work and not worry about me – [...] I guess I took on some of that role myself and I mean in hindsight, I probably, I missed quite a lot of fun during my teenage years because of that. But having said that, I went and chose a profession, which was considered to be in the 'caring field,' so I guess there is an element of my experiences coming into my adult life really.²⁷

None of the interviewees mention receiving advice or information from schools or parents about sexual relations in the 1950s, as was the case with unmarried mothers in the previous chapter. More frequently, memories of church attendance, Sunday school and educational experiences are included in reflections on childhood and adolescence. Doris, Sue Long and Sue Townsend left school at the minimal compulsory age and entered employment. Violet went to teacher training college for two years in Jamaica. Occupations amongst the interviewees were common to young women generally in the

²⁶ MMB, C900/05573, Audrey Hughes.

²⁷ MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

1950s.²⁸ Audrey was the only interviewee to go to university following attendance at a private girls' school. However her middle-class educational opportunities were tempered by the compulsion to find work whilst studying in order to support herself and her mother after her parents' separation.

There is very limited reference in the sample to relationships with boys before marriage, unlike previous chapters. This may be partly due to the particularly young age at which most of the interviewees married, the average age being twenty years, younger than the national average, which was 23.1 years for women in 1961. Marriage was central to the interviewees' aspirations. Cindy, Violet, Sue Long and Sue Townsend were all eighteen when they married and their testimonies transition quickly between adolescent employment and marriage. As already discussed, marriage was at its most popular in the 1960s and the average age of first marriage fell to its lowest point in the century during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁹ In the 1960s, Sue Townsend left her family home before she married and moved into a shared flat with a friend. This was unusual in the 1960s, when most working-class young women would remain in the family home before marriage. Interestingly, Sue's flatmate was an unmarried mother. Her description of how this woman was treated meets with the testimonies of unmarried mothers in the previous cohort and informed the context in which Sue experienced her own sexual license as a single woman living away from her family: 'I shared a flat with a girl who had a baby who was a single parent who, I mean she wasn't treated exactly like one might treat a leper in those days, but almost.'³⁰ Doris was living with her nine month old daughter and parents in the 1950s when she met her first husband. With her father's permission, she quickly married and her husband adopted her illegitimate child. Sue Long, Sue Townsend and Violet appear to have married their husbands not long after meeting them, indicating the importance of marriage for sexual relations in the 1960s. Sue Townsend married very quickly after meeting her husband: 'I got married when I was eighteen in one week!'³¹ Audrey and Cindy had longer engagements. Doris, Violet, Sue Long and Sue Townsend married men in manual occupations. The occupation of Audrey's husband is not recorded in her interview, but she describes middle-class living conditions in marriage and Cindy's husband worked in the Royal Air Force.

²⁸ 'By 1951 the structure of girls' employment had changed radically. The most noticeable feature was the shift away from domestic service towards white-blouse work, in particular retailing and office work, and also teaching and nursing.' Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 28.

²⁹ See Lewis, 'Marriage', p. 71.

³⁰ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

³¹ *Ibid.*

II.ii Marriage, Separation and Divorce

In the previous two chapters, the idea of the companionate marriage has been discussed. Thus far, this study has found that traditional expectations of role allocation in marriage endured in the 1940s and 1950s (even when wives worked, men were expected to be primary breadwinners and women primary homemakers) and that material frustrations put the greatest pressure on marriage, as opposed to ideological pressure towards greater egalitarianism or intimacy espoused by the companionate model of marriage. Endorsing Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher's findings, it has been argued that in the 1940s and 1950s, caring within marriage was understood as the fulfillment of gender demarcated roles and shared goals towards the overall fortunes of the family.³² The inability of men to sustain their breadwinning roles or to behave in such a way that jeopardized the family's security was most often cited as a reason for interviewees in previous chapters to leave husbands. Domestic violence was another aspect of marital breakdown and adultery, when present, was often not tolerated. In this chapter, material pressures within marriages still feature as key to marital dissolution. However, alongside this theme, there is another contribution to separation and divorce, which introduces a new element into the discussion. Interviewees in this cohort gave greater importance to individual agency and self-expression above previously endorsed moral prescriptions in relation to marriage and the family. In the previous chapter, Ann Hoad's resentment at being what she called 'a skivvy' indicated disquiet with gender-demarcated roles, and it is such disquiet which is voiced more strongly by interviewees in the late 1960s and 1970s. The influence of the second wave women's movement and the critique of the gender order within social scientific research during this period will therefore be addressed, alongside interviewees' testimonies.

When comparing his two studies of marriage in 1950 and the late 1960s, Geoffrey Gorer observed: 'Comparing the answers given in 1950 and those in 1969 to the same question, it is interesting to note the virtual disappearance of material circumstances as essential to a happy marriage.'³³ In response to greater affluence in the 1960s, Gorer's second study argued that material conditions played a negligible role in the expectations and frustrations of married couples. Instead, he claimed that the

³² Szreter and Fisher, 'Married love' and 'Love and Authority in Mid-Twentieth-Century Marriages.'

³³ 'The material causes for marital unhappiness are not today considered to play an important role.' Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today: A Study of the Views and Experiences of the Under-45s* (London, 1971), p. 89.

'companionate marriage' came to the fore in his later sample, with most husbands and wives emphasizing the importance of 'comradeship,' shared activities and good communication, more so than in his study of the 1950s. This led Gorer to argue that there had been a shift away from economic qualities being emphasized in marriage and a move towards more intimate qualities in the 1960s.³⁴ However, despite Gorer's assertion that the companionate aspect of marriage had overtaken traditional expectations around husband and wife roles, evidence in his sample seems to contradict his finding. When looking at reasons for marital breakdown, wives in the study mention economic conflict as a highly significant reason for separation and divorce, but this aspect becomes muted in Gorer's analysis.³⁵ Husbands in Gorer's 1969 sample placed great emphasis on their wives' housekeeping and mothering skills. A typical comment by a husband about an appreciated wife was: 'Good cook, good manager, good mother.'³⁶ Yet the endurance of segregated marital roles amongst the interviewees are overlooked, an interpretation which may be rooted in the affluence of the period and the more general 'optimism' for marriage expressed in much sociological literature of the 1950 and 1960s, as discussed in Chapter Four.³⁷ In 1973, Peter Willmott and Michael Young published *The Symmetrical Family*, which went further than the idea of the companionate marriage in arguing that with the increase in married women's employment and the impact of technology on domestic work, marriage had become a symmetrical partnership of shared roles.³⁸ In contrast to these studies, feminists in the 1960s and 1970s were advancing an alternative and subversive view whereby the unequal and oppressed position of women in the family was emphasised. Marcus Collins has demonstrated how the second wave women's movement ultimately challenged the long-held twentieth-century idea of 'mutualist' marriage – Collins' term for the companionate marriage – and argues that it 'took the women's liberation movement to expose the full flaws of the mutualist ideal.'³⁹ Research on housewifery and housework by writers such as Betty Friedan, Hannah Gavron and Ann Oakley argued that the nuclear family made women socially and economically

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁵ 'Arguments about money, rather than absolute or relative poverty, are instanced, particularly by wives, as behaviour which could wreck a marriage.' *Ibid.*, p. 118.

'In their views of what makes for a happy marriage the divorced and separated emphasize (in contrast with those whose marriage have endured), give-and-take and financial security.' *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁸ Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (London, 1973).

³⁹ Collins, *Modern Love*, p. 207.

subordinate, a critique more widely voiced by feminist activists and literature.⁴⁰ Gorer's negation of his male interviewee's expectation that a wife should be: 'good cook, good manager, good mother,' was highlighted by the women's movement, which exposed the disproportionate responsibility of women for childcare and housework in the 1970s. The 'double burden' – a burden carried by most working-class women throughout the industrial period, as this study has evidenced – became a political cornerstone of the women's movement, referencing the dual demand on women as their participation in waged work grew and their domestic responsibilities remained intact. Margaret Wynn articulated the concept of the double burden but in relation to the lone mother, whose burden as this study has illustrated, was acute in trying to bridge two separate spheres:

Does society too readily assume that the mother of a family can be both mother and breadwinner? No such assumption is made about the father. He is not expected to come home after a day's work and cope with shopping, cooking, washing and care of the children [...] Fathers are never expected, and only very few manage, to carry the double burden unaided by a woman.⁴¹

Audrey and Cindy became housewives after they married. Interestingly, Audrey and her husband adopted two babies from unmarried mothers after finding they could not conceive. Their descriptions of conflict during marriage centre on how they both 'changed' after becoming involved in social experiences outside the home: Audrey became involved in amateur dramatics and Cindy with adult education classes. Although neither interviewee refers to the feminist movement directly, their language is indicative of the influence of such wider social shifts in the notion of acceptable womanhood and the legitimacy of self-determination. Cindy recalls the importance of seeing herself as an 'individual' in the late 1960s: 'Yes, I think it dissolved around a realization that I think I wanted as an individual to feel that I had a life that was mine, not just to be shared with somebody else.'⁴² The following extract from Cindy's testimony is suggestive of a feminist discourse of self-assertion beyond the role of housewife:

I'd spent a fair bit of time on my own. I also began to develop my own contacts, for me as my own person, not as 'the wife of.' I began to think. I actually went to night school and did something like basket making and that started to open

⁴⁰ Betty Friedan (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, USA: Penguin; Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London, 1966); Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London, 1974); Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London, 1974).

⁴¹ Wynn, *Fatherless Families*, p. 145.

⁴² MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

up doors. I began to change, very much so, and the changes weren't acceptable to my husband.⁴³

Sue Townsend was employed throughout her marriage whilst raising her three children; her husband was a foundry worker. In the following passage she describes his infidelity in the late 1960s as a symptom of the era's permissiveness. The pursuit of 'love' is justified as an acceptable assertion of agency for a man who had been constrained by his class position:

I think the sixties didn't help. He fell in love and I've always understood that. You know, he fell madly in love and 'followed his heart' as they say. You know, it's a hard life, very young – I'm not excusing him – you can see, three small children at home, cycling in Leicester, four miles there, working, (oh Jesus, I can't remember the technical name for it, but hitting metal with a hammer, that's what he did) but just hitting metal all day!⁴⁴

Alongside these descriptions of marital disharmony, which lend themselves to an understanding of the late 1960s and 1970s as a time of cultural upheaval as a result of social movements, other interviewees describe the kind of material frustrations and associated strains on marriage which had been common to past generations. Sue Townsend articulates an alternative view of the 1960s/1970s to the one above whereby she emphasizes the continuity in her domestic life with earlier generations, despite the 'swinging sixties':

I don't remember the Sixties. The only thing I remember is taking my kids to an open-air rock concert and they were wearing tie-dyed t-shirts, they were all little – I had three children under five, very quickly, and that's the thing. I had my head in a nappy bucket. There weren't disposable nappies then, you were talking washing by hand. You know, so gruesome in those days! The sheer amount of hard work, gruesome kind of housework.⁴⁵

Sue Townsend said of paid work during marriage: 'I was working only at night, when they were in bed. I always worked, always. I worked selling hot-dogs at St Margaret's bus station.'⁴⁶ Doris, Sue Townsend and Violet were all employed whilst raising young children; Sue Long is the only working-class interviewee in this cohort who did not work after becoming a mother. Violet's husband left Jamaica early in their marriage to pursue employment prospects in the UK. Violet followed him in 1965, leaving behind their first

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

daughter in the care of extended family. Four years of separation put a strain on their marriage: ‘When I came here I was a stranger to my husband.’⁴⁷ Violet and her husband first lived in small bed-sit in Gloucestershire and saved their wages in order to pay for their daughter to come to England: ‘The priority was to earn money so that I could send for my daughter.’⁴⁸ Violet’s decision to become a psychiatric nurse in the mid-1960s, despite being trained as a teacher, was motivated by the expansion of the National Health Service when many black women were employed as nurses. Both Violet and her husband experienced racism living in England in the 1960s and became further estranged through employment, which necessitated shift work whilst also raising young children:

I used to go at nights [to work] so we didn’t see each other. By the time I come in the mornings, he’s gone to work. By the time he comes, it’s time to eat, he eats and I’m gone. We didn’t really see each other, you know?⁴⁹

For Doris, whose husband was unemployed for most of their marriage, her wages were crucial in keeping the family ‘above board.’ Doris had seven children during the 1950s and 1960s and a particularly violent marriage, which led to her deciding to be sterilized. Two of her children were taken into care and the family lived in extreme poverty:

Times were very, very...poverty. I mean I got that no light, no gas, nothing to eat. If your shilling went out in gas you couldn’t cook. I remember going to shops and getting, you know, bacon ribs, what they have now. I used to go and get half a crown’s worth of bacon bones and boil ‘em and we used to sit there, sit there and eat the bone – all the kids – to feed ‘em, you see? That’s what I’m saying.⁵⁰

In relation to suffering years of domestic abuse, Doris recalled how she could not turn to social services or the police for support, using the phrase ‘domestic troubles’ to indicate the illicit nature of her suffering in the 1960s: “There were nothing they could do with, you know, ‘domestic troubles.’ I mean I think they do it now, don’t they?”⁵¹ Eventually, Doris left her husband in the 1970s: “He used to come home and start on me. One day it came to a head and he beat me that much, so all me face were black and blue, and then I thought, ‘well, I can’t stand this.’”⁵² The ‘non-interventionist’ approach of the police over domestic violence was altered in the 1970s as a result of feminist campaigning, a change

⁴⁷ MMB, C900/04619, Violet Ellis

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

reflected in the alternative story of Violet.⁵³ Violet's husband also became violent during their marriage: 'He was very nasty to me. He used to really batter me about.'⁵⁴ However, in contrast to Doris' experience earlier in the 1960s, Violet's description of contact with the police and social services in the mid-1970s reflects a shift in the way that domestic violence was being responded to by this point in the century:

I'd always be having to get the police and the social worker in because he would be violent and the doctor had to come because the kids were sick [...] The doctor, the social worker, they said to me: 'It's best if the kids have one-parent and they're happy than have two and unhappy.' You see? So I divorced my husband.⁵⁵

The state responded to the social campaigning of the women's movement and the Domestic Violence Act (1976) was passed which enabled women (both wives and cohabiting women) to take out a court order against a violent husband and remain in the marital home. Violet's decision to divorce her husband was legitimized by the doctor and social services advocating that she leave her husband, and contrasts with earlier generations when welfare agencies placed emphasis on the importance of married couples saving failing marriages.

Unlike interviewees in past generations who recalled the difficult legal steps involved in divorcing their husbands, the women in this chapter do not describe such arduous divorce proceedings, reflecting a relaxation in the divorce process brought about by the 1969 Divorce Act. Although Cindy 'had a dread of going to court,' she remembers that 'it didn't take very long to get a divorce, solicitors on both sides were very understanding of that really and there was no antagonism in the whole process at all.'⁵⁶ This is not to suggest that the emotional impact of divorce was not felt strongly by interviewees, who despite being able to obtain divorces more easily describe the distress of marital break-up: 'My marriage failed [...] you know, and it was heartbreaking for me, 'course it was, and for the kids.'⁵⁷ Doris was the only interviewee in this cohort who lost custody of her children after initially leaving her husband with her three daughters (her

⁵³ 'But it was the police who had been most commonly turned to by battered women and they who have been consistently described as unhelpful. The police have a policy of non-intervention in 'domestic disputes' which effectively leaves a woman unprotected by law within her own home.' Val Binney, 'Domestic Violence: Battered women in Britain in the 1970s' in *Women in Society: Interdisciplinary Essays*, The Cambridge Women's Studies Group (London, 1981), p. 117.

⁵⁴ MMB, C900/04619, Violet Ellis.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

⁵⁷ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

other children had left home by this time). She described how her attempts to take her own life during her marriage were held against her in court, despite the extreme violence of her husband. The following extract illustrates the persistence of the concept of the neglectful and unfit mother in the 1970s, central to notions of the ‘problem family’ in the post-war period: “He won the case, coz he said I was an ‘unfit mother,’ and I wasn’t really. But he told lies – they told lies – so he got the house and all the kids and I were left with me mother.”⁵⁸ Carol Smart has demonstrated how a significant shift took place in the position of married women to the law in the 1970s after the Divorce Reform Act was implemented, the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act (1970) overturned the practice of magistrates’ courts not awarding maintenance to adulterous wives, and the Domestic Violence Act (1976) was passed.⁵⁹ However, the legacy of wives being perceived as deserving/undeserving in the process of divorce still came to light and Doris’ experience is a case in point. However, despite initially losing custody of her children, very shortly afterwards her ex-husband died and her three teenage daughters came to live with her.

II.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

The 1970s saw significant changes in the national housing situation compared with earlier decades:

In 1945 only 26 per cent of all houses in England and Wales were owner-occupied; by 1966 the proportion was 47 per cent. [...] The proportion of houses rented from local authorities or new town corporations also more than doubled since the war, though from a lower base, from 12 per cent in 1947 to 30 per cent in 1970. By contrast, houses let by private landlords, which in 1947 constituted 58 per cent of the housing stock, had already shrunk by half by 1961, and in 1973 accounted for only 14 per cent of houses.⁶⁰

Such national changes in the nature of housing tenure are reflected in the experiences of the five women in this cohort. Whereas in previous chapters, securing ‘a roof over one’s head’ had been exceptionally difficult and in some cases unobtainable for women who became homeless, in this chapter concerns over housing are less pronounced within the oral histories. In several cases, the issue of housing is not mentioned at all for the first

⁵⁸ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

⁵⁹ Carol Smart, *The Ties that Bind*, p. 99.

⁶⁰ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (London, 1980), p. 274.

time. Doris initially moved with her three daughters to her mother's house, indicating the continued importance of kin as a safety-net when women left husbands. The most significant shift is the availability and entitlement of lone mothers to social housing. In previous chapters we have seen how lone mothers faced discrimination in acquiring public housing at a time of national housing shortage and many rented in the private market, with high rents and poor security. Although problems with housing persisted for lone mothers throughout the 1970s, compared with previous decades the state played a greater role in facilitating the capacity of single women with dependent children to obtain affordable and secure housing and although the five cases outlined here are not representative, they are suggestive of such a shift.

In 1977 the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act was passed which made local authorities responsible for the first time for housing the homeless. Prior to this, local councils determined who was most in need of housing and allocated residents according to a waiting list, which often led to a differentiation between 'undeserving' and 'deserving' cases, as we have seen with lone mothers. The 1977 Act made it a duty of local housing departments to prioritise the 'unintentionally homeless,' a category which included single women who had left the marital home because they were at risk of, or had experienced violence.⁶¹ This change in law and the subsequent opening-up of council housing to lone mother families epitomizes the state's recognition of the one-parent family as a specific social group in need and shaped the condition of lone motherhood in the decades to follow. Amongst families with children housed under the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act in the first two years of its implementation, over half were single parents.⁶² Sue Long was offered a new council house in the early 1970s when she separated from her husband and actually found herself in better housing as a lone mother compared to the back-to-back she had lived in with her husband: 'Well, I was offered property in Kingstanding, a nice new house with three bedrooms and a bathroom, garden, back and front, the council moved us.'⁶³ Being moved to a new housing estate as a lone mother with young children, Sue found herself missing her old neighborhood in the slum district, although improved housing conditions were ultimately preferable:

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 226.

⁶² Hilary Land, 'Housing and Lone Mothers' in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 211-240, p. 231.

⁶³ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

If your children were little you'd always got somebody to keep an eye on them for five minutes if you wanted to run around to the shop or whatever. There was always somebody to talk to...knock on somebody's door and you could...there was no need to be lonely because you could always knock somebody's door and have a chat. It was different after I moved because obviously I didn't know a soul. I did at first, I really missed the old area, but the good advantages of the housing outweighed the bad.⁶⁴

By the mid-1970s, lone mothers were receiving more assistance from the state with housing costs. In 1972, entitlement to a rent rebate from local authorities was equalized for one-parent and two-parent families in the Housing Finance Act. Before the bill was passed the Conservative government had attempted to provide a lower 'needs' allowance for one-parent families, but the Finer Committee successfully challenged this discrimination, arguing that one-parent families actually had greater needs in most cases.⁶⁵ Rent rebates throughout the 1970s were still variable according to area, with councils setting rebates according to type of housing, income levels or family size. Sue Townsend who lived on a council estate as a single parent, remembers receiving a rebate on her rented accommodation in the 1970s, but it was in the early 1980s when a unified housing benefit was introduced that she recalls the costs of housing being significantly alleviated: 'You had rent decrease and you know it was, if you only earned a certain amount of money you paid no rent and that happened towards the end.'⁶⁶

In this chapter we see a higher number of women from both social classes remaining in the marital home after separation/divorce. As discussed above, legislative changes in the 1970s gave separated and divorced women greater capacity to remain in the matrimonial home and even to acquire a share in the equity of the house.⁶⁷ Women suffering violence did not have to leave their homes if able to get a court order against violent husbands/partners. Thus in contrast to some of the women in previous chapters who experienced homelessness as a result of leaving abusive husbands, Violet remained in her marital home with her children and her husband left. Cindy and Audrey also remained in the marital home after their marriages broke down. As we have seen in previous chapters, it was very difficult for single women to acquire mortgages and other forms of credit without a male guarantor. The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act changed this situation, opening-up the opportunity for women to get a mortgage in their own name.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Land, 'Housing and Lone Mothers', p. 224.

⁶⁶ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

⁶⁷ Land, 'Housing and Lone Mothers', p. 223.

However, lone mothers lagged behind two-parent families in acquisition of owner-occupation in the 1970s, as their incomes were low and they rarely possessed capital.⁶⁸

Maternal Economy

Compared to previous generations, the interviewees in the 1970s gathered more income from state benefits, a trend which fits with the national picture whereby divorced lone mothers' reliance on state benefits doubled between 1970 and 1975.⁶⁹ Other than SB, which lone mothers could claim without having to seek employment, FIS was available to lone mothers in employment and in 1975 Child Benefit was introduced (replacing Family Allowance) which saw selective provision being made for one-parent families with the introduction of a One-parent Benefit (initially the Child Benefit Interim) available from 1976.

In previous chapters, separated or divorced mothers with pre-school children have been most acutely affected by the conflicting demands of wage-earning and childcare and very often relied on kin for childcare in order to re-enter employment. Reliance on NA/SB was not only an inadequate form of income, but its association with poor relief made it an undesirable option. In this chapter, a significant shift is detectable in the willingness of interviewees to claim state benefits. Sue Long refers to her choice as a lone mother with three small children to claim SB as 'obvious': 'My husband and I split-up in 1971 when my youngest was five months old and my eldest was three and obviously, from then on, I happened to live on social security.'⁷⁰ Violet recalls being instructed by social services to opt for state benefits as a means of drawing income: "The social worker said: 'Now you'll have to pack your job up because you wouldn't be able to work and look after the kids.' You see? Coz they were at school that's what happened, I packed my job up."⁷¹ Violet claimed SB and was able to care for her children at home.

Despite a greater number of women in this cohort deriving income from state benefits, this did not equate to leaving the labour market permanently and in all but one case, employment was the more significant contributor of income over the long-term. Audrey and Cindy both drew income from full-time employment; Sue Long relied

⁶⁸ 'In 1972, only 13 per cent of single parents drawing social security had any capital assets, and only 2 per cent had sufficient for them to be taken into account when calculating their entitlement.' Brian Jackson, 'Single-parent families', in R.N. Rapoport, M. P. Fogarty and R. Rapoport (eds.), *Families in Britain* (London, 1982), p. 172.

⁶⁹ 'The numbers of divorced lone mothers dependent on SB grew in the 1960s and 1970s doubling between 1970 and 1975.' Land, 'Social Security and Lone Mothers', p. 182.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ MMB, C900/04619, Violet Ellis.

initially on SB, but then combined this with earnings from part-time employment, and Sue Townsend initially relied on SB but then entered full-time employment. Only Violet relied solely on SB throughout her time as a lone mother. The sources of Doris' income as a lone mother are unclear in her testimony. This picture of the diverse ways in which lone mothers packaged income reflects a broader picture which emerged in the last decades of the twentieth-century, whereby despite the increase in numbers of lone mothers claiming state benefits, income was often gathered in a variety of ways and not exclusively from the state.⁷² As the cases of the women in this cohort illustrate, decisions about income were also rarely static, something overlooked by sociological studies of lone mothers' relationship with state benefits due to their overwhelmingly cross-sectional nature. The factors which mostly influenced decision-making amongst the interviewees in terms of their capacity to enter employment were: educational training/employment experience prior to marriage, the real value of waged income in relation to benefits, and the extent of a child's/children's age related dependency. Audrey Hughes and Cindy Clark both came from middle-class backgrounds and were able to draw reasonable income through employment due to qualifications gained before marriage: 'I was able to get a job in a school because of my nursery nursing, which is something that I did when I left school.'⁷³ For Sue Long and Sue Townsend, employment options were largely restricted to low-paid, casual work due to leaving school with elementary qualifications: 'I left school when I was sixteen, I got O-levels, but I mean I couldn't type or anything like that. I wasn't qualified to do anything.'⁷⁴ For Doris, Violet, Sue Long and Sue Townsend, their capacity to enter the labour market was limited due to the age-related dependency of young children. Sue Long raised her pre-school children on SB, but once they entered education she sought employment in order to meet clothing requirements and reach a relative level of comfort: '[It] was alright for a short period of time, but when you have to live on it continuously and your children need shoes and clothes and generally you want a decent home, then you have to do what you can to earn extra money.'⁷⁵ As we saw in

⁷² 'Taking an average estimate for 1982-1984, it appears that roughly half of all lone mothers were both on supplementary benefit and not employed; less than one in ten combined part-time employment with supplementary benefit, a little over one in ten combined employment with Family Income Supplement (FIS), a means-tested benefit for family heads in low-paid work. This leaves about three out of ten lone mothers not claiming either benefit, of whom two in ten were in employment.' Heather Joshi, 'Obstacles and Opportunities for Lone-parents as Breadwinners in Great Britain,' in *Lone-parent Families: The Economic Challenge* (1990) OECD Social Policy Studies No. 8., Paris: OECD, pp. 127-150, p. 127.

⁷³ MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

⁷⁴ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

past generations, lone mothers could be deterred from supplementing their state benefits with income from employment because of the earnings rule, although some ignored this, combining benefits with more paid work than was legitimate. In 1975 the earnings disregard was increased for lone mothers to £6, remaining at £2 for the unemployed. Again this measure targeted one-parent families as a group with specific and greater need than other claimants.⁷⁶ In the early 1970s, when the earnings rule was still set at £2 a week for lone mothers, Sue Long took on a part-time cleaning job to supplement SB but found that it was only by not declaring her earnings that the family's living standards were significantly improved: 'I had a cleaning job from ten o'clock 'til two o'clock and I think I earned four pound fifty a week, something like that, but it made a big difference to our existence.'⁷⁷ Sue's justification for not declaring her earnings whilst claiming state support surfaces throughout her interview. She exposes a rationale which claims her actions were a response to social injustice and surviving as an unsupported mother: 'I mean I couldn't work officially, I'd got three children to bring-up. My husband wasn't going to pay me, so what else could I do?'⁷⁸ Sue later goes on to say that she was 'entitled' to a better standard of living in order to redress what she saw as the state's undervaluation of single women caring for their own children, compared to other forms of state facilitated childcare:

Well I was a bit worried that somebody might 'tweet' on me. I mean I didn't feel as though I was doing anything wrong because the money they pay you isn't enough to keep you. When you compare what they – social security – pay a single mother to keep her children and what they pay somebody who fosters children, there's a big difference. I mean I could have put my children in a home and cost the state a lot more money than keeping them with me, so I felt I was entitled to earn a bit more than they allowed me to.⁷⁹

As Sue mentions, she did not receive maintenance payments from her ex-husband, and she later says that she 'never took him to court for a penny,' receiving the occasional contribution at certain times of the year, such as Christmas. Sue Townsend did obtain a court order for maintenance, but her ex-husband frequently failed to pay. These examples of the absence and inconsistency of income from fathers accord with the experience of women thus far in this study. Income from fathers remained minimal, or absent.

⁷⁶ Land, 'Social Security and Lone Mothers', p. 179.

⁷⁷ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Poverty was still a significant aspect of the testimonies of interviewees in the 1970s. Most of the interviewees were employed in service sector work such as cleaning, retailing and waitressing where wages were low. Sue Townsend had three jobs in the mid-1970s and worked all day and night on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday when she would supplement her job at a youth club and community centre during the day with waitressing until two o'clock in the morning: 'I depended entirely on my tips because the wages were hardly, I mean it hardly covered the bus fare.'⁸⁰ Income levels from SB were not adequate in meeting the needs of lone mother families in the cohort, beyond facilitating a basic standard of living. Violet and her five children lived on £21 a week in the mid-1970s, an income which she says allowed her to 'cope' but which was significantly lower than average weekly male earnings during the period of £30.93.⁸¹ Reflections on poverty by the interviewees moved between speaking of 'survival' in terms of struggling to meet basic needs and stories of exclusion from 'standard' forms of consumption. Sue Townsend recalls the day when she was turned away from the magistrates' court after being told her husband had failed to pay maintenance and having no money left to get herself and her three children home on the bus. As a result they spent the afternoon collecting empty bottles in the centre of Leicester in exchange for money from a local shop to afford bus tickets home. Having no money to buy food that evening, Sue describes how she managed to feed the family. She uses humour to frame her bleak memories of poverty:

I had some suet and I had some sultanas and I had some peas and I made a pea soup and Les Dawson's joke about: 'Put another pea in the soup, mother' – about poverty – always used to crack me up because that actually happened to me! I made a pea soup with an Oxo cube and some peas and I made a kind of roly-poly pudding.⁸²

In referencing Les Dawson's comic treatment of his childhood growing up in poverty in the North of England in the 1930s, Sue was also making an inter-generational observation about the maternal management of poverty, relating her material experiences in the post-war period to an era of austerity, supposedly surpassed. Common to most of the interviewees in this cohort was the problem of buying children's shoes, something recalled in previous chapters and referenced by the sociological studies of poverty in the

⁸⁰ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

⁸¹ Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, Fourth Edition, (London, 2003), p. 88.

⁸² MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

1970s.⁸³ Sue Townsend highlights the distinction she felt as a lone mother between ‘surviving’ and being excluded from the kind of consumption that would have allowed her to participate in a higher standard of living. An observation which reflects a rising scale of relative needs in relation to children’s attire:

Again, ‘survival,’ yeah. You’re talking about the suet and the pea soup, but not a birthday present, not a birthday card, not like the four pairs of shoes that children need – plimsolls, wellingtons, school shoes – that’s three basic, they have to have those. Do you know what I mean?⁸⁴

Sue Long’s repeated reference to the significance of being able to afford new clothing for her children connects with her childhood memory of being ‘hard-up’ and not having the right clothes for Sunday best. Sue’s testimony includes references to inter-generational experiences of poverty and subverts a linear notion of growing affluence in the second-half of the twentieth century. She claimed that compared with her own childhood in the 1950s, her children in fact experienced worse degrees of poverty in the 1970s because of their exclusion from a more general increase in national living standards: ‘When I was a child, although times were hard, we always had a cooked Sunday lunch, we were always fed and clothed, that was the main thing [...] I wanted something better than I had for my children and actually it was worse than I had.’⁸⁵ The absence of family holidays and the problem of affording school trips are mentioned by nearly all the interviewees and are recalled with particular resonance as a sign of social exclusion.

As in past generations, lone mothers had to adopt a variety of strategies to manage poverty. Sue Long describes the importance of friends lending her money in order to make her social security income stretch across the week, a form of credit which we have seen described by working-class interviewees across the twentieth century:

I tried to work when I could but obviously if I wasn’t at work then all I had was my social security, which I got on a Monday morning. On a Monday morning I’d get paid, I’d go shopping, get as much groceries as I could afford and then throughout the week I’d cook a meal for when my children came in from

⁸³ ‘Numerous studies from the mid-1970s on have shown that the purchase of clothing and footwear is another regular expense which claimants have difficulty meeting. In the Leeds survey, one-third of pensioners, over half the unemployed and sick and disabled respondents and two-thirds of the lone-parents interviewed said that they did not have sufficient clothing to meet even the minimum standards laid down by the SBC.’ Carol Walker, *Managing Poverty: The Limits of Social Assistance* (London, 1993) p. 76.

⁸⁴ MMB, C900/09130, Sue Townsend.

⁸⁵ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long

school. By Friday morning I was always broke, so Friday I'd have to borrow money off a friend, which had to be paid back on a Monday morning.⁸⁶

For Sue, social inclusion meant being able to provide her children with a Christmas holiday which included, new clothes and shoes, presents, and the usual roast dinner: 'what everybody else had at Christmas':

I did the best I could and I think we survived. We always had a roof over our heads, we had a cooked meal every night (well, most nights) and my children always had shoes on their feet and clothes on their back. They may not have had everything their friends had – coz designer clothes and that were coming out as they were growing-up – but they always had things when it came to like Christmases. We always had a proper Christmas: they always had new clothes, food. We always had a turkey.⁸⁷

In order to provide Christmas, Sue would start her shopping from September onwards and hoard small gifts, food and sweets. Along with another single mother, she also claimed a social security grant on the premise of needing basic items for the winter in order to access a relative level of consumption in the form of Christmas gifts and decorations: "We'd write off to the social security saying our children 'needed winter coats' or we 'needed bedding,' or this, that and the other and we always had a grant come just in time for Christmas and we'd go shopping."⁸⁸

Social Membership and Identity

Compared with the testimonies of divorced women in previous cohorts, the testimonies of the 1970s include very little, if any, reference to the stigma of divorce or lone motherhood. Such decline in stigma amongst the interviewees may well reflect the increase in the numbers of divorced women – as Cindy recalls, 'it was certainly becoming more common,' – as well as a range of influences, such as the shift in the public perception of divorce brought about by permissive legislation, cultural changes in religious and moral values, the visibility of lone mothers as council house tenants, the anti-poverty lobby in the late 1960s and the WLM.⁸⁹ Most of the interviewees in the 1970s identified with the label 'single parent' or 'single mother': 'We may have been single parents but we always put a turkey on the table at Christmas.'⁹⁰ Sue Long's use of

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

⁹⁰ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long

the pronoun 'we,' also draws attention to another distinction between this sample and previous generations of divorced lone mothers, which sees interviewees in the 1970s more frequently mentioning solidarity with other lone mothers and identifying with a common group:

I'm very much aware that I was, I wasn't on my own, that there were a lot of single mums around. I think you do find your own friends and people in similar situations. Its amazing when one door closes another door opens and I think you quite naturally drift into finding people in similar situations, those people around were a strength at that because you're all struggling with the same sorts of problems.⁹¹

My sister in law was in the same position as me, although her husband was in prison and she'd got two daughters. We used to stay together when we could and share the cost of living. Christmases we always spent together.⁹²

None of the interviewees explicitly mention the impact of feminism or other social movements on their sense of social standing, but the above extracts suggest an affinity with the campaigns and categories produced by the anti-poverty lobby, sociological research and the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The references to 'entitlement' by interviewees discussed above, coupled with identification as 'single parents/mothers,' indicate a shift in relationship with the state towards recognisable social rights compared to earlier generations' recollections of exclusion from social welfare. The stigma of being dependent on state services did not disappear. Sue Townsend, for instance, was told to apply for an 'emergency payment' when her husband's maintenance did not transpire, and in her distress she was shown the limits of entitlement: "I was desperate and tried to explain to this young man behind the grill, I hadn't got any money: 'I hadn't got any money to get back home, let alone buy food or anything,' and he said, 'No, you'll have to go to a relation.'"⁹³ The next day, Sue returned to apply for assistance and relates how a 'respectable' demeanor altered the treatment she received exposing how notions of the deserving/undeserving poor continued to operate:

I went back to the benefits place and I took a *Guardian* with me. You know, I took a *Guardian*, coz that night I went to my mother and borrowed some money – which I hated doing – she gave me a fiver and I bought a *Guardian*. I just knew, if I went in with a *Guardian* and not three kids hanging-on, I would be

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² MMB, C900/07129, Cindy Clark.

⁹³ MMB, C900/09139, Sue Townsend.

treated differently and I *was* treated differently.⁹⁴

However, memories of stigma or exclusion were rare compared with an increased impression of state support. Violet refers to the constructive intervention she received from social workers, who advised her to leave her husband and claim state benefits, and the assistance she received from her Local Education Authority in providing school uniforms for her children. Sue Long stressed the positive character of the welfare state, which provided her with adequate housing compared to earlier generations. The following statement, quoted in full at the beginning of this chapter, is reflective of her sense of inclusion in social welfare, something which past generations had recalled exclusion from: “The welfare state’s a good thing and council housing is a good thing.”⁹⁵

In previous cohorts, interviewees cited employers as providing a degree of support for lone mothers and described reasonable working conditions, but in the 1970s such descriptions are lacking. This reflects the wider economic and labour market position of women in the 1970s (outlined in Section I). Most of the women in this cohort were working in part-time, service sector jobs and often doing shift work. Sue Townsend described working in three different part-time jobs in the mid-1970s. Such ‘flexible’ part-time work was a strong feature of women’s employment in the 1970s. Part-time, flexible work, although seeming to offer a solution to the problem of reconciling childcare and waged work, also offered employers a chance to reduce costs at a time of declining profitability. Lower earnings for part-time workers relative to full-time workers and the loss of occupational benefits have been well recorded.⁹⁶ Sue Long and Sue Townsend describe poor working conditions in jobs which instead of providing a means of financial and social relief, took advantage of their economic vulnerability: “While I was on social security the jobs I had were nearly always cleaning jobs and we worked for cleaning contractors who basically exploited people who were in my position. You never had to give your National Insurance number or anything like that.”⁹⁷ Sue Long and the other women she worked with resorted to stealing cleaning products and other goods from their employer as means of redressing their exploitation:

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

⁹⁶ Susan Lonsdale, ‘Patterns of Paid Work’ in Caroline Glendinning & Jane Millar (Eds.) (1987) *Women and Poverty in Britain*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 98-99, p. 103.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The company were paying us a pittance so why shouldn't we try to save a few shillings somewhere along the line? [...] We didn't feel as though it was stealing because we were paid so little for the work we did, it just made-up for the pittance they paid, basically.⁹⁸

Such recollections of the workplace contrast with previous decades. Before the 1970s, employment presented obstacles and gendered constraints, but interviewees' still often spoke of employees as supportive in relation to childcare demands and tended to emphasise the economic and social benefits of paid work.

Despite greater reference to formal support during this decade, family and friends continued to be a vital source of support, particularly in providing childcare, goods and financial contributions: 'They were a struggle. Those years were a struggle. If it hadn't have been that I'd got good friends, we'd have starved at some time, sooner or later.'⁹⁹

II. iv Cohabitation and Remarriage

Two of the interviewees, Doris Grainger and Sue Townsend remarried. Remarriage rates peaked in the first-half of the 1970s as they had done after World War Two. The increase after 1971 was due to the Divorce Reform Act, which enabled people who had begun relationships whilst still married to formalize these relationships as soon as they were granted a divorce.¹⁰⁰ Doris was a typical case in this regard. She began cohabiting with a married man in the early 1970s, which she describes as a transgression: 'His wife were having an affair with somebody so we decided to go and live together and I mean that was a bad thing in them days. When our divorces came through we both got married.'¹⁰¹ The increasing numbers of remarriages from the 1970s onwards indicates the continued valuation of marriage, despite increased divorce rates.

III. Oral Histories from Unmarried Mothers

Interviewees who experienced motherhood outside of marriage were more difficult to uncover from the MMB for this decade than any other. The scarcity of material can be

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ 'The first peak in divorce rates immediately after the war, is mirrored by a peak in remarriage rates for both men and women and the second peak in divorce rates which occurred in 1971 after the Divorce Reform Act is also reflected in the remarriage rates.' Jane Elliot, 'Demographic trends in domestic life, 1945-87,' in David Clark (ed.) *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, pp. 85-108, p. 95.

¹⁰¹ MMB, C900/14621, Doris Grainger.

explained by the fertility demographics of the period, whereby the number of extramarital births, along with marital births, declined during the 1970s as discussed in Section I. Four testimonies are included in this section from women who became unmarried mothers in the 1970s. Carolyn Maynard is the oldest interviewee and grew-up in the 1950s; she became an unmarried mother in her late twenties. The other three interviewees became unmarried mothers in their late teens and early twenties and grew-up in the 1960s and 1970s. Susan McGrath and Kathryn Marie Riley came from working-class backgrounds and Carolyn Maynard and Felicity Rock from middle-class backgrounds. Geographically they resided as lone mothers in Birmingham, Liverpool, Middlesbrough and South London.

III.i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Material conditions in childhood differed by social class. Carolyn and Felicity's fathers had middle-class occupations and their mothers took-up employment in teaching and administration after lengthy periods as housewives with young children. Felicity said of her mother's home-based status: 'I mean it wasn't the done thing to work.'¹⁰² Carolyn and Felicity do not mention material hardship during their childhoods, whereas Kathryn and Susan vividly recall periods living in poverty during the 1960s. Kathryn was one of five siblings and her father was a demolition worker; the family lived in a tenement block in Liverpool. As has been the case with previous generations of large working-class families, overcrowding is described by Kathryn, but so too is the social company of growing-up in a large family: 'When you've got a big family you've always got people to play with and things to do and often we'd all be in one bed.'¹⁰³ Kathryn recalls the endurance of systems of mutual support between working-class families in the tenement blocks:

Everybody helped each other. I remember lots of times, running along the landings when the rent-man would be on his way and everyone would be alerting everybody and people would borrow money to help each other out.¹⁰⁴

This memory of the persistence of poverty in a decade associated with growing affluence disrupts the interviewer's perception of pre and post-war social history:

¹⁰² MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹⁰³ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Interviewer: Now, I think people listening to this will think: ‘Oh yeah, that used to happen before the war, but not in the 1960s.’ It was still?

Kathryn: Oh it was happening, definitely in the Four Squares [area of Liverpool].¹⁰⁵

Kathryn’s mother left the labour market whilst her children were young, after which she took on cleaning work: ‘She was at home, she was a mum.’¹⁰⁶ Kathryn’s description of her mother meets with that of other working-class women from previous generations who describe their ‘mum’ as home managers and strong directional figures within the household. Susan was illegitimate and is reluctant during her interview to disclose the circumstances in which her mother became an unmarried mother. Her trepidation is indicative of the stigma and shame associated with illegitimacy in the 1960s: ‘I mean I’d like to say, but I think I’m a bit frightened. I don’t know who’s going to listen to this.’¹⁰⁷ Like many lone mothers in the 1960s, her mother generated income through employment, working as a bus conductress, but the family struggled to keep out of poverty: ‘We didn’t have naught, it was hard for my mum [...] She had nothing at all.’¹⁰⁸ Susan’s family circumstances changed when her mother re-married. Susan was eight at the time and she recalls the difference in the family’s living standards: ‘He moved in and we got fitted carpets! We got tellies! To me, my brother, they were like toys, we were fascinated by them. You know, we were actually walking on a carpet and that!’¹⁰⁹

The interviewees in this cohort reconstruct ‘teenage’ culture in the 1970s by reference to fashion and popular music. Carolyn remembers girls in her peer group wearing the ‘mini skirt.’ Kathryn recalls the significance of acquiring her first pair of jeans: ‘I remember jeans coming out – Wranglers – and crying for a pair and me dad buying me them.’¹¹⁰ None of the interviewees’ spoke of drinking or taking drugs, but smoking was common: ‘Everybody smoked, I don’t think there was one in our gang that didn’t smoke.’¹¹¹ Susan described her adolescent self as ‘rebellious.’ She frequently spent all night out with her friends, taking part in petty stealing, behaviour which she saw as a response to being overly restricted: ‘It was a case of my brother can stay up all hours, but

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

you were a girl. You know, that's what you got, you're a girl, you've got to be in.'¹¹² Such differential treatment of girls within families – more specifically, the expectation that they assume greater domestic responsibility and surveillance from parents – has been a common theme throughout this study. Felicity also recalls feeling a significant degree of responsibility as the eldest daughter: 'As the eldest I always felt this slight degree of responsibility for my younger brothers and sisters.'¹¹³ Despite the continuation of such expectations of daughters' home-based responsibilities, there was a greater degree of adolescent liberty expressed amongst this generation. In 1969, under the Family Reform Act, the age of majority was reduced from twenty-one to eighteen.¹¹⁴ This re-drawing of the official age at which a person became 'adult' had implications for intergenerational relations between parents and offspring. Elizabeth Roberts notes the 'growing independence amongst the young,' whereby adolescents became more questioning of parental authority and were able to act more independently of family ties.¹¹⁵ Thus far in this study, parental authority has been strongly present in the lives of young women in the post-war period. In this chapter, parental protection of teenage daughters and influence over educational and employment trajectories is still apparent, but less pronounced.

Susan and Kathryn, like working-class girls before them, went into employment as soon as they left school in 1976, the school leaving age having been raised to sixteen in 1972. Both worked as shop assistants and continued to live at home with their parents. Carolyn left her grammar school at sixteen and trained as a typist. Both Carolyn and Felicity spent periods of time living independently from parents as young adults: Carolyn lived with girlfriends whilst working in retail and Felicity lived in a shared house as a university student. Felicity provides the first in-depth testimony of life as a university student. She describes having 'tremendous freedom' at university and unlike the working-class interviewees, experienced her young adulthood as a time when expectations of employment were put aside in favour of learning for personal reward: 'You chose a subject that you enjoyed at school and that you wanted to do purely for pleasure.'¹¹⁶ Reflecting on her time in higher education, Felicity emphasizes the social aspect of the experience, living with other students and making friends: 'I mean, I think probably the

¹¹² MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹¹³ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹¹⁴ Carol Dyhouse, 'Education,' in Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 119-133, p. 127.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, *Women and Families*, pp. 45-49.

¹¹⁶ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

main thing that happened at university was that I developed some very close friends [...] I remember these long conversations going on into the night.¹¹⁷

III.ii Pre-Marital Sexual Relations and Pregnancy

In 1968, official guidance for schools made the teaching of human reproduction an explicit aim and for the first time included reference to contraception.¹¹⁸ There seems to be more evidence of schools providing basic sex education amongst this cohort, although elementary and ambiguous in content: 'I remember watching a video but it was never explained to you. Things were just shown to you and you were expected to know exactly what was happening.'¹¹⁹ Christine Farrell's survey of sex education in the 1970s found that most secondary schools provided information on reproduction, but less than half of those she surveyed mentioned birth control.¹²⁰ In keeping with previous generations, parents were not recalled as a source of advice or information about sex. When Kathryn started menstruating in the early 1970s and went to her mother for guidance she was told to make sure she hid her sanitary wear from her father: 'I don't think my dad ever knew that anybody had a period because it was hidden, totally, so I don't think I ever discussed it at all with my mother.'¹²¹ Felicity also remembers having to keep concerns about puberty and feelings for boys hidden from her parents: 'I feel very much through my own teenage years and subsequently that I kept quite a lot to myself and suffered often as a result.'¹²² Most interviewees mention the pill, but for those who became sexually active whilst still living at home (Susan and Kathryn) parental authority exercised constraint over their capacity to acquire it and levels of ignorance surrounding contraception and reproduction persisted:

Well, I can remember asking my mum to go on the pill when I was sixteen and she wouldn't, you know, them days.¹²³

I think in those days you definitely didn't know about transmitted diseases, like you do today and the worries around using contraception and making sure people use contraception. I had no idea of any of those things. I remember girls

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ 'It was not until 1968 that official guidance for the first time explicitly stated that children should be taught about human reproduction.' Angela Davis, 'Oh no, nothing, we didn't learn anything', p. 671.

¹¹⁹ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹²⁰ Christine Farrell (1978) *My Mother Said: The Way Young People Learn About Sex and Birth Control*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 140.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹²³ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

in school talking about going on the pill and I probably thought to myself: 'If I just did this once, then I wouldn't have to do it again,' honestly, can you believe that?¹²⁴

There appears to be greater evidence of girls and young women discussing sexual relations and contraceptive options during this period, as the quote above from Kathryn indicates. As an undergraduate in the mid-1970s, Felicity remembers the impact of the pill on her female peers: 'I mean when I was sexually active, I suppose it was the heyday of the pill and everybody went on the pill.'¹²⁵ Felicity's autonomy appears greater than Susan and Kathryn, due to her middle-class background as a student living away from her parents. The lowering of the age of majority to eighteen in 1969 meant that universities in the 1970s were not – as they had been in the past – expected to act in loco parentis and monitor the sexual morality of students. The student press in the late 1960s and 1970s became very vocal about the importance of providing students with birth control advice.¹²⁶ Despite the increasing availability of contraceptive information at universities, Carol Dyhouse has drawn attention to evidence from studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s which suggests that significant numbers of students were sexually active without using any form of contraception and that unplanned pregnancies and abortions were high amongst the student population.¹²⁷ Felicity accidentally became pregnant at the age of twenty-one in the third year of a four-year course. She does not disclose details about her relationship, or whether this was her first sexual relationship, but the pregnancy was not the result of a casual encounter. Kathryn and Susan both became pregnant at the age of seventeen to boyfriends with whom they had shared their first sexual experiences. Neither had been using contraception. Susan had tried condoms but 'didn't like them,' and practiced withdrawal with her boyfriend. Such experiences question the assumption that women in the era of the pill straightforwardly adopted this

¹²⁴ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹²⁵ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹²⁶ Dyhouse, *Students*, p. 106.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

new method of birth control.¹²⁸ As historians have recently argued ‘withdrawal remained the mainstay of family limitation practices long into the twentieth century.’¹²⁹

Kathryn and Susan had to disclose their pregnancies to their parents whilst still living at home. The prospect of informing parents was a frightening one, as had been the case for past generations. Kathryn recalls how her father cried when he heard the news and that her parents ‘were absolutely devastated, a family just torn apart.’¹³⁰ The expectation of the shot-gun wedding as a means of hiding pre-marital pregnancy was upheld by the comments of a neighbour: ‘I’d told a friend and they probably told somebody else and being such a close community and everything somebody actually asked my mother, ‘did she have a hat for my wedding?’”¹³¹ Susan and Kathryn’s parents did not insist on adoption, reflecting its decline as a solution to pre-marital pregnancy in the 1970s, but abortion was suggested. However, both interviewees objected to abortion and Susan was defiant in her decision to keep her child under parental and medical pressure: “They put pressure on me to have a termination, me mum did and the doctor – no – it was: ‘I want this baby,’ and I had him.”¹³² Susan rejected the social expectation that she should marry the father of her child, who she discovered was unfaithful: “I had Paul when I was seventeen – I mean in them days, you were supposed to marry the dad and I thought, ‘you can go and swan-off.’”¹³³ Living away from home, Felicity was not faced with the immediate task of telling her parents she was pregnant, but their reaction when she did was supportive ‘My parents, although I think they were shocked, in some respects they were supportive.’¹³⁴ Felicity recalls the strong degree of independent decision-making she possessed as a young woman, which along with the testimonies of Kathryn and Susan suggest a decline in deference towards parents and other authority figures amongst this cohort when compared to earlier generations: ‘Certainly when I became pregnant with Sarah there was absolutely no question of anybody telling me what

¹²⁸ ‘Apparently high levels of Pill use, such as are indicated by the finding that by 1989 over 75 per cent of all women born between 1945 and 1959 had used the Pill at some time or other, can be misleading: many of these women may also have used other methods, and been on the Pill for varying periods of time. Even after the 1960s, not only were condoms still widely used, but the extent of the use of withdrawal continued to surprise investigators in the 1970s, and other new technologies, notably vasectomy, also made significant gains.’ Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960*, p. 242.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³⁰ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

I should do.’¹³⁵ Like Kathryn and Susan, Felicity also rejected the availability of legal abortion, expressing assurance that she would keep her baby: ‘It never even occurred to me to even think along the lines of having an abortion or considering any other alternatives.’¹³⁶

Carolyn became pregnant in her late twenties as a consequence of cohabitation. Carolyn and the father of her child both met at work as sales assistants; he was already married but had separated from his wife. They began living together in a shared house with other unmarried people. Carolyn describes this ‘communal living’ arrangement as distinctive of her generation and the social changes of the ‘permissive’ era: ‘1970s, I suppose – perhaps a throw back from the 1960s!’¹³⁷ However, despite being part of a growing trend amongst the young and whilst aware of the long-term existence of cohabitation, Carolyn recalls the stigma associated with unmarried couples openly living together in the 1970s:

It was quite a difficult decision in some ways. People had lived together for years, you know, people have always lived together. But in the main, when people lived together they pretend to be married, at that time – I mean we’re talking 1974/1975 – at that time, there were many people who were living together, but they just pretended to be married, and we didn’t.¹³⁸

Carolyn’s defiance at the convention of marriage went further when she rejected her partner’s suggestion that they marry, divorce being readily available to him in the mid-1970s: ‘He’d talked about it and he was always the one who wanted to get married and I couldn’t. I remember saying, well, he wasn’t free to do so anyway and I couldn’t really see the point. It didn’t seem relevant.’¹³⁹ Carolyn and her partner had joint ownership of their house; such egalitarian practice between married couples was becoming more common during this decade, enabling women to enter property ownership.¹⁴⁰ Carolyn’s cohabiting relationship in many ways mirrored a companionate model of marriage, but the limits of remaining outside a formalized union were reached when she became

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ ‘One way that modern wives have managed to gain access to property, though, has been through the device of joint ownership of the matrimonial home. This is an increasingly popular conveyancing practice which gives a lot of women a claim to property they could possibly not afford if they were single because of women’s depressed level of earnings. Moreover on an ideological level it is a practice that is seen to reflect the modern marriage as a partnership of equal but different contributors.’ Smart, *The Ties That Bind*, p. 104.

pregnant: “I can remember saying to him, you know, ‘perhaps we ought to get married?’ The reason why I said that was because my mother was so distressed.”¹⁴¹ The influence of parental disapproval is therefore re-affirmed in the case of Carolyn, despite her economic independence. She ended her relationship on discovering infidelity; when her partner suggested she might need his ‘help’ she recalls retorting: ‘help like yours I do not need.’¹⁴² Susan’s defiant rejection of marriage is also indicative of a pronounced shift amongst interviewees in the 1970s in terms of the constrictions surrounding motherhood outside of marriage which had been so difficult to overcome for interviewees well into the 1960s: ‘You were supposed to marry the dad – ohh – goodnight! If I’d had ten kids with him I wouldn’t have married him.’¹⁴³ Susan objected to being referred to as a married woman in a maternity ward, something which sharply contrasts with the acceptance of such practice in previous decades: “I didn’t like being called ‘Mrs’ Hill in the hospital, I used to say, ‘you don’t call me that, I’m Miss.’”¹⁴⁴ Two small-scale surveys in the late 1970s, which both used interviews with thirty-six unmarried mothers in the UK found that women were rejecting pressures to marry on discovering they were pregnant.¹⁴⁵

III.iii Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

There is a noticeable absence of reference to Mother and Baby Homes amongst this cohort, both in terms of direct experience and through association with the condition of never-married motherhood in communities. A survey published in 1975 entitled *Seven Mother and Baby Homes*, provides an interesting follow-up to Jill Nicholson’s survey of homes in the 1960s, discussed in Chapter Four. The findings of the 1975 survey offer insights into the changed social conditions surrounding motherhood outside of marriage in this era as well as new aspects. The authors conducted questionnaires and interviews with staff and residents in seven Mother and Baby Homes in the mid-1970s.

¹⁴¹ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Sally Macintyre, *Single and Pregnant* (London, 1977); Robert Page, *Stigma: Concepts in Social Policy Two* (London, 1984).

Whereas in 1968 there were 172 Mother and Baby Homes in England, by 1976 there were just forty-nine homes.¹⁴⁶ By the mid-1970s, most of the Church of England homes had closed. Out of the forty-nine remaining homes, thirty-nine were run by religious bodies and ten by local authorities.¹⁴⁷ The majority of the homes in the 1970s were in the South East and North of England.¹⁴⁸ This significant decline over a relatively short number of years, is suggestive of a profound shift in social values which made the provision of emergency shelter for unmarried mothers less pressing. It also indicates how secularization was affecting the church's role in voluntary assistance. Alongside these changes, the authors highlight how the homes in the mid-1970s had broadened the 'category' of person granted admission. Although the majority of residents were still young, women between the ages of 16-25 living with parents, 'battered women,' and 'homeless women' who were often married, were also resident. Homes in the 1960s were specifically set-up to grant pre and post-confinement care to unmarried mothers, and had strict admittance policies, but the homes in the 1970s were broadening their remit, perhaps reflecting the absorption of more homogenized and less morally structured notions of single women with dependent children prompted by the anti-poverty lobby.

The survey makes some interesting observations in relation to the issue of stigma. Amongst young women who were still living with parents, entrance into the homes did not necessarily signal rejection by parents. Instead, it could reflect a wish to access temporary refuge to avoid 'respectable' reputations being tarnished: "These girls often came from 'respectable' backgrounds and their desire to keep their pregnancy a secret from neighbours or school fellows did not necessarily indicate lack of family support."¹⁴⁹ The majority of residents intended to keep their babies and return to live with their parents after birth, unlike the majority of women in Nicholson's survey who had their children adopted.¹⁵⁰ These findings point to the continued salience of class-based respectability and its proximity to female behaviour, but it also demonstrates a greater willingness on the part of parents to have daughters return to them *with* their babies. The homes in the 1970s therefore appear to have had a different function from their predecessors; instead of facilitating adoption, they provided families with temporary relief from community condemnation. The most severe instances of stigma were

¹⁴⁶ Desmond Picard and Pat Cawson, *Seven Mother and Baby Homes* (London: Social Research Branch, Department of Health and Social Security, 1978), p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

amongst Indian and Pakistani immigrants, whose families regarded their pregnancies as shameful and damaging to their prospects of future marriage, as well as white women who had relationships with Afro-Caribbean men and had been rejected by their families.¹⁵¹ These observations clearly indicate the impact of immigration and raise issues of ethnic difference, which will be explored more in Chapter Six. The authors of the survey refer to West Indian parents' creation of the 'grandmother family' as a solution to the pre-marital pregnancies of their daughters.¹⁵² However, such three-generational family forms have been a consistent feature of family solutions to unmarried motherhood amongst white communities in this study, and therefore the 'grandmother family' is rather exoticised by the authors of the survey.

Compared to homes in the 1960s which had a punitive and incarcerating approach towards unmarried mothers, the homes in the 1970s appeared to provide safe, equipped accommodation, but expected residents to provide their own food and be 'self-sufficient.' Religious ritual was not reported by the survey. Where the homes did act in an advisory capacity they helped mothers to find independent accommodation if they did not wish to return to live with parents. A quarter of the residents of the homes surveyed, planned to set-up their own homes with their children and had been put in contact with local authorities' homeless families departments.¹⁵³ Some of the homes had made provision for 'sheltered flatlets' as a longer-term form of housing for mothers. Such evidence of the changing nature of and reduction in homes for never-married mothers during the 1970s marks a significant shift in the social status of lone mothers and the greater availability of social housing.

There was a strong sense of continuity between our 1970s cohort and previous generations in the importance of parents providing a home for unmarried daughters and their children. Half of all unmarried mothers claiming FIS, according to research carried out by the Department of Health and Social Security in 1979, lived with their parents.¹⁵⁴ As evidence from previous chapters suggests, such multi-generational housing arrangements were often welcomed as they regularly enabled unmarried mothers to enter employment, with grandmothers providing necessary childcare. Kathryn and Susan remained in their parents' homes and re-entered employment not long after having their

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

¹⁵² Ibid., pp. 39-40.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁵⁴ Jill Nixon, *Fatherless Families on FIS*, DHSS Research Report, No. 4, (1979), cited in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 260.

children, therefore their cohabitation in the family home enabled them to earn, as Susan said: 'Me mum helped.'¹⁵⁵

Felicity and Carolyn lived independently from their parents as unmarried mothers. Felicity was allocated council housing in Birmingham in the late 1970s and describes living in relatively poor housing conditions at a time when sub-standard housing conditions were receding: 'It was one of the few remaining houses in the road that still had a bath in the kitchen, with planks of wood over it that you used to use as your sort of work surface and an outside loo.'¹⁵⁶ Later on, Felicity decided to live in shared housing with another single parent: 'An opportunity came up to live with another single parent and her child. I didn't actually know the person very well.'¹⁵⁷ Such an experience attests further to the social consequences of identification as a 'single parent' in the 1970s and an emerging solidarity between lone mothers in terms of managing material and social needs, shown here in terms of a shared housing arrangement. Carolyn remained in the house she had jointly owned whilst cohabiting with the father of her child: 'At the time we parted company, the house was in joint names. He signed-over the house to me and I agreed that I would not ask him for maintenance.'¹⁵⁸ Carolyn's experience reflects the emergence of the 'clean-break' settlement in the 1970s, whereby on divorce, maintenance was foregone in preference for a once and for all settlement of finance and property amongst some property owning couples.¹⁵⁹ Despite not having been formally married, Carolyn's negotiation of such an arrangement with her ex-partner makes her case much more like that of a married woman, and quite distinct from the other unmarried mothers in this cohort. She entered 'never-married' motherhood as a property owner, with an established job and without recourse to turn to the father of her child for income, which gave her an unusual degree of agency.

Maternal Economy

As was the case with separated or divorced mothers, unmarried mothers drew more of their income from state benefits in the 1970s. Of particular importance for unmarried mothers was the introduction of Child Benefit and the eventual One-parent Benefit in the mid-1970s, which replaced Family Allowances. Child Benefit was available to first-time mothers and One-parent Benefit gave lone-parents a higher rate of benefit in

¹⁵⁵ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁵⁶ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

¹⁵⁹ Smart, *The Ties That Bind*, pp. 114-115.

recognition of their greater need. However, amongst our four interviewees, employment was the main generator of income. Only Felicity gathered an income primarily from benefits when her child was an infant. Carolyn expressed a negative attitude towards claiming state assistance. Carolyn's use of the metaphor 'cap in hand,' signifies a generational distinction between herself and the younger interviewees and her possession of capital assets underlies her perception of herself as self-sustaining and a class apart from benefit claimants: "I've always done – stood on my own two feet – I haven't been in a situation of having to go 'cap in hand.'"¹⁶⁰ Susan and Kathryn both continued in the jobs they had begun after leaving school, working in retail as young mothers. By combining low paid work with motherhood, their life stories were in keeping with many of the working-class women (including their own mothers) with whom they had grown-up in the 1960s. The interviewer's assumption that maternity and employment would have been incompatible in the 1970s is quickly dispelled by Kathryn:

Interviewer: How were you managing for money, coz you weren't working were you?

Kathryn: Oh yeah, I'd gone back to work in Lewis' and Dominique was in the nursery [...] She went in there when she was eight months old so I could go back to work.¹⁶¹

Felicity was in her last year at university when she drew state benefits to support herself and her child, returning to complete her degree after a year out. She expressed a distinct sense of entitlement to state support as a 'single mother,' which legitimated her removal from wage earning similar to some of the divorcees above:

It didn't occur to me that I could work, sort of properly, doing a 9-5 job or something. I don't really know why it didn't occur to me that I couldn't work, but I just thought: 'I've got a young child, I'm a single parent.'¹⁶²

Felicity eventually entered paid work as a cleaner to supplement her SB and after finishing her degree began some voluntary work, which led her to become a librarian and work full-time. Like most of the separated or divorced mothers in Section II, her relationship with state benefits was periodic.

¹⁶⁰ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

¹⁶¹ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁶² MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

Only Felicity recalls receiving limited maintenance from the father of her child. Carolyn actively rejected receiving maintenance from her ex-partner, associating this with a similar negative dependency as she had state assistance: 'I agreed that I would not ask him for maintenance and I'm not a great one for [pause] I don't really see that you should be a millstone around somebody's neck.'¹⁶³ When challenged about this decision by the interviewer, Carolyn's response reveals an interesting attitude towards becoming an unmarried mother in an era of legal abortion:

Interviewer: Even though it's his child?

Carolyn: Yes. But it was my decision to go ahead with Henry. You know, I could possibly have made the decision to bring that to a halt very early on and not be in that position. I somehow feel that's my responsibility [...] That's sort of me looking after my own, if you see what I mean.¹⁶⁴

Such a view suggests that in an era of legalized and effective birth control methods, women may well have felt greater individual responsibility for an unplanned pregnancy, which in this instance, heightened Carolyn's reluctance to ask for economic support from an individual man. This point has been raised by Kate Fisher in relation to the arrival of the pill: 'Some women complained that, by expecting them to be on the Pill, or to get an abortion in the case of an accident, men burdened their female partners with sole responsibility for preventing pregnancy.'¹⁶⁵

Felicity mentions the relative poverty of living on SB in terms of not being able to take part in the social activities and consumption open to people in her student peer group: 'I was living on SB (as it was called) and it was a struggle, I couldn't do everything that my friends were doing.'¹⁶⁶ Susan describes operating a sacrificial maternal economy as a lone mother to protect her children from the poverty she remembers living through as an illegitimate child in the 1950s. Her efforts to buffer her children from deprivation seem to be in part a response to demands for consumption arising from a youth market in the 1970s:

¹⁶³ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain*, p. 241.

¹⁶⁶ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

I've struggled all these years to give them the best I can. They've always got what they wanted, regardless of whether I've had to get it to death – go without myself – they've wanted it, I've got 'em it.¹⁶⁷

Descriptions of poverty were a more pronounced aspect of divorced lone motherhood in this chapter, a finding which could be explained by the shorter periods of lone motherhood which the never-married interviewees lived through (Susan and Kathryn shortly married after becoming lone mothers). However, this difference is also the consequence of Kathryn and Susan living with parents, an arrangement which buffered them against housing costs and enabled an inter-generational sharing of the costs associated with raising children.

A national study in the 1970s found unmarried mothers were still particularly reliant on their own mothers for childcare: 51 per cent depended on grandmothers and a third of all lone mothers utilized local authority provision for their childcare needs.¹⁶⁸ Susan and Kathryn's mothers helped with childcare, but more frequent mention of formal provision is made amongst this cohort, a likely reflection of the increased availability of public nurseries in some regions in the first-half of the 1970s.¹⁶⁹ Vicky Randall has discussed how the Finer Committee was a significant party in the development of an 'under fives lobby' during the 1960s and 1970s, recommending the expansion of child day care services based on the written requests of lone mothers.¹⁷⁰ Felicity affirms the continued importance of informal sources of childcare support while she was a university student:

My daughter was born into a world of students and had a very different babyhood as a result. She had endless babysitters, everybody queing-up to want to babysit for this little girl [...] I found myself with a job in a library and one of my friends kindly offered to child-mind Sarah (she had two daughters of her own Sarah got on with) and basically from there I began to work full-time.¹⁷¹

Social Membership and Identity

As was the case with divorced lone mothers in Section II, references to the stigma or shame of motherhood outside of marriage were noticeably reduced amongst this generation of unmarried mothers, compared to previous cohorts. Felicity's story offers a

¹⁶⁷ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁶⁸ Hilary Land, 'Lone Mothers, Employment and Childcare,' in Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, pp. 241-275, p. 260.

¹⁶⁹ Randall, *The Politics of Child Daycare in Britain*, p. 74.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁷¹ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

contrast to Lesley Swire in the 1960s (Chapter Five), who was expelled from teacher training college when she became pregnant. Felicity remembers the apprehension she felt about telling her university tutor she was pregnant, but his response was one which demonstrates a shift in the social attitudes towards unmarried mothers in the 1970s:

I remember going to see my tutor at university and saying, 'I've got something to tell you, I'm going to have a baby.' And I was so surprised, so pleased really, when he just said, 'Congratulations!' I thought: 'Wow.' You know, I thought he was going to come down with this sort of dreadful hammer of judgment and say, 'Oh you won't be able to finish your course, you won't be able to do this.' And I was just amazed when he said, 'Well, that's fine, you can take a year out.'¹⁷²

Carol Dyhouse has outlined the controversy amongst university authorities in response to the permissive climate of the 1960s and 1970s and the moral consequences of co-residential colleges; such concerns "often focused around the 'problem' of the pregnant woman student."¹⁷³ However, by the end of the 1970s, co-residence had become normalized and testimonies such as Felicity's attest to a shift during this decade in the accommodation of student mothers' needs and a move away from the association of the pregnant student as a 'problem' case. Indeed, Felicity reflects on her own historical passage into a new era of social values towards parenthood outside of marriage, by way of recalling her father's distinctly different experience in the 1950s: 'When his girlfriend became pregnant he was told by his parents that he mustn't see her again and she was whisked-off into the countryside to have the baby.'¹⁷⁴ Felicity's inter-generational observation points again to a decline in parental authority during the 1970s, which allowed young women like herself to become self-determining in their decisions to become parents outside of marriage. When asked about stigma in her interview, Kathryn also indicates how important her parents' attitudes were to the social acceptance of her situation and the role that extended family members played in reducing moral panic:

It wasn't the end of the world. I had aunties and uncles who'd said to my parents: 'It's not the end of the world' and 'she won't be the first and she certainly won't be the last.' You know, so I think, yeah, the stigma had gone.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁴ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹⁷⁵ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

In previous decades the outrage expressed by parents was often informed and reinforced by the attitudes of neighbours and extended family members. Nevertheless, despite a greater degree of acceptance towards unmarried motherhood, Kathryn attests to the persistence of a notion of questionable ‘respectability’ within her family’s working-class community:

Well [stigma] had gone, but you could still feel people’s eyes peering on you. You know, when you went down the street, sort of, and I think that’s what my parents were bothered about, was people looking at you and people talking about it.¹⁷⁶

Felicity’s membership of a largely middle-class, student community elicited a different response, whereby despite feeling ‘unusual’ as a student mother – ‘It was certainly an unusual thing, there, to have a student with a child. I remember pushing her buggy around the campus and it was a very, very unusual sight,’ – Felicity was met with overwhelming acceptance and support: ‘I was actually surrounded by support and a non-judgmental atmosphere.’¹⁷⁷

The category ‘unmarried mother’ is not used by any of the interviewees in this chapter who became pregnant outside of marriage, signifying a break from the former cohort who identified with the term in the 1960s. Instead, the term ‘single parent’ is used in most cases to positively identify as a lone mother, like the divorcees in Section II. Felicity’s use of this category as a means of self-description underlines her legitimacy as an SB claimant: “I just thought: ‘I’ve got a young child, I’m a single parent.’”¹⁷⁸ Susan adopts the term as a means of capturing her experience of moving in and out of lone motherhood as a single woman and then a divorcee between the 1970s and 1990s: ‘I’ve been near enough a single parent all my life.’¹⁷⁹ Carolyn identified ambivalently as a ‘single parent,’ but then redressed her ambivalence by referencing the significance of her independence as a lone mother: ‘I was a single parent before I met my husband and I’m a single parent again. It’s not a pleasing thought, but at the same time, at least I’m in control.’¹⁸⁰ Carolyn’s ambivalence rested on her association of state dependency (‘to go cap in hand’) with single motherhood, revealing how notions of class-bound respectability persisted, but her affirmation of the term signals an endorsement of the gendered idea of female self-determination. Felicity also positively recalled the autonomy

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁸⁰ MMB, C900/01104, Carolyn Maynard.

she felt as a single parent, despite material hardship: 'I felt quite liberated from what had become quite a constricting relationship and being just myself and my daughter, we seemed to have a lot of fun. In another sense it was hard, financially and economically.'¹⁸¹ Such references to the rewards of mothering independent of male involvement may well indicate the influence of the feminist movement within the life stories of Carolyn and Felicity, although this is not mentioned explicitly during interview.

III.iv Cohabitation and Marriage

All four interviewees went on to have further relationships, some cohabiting, others marrying. For three of the interviewees this meant re-entering lone motherhood after a second relationship ended. Carolyn married after two years of being a lone mother and then divorced in the 1980s having had one other child during marriage. Kathryn married the father of her first child shortly after becoming a lone mother and then subsequently divorced after having a further two children. Susan married after a short period as a lone mother and then became divorced in the early 1980s, having one other child during this marriage and she later went on to have more children outside of marriage. The increase amongst this sample of multiple phases of lone motherhood across the life course reflects the increase in re-marriage rates from the 1970s onwards and the increase in cohabitation. The testimonies of Carolyn, Kathryn and Susan will therefore contribute to the proceeding chapter.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter represents a break with previous decades. Historiography of the 1960s and 1970s has tended to present the gains of the sexual revolution for women in terms of new freedoms to limit fertility and prevent unplanned motherhood, as is evident in the work of Hera Cook and Callum Brown.¹⁸² The point in relation to our subject is that in the 1970s women gained greater capacity to *keep* their illegitimate children and mother outside of marriage, as a result of decreased social sanctions, legislative change and greater formal provision. We have seen how women themselves took-up a language of entitlement in response to anti-poverty and feminist campaigning, mobilizing the category of 'single parent' and 'one-parent family' to enact new rights. When Lorraine

¹⁸¹ MMB, C900/18574, Felicity Rock.

¹⁸² Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*; Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*.

Fox Harding refers to the 1970s as the 'single parent (divorced) family decade'¹⁸³ this can be seen as not only a demographic statement, but a statement of social legitimacy, created by the kind of life stories of the period discussed here, whereby women adopted a new language of social inclusion as lone mothers. The divorced mother was central to this process of enabling other women in proceeding decades to claim classification as 'single mothers' through never-married motherhood and in particular, cohabitation. Such a shift illustrates Mike Savage's argument about the impact of the post-war social sciences on people's sense of identity in the late twentieth century: "The very success of the post-war social sciences has itself helped to generate a proliferation of classificatory devices which now change the very meaning of social identities and relationships."¹⁸⁴ After decades of exclusion from the post-war welfare settlement, lone mothers in the 1970s perceived themselves in relationship to 'the social' as entitled beneficiaries. As Sue Long said: 'Basically, yeah, the welfare state is a good thing.'¹⁸⁵ The opening-up of council housing to lone mother families meant non-reliance on 'hidden' refuges in the guise of Mother and Baby Homes. The period saw 'universal' family allowances made truly universal by inclusion of (lone) mothers with one child. Associations between poor relief and post-1945 assistance were far less pronounced amongst this cohort than earlier generations. References to social workers within testimonies of the 1970s reflected a sense of welfare agencies enabling mothers' independent existence from marriage, particularly in response to violence. The voluntary sector still featured as an important resource for lone mothers, but in a distinctively different way than the 1950s and 1960s. Mother and Baby Homes took in 'residents' as opposed to 'inmates' and assisted women transitioning into independent housing and those returning to families *with* their babies, and they existed alongside new refuges for women suffering domestic violence.

Despite these gains, the poverty accompanying lone motherhood amongst this generation was consistent with earlier decades. Reflecting on the rise in divorce since the 1970s and the loss of the moral and political power of marriage to order sexual and familial behaviour in the last decades of the twentieth century, Stephanie Coontz has claimed that 'During the 1970s and 1980s women won legal autonomy and made huge strides toward economic self-sufficiency.'¹⁸⁶ Although women's increased economic and legal agency is certainly a strong feature of these decades, the testimonies of lone

¹⁸³ Fox Harding, *Family, State and Social Policy*, p. 64.

¹⁸⁴ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 249.

¹⁸⁵ MMB, C900/18603, Sue Long.

¹⁸⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, 2005), p. 308.

mothers in this chapter expose inter-generational continuity in terms of sacrificial maternal economy and poverty management, arising from the predicament of mothering and sole wage-earning in an economy patterned by gendered inequalities, which made them far from economically 'self-sufficient.' Margaret Wynn's observation about the crucial difference between the mother with pre-school children and the mother whose children had entered the 'social service' of state education, continued to present itself as one distinction amongst lone mothers in this chapter. Assistance from mothers, other family members, friends and neighbours was still a strong feature of lone-parenting during this decade, despite the greater role of the formal 'safety-net.' Generational differences between lone mothers could affect levels of support from kin, with divorcees in this cohort sometimes lacking input from family, compared with younger mothers who still frequently relied on three-generational household arrangements to manage childcare and employment.

Interviewees did not directly refer to the influence of the WLM in their testimonies, although this silence may be the result of disassociation from a movement, which at the end of the twentieth-century had become broadly delegitimised.¹⁸⁷ However, memories of self-determination beyond the traditional boundaries of marriage, claims to 'independence' and rights-based language amongst this cohort could suggest the influence of feminist ideas. Marcus Collins argues the WLM not only offered a destabilising critique of the companionate marriage, but also advanced a 'separatist' ideology in the spirit of late-modern individualism.¹⁸⁸ It is through the life histories of the final decade in our study, that the concept of individualism in relation to partnership and family formation will be explored.

¹⁸⁷ See Susan Faludi for a discussion of the 'backlash' against the WLM in the late-twentieth century: Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London, 1992).

¹⁸⁸ Collins, *Modern Love*, p. 187.

Chapter 6

The Limits and Resilience of Entitlement: the 1980s

They are casting their problems on society and who is 'Society'? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.¹

British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, 1987

I. Introduction

The 1980s saw rising economic inequalities with the gap between rich and poor at its highest since the Second World War: 2.4 million people were living below the poverty line and 7 million people were living on the poverty line in 1985.² The unemployment rate stood at three million in 1982. Trends in the labour market since the 1970s had intensified divisions between those in secure, well-paid employment and those either out of work or in low paid employment. Women occupied centre stage in terms of the growing divide: 'We have seen that the typical low paid worker is female. In general women outnumber men in the low paid sector by more than 5 to 1.'³ Much of the increase in women's employment in the final decades of the twentieth-century was in part-time work, commonly suspended for a period whilst raising young children.⁴ The male-breadwinner model, which although a historical unreality for many working-class couples, was considered normative across our period so far, but in the 1980s we see the emergence of the dual-earner household or 'adult-worker model family' as increasingly common, and by the end of the century the prescriptive model for household organization.⁵ The life histories in this chapter are thus set against a changed political economy, whereby the slow down of national growth and increase in female employment was accompanied by rhetoric and policy that prioritized a reduction in public expenditure. Margaret Thatcher's renowned statement above made clear the death of 'the social' and the precedence of the individual in relation to welfare. However, as this

¹ Interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Women's Own*, 31st October, 1987, cited in Andy McSmith *No Such Thing as Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London, 2010), p. 297.

² Rodney Lowe, 'Postwar Welfare' in Johnson, *Twentieth Century Britain*, pp. 356-373, pp. 363-4.

³ Littler & Salaman, *Class at Work*, p. 21

⁴ Lonsdale, 'Patterns of Paid Work.'

⁵ Jane Lewis 'Decline of the Male Breadwinner Model: Implications for Work and Care', *Social Politics* (Summer 2001), pp. 152-169.

chapter will argue, the testimonies of lone mothers in the 1980s demonstrate the resilience of social rights only recently taken-up by lone mothers in the 1970s despite the shrinking of state welfare, supporting Lynn Hollen Lees' claim that: 'Structures of the post-1945 welfare state have proved remarkably stable and politically popular even under the recent rule of Margaret Thatcher.'⁶

By the early 1980s, lone mothers had taken up entitlement to access council housing and far outnumbered two-parent families as local authority tenants.⁷ By the mid-1980s, half of all families with children claiming SB were one-parent families.⁸ Not long after this take-up of welfare provision, the single mother became central to government denouncements of 'welfare dependency' in the late 1980s. In 1988 Margaret Thatcher claimed she was keen to act on the 'growing problem in the welfare state of young single girls who deliberately become pregnant in order to jump a housing queue and gain welfare benefits.'⁹ Ten years after the Housing and Homeless Persons Act (1977) had given lone mothers priority status in being housed by their local authorities, Margaret Thatcher's statement de-legitimised this policy by claiming women were exploiting it. The accusation that single mothers were calculating profiteers was one that we saw voiced by the Poor Law Commission in the nineteenth century (Chapter 1): 'To the woman, a single illegitimate child is seldom any expense, and two or three are a positive source of profit.'¹⁰ Its reappearance in the late twentieth century against a backdrop of state welfare retrenchment concentrated on teenage single mothers who were seen to transgress normal standards of female development, becoming householders as mothers via state provision rather than by the acceptable routes of employment or marriage:

The initial impetus for the attack on single mothers in the housing context centred on the under -18s. Peter Lilley's speech to the Conservative Party conference in 1992, which referred to single mothers jumping the waiting list ('I have a little list...'), was an attack on 16 - and under 17 - year-olds.¹¹

⁶ Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 344.

⁷ 'Public sector housing is a service on which lone mothers are heavily dependent. In 1983, 62 per cent of lone mothers were local authority tenants compared to 26 per cent of two-parent families.' Joshi, 'Obstacles and Opportunities for Lone-parents', p. 129.

⁸ 'By 1986 nearly half of all families with children claiming Supplementary Benefits were headed by single parents.' David Vincent, *Poor Citizens: The State and the Poor in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1991), p. 172.

⁹ Margaret Thatcher in *The Times*, 26th October, 1988, cited in Carol Sexty, *Women Losing Out: Access to Housing in Britain Today* (London, 1990), p. 36.

¹⁰ Cited in Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 141.

¹¹ David Cowan, *Homelessness: The (In-) Appropriate Applicant* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 69.

Rhetoric about teenage pregnancy at the end of the 1980s articulated a notion of historical precedence disproportionate to actual rates of teenage conception and births during the decade, which were in fact higher in the 1960s, although more ended in marriage in the earlier period:

A review of teenage motherhood in the 1960s and 1980s should make us wary of any suggestion that the former period represents a golden age when traditional values reigned and teenage pregnancy was in some sense less of a problem. Teenage birth rates were substantially higher in the 1960s than in the 1980s and the number of extra-maritally conceived births was also higher, albeit more ended in marriage.¹²

The 1980s actually saw less of a marked rise in single parenthood compared to the 1970s, but in both decades it was divorce which drove rates of lone motherhood, not births outside of marriage.¹³ By far the most important trend during both decades was the increasing ‘normality’ of divorce, a trend which was not confined to Britain, but widespread across most industrial countries.¹⁴ The numbers of births outside of marriage also increased during the 1980s, but the majority of these births were to adult couples cohabiting but not married.¹⁵ Teenage, never-married motherhood was therefore far from significant in terms of the growing presence of lone mothers in late-twentieth century society, but what was significant was the degree to which marriage was no longer a compulsory structural force in the organization of women’s sexual, reproductive and familial lives. With the legal capacity to exit marriages, women in the 1970s did so in much greater numbers than men – over 70 per cent of divorce petitions were filed by women in the late 1970s.¹⁶ The life histories in this chapter will explore women’s

¹² Peter Selman, ‘Teenage motherhood then and now: A comparison of the pattern and outcomes of teenage pregnancy in England and Wales in the 1960s & 1980s’ in Helen Jones and Jane Millar (eds.) (1996), *The Politics of the Family* (Ashgate, 1996), pp. 103-128, p. 124.

¹³ ‘The sharpest increase in single parenthood came in the 1970s rather than the 1980s; for example, while the increase between 1971 and 1981 was over 70 per cent from November 1979 to February 1986 the number grew by 20 per cent.’ Fox Harding, *Family, State and Social Policy*, p. 64.

¹⁴ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, p. 277.

¹⁵ ‘Cohabitations in the post-war period have tended to be short-lived and childless, but from 1980 children were increasingly born within these relationships [...] Of the 77 per cent who jointly registered their babies in 1994, 58 per cent lived at the same address.’ Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 73.

¹⁶ ‘In the quinquennium 1946-1950 just under half (45 per cent) of petitions filed were by women; this proportion rose virtually monotonically to a level of 73 per cent in 1977 (the only aberrant year being 1971 when the proportion fell from 64 per cent in 1970 to 60 per cent). Since the end of the 1970s the proportion of divorces legally initiated by wives has stayed fairly

orientation towards marriage and their motivations for exiting marriage and forming one-parent households.

Theories of late-modernity have prioritised the impact of individualism on private life and heterosexual relationships and emphasised ideational factors as opposed to economic ones in the process of the ‘individualization of the social.’¹⁷ Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argues the decline of traditional belief systems and conventions has given individual choice greater supremacy within relationships, making them more fragile in the process.¹⁸ Anthony Giddens claims heterosexual relationships have become more democratic and contingent because the individual is detached from traditional notions of obligation, captured by his term ‘pure relationship.’¹⁹ Marcus Collins’ suggests the companionate marriage ideal was brought to an end by the ‘separatist’ philosophy of feminism, which prioritized individualism. Through analysis of oral testimony, this chapter will challenge such theses about the importance of choice, individualism and separatism, and emphasise the economic and social implications of domestic and paid work in shaping the story of lone motherhood in this final decade.

II. Oral Histories from Unmarried and Divorced Mothers

The testimonies of unmarried and divorced mothers are analysed here collectively, rather than in separate sections, as was the case in preceding chapters. As we saw with interviewees who became lone mothers in the 1970s, the women in this chapter identified most frequently as ‘single mothers,’ despite their different routes into lone motherhood. Therefore their life histories are conflated to reflect such homogenized identification, although distinctions between the two routes into lone motherhood will be discussed.

The thirteen testimonies in this chapter are from women who became lone mothers due to pregnancy outside of marriage or divorce in the 1980s and early 1990s. They were born between 1943 and 1969. The majority of interviewees were adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s. Yvonne Davis refused to give her date of birth during interview in defiance of what she considered the ‘very ageist’ aspect of British culture at the turn of

constant at 71 to 73 per cent.’ B. Jane Elliot, ‘Demographic trends in domestic life, 1945-87’ in Clark, *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, p. 92.

¹⁷ Zsuzsa Ferge, ‘The Changed Welfare Paradigm: the Individualisation of the Social’ *Social Policy and Administration* 31, No. 1 (1997), pp. 20-44.

¹⁸ Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Reinventing the Family: In Search of New Lifestyles* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁹ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.

the twenty-first century.²⁰ Yvonne is one of three ethnic minority women in this chapter. The greater number of ethnic minority interviewees in this cohort reflects the increase of immigrant communities in the UK after the 1950s and the development of a multicultural society in the latter part of the century. These interviewees had parents who migrated to the UK in the mid-twentieth century; Yvonne and Malika Ahmed's parents migrated from the Caribbean, Farida Anderson's father migrated from Somalia and married her white mother in the 1950s. Their presence allows for consideration of ethnic-based differences in the experience of lone motherhood alongside class-based differences. Ten of the women in the sample are from working-class backgrounds and three from middle-class backgrounds. Geographically the interviewees resided as lone mothers across a range of locations, including: Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Oxford and Sheffield.

II. i Childhood and Young Adulthood

Descriptions of poverty in childhood were less prevalent in the testimonies of interviewees' growing-up between 1960 and 1970 in two-parent families, than among earlier generations. Notably, paternal unemployment within two-parent families is not mentioned. The general absence of descriptions of hardship in childhood amongst those interviewees in this cohort from two-parent families could be said to reflect the economic prosperity of the 'golden age' of full employment during the 1950s and 1960s, which would have been the backdrop to the interviewees parents' family formation and subsequent childhood living conditions. Nevertheless, as discussed, sociological studies in the 1960s revealed how families with large numbers of children were vulnerable to poverty. Kathryn Riley came from such a family, being one of six children, and recalls the cramped living conditions of the tenement block she lived in Liverpool, sharing a bed with two other siblings. The remaining interviewees grew up with one or two siblings, reflecting the general trend in reduction in family size since the 1930s. Poverty is, however, recalled by the five interviewees in this cohort who grew up in one-parent families. In keeping with the material struggles described by lone mothers in Chapters Four and Five, the interviewees who were the children of one-parent families in the 1960s and 1970s, recall both poverty in childhood as well as the strong presence of their

²⁰ Yvonne's refusal to provide her date of birth disrupts the standard expectations which the researcher brings to the analysis of an oral history interview. Despite making the allocation of the interview to a chronological timeframe difficult, there is enough reference to decades to place Yvonne's experience of divorce within the 1980s.

mothers who managed material hardship. Wendy Turner and Karen Chazen's parents' divorced when they were children. Malika, Susan McGrath and Samantha Walker were all illegitimate and never knew their fathers. Samantha remembers the novelty and stigma attached to being a child from a one-parent family, despite increased numbers during the 1970s: 'Well, you didn't seem to see that many single parent families or you didn't sort of hear about them [...] You had free school meals and all that, so there was a bit of stigma attached to it.'²¹ Samantha shared a bedroom with her mother until she left home in 1985. Her recollections of poverty attempt to articulate a distinction between absolute poverty of a bygone era and her experience of hardship in the 1970s and 1980s, but her description exposes inter-generational continuity, particularly in terms of the maternal sacrificial economy: 'I can remember times when all we lived on were potatoes [...] I mean we didn't walk around with holes in our shoes, you know, nothing like that. Again my mum put us first rather than herself.'²² Susan McGrath recalls the importance of food and clothing contributions from neighbours and relatives in the 1960s and her mother's efforts to manage their hardship:

I remember my mum telling me stories, like if people made soup they'd send it to us. Some of our clothes were hand-me-downs, what uncles and aunties had bought us. My mum used to cut clothes up to send me to school in.²³

Malika remembers her mother as an 'independent' woman and a strong figure, adopting the language of 'single-parent' and 'head of household' to describe her status within the family: 'When I was a child, I suppose it would be applicable to say I grew up in a single-parent household. There was myself, my two older sisters, and my mother was the head of the household.'²⁴ The frequency of maternal employment amongst those interviewees who grew up in lone mother families in the 1960s and 1970s was high, as it has been for lone mother households across the period thus far. For the remaining interviewees who grew up in families with two parents, maternal employment was greater across both classes during this cohort than it has been in previous decades, reflecting the acceleration of married women's labour market participation. However, as has been noted in previous decades, mothers still moved in and out of employment as they took time to rear young children at home. The only exception to this trend was Lois Carnie, who had parents

²¹ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

²² Ibid.

²³ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

²⁴ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

with professional careers and whose mother worked constantly as a teacher. Three of the working-class women in the sample refer to their mothers as 'housewives,' despite their mother's engaging in periodic casual labour.

In previous chapters, the post-war tripartite system featured as an important aspect of childhood, but from 1965 onwards comprehensive schooling was introduced and as a result: 'By 1975, 75 per cent of secondary school children were no longer undergoing any form of selection for entry into secondary education.'²⁵ Class and type of educational institution remain strongly linked in this chapter, with the majority of middle-class interviewees attending private schools and working-class interviewees attending comprehensives. However, Farida whose parents ran a successful corner shop in Manchester went to a private school; her schooling was a very important aspect of her father's aspirations towards the family's social mobility. As noted in previous chapters, interviewees recalled the importance of their parents' attitudes in terms of educational and career choices. In keeping with previous generations, emphasis was placed on daughters acquiring employment, sometimes cutting short interviewees' hopes for further or higher educations: 'I wanted to actually stay on, but my parents wanted me to leave and get work and sort of do like everybody else. I wanted to stay on and I couldn't.'²⁶ Malika was interested in pursuing her musical interests at college, but instead she trained as a social worker at her mother's insistence that her educational choices should elicit economic security, a transition which she reflects upon with resentment: 'I was doing it because I felt that's what I should do because obviously I was told that I needed a steady job and a steady income to pay all of the steady bills.'²⁷

Religion was strikingly absent from the childhoods of white interviewees in this cohort, compared to earlier generations, but religion did feature as an important aspect in ethnic minority interviewees' upbringings. Malika and Farida's immigrant backgrounds reflected the increasing presence of religious diversity within Britain in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Farida was brought up in a Muslim household and Malika's mother was a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a Christian denomination. Farida rejected her religious upbringing as a teenager, but Malika remained involved in the life of the church throughout her youth. Apart from Farida and Malika, whose leisure activities whilst living at home were restricted by religious values,

²⁵ Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and Growing Up,' in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 35-50, p. 76.

²⁶ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

²⁷ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

most of the interviewees recall leisure activities as being an important aspect of their teenage years. 'Clubbing' and attending music concerts played a greater role in descriptions of youth than in previous decades, as did visiting the local pub, an aspect of young people's leisure pursuits which took root in the 1970s.²⁸ Karen recalled 'having a wild time,' clubbing as a teenager and the significance of a 'girls night' on a Saturday.²⁹

Adolescent employment was common amongst the sample. The school leaving age was raised to sixteen in 1972 and most of our interviewees left at this age, though two completed post-compulsory education.³⁰ Samantha and Farida left home whilst in further education due to family conflict. Malika completed a vocational qualification aged eighteen and Lois (the only interviewee amongst the sample whose parents were professionals) went on to university. Most of the interviewees entered the youth labour market in the 1970s and 1980s. Unemployment is not recalled as a problem by those who left school and went into paid work in the 1970s, reflecting a general picture which saw high employment levels amongst school-leavers for most of the decade, a trend which was sharply reversed in the 1980s and 1990s when youth unemployment became entrenched.³¹ Reference to a sense of independence from young, wage earning women was apparent as interviewees looked back on their teenage years: 'I was sort of very independent by this time and my boyfriend and I decided that we was going to have this career together.'³² Karen left school at sixteen and entered office work whilst still living with her father. She recalls having 'money to buy new clothes,' and going on holiday to Barbados (the last holiday she was able to afford before becoming a lone mother in her mid-twenties). Young adult employment in the 1970s and 1980s did not translate into self-sufficiency, rather a diverse picture emerges amongst the cohort of varying degrees of economic agency and capacity to fully exit from the parental home. Expectations of achieving 'independence' were in some cases crushed by the experience of low pay, exploitation and housing costs. Wendy went into office work at the age of sixteen whilst still living with her mother to whom she gave half her weekly wage of £6.50, reflecting the continued contribution of adolescents' breadwinning to the family economy in the last decades of the twentieth-century.³³ When Wendy left home in the early 1970s to

²⁸ Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, p. 163.

²⁹ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

³⁰ Katherine Watson, 'Education and Opportunity' in Carnevali and Strange, *Twentieth Century Britain*, p.362.

³¹ Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, p. 156.

³² MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

³³ Allan and Crow, *Families, Households and Society*, p. 46.

pursue a career in catering, she found herself working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week as an apprentice for £6 a week, which was a fifth of average male earnings in 1971.³⁴ Those interviewees who became homeless as teenagers were compelled to find paid work and in some cases abandon educational courses. Farida recalls how she ‘just went knocking on doors looking for a job [...] It was all about money. It wasn’t being greedy, it was about survival.’³⁵ Farida struggled to earn enough to pay for housing costs in the private market, despite working during the day as a travel agent and at night as a waitress. She returned home to her parents at the age of nineteen after suffering a nervous breakdown.

In contrast to earlier generations, descriptions of youth amongst this cohort are conspicuous in their absence of interviewees leaving home at the point of marriage. Compared to earlier generations, there was a clear reduction amongst this cohort in parents’ prioritizing marriage for daughters as a normative route into womanhood. Farida’s father was the exception in this regard. Due to cultural and religious values he expected to ‘arrange’ a marriage for his daughter, a practice she keenly resisted. Sue Sharpe’s study of girlhood in the 1970s found strong continuities with previous generations in terms of working-class girls’ expectations and experiences: 82 per cent of her sample wanted to marry, a third by the age of twenty.³⁶ Marriage was seen as the most satisfying aspect of womanhood amongst her participants.³⁷ Despite an absence amongst our cohort of parental pressure on daughters to marry, Liz MacKenzie, Kathryn and Samantha remember identifying with the idea of marriage as a positive aspiration: ‘It was something I believed in. I’d get married and I would live with that person for the rest of my life.’³⁸ But whereas in previous generations, the vast majority had left due to marriage, now only half left to cohabit with a partner or marry.³⁹ Transitions into adulthood thus appear more splintered amongst this generation.

Conflict with parents during adolescence was common amongst the cohort and resulted in Malika, Yvonne, Farida and Samantha all becoming homeless between the ages of sixteen and seventeen during the 1970s and 1980s. Wendy also left her family home at seventeen but moved into accommodation with a boyfriend. These interviewees left the family home at a much earlier age than women in previous chapters and the

³⁴ Average male earnings stood at £30.93 a week in 1971. Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, p. 88.

³⁵ MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

³⁶ Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl: How Girls Learn to be Women* (Harmondsworth, 1976) p. 217.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

³⁸ MMB, C900/19556, Liz MacKenzie.

³⁹ Sexty, *Women Losing Out*, p. 31.

frequency of adolescent homelessness is distinctive. Homelessness in Britain accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s and young people and ethnic minorities were found to be prominent amongst the homeless population of this period.⁴⁰ A study by the homeless charity Centrepoint in 1989 found the majority of young homeless people they came into contact with were homeless due to 'push' factors originating in the family home, such as overcrowding, parental conflict and abuse.⁴¹ The main reason interviewees left the parental home was conflict with fathers and stepfathers. Samantha describes how she became homeless after her mother remarried and she found it too difficult to live with her stepfather. She lived on the streets for a while and then moved into a hostel, before eventually acquiring council housing. Farida's father restricted her participation in the conventional social activities of her white peers: 'I wasn't allowed to go to the pictures. You know, I was on twenty-four hour watch, practically.'⁴² Farida decided to leave home due to her father's authoritarianism. Yvonne's father was repeatedly violent towards her, she describes routine 'beatings' and the degree to which paternal abuse affected her: 'My father tried to get me to submit, to break my will, my spirit. He succeeded to a point.'⁴³ Yvonne left one day during a violent confrontation by escaping out of a back window. Malika left home at seventeen when she became pregnant.

II. ii Pre-marital Sexual Relations and Pregnancy

Sexual relations are described as taking place amongst this cohort within steady relationships with a 'boyfriend.' This observation is strengthened by Sue Sharpe's sociological study, *Falling for Love: Teenage Mothers Talk*, in which she argued that although teenagers were entering sexual relationships at a younger age in the 1980s than previous generations, they did so in established relationships and not as a result of promiscuity.⁴⁴ A study entitled, *Young Single Mothers Today*, commissioned by The National Council for One-parent Families (NCOPE) in 1989, found that although unmarried, most young women became pregnant outside marriage after a 'stable partnership' broke down.⁴⁵ Wendy began a sexual relationship with her boyfriend at the age of seventeen, something which her mother accepted without concern: 'My mother wasn't unduly worried about

⁴⁰ Julie Rugg, 'Poverty and Social Exclusion,' in Carnevali and Strange, *Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 308-322, p. 314.

⁴¹ Sixty, *Women Losing Out*, p. 32.

⁴² MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

⁴³ MMB, C900/05119, Yvonne Davis.

⁴⁴ Sue Sharpe, *Falling for Love: Teenage Mothers Talk* (London, 1987), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Emma Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today: A Qualitative Study of Housing and Support Needs*, (London: National Council for One-Parent Families, 1989) p. 2.

this. I think she was quite open-minded and she knew that I was sleeping with my boyfriend.⁴⁶ Such ambivalence from a parent towards the sexual autonomy of an unmarried daughter is unprecedented in this study and reflects a shift in moral norms governing sexual activity outside of marriage. Parental intervention and advice surrounding sexual relations and reproduction varied amongst our interviewees. The FPA was mandated to give contraceptive advice to single people, but controversy surrounding the issue of parental consent in relation to health professionals providing information or prescribing contraception to those under sixteen continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985 the House of Lords upheld the right for young people under the age of sixteen to access contraceptive services, after a parent attempted to get legislation passed which would stop health professionals providing those under sixteen with birth control services without parental consent. Lois Carnie, despite being over the age of consent, recalls how in the early 1980s she felt constrained in her capacity to acquire contraception or to approach her parents about the matter:

When I became a single parent, getting contraception and things, you know, this is 1981 (it's not exactly the dark ages) but it was a lot more difficult, particularly for a teenager to get that kind of thing sorted out. There was none of this 'you can talk to your parents.' If I'd told my parents, they would have flipped.⁴⁷

Parental approval was a particular concern for young people still living with parents. As Phoenix found in her study of young mothers in the 1980s, the fear that parents might discover contraception amongst those in her sample living in the parental home, constrained their usage of birth control.⁴⁸ Beatrix Campbell in her study of communities in the Midlands and North of England in the early 1980s, found that young women living at home with parents feared having their sexual activities discovered and associated the FPA with further disapproval and surveillance: 'The girls said some of them were on the pill, others weren't because their mams and dads don't know and they daren't go to the Family Planning Clinic.'⁴⁹ Reference to sex education in schools is not topical amongst our cohort. Christine Farrell's study, *My Mother Said: The Way Young People Learned about Sex and Birth Control* found there had been a significant rise in the provision

⁴⁶ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

⁴⁷ MMB, C900/07621, Lois Carnie.

⁴⁸ Ann Phoenix, *Young Mothers?* (Cambridge; Oxford, 1991) p. 79.

⁴⁹ Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s* (London, 1984), p. 65.

of sex education in schools during the 1970s.⁵⁰ However, the majority of youngsters were taught about animal reproduction by science teachers.⁵¹ Farrell found friends were the most frequent source of information about sex and contraception in the 1970s, and Kathryn mentions how the pill was a topic of discussion amongst female students at her school. In the 1950s and 1960s, the sharing of information about sex between young female groups did not feature. Its greater presence in the 1970s and 1980s signifies a further shift in the boundaries of acceptability surrounding sexual knowledge and behaviour.

Ann Phoenix argued that contraceptive knowledge became widespread amongst the young in the 1980s, but that 'contraceptive knowledge theory', which assumes availability of information informs usage, is undermined by her finding many young women became pregnant amongst her sample, despite knowing about birth control methods.⁵² In both Phoenix's study (where 61 per cent of interviewees did not use contraception when in a sexual relationship)⁵³ and the other sociological studies of young women's pre-marital sexual relationships discussed here, it was common for interviewees not to use contraception.⁵⁴ Phoenix drew attention to the fact that use of contraception amongst her sample changed across the life course of interviewees and even within relationships, consistency of method was often lacking. Young women and those at the start of a relationship were less likely to use contraception than older women and those in established relationships. Certainly, amongst those interviewees in our study who were sexually active as teenagers, contraception often appears not to have been used and, when it was, methods were inconsistent. Interviewees do not mention discussing birth control options with boyfriends, an observation also made by Sue Sharpe⁵⁵, indicating the tendency towards limited mutual responsibility between the sexes for birth control practice which Kate Fisher suggested was characteristic of married couples in the period 1918-1960. However, whereas Fisher argued men took on greater responsibility for birth control within marriage, evidence suggests that men for the post-1960 generation

⁵⁰ 'The only guide there is to whether sex education is provided more often now than it was in the past is to compare our findings with those of Schofield (1965, p. 102). In 1964, 47 % of boys and 86 % of girls said that they had had some sex education in school. In this study, 87 % of the boys and 97 % of the girls recalled being taught something in this area.' Farrell, *My Mother Said*, p. 124.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵² Phoenix, *Young Mothers?*, p. 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 66.

⁵⁴ Emma Clark found that seven out of fifteen of her participants were not using contraception. Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Sharpe, *Teenage Mothers Talk*, p. 19.

relinquished this responsibility due to the advent of the pill. Phoenix found: “Many women said their own male partners considered that contraception was ‘up to the woman,’ and wouldn’t use it themselves.”⁵⁶ The following statement from Susan McGrath, who became pregnant at seventeen, is illustrative of both inconsistent use of contraception and the displacement of responsibility for birth control onto women:

I mean we tried condoms. I didn’t like ‘em. Then it was withdrawal and that worked and then come New Year’s Eve, 1976, we started having intercourse and Nick said: ‘Do you want me to leave it on or take it out?’ Coz like I say, we were using withdrawal, and me – clever git – just said: ‘Well, I’ve got to find out what it’s like to go all the way!’ And I went all the way and that’s how I fell pregnant.⁵⁷

Phoenix found that young women who had been using withdrawal method and not become pregnant often held the belief that they would never be able to conceive.⁵⁸ There is some implication of this in the above extract from Susan McGrath’s interview. Kathryn’s recollection below also demonstrates the belief that the first experience of sexual intercourse would carry a lower risk of pregnancy than future encounters:

I remember girls in school talking about going on the pill and I probably thought to myself, ‘if I just did it this once,’ then I wouldn’t have to do it again. Honestly, can you believe that? [...] ‘If I do it again (coz that’s how far away I was thinking) I’ll go on the pill.’ I never had the time to go on the pill; I was pregnant immediately.⁵⁹

A few of the interviewees who became pregnant as teenagers implied that contraception had failed to work. Two studies in the 1980s referred to by Phoenix and supported by her own findings found that a contraceptive failure was a significant cause of unwanted pregnancies.⁶⁰ Fisher has raised an important consideration in relation to the question of women’s use of birth control in the twentieth-century and one which seems pertinent to this study. As contraception became more readily available especially after the 1960s, it must not be assumed that women inside and outside of marriage had a straightforward relationship with birth control practice or that planned motherhood was an automatic choice. As has been demonstrated throughout this study thus far, maternity was a very

⁵⁶ Phoenix, *Young Mothers*, p.72.

⁵⁷ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

⁵⁸ Phoenix, *Young Mothers?* p. 76

⁵⁹ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

⁶⁰ Colin Francome, *Abortion Practice in Britain and the United States* (London, 1986); Madeleine Simms and Christopher Smith, *Teenage Mothers and their Partners* (London, 1986). Phoenix, *Young Mothers?* p. 81.

important aspect of young, unmarried women's identities and often a priority in terms of life choices:

Women in particular sometimes commented that they did not want to eliminate the chance of pregnancy. Historians' assumption that women's motivation to avoid conception was likely to be high, and that their pleasure was contingent on their ability to separate sex from reproduction, needs to be balanced by the understanding that having children was central to some women's identity. We should not assume that the 'labour' of childbearing necessarily had a negative effect on women's perceptions of the risks of pregnancy, nor that the fear of pregnancy was always detrimental to women's ability to enjoy sex.⁶¹

Emma Clark's study for the NCOF in 1989 aimed to investigate the association between adolescent pregnancy and access to social housing in the late 1980s, and found that interviewees felt apprehensive about the likelihood of being allocated housing on becoming pregnant and their aspirations about becoming a mother were paramount in going ahead with an unplanned pregnancy.⁶² As one of Clark's interviewees commented: 'Like you didn't just have him to get a house. I had him because I didn't want to get rid of him. I wanted to be a mum myself, like.'⁶³

Kathryn and Susan McGrath became pregnant at the age of seventeen, the youngest age for unmarried mothers in this cohort; Malika became pregnant at eighteen and Farida and Lois became pregnant at nineteen. The remaining two unmarried mothers – Catherine Parker and Karen became pregnant in their mid-twenties outside of marriage. Therefore, although there are a greater number of unmarried mothers under the age of twenty in this cohort, the average age of eighteen at first pregnancy is not significantly lower than for previous chapters (the youngest unmarried mother was Mary Jarvis, Chapter Three). The national average age at which women under the age of twenty became unmarried mothers in the 1980s was between eighteen and nineteen, a statistic reflected in Phoenix' sample.⁶⁴

Karen and Catherine were both in employment and living alone in the 1970s and 1980s when they became pregnant in their mid-twenties. Karen worked in an office and

⁶¹ Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain*, p. 183.

⁶² 'Neither in the groups, nor amongst the individuals, was there anyone who had thought of pregnancy or motherhood as a passport to guaranteed housing or income. Often when the question was raised, it was greeted with derision or disbelief. [...] Some were aware that they had a right to apply for council housing, although not all were old enough to register yet. Most were also aware that they would have to wait before being housed.' Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Phoenix, *Young Mothers?*, p. 13.

describes spending a disposable income on clothes and holidays and enjoying the ‘club-scene’ in Liverpool. She remembers having many boyfriends during this time, but not ‘one-night stands.’ Catherine was living and working in London in the late 1970s, and also describes having been able to travel abroad and lead a ‘wild life’ going to nightclubs and pubs in London. Both these testimonies express narratives of the ‘single girl,’ not seen in previous decades, emphasising economic agency and social adventure (particularly through the experience of travel). However, both Catherine and Karen recall the continued presence of expectations surrounding marriage and the female life-course. Catherine described being ‘on the shelf’ in her mid-twenties as most of her female friends were married by this time (in 1981 the average age of first marriage for women was 23.1).⁶⁵ Karen was told to see her employer on her eighteenth birthday and asked: ‘You’re of child-bearing age now, so are you going to do your job or are you going to have a child?’⁶⁶ Despite the persistence of such expectations of young women’s prioritization of marriage and childbearing, Catherine and Karen resisted these and instead prioritized careers. They both became pregnant whilst in established relationships with boyfriends. The following passage demonstrates how Catherine was willing to have a regular sexual relationship without anticipation of marriage and the lack of compulsion to marry when discovering a pregnancy:

I didn’t expect or intend to get pregnant. I think when it actually happened, he was quite shocked by it and although we went through the pregnancy with him blowing hot and cold, as time went on we knew it wasn’t going to work out. He finally made his exit about six weeks before Stephen was born [...] He was never really committed to the relationship. Had I not become pregnant, we would have drifted apart, possibly sooner. You know, it was never a relationship made in heaven, really.⁶⁷

Karen took an offer of redundancy from her office and went back into education having left school at sixteen. She trained as a Nursery Nurse and in her final term became pregnant. Karen was pressured by her boyfriend to have an abortion but she rejected his insistence and went ahead with the pregnancy, the relationship ending in the process. Malika was the only interviewee to consider abortion: ‘It was a question of do we keep the baby? Do we get rid of it and live with it or do we keep it and go ahead and try and

⁶⁵ Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 71.

⁶⁶ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

⁶⁷ MMB, C900/08563, Catherine Parker.

make a life?’⁶⁸ The majority of interviewees in Clark, Farrell and Phoenix’ studies rejected the availability of legal abortion and made statements of strong disapproval over termination: ‘Most were strongly against abortion in principle feeling that it was wrong to destroy a life already started.’⁶⁹ The majority of interviewees in this chapter objected to abortion, some on strong moral grounds. Nationally in the mid-1980s, the majority of teenage females over sixteen who became pregnant outside of marriage were opting not to have terminations.⁷⁰ Kathryn and Susan McGrath were advised by health professionals to have abortions because they were considered too young to be mothers at seventeen, but Kathryn stated: ‘It’s a child’s life.’⁷¹ One of Clark’s interviewees made an interesting statement when asked about the ‘choice’ to have an abortion: “I didn’t feel I had any ‘choices’ because I wanted to keep him.”⁷² Such a comment subverts the notion of ‘choice’ attached to reproduction for women who wanted to continue with unplanned pregnancies in a social context in which reproductive ‘choice’ equated with being able to avoid motherhood via legal termination, articulated in the campaign for accessible abortion by the WLM.

Parental responses to daughters’ pre-marital pregnancies varied. For Catherine and Karen who were living independently of their parents, the need to disclose a pregnancy was less urgent. Karen remembers her father’s positive affirmation of her pregnancy, despite being unmarried: ‘My dad was delighted! I think he saw this as the thing that was going to calm me down somewhat!’⁷³ This reaction implies Karen’s father saw motherhood, even if outside of marriage as a normative and corrective transition for his daughter, who had so far been leading a life free from marital and domestic responsibility. Amongst the interviewees who were under twenty when they became pregnant, reactions from parents were largely negative although not as punitive as previous chapters. Malika and Kathryn, still living at home, were very apprehensive about informing their parents of their pregnancies as the following extracts demonstrate:

We were dreading telling anybody because we didn’t know what people were going to say and we were scared and frightened. We told my mother who I

⁶⁸ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 42.

⁷⁰ ‘By 1985 more than a third of all teenage conceptions were ending in abortion and abortions outnumbered maternities for those under 16.’ Selman, ‘Teenage motherhood then and now’, p. 120.

⁷¹ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

⁷² Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 25.

⁷³ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

wasn't particularly close to and that was annoying because I knew that she already knew. But she still acted like it was the greatest shock of her life and 'how could this happen to her?' And 'what would people say about her?' and everything was: her, her, her, really. My boyfriend's parents were much more supportive, really. They were like: 'Okay, it's happened, let's see what we can do to make sure that life goes on as it should do.'⁷⁴

I realized in the September I was pregnant. I was going to be eighteen and I thought, 'gosh, what's going to happen here?' No period: I was hysterical. I went off and had a pregnancy test in town. I hadn't told either of my parents and the test was positive. I came back and thought, 'oh gosh, what am I going to do?' And I told my ex (who is now my ex-husband) and he was only, you know, seventeen, the same as me and he was terrified and didn't know what to do. I think at one point he wanted to run away.⁷⁵

Fear of parental retribution is prominent in these two extracts, and very similar to fears expressed by unmarried women in previous generations. Malika's mother was so outraged by her daughter's pregnancy that Malika decided to leave home at seventeen and move into a Mother and Baby Home on the outskirts of Birmingham:

I left the house, the house that we'd been living in for sixteen years because I was pregnant. My mother was making my life unbearable and I didn't want to be around her while I was pregnant. I moved into a Mother and Baby Home in Moseley.⁷⁶

Unlike interviewees in previous chapters who were sent to Mother and Baby Homes on instruction of their parents, Malika approached entering a home in Mosley, Birmingham in 1985 as a welcome refuge from parental confrontation. Her experience is illustrative of a shift in the relationship of unmarried mothers to such voluntary institutions, as discussed in the previous chapter. Mother and Baby Homes were seen as more of a 'service' by homeless women entering them in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than as corrective institutions. Farida had already left her family home when she became pregnant at nineteen, but frequently returned during the week to nurse her mother who was terminally ill. As her pregnancy became more obvious she feared her father's reaction and used the label of 'unmarried mother' to describe her condition, a term associated with a greater level of stigmatization amongst lone mothers in generations prior to 1970: "I was an unmarried mother, with somebody who my father would never accept, coz he was a Rastafarian and it was like: 'My god, how many things can this girl

⁷⁴ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

⁷⁵ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

⁷⁶ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

possibly do?!”⁷⁷ This statement by Farida sees her reflect on her father’s outrage at her deviation from the expectations he had of a Muslim daughter, using humour to articulate the extent of her deviation. Like Farida, most other women in the cohort and in previous generations were particularly apprehensive about parental reactions and the most distressed and outraged responses from parents tended to come from fathers. Nevertheless, there was a clear distinction between this cohort and earlier generations in that none of the interviewees’ parents suggested marriage or adoption as a solution to pre-marital pregnancy. Phoenix found parental pressure to marry was rarely reported by the young unmarried mothers in her 1980s study.⁷⁸ Adoption is not mentioned by any of the interviewees, indicating its decline as a solution to illegitimacy in the 1970s and 1980s. Overall, there appears to have been a greater level of parental conciliation and support for unmarried pregnant daughters amongst this cohort than previous generations. Susan and Kathryn continued to live with their parents as unmarried mothers for a short period before both getting married, Kathryn to the father of her child. Lois, the only middle-class interviewee to become pregnant as a teenager at the age of nineteen, although apprehensive about approaching her parents about birth control (as discussed above), found her parents were very accepting of her pregnancy and she returned to live with them as a lone mother: ‘They were brilliant, yes. I went back home with my daughter and they were absolutely superb.’⁷⁹

II. iii Marriage, Separation and Divorce

The average age of first marriage amongst the cohort was twenty-one years old, slightly lower than the national average in 1971, which stood at 22.6, the lowest average age recorded for women marrying in the twentieth century.⁸⁰ In 1981 the average age of women at first marriage was 23.1.⁸¹ Carolyn Maynard married in her late twenties and Liz when she was twenty-five. These two women were the only middle-class interviewees amongst this cohort and their class backgrounds may well explain their greater age at first marriage. Carolyn had also spent part of her twenties cohabiting with the father of her first child before becoming an unmarried lone mother (See Chapter Five). The remaining interviewees married between the ages of eighteen and twenty and all came from working-class backgrounds. As discussed above, the majority of working-class women in

⁷⁷ MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

⁷⁸ Phoenix, *Young Mothers*, p. 115.

⁷⁹ MMB, C900/07621, Lois Carnie.

⁸⁰ Lewis, ‘Marriage’, p. 71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

this cohort left school at the compulsory school-leaving age of sixteen. At the point where they met their prospective husbands, they were all in employment in service sector jobs. Susan McGrath, Susan McClaren and Kathryn were all living with parents when they married. Kathryn, who had been living with her parents as a lone mother moved out of her parents' home to cohabit with the father of her child when her daughter was still a baby. They married shortly afterwards when Kathryn was nineteen. Kathryn's parents were opposed to the marriage, preferring Kathryn and their granddaughter to continue living with them:

Me mum and dad were, you know, upset by it, but realized that that was the way it was going to be. My dad begged me not to, but he wasn't going to not consent to me doing it so after about a week we decided to get married.⁸²

Samantha Walker met her first husband after being allocated council housing as a homeless teenager. Like women in previous chapters who became pregnant outside of marriage, pregnancy closely followed engagement: 'I met Kaley's dad and we were obviously together for a while and decided we were going to get married, got engaged. Then planning to get married and I found out I was pregnant.'⁸³ Samantha recalls the importance of marriage to her as a young woman in the 1980s and the expectation of fulfillment and longevity: "You sort of think when you get married, 'live happily ever after.'"⁸⁴ Janet Finch and David Morgan reviewed sociological studies of marriage in the 1980s and found that overall:

Sociological research on marriage in the 1980s placed a strong emphasis upon the centrality of marriage to most people's definition of a good life, including young people, and an image of the 'good marriage' which probably would have been quite easily recognized by their parents, if possibly not by their grandparents.⁸⁵

Interviewees who married in the 1970s and 1980s had expectations in keeping with those voiced by women in earlier cohorts, describing marriage as a life-long relationship of central importance to female adulthood. Some women in this chapter emphasized the attraction of the more functional aspects of married life as influencing their decision to marry. As discussed above, Wendy had been working in catering as an apprentice on a

⁸² MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

⁸³ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Janet Finch and David Morgan, 'Marriage in the 1980s,' in Clark, *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, pp. 55-82, p. 58.

very low wage and she recalls her economic insecurity being a key influence on her desire to marry an older man: 'It was the security I was after, you know. It wasn't love, it was just security.'⁸⁶ Women's concentration in low-paid work during the 1970s and 1980s and the distinction between male and female wages meant the appeal of marriage as a means of economic security continued to persist.⁸⁷ Like women in previous generations, the significance of acquiring a home through marriage in the late 1970s, particularly one equipped with modern appliances and furnishings, was remembered by Kathryn who had grown up in a cramped tenement block in Liverpool in the 1960s: 'To move into your own first little home [...] It was all furnished and quite modern. You know, I had a washing machine so felt very lucky to move into a flat that had all them kind of things that you needed.'⁸⁸ Yvonne also recalls the significance of buying a flat with her husband in her twenties, having become homeless as a teenager: 'I had my own home, rented accommodation when I left home. Then we bought a flat together and I was still only young so I think that surprised a lot of people.'⁸⁹

Most of the interviewees continued to work once married, apart from Carolyn, who welcomed the opportunity to stop working when she married after years in employment as a single woman and lone mother. When children came along, half of the interviewees stopped work and the other half continued, combining motherhood and employment. Yvonne ran her own confectionary business whilst having three children, actively rejecting full-time motherhood: 'I'm not the kind of person to stay and sort of be a 'housewife' – I hate that word – I never got married to a house so I couldn't really be a full-time mum, I felt I was, I needed to do something else.'⁹⁰ Yvonne recalls feeling exceptional in her decision to remain in employment with young children and the following statement suggests that her ethnic background made her less cautious about combining motherhood and wage earning: 'I mean at that time you didn't really find [...] you didn't find English women working, not with children, yeah? So it was a novelty for me going back to work with young children.'⁹¹ Liz ran a pub with her husband whilst raising children and Samantha was the only breadwinner during periods of her marriage due to her husband's unemployment. The remaining interviewees followed the

⁸⁶ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

⁸⁷ 'By 1982 it was obvious that, apart from a rapid rise of women's wages to around 73 per cent of the male wage when the Acts were first implemented, the Acts were not as effective at bringing about equality as had been hoped.' Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain*, p. 214.

⁸⁸ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

⁸⁹ MMB, C900/05119, Yvonne Davis.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

normative experience of many married women through our period, which was to stop work whilst looking after young children.

Turning to the reasons for marital break-up, this cohort of interviewees reported the highest levels of domestic violence so far within our study. Seven out of the eight married interviewees described experiencing some form of domestic abuse which led to divorce, ranging from threatening behaviour from a husband to extreme violence and physical abuse involving children. Although a significant feature of married life across the time period so far, the prevalence of domestic violence amongst married women in the 1970s and 1980s cohort may be partly explained by a greater willingness amongst this later generation to disclose such experiences. Studies of violence in the home developed from the late 1960s onwards and as discussed, the WLM brought the issue of domestic violence into the public realm.⁹² As a result, the women in this chapter may well have been more able than women from earlier generations to reveal their experiences of domestic abuse due to a greater sense of legitimacy and public receptiveness. Only Liz in this chapter is ambiguous in describing the abuse she experienced during her marriage: 'I felt that his behaviour was totally unacceptable and the children were starting to think that it was normal and it was far from that.'⁹³ Infidelity and economic hardship often accompanied testimonies of domestic violence and Wendy and Kathryn both experienced traumatic events during marriage, which saw their husbands react with violence. Wendy was working in one of the pubs in Birmingham which was bombed by the IRA in 1974. She survived the bombing but the effects on her marriage were severe. Wendy was unable to return to work after the incident and this put an economic strain on her relationship. Wendy's husband became violent and would lock her in the house for long periods. She describes how she spent a year fearing for her life. Wendy left her husband and moved to London. Kathryn and her husband lost their first baby after he was born with heart problems and subsequently their marriage deteriorated: 'I think the pressure of losing Joseph obviously was taking its toll on the marriage.'⁹⁴ Kathryn had a second child, but it was at this point that her husband became violent and embarked on an affair, whereupon Kathryn decided to end the relationship. Samantha Walker's husband was unemployed throughout their marriage, repeatedly in trouble with the police and had a dependency on alcohol. Samantha's description of marriage as one where she had primary responsibility for wage earning as well as raising children in

⁹² Finch and Morgan, 'Marriage in the 1980s', pp. 67-9.

⁹³ MMB, C900/19556, Liz MacKenzie.

⁹⁴ MMB, C900/1960, Kathryn Riley.

conditions of material hardship, parallel the circumstances of her childhood growing-up in a one-parent family. Her experience of absent male breadwinning and a husband's over-spending is continuous with descriptions of poverty and seclusion within marriage told by other married women throughout this study:

He never did a days work while I was with him, wouldn't do it. He said he wouldn't get out of bed for less than three hundred pounds a week, so I had several cleaning jobs and bits and that. He used to spend all the money in the pub. But no, he never worked. He was trained, he was trained as a painter and decorator and carpet fitter, but no, he never did a days work while I was with him. Bone idle.⁹⁵

Susan McGrath's husband also had a dependency on alcohol and after drinking heavily would physically attack Susan: 'It was a case of every time my husband had a drink, every weekend, I got beaten-up [...] I can remember him bashing me over the head with bags of shopping – tins.'⁹⁶ Samantha and Yvonne describe enduring extreme domestic violence during their marriages. In the following extract Samantha recalls how the prospect of lone motherhood seemed a 'struggle,' but the lesser hardship in comparison to her marriage:

Then I was six months pregnant and he was dragging me around by my throat smashing my head into a concrete wall. You think, 'oh, give it another chance,' you keep giving them one more chance and one more chance and then, you know, you hit back. But then you get hit back even worse, so you just give up in the end. Yeah, so you put up with it and then you think, you stay together because of the child. But then I sort of realized and thought: 'No it's not fair, I'd rather, struggle, be on my own and struggle than be in that kind of atmosphere.' Coz he'd hit me with her in my arms. You know, he wasn't bothered, so, better of out of it, definitely.⁹⁷

Samantha was supported by a health visitor to leave her husband and moved into a women's refuge. Yvonne, who had been physically abused by her father, describes how abuse followed her into her marriage:

I jumped straight from the frying-pan into the fire! [...] He beat me into submission as well, you know? After three children and some really, how do you say? Not very good treatment from him, let's say, you know, I decided, right, that was enough, so I left.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

⁹⁶ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

⁹⁷ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

⁹⁸ MMB, C900/05119, Yvonne Davis.

In his oral history of a 'slum' community in North London in the inter-war years, Jerry White offers an analysis of the high levels of domestic violence amongst the families in his sample, arguing violence was a product of male unemployment and low status which conflicted with women's growing status as wage-earners, thus unsettling the traditional reproductive and productive roles of husband and wife:

The class-based weakness of men, with its implications for the construction of gender and 'manliness'; the aggressive assertion of male power in the family, frequently the only arena in which a man could force others to respect his artificially defiant self-esteem; the relatively strong position of women, based on male worklessness and the importance of female earnings; the physical resistance to male aggression; all conspired to foster a prolonged struggle over who should fulfill the traditional 'masculine role' within the family [...] The struggle was waged on many levels within the family and exploited many weapons, including, (but not necessitating) physical violence.⁹⁹

Such socio-economic dynamics were apparent in the 1980s. Male employment decreased and female employment increased unsettling the gendered roles of reproduction and production in the household. Economic tensions and struggles over the social division of labour in the family appear to have often given rise to violence. Despite the increase in married women's employment in the 1970s and 1980s, sociological studies of marriage in the 1980s found that domestic roles remained remarkably intact.¹⁰⁰ Studies of male unemployment found that men did not increase their participation in domestic work.¹⁰¹ As Szreter and Fisher argued of conflict in marriages of the mid-century, a study of the impact of male unemployment on marital relations in the 1980s by Lorna McKee and Colin Bell, concluded that: 'There were [...] few families in our study for whom role-reversal was an appropriate and easy solution.'¹⁰² The unsettling of gendered domestic roles appears to have been a constant source of marital disharmony across our period, and male unemployment or economic liability a reason for wives to leave husbands. McKee and Bell's 1980 study demonstrated, as married women in this study have often

⁹⁹ Jerry White, *Campbell Bunk: The Worst Street in North London Between the Wars* (London, 2003), p. 143.

¹⁰⁰ 'The clear evidence of research in the 1980s was that men's and women's respective domestic roles, and the gender relations which these embodied, had changed remarkably little. Finch and Morgan, 'Marriage in the 1980s', p. 64

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰² Lorna McKee and Colin Bell, 'Marital and Family Relations in Times of Male Unemployment' in Bryan Roberts, Ruth Finnegan and Duncan Gallie (eds.), *New Approaches to Economic Life: Economic Restructuring, Unemployment and the Social Division of Labour* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 387-399, p. 394.

recalled, that a husband's economic inactivity carried a 'heavy *managerial* role for wives' who shouldered a disproportionate responsibility in managing the economic and social implications of hardship for the family.¹⁰³ Married women in our cohort with unemployed husbands had their domestic management magnified alongside paid work responsibilities. It is therefore argued that in the 1980s, married women in households where inactive husbands exacerbated the double burden, exited marriage in defiance of highly unequal domestic economies. Where violence accompanied material hardship, it no longer had to be tolerated in a social climate where greater support was available for abused wives.

All the married women in the sample initiated separation and divorce in the late 1970s and 1980s. Wendy divorced her first husband with whom she had no children in 1976, but remarried in 1978 after moving to London to find work as a chambermaid. Wendy's second husband had migrated to the UK from Egypt. They had two sons and Wendy spent three years of her marriage in Egypt as her husband wanted the children to learn Arabic. Wendy's husband remained in the UK working, whilst Wendy raised their sons with help from extended family in Egypt. When she returned to the UK in the 1980s she discovered her husband had been unfaithful and the marriage deteriorated. On initiating separation, Wendy's husband made her leave their marital home in London and forbade access to the children: 'I was forbidden to take the children and I was forced out of the house.'¹⁰⁴ Whilst waiting for her divorce and negotiating custody, Wendy's husband kidnapped their youngest son and took him to Egypt, only returning when the UK authorities threatened an indefinite prison sentence should he return without the child. Other women in the sample describe traumatic separations and divorce proceedings, particularly where domestic violence was concerned. Kathryn remained in the marital home when her marriage ended, but her husband repeatedly returned to try and gain access to the house and became violent, on one occasion kidnapping Kathryn and their daughter: 'He'd come back and smash the door in, those three years in the flat were absolute hell, because every time he decided to come back and cause havoc he did, coz at one point he kidnapped me and he kidnapped Dominique and the police came after him in his car and we got released and stuff.'¹⁰⁵ Unlike Wendy, Kathryn's husband did not contest her custody of the children, which meant her divorce took less time to be granted. However, Kathryn recalls the legal process of divorce as 'horrendous' largely

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 395

¹⁰⁴ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

¹⁰⁵ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

because of her court appearance, an experience which as the following extract implies, felt debasing due to the class-based dynamics of the courtroom:

That was horrendous because you had to sit there and wait for your name to be called like cattle. Then you went to sit with a judge who decided the custody of the children. I knew he wasn't going to contend, you know, the custody because he wasn't interested in the girls so there was no way in the world that he would. So I was just given all the rights.¹⁰⁶

Samantha and her daughter went into a women's refuge when she left her husband. When Samantha approached a solicitor's firm about beginning divorce proceedings, her husband followed her and tried to kidnap their daughter. Whilst trying to resettle in her new home, Samantha was pursued by her husband and attacked; eventually an injunction was sought and Samantha was escorted by the police when she returned to her marital home to collect her belongings: 'I had to get the police to escort me to get all my stuff coz he wouldn't let me take anything out of the flat.'¹⁰⁷

Attitudes towards divorce amongst the sample varied. Those women who had grown up in two-parent families such as Kathryn, Carolyn and Liz, felt most reluctant and regretful about becoming divorcees: 'I think one of the things I found very hard was to divorce because I did believe that I got married and that was it. You know, the decision was not taken lightly to divorce.'¹⁰⁸ However, those women who grew up in one-parent families did not attach such regret and moral apprehension to the status of being divorced.

III. Lone Motherhood

Accommodation and Housing

As discussed in Chapter Five, after the 1977 Homelessness Act there was a significant rise in the numbers of lone mothers able to establish independent households. Whilst in 1973–5, 36 per cent of lone mothers lived in council housing, by 1986–8 the figure had risen to 73 per cent.¹⁰⁹ This increase is reflected in our study where the numbers of both divorced and unmarried mothers living in council housing is greater for the 1980s than in any other cohort. Six out of the thirteen women in this chapter lived in council housing

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

¹⁰⁸ MMB, C900/19556, Liz MacKenzie.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Hardey and Graham Crow (eds.), *Lone-parenthood: Coping with Constraints and Making Opportunities* (New York; London, 1991).

as lone mothers, five being divorcees and one being unmarried. Three had housing in the private rental market. Parents were still significant in providing housing for four of the interviewees, but for two this acted as a prelude to accessing social housing. Four of the interviewees during this decade were homeowners, three becoming able to own homes after divorce settlements and one being an unmarried mother. In terms of the national housing context, there were some key trends during this decade which had implications for lone mothers: increased levels of homelessness, greater numbers of single person households and a reduction in state spending on social housing. Despite the increase in demand for single person housing due to higher divorce rates, later marriages, and greater numbers of single pensioners, government policy tended to construct housing policy in terms of the nuclear family. In the Conservative Party's manifesto of 1979 reference to housing policy came under the main heading: 'Helping the Family.'¹¹⁰ Peter Malpass and Alan Murie use the words: 'privatisation,' 'deregulation,' and 'anti-municipal approach' to characterize the shift in housing policy between 1979 and 1997.¹¹¹ Although state spending on social housing began to decrease in 1976 under the Labour government, it became severely restricted under the Conservative leadership and the 1980s was defined by the 'Right to Buy' policy which saw the state encouraging council tenants to buy their houses under the 1980 Housing Act. In the face of state prioritization of property ownership and reduced expenditure on council housing, the number of Housing Association dwellings increased by 86 per cent between 1976 and 1988, illustrating the significance of social housing for those on low incomes during this period.¹¹² The life histories discussed in this section will illustrate that although lone mothers acted on their rights to council housing, there were often barriers to realizing this right. The state's rhetoric surrounding opportunism and easy access to council housing amongst lone mothers is shown to be flawed by the evidence presented in contemporary surveys of women and housing in the 1980s. These surveys expose the problems faced by women in accessing social housing, particularly amongst black and minority ethnic women and those suffering domestic violence, as well as the significant representation of lone mothers amongst the homeless. One third of homeless persons were single mothers in 1989.¹¹³ Despite the state's association of teenage mothers with

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 81.

¹¹¹ 'The period of Conservative government saw a decline in local authority new building to its lowest peace time level since 1920.' Peter Malpass and Alan Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice*, (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 78-79.

¹¹² Sexty, *Women Losing Out*, p. 30.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 55.

council housing during the 1980s, those under sixteen had no statutory right to social housing and had to fall back on the voluntary sector or kin. This point is made apparent by Emma Clark's study of teenage single mothers which as will be discussed, demonstrated many teenage mothers preferred to live with their own mothers, when raising their first child.¹¹⁴

Malpass and Murie note that despite rising levels of homelessness during the 1980s, within the Conservative's manifesto: 'The absence of reference to the homeless or policies for the council sector (other than sale) is striking.'¹¹⁵ Malika and Samantha Walker both became homeless in the 1980s. Malika left her mother's home at the age of eighteen, pregnant and unmarried and Samantha left her violent husband with her daughter. Their testimonies provide insight into the experience of homelessness and the insecurity of keeping 'a roof over one's head' for lone mothers during this period. Malika went to a Mother and Baby Home in Moseley, Birmingham in the late 1980s. As discussed in the previous chapter, the numbers of Mother and Baby Homes in England declined throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Those that remained were largely run by local authorities as opposed to religious organizations, but the home which Malika went to was run by the Catholic Church. The unmarried mothers who went into homes run by religious bodies in the 1960s recalled knowing about the existence of such institutions through stories in their local communities, but Malika describes an unfamiliarity with the existence of Mother and Baby Homes as a teenager in the 1980s, indicative of the general decline in stigma towards illegitimacy: 'I didn't even know such things really existed. They were very helpful to me when I found myself in the position of needing to be out of the house and not having anywhere to live.'¹¹⁶ Malika's testimony suggests her status in relation to the home was as much as a 'homeless person' as a lone mother, the home acting as a half-way house by arrangement with the local authority who intended to provide longer-term housing: 'It was run by the Catholic Church and we were allowed to stay there up until we'd had our babies and for three months afterwards and then the council allocated us a place.'¹¹⁷ Such an arrangement placed Malika in a far less precarious position to those unmarried mothers in the 1960s whose only option after staying in a Mother and Baby Home was to return to their parents' home or face destitution. In Clark's study, the few women that were in Mother and Baby 'Units' regarded and

¹¹⁴ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, pp. 6-7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹⁶ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

described these institutions as ‘half-way houses’ as they waited to be placed in social housing. Some interviewees had been in institutional care, such as children’s homes, before becoming pregnant outside of marriage and overall their experience of the homes was as a helpful ‘service.’¹¹⁸ Malika recalls her time in the home as a positive experience, receiving the support she lacked from her own family from the House Mother who guided her through her pregnancy and early weeks of motherhood. Although her own strong religiosity would have made her more receptive to a religious ethos, she does not describe the kind of social restriction and religious observance which characterized the homes in the 1960s. Although Malika does describe some women having their babies adopted, her mention of the option of council housing after birth is coupled with her recalling how parents were generally reconciled with daughters returning home with babies: ‘At the end of the day they’d have the baby and you knew that they were all going to go home together and they did in many cases. In some cases the babies were adopted, but in many cases once they’d seen and held the baby, they’d take it home, scared, but happy.’¹¹⁹ Malika did not consider having her baby adopted. She left the Mother and Baby Home when her son was three months old and was offered council housing on the outskirts of Birmingham, but she rejected this on the grounds that the housing was sub-standard: ‘I was offered a grotty, disgusting council flat in King’s Norton which I looked at once and never, ever set foot in again.’¹²⁰ This experience is suggestive of the local variation in availability and quality of social housing which was characteristic of the 1980s.¹²¹ As a result of rejecting the council’s offer, Malika moved back in with her mother, but this was only a temporary stay as the problems she encountered before when living with her mother persisted: ‘During the ten months that I lived with her I didn’t unpack.’¹²² Thus, Malika’s housing situation as a young unmarried mother was highly unstable and changeable, transitioning between family, the voluntary sector and social housing. Her next move was to a hostel run by the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Watford. Like her time in the Mother and Baby Home, Malika described living in the YWCA hostel as a positive arrangement. The following extract reveals the regional diversity of voluntary provision for the homeless in the 1980s, the demand for ‘independent’ living away from parents by young, homeless women and the potential social support of such living arrangements:

¹¹⁸ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Malpass and Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice*, p. 79.

¹²² MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

When I moved to Watford I started off living in the YWCA, which was interesting because in Birmingham they didn't have a very good reputation. They were seen as places for 'down and outs,' whereas in Watford, they were like little palaces and girls were queuing-up to get a room in the YWCA because it gave them independence. I got a room down there because I had a job and I needed somewhere to live, starting-off with one room and then eventually moving on to a room with its own bathroom, which was wonderful and a shared kitchen. It was nice because it gave you company with other girls who were from all over the country. It gave you experiences and friends as well.¹²³

After living in the hostel, Malika and her son lived in a series of council houses and flats, eventually settling in Birmingham in a house which Malika describes as meeting her expectations of standard amenities: 'A very nice two-bedroom, centrally-heated house.'¹²⁴

Samantha also drew on support from the voluntary sector for accommodation when she and her daughter moved into a women's refuge to escape domestic violence. A report by the Women's Aid Federation in England in the 1980s found that demand for refuges was far out-stripping supply, leading to overcrowding and women and children being turned away.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the conditions inside refuges were found to be poor.¹²⁶ Samantha describes living in a very small room where she slept with her daughter on a stained mattress. After a brief period in the refuge, Samantha decided to apply for council accommodation. The following line demonstrates a sense of entitlement to acquiring the means to independent living: "I thought: 'No, I'm going to get my own place,' so I went to the council."¹²⁷ Samantha's experience of accessing permanent housing from her local authority was relatively straightforward, but the Women's Aid Federation found that nearly half of abused women in refuges in the 1980s were not allocated permanent housing by local authorities, despite improvements under The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act.¹²⁸ Thus women's deployment of rights did not simply lead to access. Fortunately, Samantha was presented with a range of housing locations by

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Women's Aid Federation England, *Leaving Violent Men: A Study of Refuges and Housing for Abused Women* (Bristol, 1981), p. xiv.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. xiv.

¹²⁷ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

¹²⁸ 'The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, 1977 had improved women's chances of finding permanent accommodation. However, some women still experienced serious problems. 43 % of applications to local authorities had been refused accommodation as homeless persons, sometimes because the Act was being ignored, but mainly due to restrictive interpretations which some authorities place on the Act [...] Only 44 % of women moved into council property after leaving the refuge, although twice as many had applied.' Women's Aid Federation England, *Leaving Violent Men*, p. xviii.

her local council and opted to stay on the same housing estate she had lived on during her marriage (the Kelvin estate) in order to remain near her family who resided in the same area:

I went to the council and they said, ‘right, you can either have a house at Pittsmore,’ which I thought, ‘not really!’ [laughs] or I could have gone to Norfolk Park tower blocks or another flat on Kelvin, so I thought, ‘well, I might as well have Kelvin because at least I’ve got my friends around me to support and you know, my mum just down the road and everything’ and my brother was still (my youngest brother) was living on Kelvin by that time as well.¹²⁹

Samantha’s repeated reference to ‘Kelvin’ to denote the housing estate she lived on as a married woman and a lone mother, illustrates her attachment to the estate which she describes as a beneficial community. The council flat she lived in as a lone mother met with her aspiration to be able to provide her children with their own bedrooms, something she had lacked as a child, sharing a bedroom with her mother: ‘I never had my own privacy and I wanted them to be able to have that, have their own, their own space.’¹³⁰ Amongst interviewees who lived on housing estates as lone mothers in the 1980s, descriptions of estate life include both critical and affirmative observations. Yvonne had been a homeowner during marriage. Her move to a council flat as a lone mother was difficult to accept:

You know, when I first moved in here, I mean, as I said, my marriage had broken-up. I’d lost the shop, you know, and I had a newborn baby. To come here! And they put me on the ninth floor and I just hated this place. I thought, this is only temporary and I refused to unpack. I wouldn’t unpack anything [...] I’m here temporarily for thirteen years!¹³¹

Yvonne’s description of life on the estate is conflicted. She recalls the problems of a lack of privacy with neighbours being ‘over friendly’ as well as an absence of solidarity, finally suggesting ‘it’s got its pluses and bonuses.’¹³² Yvonne set up a youth group on her estate, indicative of her attachment to the local community. Alison Ravetz in her review of the limited research available about the life experiences of council housing tenants, suggests:

Estates continued, however, to generate strong loyalty and attachment – often beyond the credence of middle-class observers, who saw only their worst points [...] The enduring loyalty that attached even to the worst estates is found to

¹²⁹ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ MMB, C900/05119, Yvonne Davis.

¹³² Ibid.

often be ignored. Typically, residents explained away any problems by saying, 'There's good and bad all over' – in effect an acknowledgement that stigmatization was a crude caricature of a living environment that was in many ways satisfactory.¹³³

Furthermore, council housing was more than 'a roof' for Susan McGrath who described the house she brought up her four children in as 'home,' despite council ownership:

Me home's me home. Everything I've got – well, it's not my home, it's like, it's council housing, but it's *my* home – everything in it, it's mine. It's what I've bought, I've struggled, I've paid for and I value. I look after it, because I do know what it's like to go without.¹³⁴

Such a statement about the security of 'home' regardless of ownership, conflicts with the political assessment of the council tenant's position voiced by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The following quote by Thatcher implies that the head of household was uniformly a male-breadwinner ('master'). It runs contrary to the expressions of attachment by lone mothers to their council houses in this study. Thatcher claims that property-ownership legitimated and ensured family life and that council tenants were eager to be released from the neighbourhoods in which they lived:

The perpetuation of large Council-owned fiefdoms means that millions of families are not master in their own home; have no chance to acquire a capital asset for themselves or their children, are unable to move, unless they can find a suitable exchange – and that happens all too rarely.¹³⁵

'Right to buy' in relation to social housing was a policy which overwhelmingly benefitted the nuclear and couple-headed households. We have seen throughout this study as a result of lone mothers' low incomes and lack of capital, their levels of property ownership lagged well behind the national trend. In the 1980s owner-occupation rates for lone mothers were half the rate of other households.¹³⁶ In London single parents

¹³³ Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture, The History of a Social Experiment* (London, 2001), p. 172-173. On this subject see also, Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London, 2008).

¹³⁴ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹³⁵ Cited in Ewan Green, *Thatcher* (London, 2006), p. 130.

¹³⁶ 'Although the proportion of owner-occupiers among lone mothers has grown, it has remained at half that for other households which between 1980 and 1990 grew from 60 per cent to 76 per cent.' Land, 'Housing and Lone Mothers', pp. 231-232.

made up 2 per cent of those who bought their council houses in the 1980s.¹³⁷ Those interviewees who did become property owners, apart from Catherine who was the only unmarried mother to acquire a mortgage in her mid-twenties as a single woman prior to pregnancy, were able to buy their homes after divorce settlements. Wendy eventually responded to the government's 'Right to Buy' policy, purchasing her house on a council estate. However, for Wendy and Liz, property ownership followed an initial period of being housed by the council. Thus, housing trajectories amongst this cohort as we have seen in previous chapters, involved multiple accommodations and housing types, there was rarely a straight line into social housing.

Living with kin still featured as an essential and sometimes desired housing option. Clark's study of young single mothers found most lived in the family home in the 1980s. For those interviewees in her sample who were under sixteen, they had no recourse to turn to the state. Those who could apply for council housing were aware of lengthy waiting lists and most felt they had received no priority treatment when they approached housing officials.¹³⁸ Thus, although Clark found young single mothers had an awareness of 'rights,' this was tempered by an equal awareness of barriers to access.¹³⁹ Furthermore, many of her participants favoured remaining in their family home largely because of the support offered to them by their mothers, as the following quotes illustrate:

I want to be as close to me mum as I can. (Laura, 17)

I'd like to eventually move into a house, but for me first few years a flat would do. Me mum's not really in a rush to get me out. I'm planning to go to college next year, anyway. She'll look after the baby for me. (Kay, 16)¹⁴⁰

The evidence presented by Clark's sample accords with the findings of this study which has demonstrated that across the post-war period, remaining in the family home was an arrangement which provided more than 'a roof' for many lone mothers, with grandmothers providing essential care. Family was an important source of housing for lone mothers in this cohort. Lois moved back in with her parents when she became pregnant in her first year at university and with her parents' support she was able to raise her daughter and eventually complete a degree: 'I went back home with my daughter and

¹³⁷ 'Research conducted by the London Research Centre (1989) showed that households buying their homes under the right-to-buy legislation in London were overwhelmingly couples and couples with children (88 per cent in total).' Sexty, *Women Losing Out*, p. 61.

¹³⁸ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 6.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

they were absolutely superb. I mean if it hadn't been for my parents, I couldn't have got my degree.¹⁴¹ Lois' mother took early retirement so that she was able to provide childcare for her grandchild, enabling Lois to continue in employment and undertake a university course. As has been argued throughout this study, the separated or divorced lone mother was equally as dependent on kin for housing as young, unmarried mothers. Despite the opening-up of social housing to lone mothers in the 1980s, family still provided a safety-net for the homeless wife. For Wendy, who had been thrown out of her marital home by her husband, her immediate and only option was to live with her mother and subsequently to turn to her sister for temporary accommodation: 'I had nowhere to go except my mother. It was very difficult living with my mother after all the time that I'd been away, so then I went and spent some time with my sister.'¹⁴² The availability of social housing for lone mothers enabled women such as Wendy, Kathryn and Susan McGrath to escape the problems of previous decades which could accompany living with kin, such as overcrowding and inter-generational conflict. Kathryn's assertion of her right to be independently housed, allowed her freedom from the poverty of overcrowding she had grown-up with in Liverpool:

I remember my dad saying, 'right, it's time to come home,' and you know, 'come and live with us.' But that wasn't the answer because I had Dominique who was two and a half and I was about to have this baby and I just thought, 'mum's got enough with her own five without me with another two.' It was my bed and I was going to lie on it, if you like. I decided that I was going to bring them up on my own and I did.¹⁴³

Susan McGrath lived with her mother for three years and describes their relationship as fraught with arguments, a problem which was eventually responded to by a social worker who enabled her to live independently:

Well, I was living at my mum's. I lived there for three years. It was hard; we'd have our arguments. I was going to group therapy on Borough Road and every time I'd go it was the same story and in the end my social worker at the time, he got me my house.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ MMB, C900/07621, Lois Carnie.

¹⁴² MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

¹⁴³ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁴⁴ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

Maternal Economy

The relative improvements in social security entitlement for one-parent families during the 1970s carried over into the first-half of the 1980s when further changes were made to the welfare system which were of benefit to lone mothers: the maternity grant (established in 1965) was made non-contributory in 1982, helping young lone mothers in particular. A tapered disregard was introduced for lone-parents on SB, which was more generous than for other unemployed claimants, and the lone-parent's child benefit was increased at a greater rate in the early 1980s than the standard child benefit.¹⁴⁵ Hilary Land argues that lone mothers were under-targeted in terms of benefit reductions in the early 1980s.¹⁴⁶ Some benefit changes brought improvements to their circumstances. SB was replaced by Income Support (IS) in 1986, but one-parent families were still recognized within this new system as qualifying for a separate premium. In fact, the premium continued as long as a child remained in full-time education, whereas under the SB scheme the premium had ended at sixteen. However, by the end of the decade, political attention had turned to the substantial increase in the numbers of lone mothers' claiming state benefits, an increase which Land argues was unanticipated by the government.¹⁴⁷ Thus effort to rein in such public expenditure became paramount. In the late 1980s, the responsibilities of fathers were brought into sharp focus by policy-makers who saw state spending on one-parent families as having become a substitute for paternal obligation. In 1988, Family Credit (FC) replaced Family Income Support and an attempt was made to include this transfer in a father's earnings rather than a benefit book sent to the mother as with FIS, but this proposal failed due to lobbying by campaigning groups. Unlike FIS, the children of FC claimants would no longer be eligible for free school meals or other food welfare schemes and home-owners would not be eligible for housing benefit. Under the NAB, the SBC and the DSS, it had been policy to assume absent fathers would meet the obligations of second families before first families, but this assumption was reversed in 1991 when the Child Support Act (CSA) was introduced, obliging father's to take principle financial responsibility for the maintenance of children and ex-partners from a first family through liability for IS paid by the state. The Secretary of State's power to initiate a maintenance order on behalf of an IS claimant was strengthened by the Act and in cases where women refused to have contact with absent fathers, without 'good cause,' they could have their benefits reduced. This policy

¹⁴⁵ Land, 'Social Security and Lone Mothers', pp. 186-187.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

trajectory for the 1980s is reflected in Kathryn's recollection of her time as a lone mother in the 1980s. She recalls how under FIS she received a contribution towards her income, which supplemented her earnings as well as leaving her eligible for housing benefit and free school meals. This set of state benefits assisted Kathryn in being able to live independently of requests for maintenance from her violent ex-husband, before being contracted at the end of the decade:

It was a kind of scheme and it was great because I could get FIS at the same time and me rent would be paid and in those days, the kids could still get free dinners when you were getting FIS (like you can't get now). It was great being a single parent in the eighties, I think, because there were things that you could get that would help you along. You know, so you could work, not like today, where if you work they can't get free dinners or they can't get the school grants so it doesn't actually help, whereas in those days it did and it was great for me.¹⁴⁸

The 1980s saw a significant rise in the number of lone mothers claiming state support. By the middle of the decade over half of lone-parent families in the UK were in receipt of SB.¹⁴⁹ However, half of lone mothers were also engaged in paid work, a large number combining part-time work with state benefits.¹⁵⁰ Most of the interviewees in this cohort combined employment with state benefits. Susan McGrath appears to be the only interviewee who drew income entirely from benefits. Carolyn generated income solely from employment without any supplement from the state due to having established a career before marriage, which she was able to easily re-enter. The majority of interviewees who combined state benefits with employment often had more than one job and worked part-time, reflecting the growing presence of women as part-time workers in the economy during the 1980s and the increase in more 'casual' forms of employment, discussed in Chapter Five. Like married women in the 1980s, exiting and returning to employment was influenced by the age of lone mothers' children. When she left her husband, Susan McGrath had four children, some of pre-school age which influenced her decision to draw income solely from benefits. Emma Clark's interviewees articulated the desire to mother full-time during their child's early years: 'Most seemed content with their role as full-time mothers, wanting to be there during the early, formative years.'¹⁵¹ A report commissioned by the Department for Social Security in

¹⁴⁸ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁴⁹ 'Well over half of all lone mothers now claim [SB] (50 per cent in 1982; 57 per cent in 1954).' Heather Joshi, 'Obstacles and Opportunities for Lone-parents', p. 127.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁵¹ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 16.

1991 found two-thirds of lone mothers claiming income support did not want to return to work with young children, but like married women, anticipated returning to the labour market once their children were beyond their early years.¹⁵² Childcare arrangements were decisive in shaping interviewees' orientation towards the labour market. Informal arrangements were still significant amongst this cohort. Grandmothers provided regular childcare, particularly in the cases of Kathryn and Lois who were living with their parents as unmarried mothers. Yvonne's extended family looked after her children as they had done during her marriage. Arrangements with friends who also had pre-school children were mentioned, as in the case of Farida Anderson: 'I've got a very, very good friend of mine, who's like a sister to me and we sort of made these plans around: she could have one and I could have one.'¹⁵³ However, for women such as Susan McClaren, who had no family members living nearby, the limited availability and cost of formal childcare facilities proved a barrier to employment:

There was no proper after-care, you couldn't have a child and work full-time, not satisfactorily, and you still cannot do it today, not when you're by yourself. Now, I'm talking about women like myself, not about women with extended families, I can see it works for them, it must be marvelous.¹⁵⁴

One study found the costs of childcare in the 1980s amounted to a quarter to a half of a lone mother's income.¹⁵⁵ For those women with school-age children, the role of state schooling in providing relief from a mother's sole responsibility for childcare was significant as it has been across our period. The pressure of juggling employment with motherhood often turned on the anxiety of being able to coordinate leaving work with picking-up children from nursery or school: "The clock saying, kind of, 'tick, tick, tick,' the nursery's going to be closed in a minute. It was a constant period of stress."¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, women's employment status *prior* to entering lone motherhood shaped their capacity to take-up paid work. Farida and Malika were able to re-enter employment, having established steady jobs before their pregnancies as young women, but for those interviewees whose employment had ceased during marriage, or who had experienced unstable employment prior to or during marriage, generating income through paid work

¹⁵² Jane Bradshaw and Jane Millar, *Lone-parent Families in the UK*, Department for Social Security Research Report, No. 6 (London, 1991).

¹⁵³ MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

¹⁵⁴ MMB, C900/01584, Susan McClaren.

¹⁵⁵ 'One study found that 27 per cent of lone-parents and one-third of couples were spending between one-quarter and one-half of the mother's take-home pay on childcare.' Land, 'Lone Mothers, Employment and Childcare', p. 271.

¹⁵⁶ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

was more difficult. Kathryn described employment as a necessity which she had consistently combined with motherhood inside and outside of marriage. However, paid work as a lone mother did little to raise her standard of living due to the poor pay attached to the casual cleaning jobs she took on:

I went right back to work. Karen was only a week old and I think there was a place called 'Leo's' and I was scrubbing the floor in 'Leo's' and the mop was bigger than me and the bucket was bigger than me! But I had to coz by the time the DHSS had worked my money out it was something like thirteen pounds a week for me and my two children [...] I was in a desperate situation.¹⁵⁷

The problem of unemployment during the 1980s and poor rates of remuneration for women is referred to by Susan McGrath as a disincentive to taking on paid work, a reality which she sees as belying the assumption behind explicit work-incentive based policies towards lone mothers in the 1990s:

I don't agree with these, you know, MPs sitting in their big posh houses, telling us what we should and shouldn't live on, like. Dictating, you know, 'you will go out and work.' They'd give me a job I'd go and do it, if it's worth our while.¹⁵⁸

Susan's comment exposes the sense of a gulf between the classes in the 1980s. Her assertion that work would have to be 'worth our while' encapsulates the position of a working-class mother evaluating the cost as well as the benefit of paid work in a volatile economy, where women were concentrated in low-paid positions. Jane Millar reflects on the nature of many lone mothers' income packages in the early 1990s. Her breakdown of expenditure reveals the complexity of income composition when compared to earlier generations of lone mothers who drew the majority of their income from wages:

At the lower earnings levels income is very complex. For a lone mother on fairly typical part-time earnings of about £65 gross per week, total income is made up almost equally of the three main sources: net earnings (33 per cent), child support (27 per cent) and family credit (22 per cent) with child benefit contributing 13 per cent and housing benefit about six per cent. So if any one of these either goes unclaimed or is for some reason unpaid, this will leave a large gap in total income.¹⁵⁹

The only aspect of the income package which was guaranteed in the 1980s and early 1990s was Child Benefit. All other components were interdependent. If Child Support

¹⁵⁷ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁵⁸ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁵⁹ Jane Millar, 'Poor mothers and absent fathers: support for lone-parents in comparative perspective' in Jones and Millar, *The Politics of the Family*, pp. 55-56.

from fathers went up, or alternatively wages increased, Family Credit would go down. Fathers amongst our cohort made very limited contributions, and sometimes none at all. Decisions about income therefore involved a fine balancing act for lone mothers during the 1980s. As Clark found, the decision to limit labour market participation and rely on state benefits was seen as preferable amongst her interviewees, faced with insecure employment: 'A regular, secure income, albeit small, was preferable to the uncertainties of unskilled or semi-skilled work in the current labour market.'¹⁶⁰ Many of Clark's participants were re-entering education in order to enhance employment prospects, as did over half the women in our cohort. Interviewees spoke of the importance of developing a 'career.' Yvonne and Kathryn both undertook degrees in order to become teachers and Liz became a manager in social services after gaining her degree. Other women in the sample did vocational courses in subjects such as Information Technology and Nursery Nursing. Interviewees also took on voluntary work, not only as a way into future paid employment, but also in order to acquire the means to run a car or to gather some extra income through expenses, which could help the family economy:

I did voluntary work, which didn't pay any money so the government couldn't knock me any money off for that. But what it did pay was expenses so it would also, not only would it pay for me to just keep the car on the road, but sometimes at the end of the month there might be a bit extra that was going to pay towards the bills and things like that.¹⁶¹

Examples of severe hardship appear amongst this cohort: Samantha could not afford to heat her house, and with no bed to sleep in, slept on the floor. Wendy was left destitute after her husband threw her out of the marital home and describes the barrenness of the council house she occupied after living with family:

I had nothing. I didn't have a knife and fork to eat my meals with; I didn't have a plate to eat my meals off. I didn't have a cooker to cook my meals on. I didn't have a bed to sleep in. All I had was the clothes I stood in.¹⁶²

Samantha contrasts the poverty she endured as a lone mother in the 1980s with the conditions of poverty she experienced as the child of a lone mother in the 1960s, describing the conditions of her childhood as distinctly harsher: 'I can remember times when all we lived on were potatoes [...] we'd get up in the morning and there'd be a

¹⁶⁰ Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 28.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

food parcel on the stop [doorstep].¹⁶³ However, aspects of her childhood experience as the daughter of a lone mother were consistent with her adult experience of lone motherhood. Samantha, like her mother and many women in this chapter, operated sacrificial maternal economies, denying themselves food and clothes and restricting spending on modest recreational activities, such as visiting the local pub, in order to buffer their children against the extreme effects of poverty:

I mean we didn't walk around with holes in our shoes or you know, nothing like that, again my mum put us first rather than herself [...] Yeah, I mean there's lots of things that I'm desperate for, but you know, they come first. I'm here to look after them and they're the priority, they come first.¹⁶⁴

Me kids have never gone without. They don't go without food, if I have to sit in every night and not go out for a drink, then I sit in. Nine times out of ten, it's friends who've took me out.¹⁶⁵

Following on from the research undertaken by Townsend in the 1960s, the *Breadline Britain* survey set out to provide an assessment of what people living in the 1980s needed in order to be above the 'breadline.' There was consensus amongst two thirds of respondents on the following 'necessities':

- Enough money for public transport
- A warm water-proof coat
- Three meals a day for children
- Self-contained accommodation
- Two pairs of all-weather shoes
- A bedroom for every child over 10 of different sex
- A refrigerator
- Toys for children
- Carpets
- Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas
- A roast joint or its equivalent once a week
- A washing machine¹⁶⁶

Such necessities have been consistently difficult for lone mothers to acquire across our time period and during the 1980s, many of the interviewees still fell short of being able to realize these necessities especially when children were young. David Vincent states of the economic context of the 1970s and 1980s: 'Luxuries became necessities at just the

¹⁶³ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁶⁶ Joanna Mack and Stuart Lansley, *Poor Britain* (London, 1985), p. 55.

point when it was impossible to afford them, and necessities became more expensive when it was essential to economise.¹⁶⁷ We see this reflected in the difficulty of affording food, fuel and clothing amongst interviewees in this cohort and the recourse to credit in order to make such necessary purchases. As was the case in the previous chapter, interviewees recalled struggling with being able to afford the latest consumer goods for teenagers. In the 1980s, being able to purchase such items assumed even greater significance and made the difference between feeling ‘poor’ and feeling included in the relative living standards of others:

I don’t think they did without anything that they actually needed, but things they wanted, you know, slightly different.¹⁶⁸

I mean they’ve got named clothes, but I don’t go out every day. I can’t go out like some people can and buy them every day. They get them, to me that’s their treat at Christmas.¹⁶⁹

Like women in previous decades, not being able to afford a holiday was frequently mentioned by women in this cohort as contributing to a sense of exclusion from contemporary living standards.

Consistent with women throughout this study, the interviewees in the 1980s ‘managed’ poverty through various strategies, often expressing a sense of self-possession and achievement over their capacity to manage strained domestic economies. Frequently they drew on memories of mothers in working-class families who managed income and expenditure on a weekly basis:

I get me money on a Monday. I pay all the debts. What I’ve got left I struggle with, I can do it, but I can only cope on what I have left because I can budget, I’ve learnt a lot from me mum. I’ve got a lot of me mum’s own values [...] It’s the way I was brought-up, I’ve learnt that off me mum and I can budget me money.¹⁷⁰

We’ve never had money, never as a child. I’ve never had money so I don’t know what I’d do with it. You just get used to not having it and you manage and you scrimp and save and cut corners and make do.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, p. 191.

¹⁶⁸ MMB, C900/19556, Liz Mackenzie.

¹⁶⁹ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ MMB, C900/14626, Samantha Walker.

Family and friends made important financial contributions, whether in the form of loans or purchases for children. As teenagers became able to enter the labour market they would often make an important contribution to the family economy. For instance, Kathryn's daughters contributed in equal part to the family income whilst Katherine studied to become a teacher: 'We shared everything, the three of us [...] We shared the home, we shared the cleaning, we shared the shopping. We shared everything.'¹⁷² Catherine would acquire the consumer goods desired by her son, such as trainers, by searching out second-hand goods: 'There's ways an means. I've been rooting around second-hand stalls, looked in the papers for cheap bargains and we've got it. And so what if it's not brand new, you know. No one knows at the end of the day.'¹⁷³

One distinction appears amongst the women in this chapter compared to previous chapters and that is the use of formal credit facilities, especially to buy Christmas presents for children and new clothes. Susan McGrath, Samantha and Wendy all spoke of incurring debt through the use of credit catalogues. Access to such forms of credit allowed for large purchases to be spread out over time and for the impact of irregular earnings to be mitigated: 'I found catalogues very useful because you didn't have to pay out an awful lot of money in one go.'¹⁷⁴ National mail-order catalogues were twice as widely used by those in poverty during the 1980s as older systems of clothing cheques.¹⁷⁵ Women's increased mention of credit during this decade contrasts with previous generations when single women found access to such finance difficult and reflected a general rise in levels of consumer credit from the 1970s onwards.¹⁷⁶ The increased cost of necessities such as fuel, food and clothing became even more inflated in price as lone mothers, such as Susan McGrath, purchased these on credit, and subsequent debt then featured as a priority expenditure on receiving weekly benefits. During this decade, single parents became highly represented amongst those struggling with commitments to creditors.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁷³ MMB, C900/08563, Catherine Parker.

¹⁷⁴ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

¹⁷⁵ Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, p. 186.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁷⁷ 'Four single-parent families in ten had at least one problem debt at the end of the eighties, and one in seven were in serious trouble, with three or more outstanding commitments.' Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, p. 188.

Social Membership and Identity

As discussed above, kin provided essential support in terms of housing, childcare and financial contributions for lone mothers, and friends were also frequently recalled as offering assistance. However, incidences of rejection by family were also mentioned in this cohort, particularly by those interviewees from minority ethnic backgrounds who became pregnant outside of marriage. Malika's mother and extended family marginalized her for a time after she became pregnant at eighteen, largely due to their religious affiliation with a Christian sect, the Seventh Day Adventist Church. In her case, friends offered relief from initial familial ostracism and were an ongoing source of support: 'My friends were fine, they're all around the same age as me and they just saw it as something exciting, one of us having a baby.'¹⁷⁸ Some interviewees spoke of a generalized lack of support as lone mothers and the subsequent isolation which accompanied their self-reliance: 'I've felt very isolated; I've suffered with depression, you know, just by trying to get through everyday life [...] Having to go through it all alone.'¹⁷⁹ For some women in the sample who raised children without support from kin, a narrative of decline surrounding extended family support in the late twentieth century was conveyed as leading to a greater sense of isolation for lone mothers:

In my situation, I really don't have a lot of family help. It must be different when family, you know, when single parents do have family help. In the olden days when extended family expected to help out, I think now we're living in an insular society where there's lots of isolation.¹⁸⁰

Catherine's sense of remoteness from kinship support was the result of geographical distance between her family members. Although growing geographical distance between relatives was a feature of late-twentieth century society, support across the extended family had not become a feature of the past.¹⁸¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, many lone mothers, particularly in the early years of a child's life, lived in three-generational households with their parent/parents.¹⁸²

The majority of interviewees in the 1980s identified as 'single mothers' or 'single parents.' For some interviewees, such as Wendy, this identification conferred a sense of pride and autonomy:

¹⁷⁸ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

¹⁷⁹ MMB, C900/08563, Catherine Parker.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, p. 190.

¹⁸² Allan and Crow, *Families, Households and Society*, p. 42.

I've been a single parent since 1987. My son is now fourteen and I have managed to bring him up single-handedly and I must say, I'm quite proud of what I've done. I've made an awful lot of sacrifices and I wouldn't change anything.¹⁸³

As was suggested in the previous chapter, interviewees in the 1980s engaged in what Mike Savage has termed 'class talk,' demonstrating knowledge of the politics of classification surrounding lone motherhood.¹⁸⁴ Kathryn referred to the category 'single parent,' as both problematic and enabling. She felt it carried both negative connotations as well as conferring solidarity with other lone mothers over social rights:

Just left it unsaid, never classed myself as a 'single parent.' It was only when I was fighting for them, I used to say: 'yeah, I'm a single parent!' Because they get a bad deal, the press is terrible and people have no idea of the struggle, not only financial, but making decisions and when things go wrong. You are totally alone. You're the one that picks up all the pieces by yourself.¹⁸⁵

Some interviewees queried the universality of such connotations as self-reliance and solitariness, which the term 'single parent' evoked. Karen was the only interviewee amongst the cohort to use the term 'lone-parent.' She problematised its suggestion of 'loneliness' and more generally queried categorization in relation to an individual's life story, asserting her own tendency to move between categories:

People have their own preference really on language. It depends who's saying it when and what they're talking about to be quite honest. Sometimes I choose to talk about myself as being 'single,' but I am a 'lone-parent.' 'Lone' also brings-up this image of 'alone' as well and you're not necessarily alone when you're a lone-parent and so it's very important to get it right.¹⁸⁶

Now I am single and I have a son, but I don't see myself as a 'single parent.' Mainly because his father has always been there, throughout his life [...] His family have always been there, his parents, his three sisters and his brother have always been constant figures in my son's life, Plus there's my two older sisters as well, plus my brother-in-law, so I've never felt as if it's just me and my son.¹⁸⁷

Those interviewees from ethnic minority backgrounds introduced particular ambiguities surrounding identification with the category 'single parent/mother.' Farida adopted the term 'unmarried mother' to describe her pregnancy as a single woman in her early

¹⁸³ MMB, C900/18554, Wendy Turner.

¹⁸⁴ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 242.

¹⁸⁵ MMB, C900/10059, Kathryn Riley.

¹⁸⁶ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

¹⁸⁷ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

twenties: 'I just felt it must be really uncomfortable for my dad, you know, to see me, an unmarried mother.'¹⁸⁸ Farida is the only interviewee who became pregnant outside of marriage in this cohort to use the term 'unmarried mother' in reference to herself. As we have seen, this term became outmoded in the 1970s, when the term 'single parent' gained greater usage. Farida's use of this phrase attaches stigma to her condition which is perhaps reflective of her religious and cultural background as a British Muslim. Malika felt her ethnicity as an African Caribbean woman was regularly assumed to equate with lone motherhood and took issue with the homogenizing effect of categories used to describe lone mothers:

People tend to assume I am [a single parent] because of my African Caribbean origin and people tend to say, 'are there a lot of people like you in your community?' which I suppose there is but we're all individuals and we all have different stories and different backgrounds.¹⁸⁹

Yvonne sidelined the term 'single parent' in favour of the notion of a lone mothers as 'heads of household,' a category more readily used in the Caribbean where Yvonne spent her childhood and where lone motherhood was familiar, not exceptional:

In the Caribbean it tends to be, how do you say? What's the word I'm looking for? It's more the woman, it's the women who are in charge. I think because there are so many women who are single parents, so consequently, women head the household.¹⁹⁰

Another feature of social support amongst this generation of interviewees was the high frequency of group membership attached to single parenthood. Farida became a lone mother after her boyfriend was sent to prison and she found herself responsible for his welfare in prison as well her children:

There wasn't any support and obviously we weren't classified as living together so I actually didn't have any part in his life, besides having these two children. I was stuck with like the children and having to support, almost like, it seems like another child, a third child in prison.¹⁹¹

In response to such circumstances, Farida set-up a support group for women (married and unmarried) with partners or ex-partners in prison. This group initially met in her

¹⁸⁸ MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

¹⁸⁹ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

¹⁹⁰ MMB, C900/05119, Yvonne Davis.

¹⁹¹ MMB, C900/05561, Farida Anderson.

own home, but grew to become a registered charity called 'Partners of Prisoners.' Interviewees mention either belonging to or establishing social groups or charities in their communities, which acknowledged solidarity over the circumstances of lone motherhood. Susan McGrath ran a 'parents group' with other mothers on her estate. Carolyn joined a 'singles group' providing social events for single people (many of whom she described as divorced women). Yvonne set-up a children's group on her estate and Karen became part of the one-parent families support group, 'Gingerbread.' This narrative of solidarity through support groups contrasts with the testimonies of widows in Chapter Two, where the absence of 'groups' for lone mothers was referred to as a distinguishing feature of social invisibility.

As discussed above, participants in Emma Clark's study referred to their 'rights,' and did not consider themselves to be a 'problem' group.¹⁹² This observation marks this generation out very distinctively from women in the 1950s and 1960s. Clark found some of the young mothers in her sample felt their respectability was questioned as a result of their pregnancies, but this did not amount to a strong sense of social exclusion.¹⁹³ Thus despite political rhetoric which de-legitimised young single mothers' claims to social support and pathologised their condition, Clark's interviewees expressed a much stronger sense of social legitimacy compared to earlier generations: "Most were stoic and resigned and regarded the occasional 'funny look' or 'snide remarks' as only a peripheral aspect of their lives."¹⁹⁴ Motherhood was central to their sense of identity – 'I'm a mum,'¹⁹⁵ the proud refrain – and denoted a transition into maturity which interviewees referred to as 'growing-up fast.'¹⁹⁶ Such a perspective strongly subverts the political rhetoric in the late 1980s which associated teenage motherhood with abnormal development and delinquency. Women in our cohort recalled public censure in relation to being lone mothers, but they also mounted counter-arguments and rejected derisive associations. Catherine and Karen challenged the suggestion that lone motherhood was a 'choice' borne of selfish individualism:

Well, I would say that, in the majority of cases, amongst the people who I know, anyway, that we didn't 'choose' to be single parents. Most of us were with

¹⁹² Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 18.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

¹⁹⁵ Betty, 18, in Clark, *Young Single Mothers Today*, p. 28.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

partners who didn't fulfill their obligations, really, or decided to do their own thing.¹⁹⁷

People believe that lone-parents put themselves in that position, that it's a 'life choice' to put yourself in such a difficult position so therefore that influences people's attitudes...¹⁹⁸

Furthermore, both women recalled the Conservative government stigmatizing lone mothers as social security claimants: 'I don't think it helps when the government tells us that we're pariahs on the state.'¹⁹⁹ Karen felt the government in the 1980s 'chastised lone-parents.'²⁰⁰ The most detailed and vivid description of stigmatization and social ostracism amongst the testimonies in this cohort came from Malika, who found herself 'de-fellowshipped' by her church and family:

Once I got pregnant [...] I began to feel what it was like to be on the other side of the fence. The people that we'd heard about every week: the sinners, the ones who do wrong things the ones who won't be accepted into heaven, the ones who are less worthy than us, the people who are down there somewhere. I became one of those people and it wasn't a very nice experience [...] Becoming pregnant outside of marriage is like the worst sin.²⁰¹

Despite being excluded from her usual church activities, such as singing in the choir, Malika resisted the church's attempt to exclude her by returning to worship and defying the congregation and church leadership:

I took everybody by surprise and I carried on going to church all the way through my pregnancy, which was probably the most difficult thing I've ever done in my whole life [...] I still did it because I felt I had a right to do it.²⁰²

Malika's defiance against the church contrasts with testimonies in the 1950s and 1960s, which detailed condemnation from families and the church and interviewees' subsequent acquiescence. Malika's reference to her 'right' to return to church as a young, never-married mother, demonstrates resilience through assertion of her social rights. Thus, despite political rhetoric in the 1980s which de-legitimised lone mothers' rights, and actual retrenchment by the welfare state, women in this chapter have demonstrated the resilience of entitlement and their stake within the 'social.' Susan McGrath's last words

¹⁹⁷ MMB, C900/08563, Catherine Parker.

¹⁹⁸ MMB, C900/10056, Karen Chazen.

¹⁹⁹ MMB, C900/08563, Catherine Parker.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ MMB, C900/18534, Malika Ahmed.

²⁰² Ibid.

epitomize the distance between her generation in the 1980s and those before her who saw themselves outside the welfare state: ‘Well, at the end of the day, I suppose, well, where would we be without the welfare state?’²⁰³

IV. Cohabitation, Marriage and Remarriage

Two of the interviewees who became unmarried mothers in the 1980s went on to marry in the 1990s, Lois and Malika. Kathryn had been in a partnership for eleven years at the point of being interviewed in 1999, but was not cohabiting. None of the divorced interviewees remarried.

V. Conclusion

Returning to the concepts of individualism, separatism and choice which were noted in the introduction to this chapter as aspects of late-modern relationships, the interviewees in this cohort demonstrate the continued significance of ‘partnering’ through aspirations towards marriage as a sustaining relationship and in some cases the continued material ‘pull’ of marriage or cohabitation for single women. Sociological surveys in the 1980s found that ‘most people continued to hold in high regard the concept of a successful marriage.’²⁰⁴ This study argues that marriage breakdown in this decade resided in the implications of the social and economic division of labour and less in idealist notions of partnership and intimacy or individualistic notions of self-determination. Against a social climate in which divorce carried minimal stigma, which had seen a decline in inter-generational conflict and in which women’s presence in the labour market had become more significant, wives’ unwillingness to shoulder an unequal division of labour where men were economically inactive and/or detrimental to familial and personal welfare, meant they exited marriage more readily than previous generations. The growth of the divorced mother as head of household in the 1970s and 1980s gave single pregnant women, cohabiting or non-cohabiting, the spur to avoid marriage or partnership if this implied an unmanageable double burden or endangered personal welfare. In this sense, The Family Law Reform Act in 1987, which equalised the rights of legitimate and illegitimate children and discredited the category ‘illegitimate,’ can be seen in part to be the product of divorced women’s historical agency in the second-half of the twentieth-century.

²⁰³ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath

²⁰⁴ Finch and Morgan, ‘Marriage in the 1980s’, p. 98.

Amongst our cohort and contemporary sociological surveys of young, single mothers, the frequency of desisting or limiting birth control usage in an era of increased contraceptive availability problematised assumptions about the value of planned motherhood. To some extent this observation suggests a conflict with the aims of the WLM, an element of which claimed reproduction and motherhood were the antithesis of women's liberation.²⁰⁵ Young single mothers in this decade overturned the feminist language of 'choice' and the idea that maternity, even when unplanned, was oppositional to selfhood.

The 1980s are seen as a period of stigmatization of the single mother by political figures and a reduction in state welfare. However, the first half of the decade was distinct in the level of take-up amongst lone mothers of social security benefits and social housing. The rights which women in the previous chapter began to speak of, were sought out in the 1980s, with interviewees in this chapter entering council housing and speaking of the autonomy which such accommodation was able to provide. At the same time, contemporary social surveys revealed the continued problem of access to housing for lone mothers and in particular those suffering domestic violence. The voluntary sector remained crucial, but women's relationship to hostels, refuges and Mother and Baby Homes was altered as they spoke of these as 'services' and not corrective institutions. The greater take-up of benefits amongst this generation demonstrated women's responsiveness to the conditions of the labour market in the 1980s with the devaluation of wages and poor security often making employment insufficient to the purposes of generating income, managing limited resources and caring for children. Poverty continued to accompany lone motherhood, as did the means by which women tried to mitigate its worst effects. The family still provided a crucial safety-net and for many women, the option of returning to live with parents as lone mothers was taken up as a means of social and economic support, defying associations between increased social rights and calculated individualism or the death of the extended family. Interviewees from ethnic minority backgrounds recalled being ostracized by family in a similar way to white women in the 1950s and 1960s, often because of religious convention. Otherwise parents were less condemnatory of daughters' mothering outside of marriage. Recollections of rhetoric denouncing single mothers in the later part of the decade met with defiance by many of the interviewees in this chapter, who reaffirmed their place

²⁰⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between feminism/the WLM and women's attitudes to motherhood and childcare in Britain, see: Vicky Randall, 'Mothers, Feminists and Childcare Demand' in Randall, *The Politics of Child Daycare in Britain*, pp. 108-138.

within a welfare settlement, the gains of which they often defined against memories of their own childhood poverty.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Female-headed households did not constitute a parasitic sub-culture in early industrial Britain. The survival strategies pursued by these families placed them at the forefront of industrialization [...] They were the vanguard of the early industrial proletariat, and as the battered spearhead they came to represent a fate which more fortunate families could strive, through thrift, work and prudence, to avoid. In so struggling the more fortunate families became the respectable working class of a less tumultuous and needy capitalism.¹

Professor Jane Humphries

I. The Divorce Revolution

In her analysis of female-headed households in the nineteenth century, Jane Humphries argues that lone mothers were key actors in the advancement of industrial society by way of their economic activity and symbolically as a benchmark against which to define the respectable working class: ‘the vanguard of the proletariat.’ In this conclusion, the main findings to have emerged out of the preceding discussion will be drawn together to suggest how lone mothers figured within post-1945 socio-economic development and the evolving character of the welfare state.

Humphries, along with other historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (outlined in Chapter One) have demonstrated how female-headed households were a common aspect of a historical period in which disease, economic insecurity, migration and war broke-up two-parent families. In this study, the life histories of each consecutive cohort demonstrate the recurrence of one-parent families across the twentieth century: nineteen of the fifty interviewees were brought up in lone mother households for a variety of reasons, including mothers being widowed during the two World Wars, divorce, deserting fathers and in some cases, illegitimacy. In her survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century working-class autobiographies, Carolyn Steedman argues that households were more frequently female-headed than assumed due a father’s marginal presence within the family as well as their complete absence: ‘The evidence of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century children used in this book shows that in their own reckoning their households were often those of a single female parent, sometimes

¹ Humphries, ‘Female-headed households in early industrial Britain’, p. 31 and p. 51.

because of the passivity of a father's presence, sometimes because of his physical absence.² Such a view unsettles the demarcation between two-parent and one-parent families and is supported by the testimonies in this study, where the distinction between the two family types is often tenuous within interviewees' descriptions of their childhoods and married lives. Descriptions of paternity as 'passivity of presence' occur in over half the childhoods in our sample, where fathers are marginal figures due to military service, unemployment, ill health or inequitable recreation. 'Breadwinner frailty' due to periodic or long-term unemployment is an aspect of working-class married life across each generation, including the 'golden' era of employment in the 1950s and 1960s, normally associated with affluence. Most of the interviewees who became divorcees after 1945 left marriages because husbands refrained from playing an active role in the economy of the household or became detrimental to it or individual members' welfare. Domestic violence featured in nearly half (thirteen) of the twenty-eight marriages in this study and usually occurred alongside tensions over material security and the division of labour between couples.

Theories espousing mutual companionship and the symmetrical family as defining features of marriage in post-war society, along with late-modern theories of individualism and freedom of negotiation between couples, have been argued to be less significant than the ongoing socio-economic dynamic between spouses over the division of unpaid and paid labour which persisted across each generation of interviewees. Jacqueline Burgoyne's survey of sociological research on the family since the Second World War, including her own studies of divorce and stepfamilies, concluded that despite an emphasis on change within much of the literature, continuity in the social and economic division of labour between couples was the most defining feature of post-war family life.³ Rebuking the emphasis on diversity and personal choice within many late-modern theories of heterosexual relationships and family life in the 1980s, Burgoyne suggested that divisions of class and the broader economic context defined post-war marriages:

Strong on the notion of 'diversity', their language is redolent of the consumer society in which 'lifestyles' and 'options' are freely chosen as an individual act of will. Following the imagery of the symmetrical family study, they portray trend-

² Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 18.

³ Jacqueline Burgoyne, 'Rethinking the Family Life Cycle: Sexual Divisions, Work and Domestic Life in the Post-war Period', in Alan Bryman, Bill Bytheway, Patricia Allatt and Teresa Keil (eds) *Rethinking the Life Cycle* (Basingstoke, 1987), pp. 72-86.

setting, professional middle-class dual-career couples as blazing a trail for others to follow. In this, as in many other respects, their analysis ignores all the evidence of persistent and, as the result of the recession, deepening class divisions which inevitably limit or entirely eliminate the possibility of real choice in this area.⁴

This study has demonstrated how across the political economies of growth in the 1950s/1960s and economic downturn in the 1970s/1980s, married women often assumed an unequal responsibility for the social and economic division of labour within the family. The 'double burden' or 'second shift' is the term used to describe how amongst increasingly prominent dual earner households from the 1970s onwards, women have been found to shoulder an unequal responsibility for childcare and housework whilst also engaging in paid work.⁵ The oral histories in this study have shown how working-class women carried a 'double burden' over a much longer period in regularly combining employment with management of the home and mothering. David Vincent articulates the historical persistence of the inter-generational burden of working-class women after 1945, who, as many of the oral histories in this study have demonstrated, carried a double burden:

The poorer the family, the more likely the wife would be sent out to work, and the more likely that she would be left in charge of meeting the family's resources. To her fell the principal responsibility for managing the consequences of male unemployment. In essence her task was the same as her grandmother's.⁶

The argument advanced by this study is that as women both in adolescence and adulthood assumed greater status as breadwinners during the twentieth century, they possessed greater agency to exit marriages where husbands were adulterous or violent but also, and very commonly, when their double-burden was magnified by the presence of an inactive husband. The generation who left their husbands after the Second World War, prior to the Divorce Reform Act and the large numbers of women in the 1970s who left their husbands after the Act, acted on the understanding that life as a lone mother would not introduce a novel lacking of parenting or partnering because men had been passive or absent already during marriage.

Stephanie Coontz has said of the 'marriage revolution' that began in the 1970s: 'We are experiencing a historical revolution every bit as wrenching, far-reaching and

⁴ Ibid., p.85.

⁵ For example: Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (London, 1990).

⁶ Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, pp. 185-186.

irreversible as the Industrial Revolution.⁷ This study argues it was the female divorce petitioner in the post-war period who led such a revolution in response to an economic and social division of labour, the historical derivation of which left her dependent on a conjugal relationship which had long inscribed an unequal and unmanageable burden. The Second World War acted as a catalyst in exposing the malleability of this familial model as women managed homes with men absent for long periods, and in some cases never returning. The widows and divorcees in Chapter Two were thus significant in disrupting assumptions about the normality of the nuclear family in the 1950s, and prepared a path for women in the 1970s who petitioned for divorce in much greater numbers than men. The increase in never-married motherhood from the 1970s onwards demonstrates the loosening of reproduction from the bounds of marriage, but was the product of a revolution led by divorced women. The refusal of single women to remain in cohabiting partnerships or marry the fathers of their children in the 1970s and 1980s, but to proceed regardless with unplanned pregnancies, was a resistance to entering a conjugal arrangement whereby the division of labour would be inequitable and their economic hardship exacerbated. Angela McRobbie has used the phrase ‘pre-emptive strike’ to articulate such a process in relation to single teenage mothers, but I would argue this concept has wider application across age groups and ‘routes into’ lone motherhood:

One element in the appearance of female-headed households can be traced back – ironically perhaps – to the increasing independence of women in the past twenty years, their unwillingness to remain in unhappy marriages, and perhaps also their perception that the effects of poverty can be intensified with a man unemployed or semi-employed and permanently around the house. The emergence of young single-parenthood can be seen therefore as a kind of preemptive strike based on this recognition.⁸

The oral histories in this study covering the immediate post-war period up until the 1970s illustrate the implausibility of motherhood outside of marriage for young women, but the testimonies of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate how such a ‘pre-emptive strike’ became possible, partly because of the increasing social normality of the divorced mother. Despite the continued expectation of marriage as the most esteemed realm for reproduction, Susan McGrath defiantly voiced her capacity to resist entering a marital

⁷ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, p. 308.

⁸ Angela McRobbie, ‘Teenage Mothers: A New Social State?’ in Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Second Edition (New York, 2000) pp. 159-179, p. 172.

relationship in the 1970s with a man who proved himself to be a liability as a prospective spouse: ‘You were supposed to marry the dad – ohh – goodnight! If I’d had ten kids with him I wouldn’t have married him.’⁹

Interviewees’ in the 1970s and 1980s still aspired to marry or certainly looked to form lasting partnerships. The increase in remarriage rates from the 1970s onwards indicate that divorce did not put a stop to people’s inclination to enter marital partnerships. The idea that ‘individualization’ as a late-modern phenomena limited women’s aspirations towards sustaining partnerships was not held-up by the evidence in this study, a finding which supports other recent studies which dispute the empirical basis of the ‘individualization thesis.’¹⁰ However, unlike women in the 1950s and 1960s, the interviewees in the 1970s and 1980s were able to withdraw from a risky union where women before them had no option but to enter marriage if pregnancy necessitated it. Parents were crucial actors in this regard. As householders they possessed the capacity to withhold or provide abode for pregnant daughters and the relaxation of parental expectations that daughters’ transition into adulthood through marriage meant that young women at the end of the twentieth century were less apprehensive about parental alienation, should they reveal pre-marital pregnancies. The availability of social housing provided a safety-net if parents alienated daughters in the 1970s and 1980s or if family support was scarce. However, although such a safety-net enabled more autonomous decision making, it did not constitute a calculated preference, as many unmarried mothers at the end of the century opted to live in three-generational households. Such changes and continuities in housing, the economic parameters of lone motherhood and the role of the state will now be discussed.

II. Economies of Lone Motherhood and the State

The design of the post-war welfare state insured the male citizen’s widow, although, as discussed in Chapter Two, benefits for the war widow were meagre and imparted a sense of exclusion for many war widows in post-conflict society. However by the 1980s, this initial design had been restructured and the primary female claimant was the divorced mother. To a large extent this restructuring of the welfare state, whereby one-parent families became principle occupants of social housing and social security benefits was not a conscious policy of the state. As discussed in Chapter Six, the Conservative

⁹ MMB, C900/01574, Susan McGrath.

¹⁰ See Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage: Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cheltenham, 2001) and Carol Smart, *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking* (Cambridge, 2007).

government in the first-half of the 1980s oversaw the major increase in divorced women turning to the welfare state for housing and income, but it did not act to encourage or discourage this take-up. Although the 1980s are associated with the shrinking of the state and a critique of welfare dependency, these elements do not seem to have impacted on lone mothers until the second-half of the decade. During the first half of the 1980s, interviewees spoke of their assertion and realization of many of the rights that started to be voiced in the 1970s. Sociological research on lone motherhood in the 1960s and 1970s and the anti-poverty lobby had a significant impact on shaping post-war policy towards one-parent families. Although recommendations for a GMA never materialized, the legitimization of lone mothers as council house tenants in the late 1970s and changes to Child Benefit, which gave greater recognition to one-parent families, were in part descendants of the social research from the 1960s. Nevertheless, whereas existing historiography on lone motherhood after 1945 has suggested a ‘top-down’ narrative of government practice in shaping the post-war increase in lone motherhood, this project has looked at its history from below and at women’s reaction to social scientific categorisation. By looking at women’s oral histories, this study has endeavoured to show how women who exited marriage and found the means to overcome the split between paid and unpaid work as lone mothers were themselves active in restructuring the design of the welfare state.

As outlined in the Introduction (Chapter One) to this study, the Beveridgean model inscribed female dependence on a male breadwinner and privileged this model of family life as a means of delivering public welfare. However, as the discussion in Section I outlines, many working-class wives across our period found that male-breadwinning was unreliable and they had to straddle the division between paid and unpaid work, embodied in the housewife and male-breadwinner model. The assumption behind the post-war welfare settlement that marriage would bring security was found to be lacking in the testimonies of divorced women in this study. Although most interviewees who left husbands in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves living in poverty as lone mothers, they frequently expressed a greater sense of control over resources outside of marriage. Marsden made this observation in the 1960s: ‘Women compared unfavourably the uncertainties of budgeting during marriage with the regular income they received from the NAB.’¹¹ Jan Pahl found that a significant number of divorced women were better off financially after leaving husbands who controlled access to money in marriage, and Hilary

¹¹ Marsden, *Mothers Alone*, p. 62.

Graham coined the phrase 'better off poorer' to describe the preference amongst divorced mothers for autonomy over money management, even in reduced circumstances.¹² As outlined in Chapter One, the historical problem of getting fathers to provide maintenance payments towards lone mother families persisted across our period. Such absence of income was very much in keeping with descriptions of men's breadwinner frailty in marriage. As other studies have suggested, the state has been reluctant to address the issue of men's capacity to pay maintenance, particularly if they have formed subsequent families.¹³ Divorced mothers, who withdrew their labour from nuclear family arrangements and turned to employment, kin and increasingly towards the state for surety of income and shelter, overturned the state's assurance that marriage and the two-parent family would sustain welfare capitalism. Furthermore, lone mothers in this study also unsettled the government's assurance that wage earning, another key tenet of the welfare state, could ensure social membership.

As Jane Lewis asserts, modern welfare systems, dating back to the poor law, have held a firm conviction that wages can deliver welfare through social insurance schemes.¹⁴ However, the life histories in this study demonstrate the dilemma of wage earning for lone mothers who have to overcome the split between productive work and the domestic sphere which as the Introduction to this study outlined, has been central to the development of industrial, capitalist economies founded on a relationship between capital and labour. NA was meant to be a residual measure which the architects of the welfare state believed would become redundant in light of a comprehensive social insurance scheme, but the numbers accessing NA inflated in the post-war decades, the main claimants being women whose relationship with wage earning was too inadequate to qualify for social insurance.¹⁵ By looking at the testimonies of lone mothers in the post-war period, we have been able to chart their relationship with paid work from adolescence to lone motherhood, and this reveals a gradual increase, across the generations, in lone mothers turning towards social security payments to gather income.

¹² Jan Pahl found that between one-fifth and one-third of women in her study were better off once they had left their husbands; Jan Pahl 'The Allocation of Money and the Structuring of Inequality within Marriage', *Sociological Review* 31, No. 2, (1983), pp. 237-262; Hilary Graham, 'Being Poor: Perceptions and Coping Strategies of Lone Mothers', in Julia Brannen and Gail Wilson (eds.), *Give and Take in Families: Studies in Resource Distribution*, (London, 1987), pp. 56-74.

¹³ Tanya Evans, 'Is it futile to try and get non-resident fathers to maintain their children?'; Thomas Nutt, 'The Child Support Agency and the Old Poor law.'

¹⁴ Lewis, 'The Decline of the Male Breadwinner Model', p. 152.

¹⁵ Harriet Jones, 'The State and Social Policy', in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 330.

Accounts of employment amongst our sample illustrate the centrality of paid work to the majority of women in this study in the post-1945 period. Virtually all the interviewees entered employment before marriage as adolescents and young adults and many continued in employment during marriage. Those who sometimes did not enter the labour market during adolescence, or who were able to exit from the labour market entirely during marriage were middle class. Decision-making around paid employment was very much related to domestic conditions and responsibilities. In adolescence responsibilities at home often dictated entrance into paid work, especially if a parent was absent. During marriage, the age of children and the capacity of a husband to wage earn would also determine exits and returns to the labour market. During lone motherhood, conflict over employment and childcare became acute. As Tanya Evans and Pat Thane claim: ‘The challenges that lone mothers face when combining work with childcare have not changed markedly since the eighteenth century.’¹⁶ The problem of caring for children and wage earning was most difficult for interviewees with pre-school children; they adopted a variety of strategies in order to manage childcare and meet material needs (these will be discussed below). The oral histories in this study make clear that lone mothers confronted their situation as *experienced* breadwinners, and in managing single parenthood they organised economies where domestic and market factors were considered inseparable. The rewards of waged labour were measured against conditions of employment, the dependency of an infant or child, the costs of formal childcare or availability of informal childcare and the moral strictures surrounding public assistance. Across each decade, women faced inequality in the labour market in the form of gendered segregation and pay disparity, lowering the rewards of wage earning and were *reactive* to these structural conditions.¹⁷ However in the 1950s and 1960s, when economic growth was strong and wages increased, interviewees described favourable labour market conditions and rewards from employment, both material and social. With the economic downturn in the 1970s and 1980s, interviewees’ testimonies described less favourable relations of employment and reflected the growing insecurity of casual work and the decreased returns of paid work. Lone mothers therefore packaged a greater proportion of their income from state benefits in the 1970s and 1980s, as the rewards of employment were reduced. Nevertheless, Keith Snell and Jane Millar’s quantitative analysis of the number of lone mothers claiming poor relief in the late eighteenth and

¹⁶ Tanya Evans and Pat Thane, ‘Introduction: Lone Mothers’, *Women’s History Review*, Vo. 20, No. 1, February 2011, pp. 3-9, p. 8.

¹⁷ Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, p. 5.

early nineteenth centuries, compared with social security benefits in the later twentieth century, reveals that levels were comparable.¹⁸ Thus lone mothers' take-up of state benefits in the last decades of the twentieth-century was not historically exceptional. Lone mothers' closer relationship with the welfare state from the 1970s onwards was a reaction to contemporary labour market conditions as well as the formation of a rights-based notion of entitlement to state support, which will be discussed in Section III. Along with the historical legacy of lone mothers turning to the state for income, the poverty attached to lone motherhood was a consistent factor across our period, as it has been throughout modern history.

In 1981 the NCOPF published a report detailing its work with unmarried mothers since the charity's founding in 1918 up until the late 1970s.¹⁹ Plotting the changes in legislation and attitudes towards lone mothers, which brought improvements to their social circumstances across the twentieth century, the report nevertheless states: 'But to the history of these years, looking for a big advance in the material welfare of one-parent families, compared to two-parent families, is to be disappointed.'²⁰ Social theorists have spoken of the recent 'feminisation of poverty', but the history of lone motherhood demonstrates that women have had a much longer and consistent proximity to poverty.²¹ Comparing analysis of the relief received by women during the poor law system and benefit levels for lone mothers after 1945, such transfers have been consistently low. For much of our period, benefit levels received by lone mothers were half the average worker's income.²² Some representative studies suggest the material situation for lone mothers in general did not change substantially over the twentieth-century.²³ The oral histories in this study chart the recurrence of poverty amongst lone mother families across each cohort and question the historiographical narrative of 'austerity,' 'affluence' and 'downturn' which is frequently evoked in relation to the post-1945 period. The operation of 'sacrificial maternal economies' was apparent across each generation and interviewees pointed to the intergenerational aspect of such experiences, recalling the likeness of their own and their mothers' sacrifices in the face of poverty.

¹⁸ Snell and Millar, 'Lone-parent Families and the Welfare State: Past and Present' p. 396.

¹⁹ Graham-Dixon, *Never Darken My Door*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²¹ Jane Lewis and David Piachaud, 'Women and Poverty in the Twentieth Century' in Caroline Glendinning and Jane Millar (eds.) *Women and Poverty in Britain in the 1990s* (London; New York, 1992) pp. 27-45, p. 27.

²² Thane, 'Women and the Poor law in Victorian and Edwardian England,' p. 41; Snell and Millar, 'Lone-parent Families and the Welfare State: Past and Present,' p. 402.

²³ Jane Millar, 'Lone Mothers' in Caroline Glendinning and Jane Millar (eds.), *Women and Poverty in Britain* (Brighton, 1987) pp. 159-77.

Memories of absolute poverty in terms of lack of food, fuel and others basic necessities, surfaced for every cohort but was not universal. However, relative descriptions of poverty were shared by almost all interviewees. Every generation expressed their exclusion from contemporary living standards and struggled for inclusion within an increasingly consumerist economy. Pressures of consumption were particularly focused on goods for teenage children from the 1960s onwards, and by the 1980s access to formal credit became an important means of realising such consumption. The minority of interviewees from middle-class backgrounds in relaying their life histories, often described distinct childhood living conditions, educational opportunities and employment trajectories compared to working-class interviewees. However, as lone mothers they frequently experienced downward social mobility and poverty as a result of widowhood and divorce.

The interviewees across our period devised strategies to tackle the problem of ‘making ends meet,’ a phrase which recurred for every cohort. Such strategies employed by lone mothers in the post-war period demonstrate continuity with the pre-war period in the way by which working-class women accessed a variety of formal and informal resources in order to sustain their family economies. Such strategies included moving between wage earning and claiming state assistance; combining both wages and benefits legitimately or not declaring cash-in-hand work; borrowing money from family, neighbours and friends; taking in lodgers; setting-up home-based production to generate income; planning and budgeting on a weekly basis; using second-hand outlets to purchase clothes, utilities and gifts and in latter decades, purchasing goods on credit. The British state’s historical evasion of publicly funded pre-school childcare meant the majority of interviewees throughout the period relied on informal sources of childcare if engaged in paid employment.²⁴ Grand-maternal care of infants in order to facilitate a daughters’ employment (particularly when lone mothers returned to live in their parents’ home) is found to be common throughout the period and demonstrates how decisions regarding income generation, childcare and housing were often interlinked. Although interviewees in the 1950s and 1960s experienced alienation from kin due to the stigma of pre-marital pregnancy as well as divorce, parents and extended family were a source of support for lone mothers throughout our period, either in terms of housing (re-adopting daughters and grandchildren back into a family home or providing the financial means

²⁴ Susan Pederson, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*; Randall, *The Politics of Child Daycare in Britain*.

for them to rent or in some cases, purchase property), regular or ad hoc gifts of cash and purchases for children. Neighbours feature as an additional resource providing cash, food and occasional or regular child-minding. Ellen Ross' use of the phrase, 'the safety net of neighbourhood', to describe the primacy of London women's self-help networks in the early part of the twentieth century, does not correspond directly with the life-history evidence for our period, because of the pre-welfare state context and provincial homogeneity of working-class neighbourhoods in Ross' study, but the concept of a 'safety net', made up of relations between lone mothers, extended family, friends and neighbours, does correspond with the descriptions of localised support across our period.²⁵ Although local and regional migration occurs within the life-cycles of most of the women in our sample, the importance of immediate, informal networks of support in terms of lone mothers managing to house themselves and keep out of poverty is persistent across each cohort. In the 1950s and 1960s when lone mothers experienced great social stigma, and in the 1970s and 1980s when state welfare was more accessible to lone mothers, informal support was nevertheless significant. When state support was absent, assistance from friends, family and neighbours presented as the most reliable of 'safety nets.' Eleanor Rathbone's observation in the early part of the twentieth century, when investigating the living conditions of widows, resonates with the findings in this study: 'One unfailing source of help is that of neighbours and friends. They know the circumstances of the family as no outsider can hope to know them and time after time come to the rescue, helping with food and shelter, clothing, attendance as the case may require.'²⁶

Aside from such historical continuities in informal support networks and strategies which lone mothers used after 1945 to mitigate hardship, a distinction emerges between our earlier and latter cohorts in terms of access to state social services. Although the voluntary sector is significant across our period – particularly in relation to shelter for the unmarried mother in the 1950s and 1960s and the married woman seeking refuge from abuse in the 1970s and 1980s – the role of state services in providing a non-income based resource is endorsed in the life stories of women from the 1960s onwards. Free school meals, legal aid, health visitors and the increasing visibility of social work professionals in the 1960s and 1970s, are services which were accessed by interviewees

²⁵ Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I' *History Workshop Journal* 15, No. 1, (1983), pp. 4-28, p. 5-8.

²⁶ Eleanor Rathbone, 'Report on the Condition of Widows under the Poor law in Liverpool' (1913), cited in Thane, 'Women and the Poor law in Victorian and Edwardian England', p. 35.

and viewed as positively enhancing living conditions, often distinguishing the adult lives of women in the post-1945 era from childhood experiences of hardship in the earlier decades of the century. War widows in Chapter Two expressed their sense of social marginalization through reference to the availability of social services for one-parent families later in the century, illustrating how formal services were an important aspect of the welfare state's gradual inclusion of the lone mother as a legitimate member of 'the social.' Alongside the value of public services to interviewees in the latter decades of our period, the opening up of social housing to lone mothers from the 1970s onwards informed articulations of improved material conditions and social inclusion.

An important milestone in the story of lone motherhood in the post-war period is how lone mothers eventually acquired the right to a stable and private abode in the social housing sector. The national increase in home ownership is a key aspect of post-war history (notwithstanding initial housing shortages after the War) but lone mothers during this period experienced a precariousness in relation to housing, which was regularly referred to by interviewees as the struggle to find and keep 'a roof over one's head.' Homelessness, institutionalisation, temporary accommodation, sharing with relatives and frequent house moving, characterized many unmarried and divorced mothers' testimonies. At the end of our period, lone mothers were far less likely to be homeowners than two-parent families. Continuities exist between the 1950s and 1960s and the pre-1945 era, in terms of the institutionalisation of unmarried mothers. Lyn Hollen Lee's assertion that: 'Confinement still seemed an appropriate solution for the economic troubles of single, adult women who had been sexually active,' in relation to the continued use of the workhouse to incarcerate unmarried mothers prior to the post-war welfare state, is equally applicable to post-1945 society where unmarried mothers who were rejected by their families had to turn to church-run Mother and Baby Homes in order to avoid destitution.²⁷ These homes, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four, retained much of the punitive aspects of earlier institutions, demonstrating the continuity in the early years of the post-1945 settlement between workhouse and welfare: 'Like clothes transferred from parent to child, Poor law hand-me-downs furnished the welfare state.'²⁸ Contemporary surveys of Mother and Baby Homes indicated not only their gradual decline but also a shift in the moral ethos of the remaining homes and the increased role of local authorities in their administration. Recollections of such homes

²⁷ Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 335.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

and hostels for young people, as well as the emergence of refuges for abused women, are referred to as ‘services’ and recounted as largely positive aids by interviewees in the 1970s and 1980s, marking a shift in the relationship between lone mothers and institutional support.

For those women who became lone mothers as a result of divorce amongst the sample, their status in relation to the marital home was tenuous throughout much of our period because of husband’s having property rights both in terms of rented and owner-occupied housing. Thus, the divorced mother was just as likely to return to live with parents as the never-married mother up until the 1970s. Changes in legislation during the 1970s saw divorced women acquire greater rights to occupy the marital home and gain a share of equity, and the Housing and Homeless Persons Act in 1977 made the one-parent family a priority category in terms of access to social housing. Although political rhetoric at the end of the 1980s constructed the teenage single mother as prime occupant of social housing, it was the separated and divorced mother who was the most common occupant.²⁹ During the 1970s and 1980s, it was the mother exiting marriage who frequently asserted her ‘right’ to council housing, as evidenced by separated and divorced interviewees in this study. Contemporary surveys of never-married mothers discovered that many opted to live with parents, welcoming grand-maternal support with childcare. Such experiences of inter-generational housing and support question theories of individualization and the decline of extended family networks at the end of the twentieth century, as queried by other studies of late-modern family obligations and arrangements.³⁰

III. The ‘Single Mother’ and Intergenerational Maternity

The concept of the ‘problem family’ or ‘broken home’, which was evoked in the aftermath of the Second World War and recurred across our period, often spearheaded a critique of the working-class mother who was very often a lone mother. The problem family represented a deviation from post-war expectations of ‘normal,’ cross-class family economies, at the heart of which was assumed to be a stable male-breadwinner who would ensure a respectable standard of material prosperity and facilitate modern standards of housewifery and maternal care. Extending Humphries’ point about the lone mother in the nineteenth century, the lone mother family after 1945 continued to act as a

²⁹ Carol Sexty, *Women Losing Out*, p. 30.

³⁰ Janet Finch, *Family Obligations and Social Change* (Cambridge, 1989).

benchmark against which to define respectable notions of the family and class. Critiques of the problem family or broken home in the 1950s blamed poverty on the character failings of incompetent mothers, as opposed to the economic consequences of unemployment and gendered inequalities, which often led to the poverty experienced by many of the interviewees in this study. The moral stigma attached to unmarried motherhood and divorce in the 1950s was severe according to interviewees. During this period the deviance of the problem family was widely evoked to reinforce the normality of marriage and the nuclear family. Thane has argued that life for unmarried mothers in the 1950s was in some respects more difficult due to a 'conventional cultural climate' than earlier in the century, when tolerance for unmarried mothers within the community was the continuation of an older tradition.³¹

The accounts by war widows in Chapter Two, to some extent challenge the notion that widows were seen as more 'deserving' in comparison to other lone mothers, as was claimed by sociologists in the 1960s and recently by historians studying the historical treatment of lone mothers.³² The fact that war widows were the only group to have their war pensions taxed and that very little was made available to them in terms of services, elicited a strong sense of exclusion from social membership. After the war, the 1950s and for much of the 1960s, many interviewees' articulated a reluctance to turn towards state assistance. A strong sense of shame was articulated in relation to the means test and its association with family hardship in the inter-war years. It was with the rise of the social sciences in the 1960s that a new sense of identity was articulated by lone mothers in relation to social membership, which brought with it a decline in the institutionalization of lone mothers.

The 'moment of sociology' in the 1960s had a profound influence on the recasting of lone mothers in the post-war period as legitimate, disadvantaged families, replacing the language of the 'problem family' with the category 'one-parent family' and 'single mother.' By using first-hand testimony, sociological studies of lone motherhood reawakened memories of poverty and the struggles of women within communities to manage single parenthood, which were assumed to be outmoded under the creation of a welfare state. Thus the interview method was used primarily to construct socio-economic narratives of exclusion, as opposed to portraits of moral degeneracy, as had been the case with portraits of the problem family and broken home after the war. The elision of moral

³¹ Thane, 'Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England', p. 12.

³² Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*.

stigma and an articulation of entitlement to state support amongst women in this study can be seen to begin in the 1970s and 1980s, as a positive response to the availability of the homogenising categories 'single mother' and 'one-parent family.' This finding supports Savage's assertion that at the end of the twentieth-century, sociological categories had become absorbed by individuals and changed the meaning of social identities and relationships.³³ The impact of the WLM on lone mothers was difficult to ascertain. Most of the interviewees made very little reference to the rise of feminist politics and expressed a general ambivalence in relation to their affinity with the aims of the WLM. Although lone mothers were clearly reactive to shifts in classification at the level of sociological theory and political campaigning, their life histories suggest that a sense of entitlement was also based on knowing their social contribution as breadwinners and mothers. By giving central position to the voices and memories of women through their oral histories, this study has inserted women's agency into the historiography of lone motherhood after 1945, which hitherto has been focused on state sources, and privileged the view that as Kiernan et al claim, 'ideas and attitudes changed from above.'³⁴

As argued in Section I of this chapter, those working-class interviewees who grew up in two-parent families across the twentieth century often recalled mothers who worked outside as well as inside the home. For the majority of interviewees, mothers featured as highly influential in shaping daughters' identities, regularly providing an endorsement of the personal rewards and social significance of mothering and management of a household economy. Interviewees from one-parent families recalled mothers who were predominantly both workers and maternal figures, who coped with economic hardship and were strong role models. Elizabeth Roberts' oral history of women's lives in England from 1940 to 1970 is one of the few existing studies which uncovers the social history of women in relation to the family after 1945. Roberts concludes that due to labour-saving household equipment, increases in living standards and women's greater participation in paid work, women experienced a loss of status in the domestic sphere as household managers and mothers, which she refers to as 'women's loss of power in the home.'³⁵ She further suggests that this decline in status was brought about by women's own rejection of their mothers' and grandmothers' domestic identities earlier in the century.³⁶ Stephen Brooke has also argued that women's

³³ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 249.

³⁴ Kiernan et al, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 13.

³⁵ See 'Conclusion' in Roberts, *Women and Families*, pp. 233-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

identities became less attached to maternity in the post-1945 period and more attached to employment.³⁷ Although questions of continuity and change are complex in relation to this subject, contrary to these assertions this study finds that women's management of the family economy and maternal subjectivity (whether within two-parent or one-parent households) was still prominent within women's life histories across our period.

As discussed, the increase in women's paid work after 1945 did not seem to detract from a maternal identity often shared between generations of women across the twentieth century. Although some women in this study described consciously reacting against what they saw as the conservative values of their parents' generation and noted the distinctions between their lives and their mothers', they also spoke of the importance of their grandmothers and mothers as role models and about how childhood experiences of maternal influence intersected with their own mothering practices and sense of self. Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher have recently claimed that married women attached importance to their caring role in the home as wives and mothers into the 1960s: 'Caring is a very positive concept, closely related to love. Caring was used by women to express and assert their personal power and authority over their children, over child-rearing and over their husbands.'³⁸ Angela Davis and Sarah Aiston have uncovered the centrality of maternity to the identities of women in the post-1945 period through oral histories.³⁹ The findings in this study meet with such assertions about the continued importance of maternal identity to women in the post-war period. Motherhood (inside and outside of marriage) was described by the majority of the interviewees as vital to their sense of personal identity, and as well as the struggles of lone motherhood, the pleasures and rewards of mothering were frequently articulated. Unlike Aiston, Davis, Szreter and Fisher, who look at married women, this study demonstrates how maternal identity endured regardless of the presence of a father or stable male breadwinner for fulfilment. Thus, the argument is made that throughout the twentieth century, an inter-generational maternal identity was sustained between generations of mothers and daughters, which for those women who grew-up in lone- mother families, made their own transition into and experience of lone motherhood both normative and 'manageable.'

³⁷ Stephen Brooke, 'Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s' *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Summer 2001, pp. 773-95, p. 3.

³⁸ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 142.

³⁹ Angela Davis 'The Ordinary Good Mother: Women's Construction of their Identity as Mothers, Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970' in Alyson Brown (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on Social Identities* (Newcastle, 2006), pp. 114-28, p. 124; Sarah Aiston, 'A maternal identity? The family lives of British women graduates pre- and post-1945', *History of Education* 34, No. 4 (July 2005), pp. 407-426, p. 425.

Such knowledge of the normality of lone motherhood handed-down through generations of women, included the understanding of motherhood and caring for a family as ‘work.’ Working-class women throughout this study who carried the double burden knew the dividing line between labour market work and domestic work to be a false one. It is therefore argued that through the enabling language of the social sciences, which produced the categories ‘single parent’ and ‘one-parent family’, women took-up the opportunity as experienced breadwinners to have their labour as mothers and managers of domestic economies recognized. As Samantha Walker, the daughter of a lone mother and herself a divorced mother living in council housing and claiming state benefits in the 1980s, asserted: ‘I’m a full time mum which I think is hard enough work!’ Contrary to the narrative of decline in legitimacy of the welfare state during the 1980s under Thatcherism, the testimonies in Chapter Six reveal how women continued to hold such a ‘right’ to state support during this decade, despite condemnation of lone mothers as a drain on public expenditure. Such resilience was born out of single mothers’ attachment to public welfare at the end of the twentieth century, affirmed by memories of the historical plight of women like themselves, and including perhaps their own mothers.

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Appendix: Key characteristics of the interviewees

Summary A: Widowed Lone Mothers

Name	Year of birth	Place of birth	One-parent or two-parent family	Father's occupation/s	Mother's occupation/s	School leaving age FE/HE	Pre-Marital occupation/s
Marjorie Hamilton	1910	Lancashire	Two-parent	Senior Engineer	Housewife	14	None
Margaret Weston-Burland	1911	Kent	Two-parent	Dockyard worker	Housewife	14	Cinema usherette
Betty Spring	1914	Gloucestershire	One-Parent	Mill worker	Housewife (died)	14	Domestic servant
Marjorie Swales	1915	Yorkshire	One-Parent	Disabled (died)	Disabled	14	Window dresser; Munitions worker
Hilda Guy	1916	Bristol	Two-parent	Plasterer	---	14	Domestic servant
Renee Kingston	1918	Birmingham	Two-parent	Unemployed	Pawnbroker	14	Secretary

Name	Age at First Marriage	Husband's occupation	Number of children	Marital employment	Age when widowed	Residence as lone mother	Housing type	Main source of income	Remarried
Marjorie Hamilton	22	RAF	3	Lorry Driver (War effort)	43	Kent	Friend's flat	Employment and Widows Pension	No
Margaret Weston-Burland	Early twenties	RAF	1	Ambulance service (War effort)	---	Birmingham	Home owner	---	Yes
Betty Spring	19	Naval officer	2	Domestic service	32	Gloucestershire	---	Employment and Widows Pension	No
Marjorie Swales	24	Clerk; RAF	1	Munitions worker	27	Yorkshire	Parents' house	Employment and Widows Pension	No
Hilda Guy	23	Banker mason	1		28	Bristol	Private rental	Employment and Widows Pension	Yes
Renee Kingston	22	RAF	1	Secretary	24	Birmingham	---	Employment and Widows Pension	No

Summary B. Divorced Lone Mothers

Name	Year of birth	Place of birth	One-parent or two-parent family	Father's occupation/s	Mother's occupation/s	School leaving age FE/HE	Pre-Marital occupation/s
Barbara Steele	1916	Gloucestershire	Two-parent	Tailor	Housewife	14 FE	Teacher
Gwen Griese	1919	Bristol	Two-parent	Factory manager	Housewife	14 FE	WRAF
Irene Sharrat	1919	Kettering	Two-parent	Carriage proprietor	Housewife	14	Factory worker; Labourer
Mary Anderson	1922	Newcastle	Two-parent	Colliery fitter	---	14	---
Rose Hellerman	1925	Gloucestershire	Two-parent	Gardener	Housewife	14 FE	Post office clerk
Barbara Shirley	1933	Coventry	Two-parent	Farmer	Farmer	15 FE	Telephonist; Receptionist
Beatrice Bell	1935	Sheffield	Two-parent	Engineer	Café proprietor	14	Domestic servant
Ellen O'Brien	1911	Northamptonshire	One-parent	Factory manager	Housewife	15 FE	Draper; Midwife
Iris Gooderman	1928	Harrogate	Two-parent	Chauffer	Housemaid	14	Civil service
Elizabeth Edwards	1929	Liverpool	Two-parent	Docker	Housewife	14	Store packer; Typist
Anne Barker	1936	Northampton	Two-parent	Shop assistant	Housewife	15	Office worker
Anne Hoad	1938	Kent	Two-parent/one-parent	Armed forces	Dinner lady/cleaner	15 FE	Midwife
Doris Grainger	1929	Doncaster	Two-parent	Sales manager	Housewife/cleaner	14	Factory worker; mill worker

Judy Sleet	1937	Birmingham	Two-parent	Builder	Housewife	15 FE	Secretary
Violet Ellis	1938	Jamaica	One-parent	Woodcutter	Housewife	15 FE	Teacher
Cindy Clark	1943	North Yorkshire	One-parent	Chiropodist	Housewife	15 FE	Nursery nurse
Sue Townsend	1946	Leicestershire	One-parent	Engineer	Canteen worker	15	Garage attendant
Sue Long	1949	Birmingham	Two-parent	Metalworker's assistant/painter and decorator	Shop assistant; factory worker; canteen assistant	16	Employed
Yvonne Davis	Not given	Jamaica	Two-parent	---	---	16	---
Liz Mackenzie	1950	Oxford	Two-parent	Farmer	---	16 FE	Sunday school teacher
Carolyn Maynard	1950	London	Two-parent	Civil servant	Secretary	16	Sales person
Wendy Turner	1956	Birmingham	One-parent	Unknown	Tram conductress	15	Office worker; Sales assistant
Susan McGrath	1960	Middlesbrough	One-parent	Unknown	Bus conductress	16	---
Samantha Walker	1968	Sheffield	One-parent	Truck driver	Housewife	16	Waitress
Kathryn Riley	1960	Liverpool	Two-parent	Demolition worker	Housewife/cleaner	16	Sales assistant

Name	Age at first marriage	Husband's occupation	Number of children	Marital employment	Age at Sep/ Divorce	Residence as lone mother	Housing type	Main source of income	Remarried
Barbara Steele	21	Teacher	1	Teacher (war effort)	29	Cheltenham	Home Owner	Employment	No
Gwen Griese	21	RAF Officer	1	RAF Sergeant	26	Bristol	---	Employment	No
Irene Sharrat	21	Miner	1		26	Northampton	Parents' house	Employment	Yes
Mary Anderson	23	Miner	1	Home help	Mid-thirties	Newcastle	Parents' house	Employment	No
Rose Hellerman	Early-twenties	Post Office Clerk; Engineer	1	Part-time	Early-thirties	Gloucestershire	Parents' house	Employment	Yes
Barbara Shirley	20	Farmer	3	Kennel operator	30	Leamington Spa, Warwickshire	Home owner	Employment Maintenance	No
Beatrice Bell	Early-twenties	US Air Force	2	Housewife	Mid-twenties	Sheffield	Parents' house	Social Security	Yes
Ellen O'Brien	33	Clerk; Unemployed	1	Midwife	46	Birmingham	---	Employment	No
Iris Gooderman	Mid-twenties	Taxi driver; Unemployed	2	Office worker/ Cleaner	Early-thirties	Manchester	Homeless/ Private rental	Employment	No
Elizabeth Edwards	19	Brick-layer	4	Part-time typist	40	Liverpool	---	Employment	No
Anne Hoad	21	Vicar	2	Part-time nurse	29	Bournemouth	Homeless/ Council housing	Social Security/ Employment	No
Doris Grainger	21	---	8	Employed	42	Doncaster	Private rental	Social security	No

Audrey Hughes	24	---	2	Part-time/ Housewife	Early- forties	Cheshire	Home owner	Employment	No
Judy Sleet	18	---	4	Teacher	35	Birmingham	Council housing	Employment	Yes
Violet Ellis	Early- twenties	Factory worker	5	Psychiatric nurse	38	Gloucester	---	Social Security/ Employment	No
Cindy Clark	18	RAF	1	Housewife	26	North England	---	Employment	No
Sue Townsend	18	Foundry worker	3	Retail/ Factory worker	Mid- twenties	Leicester	Council housing	Employment/ Social Security	Yes
Sue Long	18	---	3	Housewife	22	Birmingham	Council housing	Employment/ Social Security	No
Yvonne Davis	Late-teens	---	3	Gift-shop proprietor	Late- twenties	London	Council housing	Employment	No
Liz Mackenzie	25	Pub owner	2	Pub owner	39	Harrogate	Homeless/ Parents' house	Employment	No
Carolyn Maynard	32	RAF	2	Housewife	42	Surrey	Home owner	Employment	No
Wendy Turner	22	---	2	Housewife	31	Birmingham	Mother's home; Home owner	Social security and employment	No
Susan McGrath	20	Army office	2		22	Middlesbrough	Parents' house/ Council Housing	Social Security	No

Samantha Walker	20	Unemployed	1	Cleaner	Early twenties	Sheffield	Council housing	Social Security	No
Kathryn Riley	19	Self-employed	2	None	22	Liverpool	Private rental; Council housing	Social Security and employment	No

Summary C. Unmarried Lone Mothers

Name	Year of birth	Place of birth	One-Parent/ two-parent family	Father's occupation/s	Mother's occupation/s	School leaving age FE/HE	Occupation prior to birth of illegitimate child	Relationship with father of illegitimate child	Birth control
Doris Grainger	1929	Doncaster	Two-parent	Sales manager	Housewife and cleaner	14	Factory worker; Mill worker	Engaged	None
Mary Jarvis	1933	Carlisle	One-parent	Farm worker	Domestic servant	15	---	Incestuous/ Non-consensual	None
Margaret Suter	1939	York	Two-parent	Church caretaker	Church caretaker	15	---	Friend	None
Sheila Walker	1940	Surrey	Two-parent	Armed forces	Housewife	15	Employed	Engaged	None
Ann French	1936	Walsall	Two-parent	Electrician	Book-binder	15	Secretary	Holiday romance	Withdrawal
Vera Blanchard	1937	London	Two-parent	Labourer	Housewife	15	Upholsterer; Shop worker	Engaged	None
Beryl Steadman	1939	London	One-parent	Upholsterer	Soft furnisher	15	Upholsterer	Relationship with married man	Withdrawal
Ann D'Arcy	1943	Glasgow	One-parent	Labourer	Domestic servant	15	Retail/ Au Pair/ Factory work	Boyfriend (first child) Affair with married man (second child)	No (first child) Ineffective (second child)
Sue Marples	1949	---	Two-parent	---	---	15	---	Boyfriend/ Engaged	None

Lesley Swire	Late-1940s/ Early 1950s	---	Two-parent	---	---	15 FE	Teacher training	Boyfriend	Withdrawal
Doreen Ward	Late 1940s/ Early 1950s	Harrogate	Two-parent	---	---	15 FE	Nurse training	---	---
Carolyn Maynard	1950	London	Two-parent	Civil servant	Secretary	15 FE	Sales person	Cohabiting	Planned pregnancy
Felicity Rock	1957	London	Two-parent	Architect	Teacher	16 HE	University student	Boyfriend	---
Susan McGrath	1960	Middlesbrough	One-parent	Unknown	Bus conductress	16	Shop assistant	Boyfriend	Withdrawal/ None
Kathryn Riley	1960	Liverpool	Two-parent	Demolition worker	Housewife/ cleaner	16	Shop assistant	Boyfriend	No
Catherine Parker	1954	Leeds	---	---	---	16	Employed	Boyfriend	---
Farida Anderson	1961	Manchester	Two-parent	Shop proprietor	Shop proprietor	16	Travel agent	Boyfriend	---
Lois Carnie	1962	Glasgow	Two-parent	Vicar	Teacher	16 HE	Office worker	---	No
Malika Ahmed	1967	Birmingham	One-parent	Unknown	Nurse	16 FE	Social work training	Boyfriend (long-term)	---
Karen Chazen	1969	Liverpool	One-parent	Joiner	Housewife	16 FE	Office worker/ Nursery nurse	Boyfriend	---

Name	Age at birth of illegitimate child	Institutionalisation?	Illegitimate child adopted or kept?	Residence as lone mother	Housing type	Main source of income	Age at first marriage	Divorced?
Doris Grainger	19	No	Kept	Doncaster	Parents' house	Employment	21	Yes
Mary Jarvis	16	Mother and baby home (Church of England)	Placed in care)	Kendal	N/A	N/A	17	Yes
Margaret Suter	20	Mother and baby home (Salvation Army)	Adopted	Leeds	N/A	N/A	Married, age not given	No
Sheila Walker	19	No	Adopted	Surrey	Parents' house	Employment	Early Twenties	No
Ann French	24	Mother and baby home	Kept	Walsall	Parents' house	Employment	26	No
Vera Blanchard	18	No	Kept Married	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Beryl Steadman	29	No	Kept	London	Mothers' house	Social security and Employment	No	N/A
Ann D'Arcy	25 (first child) 27 (second child)	Psychiatric Hospital	Kept first child Second child adopted	Cornwall and for a short period, Glasgow	Private rental; Father's house; Sister's house; Social housing	Social security and Employment	No	N/A
Sue Marples	18	Mother and baby home	Adopted	---	N/A	N/A	Early twenties	No
Lesley Swire	19	Mother and baby home	Adopted	Bradford	N/A	N/A	---	---
Doreen Ward	18	Mother and baby home	Adopted	Manchester	N/A	N/A	---	---

Carolyn Maynard	30	No	Kept	London	Private rental	Employment	32	Yes
Felicity Rock	21	University	Kept	Birmingham	University accommodation; Private rental	Social security and employment	No	N/A
Susan McGrath	17	No	Kept	Middlesbrough	Mother's house	Social Security	20	Yes
Kathryn Riley	17	No	Kept	Liverpool	Parent's house	Employment	19	Yes
Catherine May Parker	Mid-twenties	No	Kept	London/Leeds	Home owner	Social security and employment	No	N/A
Farida Anderson	Early-twenties	No	Kept	Manchester	Private rental	Employment	No	N/A
Lois Carnie	19	No	Kept	---	Parents' house	Employment	22	No
Malika Ahmed	18	Mother and baby home (Catholic church); Youth hostel (Young Women's Christian Association)	Kept	Birmingham/ Watford	Social housing; Mother's house	Employment	Early-twenties	No
Karen Chazen	25	No	Kept	Liverpool	Private rental	Social security and employment	No	N/A

'Employed' = In paid work, but occupation not given

--- = No information available

