Chapter 2: Literature review

Some of these collections are marginal to the library world, others are leaders in it. (Hildenbrand, 1986c, p. 137)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the literature on women’s libraries. Literature in the related area of women’s information needs is also evaluated, due to its connection to the field of women’s libraries, and to help place the role of women’s libraries within an information setting. As the thesis has a primary focus on Wales, literature focusing on relevant information and women’s issues in Wales will also be discussed and analysed. The literature review is not concerned with the literature on women in libraries or librarianship as a career for women.

2.2 The nature of the literature

2.2.1 Searching for the literature

When beginning research in any area, one should establish a large set of keywords with which to locate the literature. Naturally, the words woman, women and female are all relevant here, but the broader term of gender, and increasingly, gendered, also need to be brought into keyword searches of catalogues and databases. As this research is primarily interested in women’s libraries, women’s resource centres and women’s archives, these terms were also incorporated. It was also important to remember to change centre to center to allow American items to be retrieved.

Introduction of terms such as library or libraries brought up a large body of literature pertaining to women working in libraries, which was not the focus of this thesis. Thus with some of the terms, use of “quote marks” or AND or the + symbol were deployed in some electronic catalogues in order to retrieve relevant material. Once a large list of references had been built up through interrogating a number of library catalogues and online services (e.g. BIDS Ingenta, British Library, LISA (Library and Information
Science Abstracts), National Library of Wales, OCLC First Search, Web of Science), further items were identified through careful reading of the bibliographies of the identified literature. The literature search was conducted in the early stages of the thesis (i.e. the first six months), with further items being discovered over time; another extensive literature search was conducted six-nine months before completion in order to ensure that all the relevant and recent material had been found.

2.2.2 Characteristics of the literature

2.2.2.1 Type of literature

The majority of the literature relating to women’s libraries, archives and resource centres tends to be descriptive accounts of single institutions or organisations e.g. Davaz-Mardin (2000) on the women’s library in Istanbul, Turkey; or Posthumus (1992) on the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women’s Movement (IIAV) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This literature, whilst useful, informative and interesting, does not form a body of empirical research from which findings can be drawn. Further, as each women’s library is considered in isolation, it promotes an impression that each institution is a lone survivor, or is unique in facing its own struggles. In fact, when the literature on women’s libraries is collated, many similarities appear.

In a similar vein, the majority of the literature relating to women’s information needs is regarded by Vyas as being “project specific and at micro-level”, and it often falls into the category of grey literature¹ (Vyas, 1993, p. 150). For example, much gender information is often generated by small grassroots voluntary organisations (out of which

¹ Grey Literature is defined by the international Luxembourg Convention as: "Information produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing i.e. where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body." (Grey Literature Network Service, n. d., n. p.). Broader definitions may refer to it as material that is not issued for public sale, and/or does not have an ISBN/ISSN (Council for British Archaeology, 2001, Appendix 4.2). It may now also include information provided via websites and electronic means.
the ‘second wave’ of feminism arose during the 1960s onwards), and may not be published or distributed formally through traditional mainstream channels, thus being hard to trace or obtain. Mbambo notes that the majority of women’s information in Africa is in the form of grey literature, which is difficult not only to disseminate but also to collect (Mbambo, 1999, p. 104). In addition, there may be no legal deposit for such items, and consequently some gender research may be difficult to discover, as Rathapo describes in relation to Botswana. To counter this problem she suggests establishing formal networks and greater co-ordination between various women’s organisations (Rathapo, 2000, p. 306). To some extent, the women’s resource centres and women’s libraries themselves can be useful in the role as repositories for such material.

The nature of the literature combined with the multi-disciplinary nature of the research, creates a situation where important information may be scattered and hard to find. From a feminist perspective, this serves to perpetuate the marginalisation of women’s issues across the world. The quote by Vyas in Section 1.3 in Chapter 1 underlines this isolation. Vyas’ recommendations are that there needs to be more dialogue between users and the library profession, more research to fill the gaps in the literature, and an improvement to the flow of official information about women (Vyas, 1993, p. 154). It is possible to see, when the research areas of women’s information needs and women’s libraries are combined, why there is a perceived lack of information; there is in fact very little overlap between the two research fields, and recommendations from one discipline are not taken up by the other, despite their common goals and objectives.

2.2.2.2 Authorship

It is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of writers discussing women’s libraries and women’s information needs are women themselves. In terms of the former discipline, the authors are predominantly those who are involved with the particular institution about which they are writing e.g. Chiguda, 1997; Colmer 1994; Darter, 1990; Davaz-Mardin, 2000; Davies & Walbe, 1982; Doughan 1990; Drenthe, 1993; Duguid, 2000; Greening, 2000; Hofmann-Weinberger & Willie, 1994; Ilett, 2003; Kramer, 1993;
Moseley, 1995; Paik, 1998; Pankhurst, 1987; Patrick, 2000; Posthumus, 1992; Richardson, 1987; Rolph, 2000 and Vriend, 2001. The majority of these articles serve to inform readers about the institutions and thus act as a form of profile-raising. Given their authorship, it is possible to see how particular positions may be enhanced, or conveniently sidelined, in the discussion. This, combined with the lack of empirical or evidence-based investigative research leads to a tendency of little critical debate surrounding the many interesting and important issues connected to women’s libraries.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that there is little literature on women’s libraries within the inter-disciplinary field of women’s studies. Can it be assumed that women’s studies researchers who perhaps use women’s libraries and archives do not consider these institutions as research topics? In addition, even though librarianship is often referred to as a female profession (Harris, 1992; Kolb & Schaffner, 2001, n. p.; McDermott, 1994), there appears to be little interest by female librarians in researching women’s libraries.

2.2.2.3 Location of studies (geography)

The literature surrounding women’s libraries has an international basis. This is in part due to the fact that there are nearly 400 women’s libraries across the world (IIAV, 2005, n. p.). In terms of women’s information needs research, there appear to be three areas of focus. These are: women’s information needs in developing countries (e.g. Botswana, India); information needs of specific groups of women (e.g. abused women, business women) and thirdly, women’s information needs from a health perspective. The latter often falls outside of the traditional library and information science areas and is only found when searches are conducted in databases that specifically include medical journals such as Journal of Advanced Nursing or Journal of Clinical Nursing.

As the findings of the literature review reveal (see Section 2.4.6), the similar positions of women's libraries and women’s information needs, despite geographical, social,
economic and cultural differences, contradicts the postmodern perspective that universal categories such as ‘women’ are no longer relevant. Whilst an element of difference is expected, given the diverse nature of women’s libraries, I believe the similarities are more revealing than the differences.

2.2.2.4 Sources of publication

Discussion of women’s libraries is rarely found in mainstream feminist research or women’s history monographs. For example, in Women in grassroots communication: furthering social change by Riaño (1994), there are no references in the index for ‘information’, ‘library’ or ‘resource’. Yet the book is concerned with communication and thus communicating information. This book is unfortunately not an exception in its omission.

Analysis of my thesis’ bibliography reveals that the literature is spread across a wide range of journals covering issues such as international development, library science, medicine, feminism, gender and women’s history. There are few dedicated monographs in this subject matter. This may be because it is a broad, and yet specific, area. Existing books on this subject tend to be proceedings from conferences e.g. Moseley’s Women, information and the future: collecting and sharing resources worldwide (1995) based on an international conference of the same name held in 1994, and Women’s issues at IFLA: Equity, gender and information on agenda. Papers from the programs of the Round Table on Women’s Issues at IFLA Annual Conferences 1993-2002 edited by Siitonen (2003) (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions - IFLA).

In addition to formal published literature, some of the literature in the field of women's libraries is grey literature, and although referred to in some bibliographies, it can be difficult to locate or obtain, especially when it is of an international nature or produced by small locally-based grassroots organisations.
2.3 **Women’s libraries as a research area**

The literature on women’s libraries whilst not displaying a long history of theoretical debate and development, is diverse in its nature and scope. For reasons of clarity and coherence it has been classified in the subsequent review into the following categories:

- theoretical perspectives
- comparative studies
- empirical research
- library management issues
- histories and descriptive narratives
- international perspectives
- women’s archives and women’s history
- women and public libraries
- women’s studies and women’s libraries
- women, information and development

### 2.3.1 Theoretical perspectives of women’s libraries

Some authors give brief theoretical reasons for the establishment of women’s libraries, such as the quote by Kramer below:

*The importance of access to relevant information for the feminist movement, for women’s studies and for equal opportunities policies has been recognized for a long time. The difficulties involved in obtaining relevant books, articles, reports etc., on women in mainstream documentation are also well known. This has led women to establish their own libraries, archives and documentation centres. (Kramer, 1993, pp. 211-212)*

Kramer also puts forward a theory of “three-generations” of women’s libraries (see Section 1.4 in Chapter 1).

Davaz-Mardin deals in considerable depth with the theory of women’s libraries within her discussion of the establishment of the Women’s Library in Turkey. She notes that:
These libraries and archives constitute the memory of women and women’s movements and their growth is parallel to the development of a feminist consciousness ... [and] ... they render the invisible women visible. (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 449)

A further reason given by Davaz-Mardin for establishing such institutions is they are often formed out of a recognition that public and academic libraries do not contain material about women’s lives and histories (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 449). She notes also that the prime reasons for the foundation of the women’s library in Turkey are “women’s history” and “re-documenting the past” (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 449). One focus for collection development that she argues is possible, and central, to women’s libraries is to concentrate on ephemera and material about the daily and private lives of women e.g. diaries, paper, letters, art, films, oral history tapes and objects belonging to women e.g. banners and badges (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 450). This type of material could form the basis for research collections and is not often collected by public or academic libraries. Further, she notes that:

*Women’s libraries have an important role to play in addition to the acquisition, preservation and dissemination of women’s documents. A women’s library clearly plays a role through its mere existence. ... Its existence stands against the historical omission of women in the acquisition, preservation and dissemination of documents.* (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 451)

She notes that a women’s library has two missions: one is to spread awareness and to make connections between the old and the new documents, and the other is to re-evaluate material by bringing a feminist consciousness to researching documents (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 452). She also highlights two key theoretical yet practical concerns for women’s libraries. One is to face outwards, raise their profiles, increase the awareness of the value of women’s documents, and encourage depositing of papers; and the other is to face inwards, to ask about the aim of the collection, its growth, future, problems of acquisition, preservation, dissemination and bibliographic control (Davaz-Mardin, 2000, p. 462). It is interesting to note that many of the other articles on women’s libraries appear to not fully engage with either mission that she identifies, in that they often do not locate the article within a wider perspective e.g. women’s history,
role of women’s documents, nor do they consider internal issues such as collection development or user needs.

Ilett’s theoretical perspective on gender and librarianship takes a different approach from much of the literature in that she analyses the effects feminism has had on the profession. She argues that libraries have been influenced by masculine viewpoints, e.g. the Dewey decimal system, (see Chapter 4 Section 4.7 for a discussion of this), and her thesis focuses on exploring how a ‘gendered’ profession like librarianship has adapted to the demands of feminism. She also considers librarianship within women’s libraries, where, following her theoretical standpoint, one would expect to see more evidence of feminist librarianship practices (Ilett, 2003). Her analysis of the connections between feminism and librarianship is an important theoretical development of this field, and has been applied in this thesis. However, although she conducted a survey of three women’s libraries in the UK, the choosing of the three organisations is not explained and other existing women’s libraries are not mentioned. The discussion surrounding the three chosen libraries focuses primarily within the context of how they operate in the profession and as such, does not provide this thesis with a comparative survey.

Hildenbrand’s comparative study of women’s libraries in America links the theory behind their foundation directly to the prominence, or otherwise, of women’s movements over time. Thus, she argues that the growing consciousness of women during the first and second waves of feminism was also seen in the growing awareness of the importance of women’s information, educating women and women’s empowerment (Hildenbrand, 1986b).

“women’s collections today owe their number, size and vigour to feminism, with its dual commitments to activism and scholarship on behalf of women.” (Hildenbrand, 1986b, p. 1)

This connection between feminist theory and feminist practice would suggest that the creation of a women’s library or archive in Wales would partially depend upon the current level of feminist awareness and activism is in Wales. This idea is expounded in Chapter 6.
2.3.2 Comparative studies

An early and important example of a comparative approach to women’s libraries is that of Hildenbrand’s 1986 edited work *Women’s collections: libraries, archives and consciousness*. Several articles cite Hildenbrand’s work as important in their own work although they generally refer to her 1996 edited book rather than the earlier work (e.g. Baggs, 2000, p. 40; Kerslake & Moody, 2000a, p. 1; Sturges, 2000, p. 5). As well as noting the origins and fortunes of women’s collections, Hildenbrand also profiled a number of different women’s collections in America (Hildenbrand, 1986). Although her comparative study provides information about the positions of women's libraries in America, there is no mention of institutions or networks outside of America.

A more global perspective is provided by Greening, formerly an archivist at the Fawcett Library and the Women’s Library. Greening was one of the delegates at the first conference on women’s information in 1991, and she discusses the type of international networking that has taken place since then as a result of that and subsequent conferences (Greening, 2000).

*The mutually supportive professional and personal relationships struck at these first conferences are still active in initiatives such as the European Women’s Thesaurus, an IIAV project ...*. (Greening, 2000, p. 468)

*All kinds of women’s resource centres and organisations are represented in this informal association, from radical through academic to United Nations-sponsored non-governmental organisations and national collections, from small one-woman initiatives to multi-staffed, multi-media collections*. (Greening, 2000, p. 469)

Interestingly, although her article is also partly about the Women’s Library and Information Center in Istanbul, and the following article in the journal is specifically about this library, both articles appear in the journal *Gender and History*, rather than in a librarianship journal. There are three issues to consider as a result: one is that it is
evidence of the multi-disciplinary nature of this topic; the second is that many of the women’s libraries focus strongly on historical reasons for their existence and have close connections to women’s history; the final important factor to consider is that a researcher has to search a wide range of related disciplines in order to find the literature. This could lead potentially to lack of awareness of developments in the field, and may also lead to the fragmentation of the topic. It also provides supporting evidence for a finding from this thesis, which is that women’s libraries have varying degrees of engagement with both librarianship and feminism. It may be difficult to be fully engaged with both fields and some libraries may have an inclination towards women’s history or feminism, whilst others favour librarianship.

Vriend’s comparative study discusses the origins of the Mapping the World database, along with theoretical reasoning behind women’s libraries (Vriend, 2001). She states that

Women have collected and disseminated information for many years, but it is only in the twentieth century that centers have been set up for the specific purpose of collecting and documenting what has come to be known as women’s information, which covers a wide spectrum of material, including cultural, political, and educational data. (Vriend, 2001, n. p.)

She locates the importance of women’s information firmly within issues of development, empowerment and equality by referring to the decisions made at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The Mapping the World database was launched by the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) in 1998 at the international Know-How Conference on the World of Women’s Information and initially contained details of 162 centres representing 78 countries. Subsequent recognition by UNESCO as to the vital global role of women’s information, provided funds to expand the database (Vriend, 2001, n. p.). With external funding the IIAV were able to produce the database in book form (see Cummings, Valk & Van Dam, 1999, Women’s information services and networks: a global sourcebook) which contains additional essays on international
women’s networks and women’s groups, and a bibliography. In 2001 the IIAV revised the website and database web interface to improve clarity and usability, and in 2004-5 undertook a complete revision of all the entries (currently at about 400) and hope to produce the newly revised database in CD-ROM format (Vriend, 2001, n. p.).

Originally designed as a tool for networking and cooperation among women’s information specialists worldwide, the database has now become a useful resource for researchers and those interested in women’s issues. Thus it not only “demonstrates the power and richness of women’s collections round the world” but has also “helped to make women’s information more accessible and visible” (Vriend, 2001, n. p.). Although Vriend’s article does not discuss, compare or analyse the multitude of women’s libraries/centres globally (an impossible task), she does highlight the level of global networking and awareness about these institution.

A comprehensive comparative presentation of women’s libraries can be found in the proceedings from the Women, Information and the Future conference held in America in 1994 published in book format (see Moseley, 1995). Whilst the majority of the papers are descriptive accounts of women’s libraries from across the globe (e.g. Australia, Bangladesh, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, and Russia), there is also discussion of women’s studies, the practicalities of managing women’s libraries, women’s thesauri and women and human rights. The combination of such varied papers in one book reveals the multi-disciplinary nature of this topic, and, the similarity of many issues faced by women's libraries and archives across the world.

Proceedings from IFLA’s Round Table on Women’s Issues (RTWI) provides researchers and practitioners with one other comparative monograph on women’s library issues, but this volume is not necessarily concerned with women’s libraries per se. Instead, it is a selection of articles presented at the RTWI over the years of its existence (1993-2002) and covers issues such as women librarians, library managers, information services for women, women’s information needs, library school education
and the information society. Whilst there is unfortunately no index in which to look up terms such as ‘women’s libraries’, some of the articles do cover this topic, but again, they are often descriptive accounts of single institutions. Despite this, the global nature of the proceedings provides an international context to the issue of women’s information.

Darter, from the Equal Opportunities Commission library, profiled 10 independent women’s institutions in the UK in a descriptive yet comparative article (Darter, 1990). Although the institutions were often small she argued that they “had a valuable, although frequently unpublicised, role in the provision of information on a national level” (Darter, 1990, p. 140). Written 15 years ago, half of the 10 centres that she focused on have now closed: Feminist Audio Books, Feminist Library, Lesbian Archive, Women Artists Slide Library and Women’s International Resource Centre. She noted that several had lost their funding, frequently commenting that “it may just be a question of time before it is forced to close” (Darter, 1990, p. 141). Of the Feminist Library, she notes that the loss of its funding in 1988 was a “drastic blow” to the collection, and that “the future does indeed look bleak and a major rescue operation will be needed if this fine resource is not to be lost” (Darter, 1990, p. 141). (The library was to continue for another 14 years.) Her main concerns regarding special women’s collections are financial difficulties, non-professionally trained staff and an over-reliance upon volunteers, because, “with the best will in the world this inevitably affects the organisation and the exploitation of their materials” (Darter, 1990, pp. 141-142). These issues are still central today.

Because the future looked bleak for many of the libraries she profiled, Darter discussed the future for such collections. She asked who would collect women’s studies material if these libraries were to close? Although collections may develop in colleges where women’s studies is offered, she argued that academic libraries do not, as a rule, often collect ephemera or grey literature. Yet this type of material is central to the women’s movement and forms the basis of many women’s collections (Darter, 1990, p. 142). She
also questioned the access to collections in academic libraries as they may not be open to non-students.

Darter also notes a desire to create or amalgamate lists and databases of the collections of women’s libraries (Darter, 1990, pp. 142-143). This was partly achieved by BiblioFem (see Section 2.3.4), and has been enhanced by Genesis, the virtual mapping of women’s collections across the UK which has created a searchable database of women-focused collections in the UK.

2.3.3 Empirical research

Blagden has conducted one of the few (published) pieces of empirical research on women’s libraries. She conducted a user survey of the Fawcett Library, which she states is:

> Britain’s main historical research library on all aspects of women in society but it [also] contains much current material. (Blagden, 1985, p. 1)

The Fawcett Library was facing constraints of money, space and staff time in the 1980s and was reviewing its acquisitions policy and needed to know more about the usage of the library (Blagden, 1985, p. 1). She sent postal questionnaires to researchers of women’s studies on lists as well as conducting eight interviews with users in the library itself. With a total of 147 replies, her success rate was high at 83% (Blagden, 1985, p. 2).

Her findings are illuminating, and they confirm findings from this thesis and other research, that the Fawcett Library and some of its services were either unknown or underused. For example, whilst 80% of her respondents had heard of the Fawcett Library, 70% of these respondents had never actually visited the library. The reasons given included that it was too far to travel to, or that the researcher felt it was not relevant to their work (Blagden, 1985, pp. 7-8). Although Blagden does not discuss the reasons for this latter feeling, it may be that many women’s studies researchers during the mid 1980s were involved in contemporary and/or grassroots work, and did not
perceive the Fawcett Library to have the material they would need, seeing it perhaps mainly as an archive of the suffrage movement. In addition, only 1/3 of the respondents had heard of BiblioFem, the combined database of the Fawcett Library and Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) library’s holdings (Blagden, 1985, p. 8). Whilst it was mainly other women’s libraries or other interested institutions that bought microfiche copies of BiblioFem, it could have been assumed that women’s studies researchers would have known about this bibliographic tool that could aid their research. For those researchers who did use the library, Blagden found that although the physical conditions were not ideal (they described it as “poky” and “tiny”), the staff were very helpful and friendly\(^2\) (Blagden, 1985, pp. 11-12). Her conclusions were that although it was a valued specialist library, greater publicity was needed in order to overcome the non-use of the library (Blagden, 1985, p. 12). However, its usage depends, inevitably, heavily on its holdings.

A European-wide survey of 55 women’s libraries or equality centres (e.g. the EOC in the UK) had the aim of improving international exchange of information and resources that provide documentation in the field of equal treatment for men and women in the European Community (Kramer, 1993, p. 212). The survey and subsequent EC report, whilst being a rare piece of empirical and comparative research does not appear to have had a wide circulation and no other piece of literature refers to the report or its findings. Kramer found that the major obstacles to increased co-operation between women’s libraries included a lack of national focus in some states, lack of sufficient funding, lack of standardized indexing and classifying, lack of computerisation and also language barriers (Kramer, 1993, p. 213). She recommended an European network of national women’s centres, better use of inter-library loan schemes, and a European database of collections (Kramer 1993, p. 214). It must be noted that since Kramer’s article (and the report it is based upon), there have been several international conferences on women’s issues.

\(^2\) A mystery shopper exercise published in CILIP’s Update magazine, found the Women’s Library to have friendly and helpful staff – unlike the majority of academic libraries visited in the sample (Brockhurst, 2005, p. 25).
information (one of which was held in Europe), an European Women’s Thesaurus (Drenthe, 1993), and a global directory of women’s libraries (Mapping the World) which is run by the IIAV, a women’s library in the Netherlands. Thus European-wide initiatives in this discipline could be seen to be improving.

2.3.4 Library management issues
Related to the paucity of published empirical research on women’s libraries, there is a corresponding lack of documentation on issues relating to the management of such libraries. This topic includes issues such as user needs surveys (see Blagden above), collection management, professional training, classification schemes and management styles.

An example of a descriptive account of a library management issue is that of Pirie’s article on BiblioFem. BiblioFem was a database of (most of) the holdings of the Fawcett Library and the EOC library and it also provided bibliographic details of material concerning women that had been catalogued by the British Library (from the 1950s onwards) and by the Library of Congress (1968 onwards) (Pirie, 1984, p. 30). Although BiblioFem was sold internationally, it was not able to cover its costs sufficiently and was discontinued in 1987 (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 231). Despite BiblioFem being an innovative tool for women’s studies researchers, Pirie’s article is very brief and does not concern itself with any theory or reason why such a bibliographic database was needed.

General management issues of concern to women’s libraries were raised by Colmer, writing about the Women’s Studies Resource Centre in Australia. She notes that because the Centre cannot afford to employ many staff, it relies on volunteers and staff that might not possess library or archive qualifications. This, she says, has sometimes “hindered the cataloguing” as it has been done by a range of different volunteers and workers leading to inconsistencies and other problems (Colmer, 1994, p. 230). However, the Centre has benefited from this sometimes transitory and temporary source of personnel as various projects such as a women’s thesaurus have been undertaken by
local graduates as part of their library courses (Colmer, 1994, p. 231) and which would not have occurred without such help.

In addition to the lack of professionally trained librarians and archivists Colmer also noted hostility from these professions.

\[\text{Traditionally the Centre has been somewhat isolated from mainstream libraries and resource centres: viewed with suspicion for its employment of non-librarians and its somewhat ad-hoc technical systems. However, the last few years have seen the centre developing stronger links with other libraries… .} \quad (\text{Colmer, 1994, p. 229})\]

This quote is interesting because it suggests that the isolation and disengagement from librarianship was not a result of self-imposed individuality, but because of suspicion from the library profession.

The most detailed example of collection management issues and women’s libraries is provided in an extensive article on collection development and the history of the Fawcett Library. By providing a historical perspective, the author (influential in bringing the Fawcett Library to the Polytechnic 1976/77, and Head of Library Services at the City of London Polytechnic until 1987) is able to give reasons for the focus of the library’s holdings, and the dilemmas involved in collecting and creating a women’s library. Pankhurst explains that much of the material was collected via donations rather than purchase, as well as through international links e.g. the exchange of feminist periodicals (Pankhurst, 1987, pp. 226-227). During the 1970s the library experienced a decline in members, decline in donations and rising costs, leading to a low level of acquisitions and some service cuts (Pankhurst 1987, p. 230). It is interesting to note that the library was experiencing a decline when the second wave of the women’s liberation movement was at its zenith. This confirms the view that the library was seen more as an archive, particularly on suffrage and middle-class women, rather than a contemporary resource collecting current material (Ilett, 200, p. 238, 247). However, Doughan, a member of staff at the Fawcett Library, writing three years after Pankhurst argued that “[t]he Fawcett Library is Britain’s main historical resource on women and feminism,
and is also a major library of contemporary women’s studies” (Doughan, 1990, p. 148). He further stated that:

*the main academic emphasis of the Library is historical and political; however, current material is actively collected, and the political range includes revolutionary radical feminism, the Women’s Institute, and the Campaign for Feminine Woman.* (Doughan, 1990, p. 148)

This suggests that the staff saw the Library as having a role in the collection of contemporary material, but low usage suggests that potential users did not hold such views.

After the Fawcett Library was acquired by the City of London Polytechnic in 1976/77, one of the first priorities was to “rebuild confidence” in the library (Pankhurst, 1987, p.230). However, by the early 1980s although there was an increased awareness of the Fawcett Library and women’s issues which led to increase in usage, library staff “had deliberately refrained from extensive publicity, because there was neither the space nor the staff to accommodate a large readership” (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 231). An increase in feminist literature, an increase in ephemera from the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) combined with a decline in the funds of City of London Polytechnic led to many problems in the 1980s, not least pressures of space and an over-full basement (where the library was housed).

Given the Fawcett Library’s primary emphasis on the suffrage movement, Pankhurst was aware that contemporary material was potentially at risk from not being collected. Her summary of the other contemporary women’s libraries reveals an attitude at the Fawcett Library that is still visible today (see Chapters 4 and 5) as she dismisses the other women’s libraries for various (and mostly valid) reasons. She argued that the Feminist Library was not secure enough, with its absence of institutional affiliation, precarious funding, and loss of professional staff, to offer a permanent home to WLM material, and she questioned its long-term future (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 233). (It is interesting to note that at the time of her article in 1987, although the Feminist Library was in a dip at that point, it survived for another 17 years.) With regard to the EOC
library, she argued that it does not collect ephemera or archives, thus this material still does not have a natural home. (Darter claims that the EOC library did collect ephemera such as newsletters from local women’s groups, Darter, 1983; Darter, 1985.) Pankhurst also dismissed the Feminist Archive as it is “merely a room” at the University of Bath, and because the university wanted the room back there was a question over its future. She also drew attention to the fact that it was only open to women, run by volunteers and had no money (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 233).

Her conclusions regarding the other women’s libraries led to the suggestion that the Fawcett Library alone should cater for the needs of the feminists of the day. In the light of this, she argues that it must assess user behaviour (e.g. information needs) and look at what issues current feminist researchers are interested in, in order to provide, and collect, the most appropriate material (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 235). (Blagden’s users survey on the Feminist Library had been conducted two years previously.) The idea of user needs surveys is not unique to women’s libraries, as all libraries should undertake such projects in order to ensure that the needs of their users (and non-users) are being met, and to consider how to improve services to meet users’ needs.

Pankhurst’s article is interesting not only in terms of her views on collection management, other women’s libraries and the geographical scope of the library, but also for the evidence of the idea of it becoming a national library for women. Pankhurst states that:

> a notion was developing that the Fawcett Library should aim at becoming the national archive or national library on women – a kind of Women’s British Library. (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 235)

Ten years later the library won its Heritage Lottery Fund bid under its (temporary) new name of the National Library for Women. However, whilst aiming at being a national library for women, Pankhurst also highlights a desire for closer cooperation among the other women’s libraries and some academic institutions.

> A network of women’s studies libraries could help to provide complete coverage and could eventually perhaps develop a successor to
BiblioFem in the shape of a union catalogue of material on women in the cooperating libraries. (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 237)

A small number of specialist women’s libraries also offer possibilities of collaboration, though problems of continuity may make a long-term arrangement difficult. (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 237)

There are good possibilities of cooperating with the major women’s libraries in other countries. (Pankhurst, 1987, p. 237)

She notes that they were awaiting an investigation of women’s studies holdings of other British libraries and academic institutions, and hoped cooperation would be possible to reduce the collection development burden. After my fieldwork at the Women’s Library, extensive cooperation between British women’s libraries was not immediately obvious, but, the development of *Genesis*, an online bibliographic database of relevant material in various locations across the UK is to be welcomed (see Section 4.7.7 in Chapter 4).

Whilst Pankhurst’s article is useful for a number of reasons, it is interesting to note that there is little discussion on the actual value of women’s libraries, why they are important, and their position within either librarianship or women’s studies in the UK or internationally. As has been outlined before, these omissions are not confined to this one article.

A more recent review of the Fawcett Library’s collection was conducted by Greening & Davis-Perkins (both part-time workers at the library at the time). Their survey looked at the conservation and preservation of all the material in order to give a picture of the library’s physical state and to estimate the size of various possible conservation projects. They noted that “it has become obvious that rare and old material has suffered from heavy use” (Greening & Davis Perkins, 1995, p. 196).

Another collection development issue is that of separation or integration of material, if the library is part of a larger institution. This is explored by both Moseley and by Voss-Hubbard in relation to two women’s libraries at colleges in America (Moseley, 1973; Voss-Hubbard, 1995). The women’s collections at both Radcliffe College and Smith...
College were started in the 1940s but whereas at Smith’s College the women’s material is shelved within the main section, at Radcliffe College it is in a separate collection. One of the leading women in women’s archives in America in the 1930s and 1940s had subsequently argued for a separate catalogue for the collection at Smith College but to no avail (Voss-Hubbard, 1995, p. 27). Moseley noted that:

*a separate listing of women’s manuscript collections implies the wish to keep women’s records either physically separate or easily distinguishable from those of men. But should women’s repositories exist at all? If they should, what should they collect? Should all women’s papers go to women’s repositories? ... It seems clear that, because of traditional neglect of women’s contributions, separate libraries about women are needed now....* (Moseley, 1973, p. 221)

However Moseley also notes the problems and dilemmas associated with a women’s library and its material. For example, she questions what should happen to documents by female doctors: should the material go to a women’s library, or to a medical library? She argues there are problems with both scenarios, but until all libraries house material on both sexes in equal quantity and scope, she argues it is perhaps better to collate women’s material separately (Moseley, 1973, p. 222).

Voss-Hubbard also discusses the merits and disadvantages of both separation and integration. By creating a separate collection, there is the advantage of creating a unique resource with a specific focus, housed together for researchers’ convenience (Voss-Hubbard, 1995). There is the parallel danger however, that only those specifically interested in women’s issues will use the material and it may become a ghetto. Integration can lead to lead to more people using the collection and it may be used by people outside of women’s studies. But, the parallel problem is that through integration there can be a loss of cohesion or sense of a unified collection and less likelihood of serendipitous findings for women’s studies researchers. Moseley felt that despite women’s libraries being excellent places:

*there are many more people who will never appear at a women’s library, so it is important that other libraries and archives increase and make known their holdings on women.* (Moseley, 1973, p. 222)
Two other important library issues of relevance to women’s libraries are those of classification and thesauri.

“Cataloguing and classification schemes have been established by men... and man is used as a generic term, and women are a subspecies” (Lochhead, 1985, p. 11).

Such is the justification for revising traditional classification schemes. Olson provides a deconstructionist critique of information retrieval and classification systems in order to overcome the traditional binary structures inherent within them (Olson, 1997). Olson argues that the process of deconstruction allows space for ‘the other’ (i.e. women), having identified and changed the previous barriers e.g. sexist language and stereotyping. Although she argues that it is important to deconstruct, reverse and replace binaries, the latter is not as clearly examined as the first two objectives in her research.

Evidence of replacing traditional systems can be seen in women’s classification schemes and in women’s thesauri.

Moseley argues that Library of Congress headings are chauvinistic in their design and terminology because women are not accorded equality with men, for example, the use of terms such as ‘women as …’ or ‘women in…’ where there is no corresponding ‘men as doctors’ or ‘men in medicine’ as it is taken for granted that terms such as ‘doctor’ will apply to men (Moseley, 1973, p. 221). Lochhead provides further evidence of how the use of the term ‘man – conception’ as a subject term renders it meaningless when ‘man’ actually refers to ‘women’ (Lochhead, 1985, p. 11). Lochhead argues that examples of such sexist approaches to classification inhibit the identification and utilisation of relevant material.

There is slightly more research on classification systems and gender bias from America than the UK, where the Library of Congress’ subject terms have been amended (Ilett, 2002, p. 35). In America, women’s thesauri were developed in 1977 and 1987 (Marshall, 1977; Capek, 1989). In Britain, although Cowley noted in 1984 five women’s resource centres and libraries in the UK which deployed their own classification systems (see Section 2.3.9) there is no separate women’s thesaurus. In the
Netherlands, frustration with the invisibility and inaccessibility of women's information in regular libraries and thus the importance of special subject indexing systems led to the development of a Dutch women’s thesaurus which was produced in 1992. At that time there were “about fifty libraries, archives and resource centres on women” in the Netherlands (Kramer, 1995a, p. 205). Kramer notes how the Dutch women’s thesaurus is different from other thesauri in that the standard terms refer to women, and where the terms relate to men a symbol is deployed to indicate this (Kramer, 1995a, p. 208). It has also been adapted by women’s libraries in France and Italy (Drenthe, 1993, p. 443) and extended to become a European Women’s Thesaurus (Drenthe, 1993).

Despite the development of several women’s thesauri, Ilett notes that there is little literature within librarianship of the theory and practice of women’s thesauri or classification schemes.

> During the 1970s and 1980s, some female librarians, particularly dealing with the multidisciplinary nature of women’s studies, tackled this, but often in publications with limited circulation. (Ilett, 2002, p. 35)

Therefore, although there are some women’s classification schemes in the UK and America, awareness of them is limited. This is in conjunction with the lack of awareness of women’s libraries in general. Ilett also argues that the writings are from grassroots feminism [which] have described difficulties and possible alternatives, but their impact has been limited to activists within women’s information centres, not mainstream librarianship. (Ilett, 2002, p. 35)

Her findings confirm that those working in women’s libraries are often not professionally qualified librarians and are not heavily engaged with librarianship. They may therefore not be aware that their development of, quite radical, feminist classification systems could have wider relevance and interest within librarianship.

### 2.3.5 Histories and descriptive narratives

Two articles from the early 1980s which are similar in the treatment of the libraries they cover and their objectives are prime examples of descriptive narratives of women’s
libraries. Both can been seen as ‘profile-raising’ on account of their content and their source of publication. Wahhab describes the Women’s Research and Resource Centre, London (WRRC) (which later became the Feminist Library) in a typical example of a descriptive account of a women’s library, although she does also mention in passing three other existing women’s libraries in the UK at that time (1980). Published in the Socialist Librarians’ Journal it is unlikely to have reached a wide audience but may well have brought the existence of the WRRC to the attention of interested socialist librarians.

Likewise, the article by Davies & Walbe in an issue of Spare Rib in 1982 will have raised the profile of the four women’s libraries included (Fawcett Library, WRRC, Equal Opportunities Commission and Feminist Archive) among women and feminists. The title of the article (Women on the shelf: a guide to feminist libraries) sets out their stance towards these institutions, even though three of the libraries did not use the word feminist in their names, and the authors note that the Fawcett Library is open to men and has male staff (Davies & Walbe, 1982, p. 20). Both authors were workers at the WRRC at the time of writing, and it is interesting to note that although the WRRC had been established in 1975 they state that “many women don’t know yet” what it actually is (Davies & Walbe, 1982, p. 21). Hence perhaps the need for an article in a feminist magazine.

> [E]ven many women who are working on or reading about various topics related to women’s history don’t seem to have heard of the Fawcett; it’s really an untapped resource considering what a lot we can learn from our past. (Davies & Walbe, 1982, p. 20)

This lack of awareness was confirmed by Blagden in 1985 (Blagden, 1985). As well as low profiles of the women’s libraries, the authors also note that financial constraints are perennial problems, and with reference to the WRRC they say that “as the financial position is always insecure it’s difficult to foresee the future” (Davies & Walbe, 1982, p. 21). The WRRC was in existence for another 22 years after this quote, but in the end, lack of sufficient finances forced its closure (see Descriptions in Section 3.10 in Chapter 3).
The Fawcett Library is the focus for several articles e.g. Pankhurst, 1987; Doughan, 1990 and Van Gend, 1999, as well as being the focus of a special issue of the *Women’s Studies International Forum* in 1987. The articles included: its history and development, funding, and collection development. Richardson’s article on the funding of the Fawcett Library highlights how, “in common with other women’s organisations, the Fawcett Library is understaffed, under resourced, and constantly looking for money” (Richardson, 1987 p. 299). It was to be a further 10 years before the Fawcett Library won a £4.2 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and even this substantial sum has not eradicated the need for constant fundraising and donation schemes. As will also become apparent in the Findings chapter of this thesis (Chapter 4), Richardson’s article highlights the fact that even if a women’s library is attached to an university, this does not necessarily guarantee a secure financial future. However, this position is disputed slightly by Posthumus in her article on the IIAV in Amsterdam. She notes that:

> women’s collections, libraries, archives, and documentation centers generally walk far behind mainstream institutions. When they are independent, they consume a great deal of energy in the struggle for sheer survival. Affiliation with a recognized institution solves some problems because it provides recognition, ‘overhead supplies’, and the possibility of doing public relations. Most important, institutional affiliation provides funding for collections and for the provision of services to researchers. Women’s libraries must recognize that independence is very energy-consuming, while affiliation improves the possibility of developing collections and hiring staff. (Posthumus, 1992, p. 94)

A library that epitomises independence and continued struggle for survival is Glasgow Women’s Library. A current member of staff and founder of Glasgow Women’s Library wrote an article profiling the library’s history, its collections and also, like the Fawcett Library, outlining its future proposals:

> The Library co-ordinators are currently making ambitious plans to develop into an appropriately resourced and staffed, more accessible Women’s Library; we are also keen to consult with anyone interested in our plans to develop into a national resource. (Patrick, 2000, p. 15)
By writing in the *Scottish Libraries* journal, and by appealing for responses to its proposals, the staff at Glasgow Women’s Library can be seen to be engaging, to some extent, with the wider library profession, seeking their opinions on the Library’s strategic planning proposals which could have an impact on library provision within Scotland.

As well as specific articles on specific women’s libraries, relevant literature can also be found in magazines, newspapers and in journal editorials. For example, in one issue of *Women’s History Review*, the editor June Purvis discusses the successful £4.2 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant to London Guildhall University for a new building for the Fawcett Library. She describes the Fawcett Library as “the premier library of women’s history in Britain” (Purvis, 1998, n. p.). She states that “[i]t has been a national disgrace that for so long the heritage of one half of humanity in this country has been kept where it is” (that is, in a cramped basement) (Purvis, 1998, n. p.). Other comments in her editorial also hint at her view on this one library as the only women’s library in Britain e.g. “A National Library for Women – in Britain? It is like a dream come true” and “now we will have a library of our own, complete with conference room, shop and café” (Purvis, 1998, n. p.). In 1998 there were several other women’s libraries in Britain, and although it is true that they did not have conference rooms, shops or cafes, reference could have been made to them, in terms of what else is happening in women’s archives and history. Despite her historical slant, she referred to a contemporary debate in the national broadsheets where discussion had taken place over what sort of material should be in a women’s library, agreeing with another prominent feminist writer (Elaine Showalter) that contemporary sources should also be included in the new National Library for Women (Purvis, 1998, n. p.).

2.3.6 **International perspectives**

International links and cooperation are a particular interest of the IIAV in Amsterdam. Posthumus outlines the history of the IIAV, which was created in 1988 when three organisations merged: the International Archives for the Women’s Movement (IAV)
founded 1935; the Information and Documentation Center for the Women’s Movement (IDC) founded 1968 and the feminist journal *Lover* founded 1973 (Posthumus, 1992, p. 93). She notes that the merger was necessary because the Ministry of Social Affairs who funded the organisations informed them that either they merged or the three organisations would not get any extra funds. In merging they have reduced expenses (Posthumus, 1992, p. 96), and have perhaps increased their combined profiles, particularly internationally. This can be seen in their hosting of, and continued support for, a (roving) quad-annual conference on women’s information and also the creation of an international directory of women’s libraries (*Mapping the World* database) and a European Women’s Thesaurus, (see Drenthe, 1993 and Kramer, 1995).

Several articles originating from European women’s libraries focus on, or mention, networking and cooperation. For example Hofmann-Weinberger & Wille discuss the Austrian Network of Women’s Studies Information and Documentation Centre and its various networking and collaborative projects (Hofmann-Weinberger & Wille, 1994); Drenthe discusses the theory, origins and foundation of the Dutch Women’s Thesaurus which was launched in 1992 (Drenthe, 1993); and Holst examines KVINFO, the Danish Centre for Information on Women and Gender and its international co-operation with women’s centres in other Nordic countries, particularly the Nordic Virtual Library for Women’s Studies and Gender Research (Holst, 2002).

Regional cooperation and international conferences on women’s libraries highlight the global nature of this field. An email mailing list (KNOWHOWCONF@NIC.SURFNET.NL) generated out of the quad-annual conference on women’s information and libraries is one example of practitioners engaging with each other across the world, but this practical approach does not seem to be translated into published literature based on empirical international research.
2.3.7 Women’s archives and women’s history

Many women’s libraries are based on important archival collections, and the field of women’s libraries is closely connected to women’s history. The neglect of women in formal written history is one of the key reasons for researching women’s lives using primary resources (Beddoe, 1998; Rowbotham, 1973; Zangrando, 1973). It is now accepted that until the last few decades, women were rarely included in histories of society, unless they were particularly exceptional or unusual (Zangrando, 1973, p. 205). Zangrando notes that in the Oxford History of the American People by Samuel Eliot Morison, the women’s suffrage movement in America was dealt with in two sentences. In comparison, the prohibition movement was given three pages (Zangrando, 1973, p. 205). This lack of space given to women in monographs and the lack of women’s papers in manuscript repositories contributes towards women’s invisibility, as few libraries or archive institutions focus attention on acquiring women-focused material (Moseley, 1973, p. 215). Early recognition of this gap in documented history led to various campaigns for women’s archives centres in America, during the 1930s and 1940s and two articles discuss the development of women’s archives in America (Moseley, 1973; Voss-Hubbard, 1995). The early women’s collections at Radcliffe College is now known as the Arthur & Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America and has an international reputation (and was where Moseley was curator).

Whilst Voss-Hubbard’s article is detailed and informative about the origins of the women’s archive movement in America, it is perhaps a little limited in that it discusses only two college collections, and does not relate events in America to collections or developments elsewhere. Several countries in Europe had already established women’s libraries and archives by the 1940s, but these are not mentioned.

A booklet concerned with the need for individual women and women’s groups to preserve their archives not only outlines the reasons why women’s documents are important but also provides a practical guide for women’s organisations on how to
manage their archives. The booklet (from New Zealand) *Preserving ourstory: keeping the archives of women’s organisations* (Berzines, 1995, p. 377-378) was written in order to prevent the loss of important archives in the future, after it was discovered that the archives of women’s suffrage groups from pre-1900 New Zealand had been permanently lost. As well as providing information on how to preserve and manage archives, the booklet also encourages depositing material in suitable repositories if keeping the archives within the organisation is not possible or practical. This guide, although short, would be useful for many women’s groups across the world and it is an idea that women’s archives and libraries in the UK could consider to help increase awareness about the importance of preserving women’s documents in suitable repositories.

2.3.8 **Women and public libraries**

There is an extensive amount of literature on women and librarianship as a profession, including stereotypes of female librarians, the feminisation of the profession, and status and pay (Baum, 1992, Goetsch & Watstein, 1993; Harris, 1992; Kerslake, 2002; Layzell Ward, 1966) but this attention does not generally extend to women’s libraries themselves. A prime example is a recent monograph edited by Kerslake & Moody entitled *Gendering Library History* (and which is proceedings from a conference of the same name held in May 1999 in the UK). The papers focus primarily on women in the profession and women as users of libraries. Although a few leading female librarians from the past are profiled, Vera Douie who was librarian at the Fawcett Library from 1926 until 1967 is not mentioned in any articles. Neither is there any mention of any women’s libraries or archives in the articles or in the index. This confirms my findings that there appears to be a slight disengagement between librarianship and women’s libraries. Despite an awareness of the importance of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s, it has previously been found that:

> the literature of librarianship contains limited references, outside the collection building area, to library service to women and on women-related issues. (Cassell & Weibel, 1980, p. 70)
Turock, for example, questioned what public libraries in the USA were doing in terms of providing information for women (Turock, 1975). She profiled one particular service that had been implemented in New Jersey where small grants were offered for the setting up of women’s information centres. Turock’s article, despite being primarily a descriptive account, is interesting for two reasons. One is that it was written during an active period for women’s issues and it would thus be intriguing to see if such a service was demanded and could be successfully initiated today. The second issue is that it offers a potential option for Wales (and other countries) that do not have the infrastructure, resources or impetus to establish women’s libraries as independent organisations, but could look to enhancing their provision within established information services such as public libraries.

It is also interesting to note that at the turn of the twentieth century in the UK, many public (free) libraries provided a ‘women’s reading room’, although services were not particularly tailored to their needs, other than having a separate area (Moore, 2000a, p. 101). Moore also notes that the provision of separate areas was a contentious issue, thus highlighting the fact that the debate surrounding integration or separation has a long history (Moore, 2000a, pp. 101-102).

Other research has found that women “did not look immediately to the library, an institution of the patriarchy, as a source for information, help, or even as a meeting place” (Neel & Broidy, 1982, p. 295). This is confirmed by much of the literature on women’s information needs (see Section 2.4.6.1 below). It has been argued that during the 1980s many feminist groups did not see the public library as a potential source of information. This is due to a variety of reasons, such as activists preferring their own networks; much of the relevant material being outside the traditional ‘published-material’ spheres, e.g. by small women’s presses that did not or could not deliver to libraries; the difficulty of keeping a collection current given the pace of output of material; and the possibly controversial nature of some of the material (Cassell &
Weibel, 1980, p. 72). Thus, developing women’s services within a public library may still not meet women’s information needs.

**2.3.9 Women’s studies and women’s libraries**

In several countries women’s libraries have developed in conjunction with the development of women’s studies as an academic discipline (Lee, 2002) and several academic institutions offering women’s studies have created comprehensive resource centres (e.g. at Lancaster University, University College Dublin and York University). A frequent debate within the field of women’s studies is that of separation or integration (see Bowles & Klein, 1983; Gillis & Munford, 2003; Kemp & Squires, 1997c). In terms of the library collection, there are arguments for maintaining a separate collection of women’s studies material, as well as for integrating the material like any other subject (see Lee, 2002; Moseley, 1973; Voss-Hubbard, 1995). An argument in favour of placing the material together is because many people find books and information through browsing; if the material on women’s issues is scattered across a collection, a typical user is less likely to find the relevant material (Lochhead, 1985, p. 14). But Searing notes that if a special collection for women’s studies is maintained it may mean book buyers in other sections are free not to select any books by or about women, and this then may distort the general collection (Searing, 1986, p. 153). Indeed, this point was reinforced by an employee of the British Library who argued in one article that not only was the selection of material in women’s studies not straightforward due to its interdisciplinary nature, but also clear statements were needed from other relevant libraries so to not duplicate material. If followed, this approach could lead to library specialisation, greater co-operation for inter-library loans and for the development of synchronised computer catalogues (Bloomfield, 1990, p. 137). But the counter argument is that separation of stock could lead to fragmentation and marginalisation – a constant worry of feminists and women’s studies scholars (Lee, 2002, p. 348). Searing argues that despite collection development problems, many women often want a “women’s place/space” (Searing, 1986, p. 153).
Researchers in women’s studies face a variety of problems, primarily because of the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, the rapid growth in the literature and the variety of outputs for research i.e. specialist women’s magazines and journals and mainstream outlets (Carter & Ritchie, 1990, p. 3). This situation could be used to the advantage of women’s libraries in promoting their resources as definitive collections of material in one place, but this does not appear to occur.

Cowley notes the interdisciplinary nature of women’s studies and the relative lack of awareness of what material is available, thus the justification for her guide to information sources for women’s studies in the UK (Cowley, 1984). The guide encompasses a directory of women’s organisations, groups and women’s resource centres in the UK, with a section on how to establish and maintain a women’s resource centre along with a bibliography of relevant material. The guide discusses selection of material, classification, cataloguing and indexing, accessibility, order, reference or lending decisions, exploitation of material and dealing with enquiries. She provides an illuminating approach to the management of women’s libraries, suggesting women’s libraries could disregard some standard library practices, if they so desired.

One pleasure of not being a professional in a certain field is that one can break the rules without feeling that one’s erstwhile tutor is frowning disapproval over one’s shoulder. And a refreshing aspect of the women’s movement is that its protagonists are always ready to question received ideas. However, there are good reasons for some of the processes carried out in professionally-organised resource centres... . I do not believe that certain library customs are always correct and any other approaches are bound to be wrong. (Cowley, 1984, p. 81)

As will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5, women’s libraries often do not adhere to several formal library customs.

2.3.9.1 Women’s studies courses

The nature of women's studies courses in the last decade has seen a shift towards ‘gender studies’, which also includes masculinities and studies on men. This is another cause for debate among feminists. It is difficult to state accurately how many women’s
studies and gender studies courses there are at undergraduate and postgraduate level. One reason for this is that some of the online course databases do not list either women’s studies or gender studies as search options, and when using keywords, the results bring up courses where gender is mentioned in perhaps only one option module on a course (see the websites of Prospects, the British Council, and UCAS -Universities and Colleges Admissions Services). Lists of courses in women’s studies, gender studies and women’s history are provided on some women’s websites such as the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research, the Women’s History Network and Genesis. Combining all this data, creates a rather confusing mass of conflicting figures. However, it seems that there are about 20-25 higher educational establishments offering postgraduate qualifications in women’s studies and gender studies, and that 18 of these institutions offer these courses as single subjects. Of these 18, about 10 are for women’s studies courses. This suggests that whilst gender studies now exists as a subject, there is still provision for women's studies. At undergraduate level, there are about five to 10 institutions that offer gender studies or women’s studies, with most of these courses being combined subjects. There are about 20 institutions offering women’s history at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, with about 10 of these offering the course as single subject.

Griffin and Hanmer’s recent research states that there were 47 women’s studies courses in the UK in 1993, thus we can see that there has been a decrease in provision (Griffin & Hanmer, 2001, p. 24). Popularity of the courses is harder to trace. It is interesting to note that some of the staff in the women’s libraries felt that user numbers in women’s libraries had fallen because of the loss of women’s studies courses. Whilst not all the courses have been lost, there are fewer courses now than 10 years ago. But, one of the women’s libraries is now actively involved with such a course. The Women’s Library (in conjunction with its parent organisation, the London Metropolitan University) now offer a MA in Modern British Women’s History.
2.3.10 Women, information and development

Many of the women’s libraries in less developed countries are connected to ideas of development, personal empowerment and democracy. Wang provides a clear argument for the need to adopt a gender-sensitive approach to information provision in order to achieve an egalitarian civic society (Wang, 1999, p. 2). Within the context of South Africa she asserts that by targeting rural women in terms of information provision, the whole of society will benefit (Wang, 1999, p. 2), in part due to the ‘trickle-down’ effect of information passing through a family via the women. She argues therefore that development programmes need to pay more attention to information resources to enable women to participate more if the development is to be successful (Wang, 1999, p. 2). She believes that:

the ability to access and use information is a cornerstone of participatory democracy and a way to contribute to the realisation of a just, sustainable social order for all citizens. (Wang, 1999, p. 7)

Wang’s position supports earlier work in this area by Vyas. Vyas argued that:

“the women’s movement and those concerned with women and development have long recognised that information is a means of empowerment for women” (Vyas, 1993, p. 149).

In addition to women’s libraries or centres, Valk, Van Dam & Cummings see the role of networking as crucial for ensuring successful development and women’s empowerment.

Informal social networks and togetherness among women have been approved forms of organization since time immemorial. Women everywhere have formed themselves formally and informally into networks to demand services and promote networks of survival and mutual help to accomplish their reproductive and productive roles. (Valk, Van Dam & Cummings, 1999, p. 26)

They argue that networking is an important means of redistributing power and is an important tool for women, indeed often one of the few tools freely available to them (Valk, Van Dam & Cummings, 1999, pp. 26-27). As much of the literature on women’s information needs shows, women across the world generally rely on networks and informal sources of information, thus showing the importance of networks and women’s groups (see Section 2.4.6.1 below).
2.3.11 Summary of the women’s libraries literature

We have seen from the preceding discussion that the literature on women’s libraries is diverse in nature, content, style and source of publication. The diversity represents the international coverage of women’s libraries, highlighting that this topic is of concern to a variety of library and archive professionals across the world. Despite the diversity, there are some interesting parallels. One is the importance of women’s history and preserving women’s documents as reasons for establishing women’s libraries, along with the concern for women’s rights universally. These theoretical issues behind women’s libraries are joined by the desire for a women’s space, for information specifically for and about women. This relates particularly to notions of separatism and being outside the mainstream. However, there are continuous debates about the value of separation and integration, with valid arguments for both approaches. The literature on women’s libraries also discusses various library management issues such as feminist classification systems, collection development and user needs. However, this element is perhaps somewhat less developed than might have been expected, highlighting some disengagement between librarianship and women’s libraries. Surprisingly also, given that women’s libraries aim to meet the varied information needs of women, there is little linkage between the literature on women’s libraries and the related field of women’s information needs.

2.4 Women’s information needs

2.4.1 Information needs as a research area

What are information needs? Information is often sought in order to make sense of a situation, to take control or to make decisions about choices (Davies & Bath, 2002, p. 303). Everybody has ‘information needs’, defined by Maurice Line as “what an individual ought to have for his [sic] work, his research, his edification etc.” (quoted in Hewins, 1990, p. 149). Thus, a woman’s information needs could cover equal opportunities information, health information or educational information. How the
information need is translated into information seeking, and the processes of finding the information are encompassed by the term information seeking behaviour.

2.4.2 Models and theories

Information needs as a research area has a long history, which Wilson dates back to 1948 and the Royal Society Scientific Information Conference (Wilson, 1981, p. 5). During the following 50-60 years, many different models and theories of information seeking, information needs and information behaviour have been developed e.g. by Chatman, Dervin, Ellis and Kuhlthau. These models provide a variety of frameworks within which other researchers can conduct their own research. Interestingly, the majority of studies on women's information needs do not explicitly place their research within any of the models of information seeking. Whether this is because the researchers do not feel the models offer valid relevant frameworks for their work, or because they do not see the need to place their work within a model of information seeking, is unclear.

Despite the lack of theoretical frameworks, the literature on women's information needs is consistent in its rigorous application of data collection methods. Many studies use traditional methodologies for their data collection, principally questionnaires and interview schedules. These tools are frequently deployed within a qualitative framework. Adopting a qualitative approach to investigate information needs may be “particularly appropriate to the study of the needs underlying information-seeking behaviour” as it is concerned with understanding humans (Wilson, 1981, p. 11), and seeks an understanding of behaviour within contexts (Westbrook, 1994, p. 242). Thus, focusing on the individual, their words and a broad context can be seen as central to understanding their information needs, as opposed to collecting numeric data for statistical analysis, which, whilst valid and useful, may not illuminate the specific concerns of the people involved.
Pettigrew, Fidel & Bruce conclude their recent review of information studies by arguing that the challenge for research in this field is to “provide concrete guidance for systems design” (2001, p. 68) i.e. to take the findings back into the field of librarianship or information provision so that improvements can be made to the systems that people use to find information. This finding was not new: ten years earlier Hewins had noted that some of the literature focused on the end-user, whilst other work looked at the information systems in libraries and how these can be improved to help the information needs of users but that not all studies went as far as making recommendations of how information provision can be adapted (Hewins, 1990, p. 148). All of this confirms my findings from the literature review of the two disciplines of women’s libraries and women’s information needs in that there appears to be little overlap between the different fields, with recommendations from one context not being applied or adopted by the other.

2.4.3 What are women’s information needs?

To serve a population group effectively, information workers must understand its information needs and its information-seeking habits. ... The role of research in establishing the information needs of women cannot be overemphasized. (Mbambo, 1995, p. 47) Women not only need information for themselves, but they are often also the information providers for the whole family (United Nations, 2000, p. xiv) which can create a wider range of information needs. Women’s information needs can cover a wide spectrum of issues e.g. issues of employment, lifelong learning, reproductive rights and divorce³.

³ In the UK more women file for divorce than men. In 2004 69% of divorces were granted to the woman in England and Wales. The most frequent reason for which divorce was granted to a woman was the unreasonable behaviour of her husband (National Statistics, 2005, n. p.).
adequate training, education and effective library facilities to support these information needs. (Panigrahi, 1998, p. 111)

However, for various social, economic and cultural reasons\(^4\), they may often lack the time and skills to search for the information. It is therefore valid to look at their information needs and information behaviour, and how women’s libraries or resources centres may be one way of meeting those information needs.

Some consider that women’s information needs are different in extent and nature to men’s information needs (see United Nations, 2000). Some women need information in order to give them a voice, to strengthen their position in society, to empower them and to keep women’s history alive (Cummings, Valk and van Dam, 1999, p. 15). UNESCO recognised the need for a “gender-sensitive approach to information provision” (Wang, 1999, p. 2). Wang argues that the success of rural development depends upon the involvement and ‘capacity building’ of women (Wang, 1999, p. 6). This is confirmed by the United Nations who found that the education of women is central for improving the health and education of the family unit (United Nations, 2000, p. xiv). That women are central to development and social progress was also revealed by an international online conference looking at information access for rural women organised by WOUGNET (Women Of UGanda NETwork). They found that ICT empowers women, and that women are central to the success of development programmes (WOUGNET, 2002, n. p.). Women’s information needs are therefore important not only on local, social and economic levels, but also at international and strategic policy making levels.

And yet, despite women forming half the world’s population,

“analysis of and attention to women’s issues and needs both as library users and library workers lags far behind our majority representation.”

(Parikh & Broidy, 1982, p. 295)

\(^4\) Such as lower literacy rates, fewer qualifications or unequal economic conditions – see statistics in Section 1.6 in Chapter 1.
Even though Parikh & Broidy were writing 20 years ago, their findings are still relevant today. For example, Kramarae & Spender note that “the provision of library collections and services to Women’s Studies programs deserves better documentation and analysis” (Kramarae & Spender, 1992, p. 231) and Healy notes that “the thirst for information on and collected by or shared with other women is great” (Healy, 1996, p. 34). Within the UK, the Government recognises that “[w]omen are the key users of health and education services” (Women and Equality Unit, 2001, p. 5) and recognises that if it wishes to improve the delivery of public services, it has to consider the needs of women when redesigning these services. Its report Better services - better working lives: how health and education services are delivering for women (Woman and Equality Unit, 2001) provides case study examples of where women’s needs are addressed directly and is an example of the benefits of changes in policies.

2.4.4 Research on women’s information needs

Despite international recognition of the importance of women’s information needs, recent literature on women’s information needs notes that “there are few studies on women’s information needs” or of women’s user studies in libraries (King, 1995, p. 179; Marcella, 2001, pp. 492-493). King argues that women often form the majority of library users and argues that their information needs have been neglected.

The perception that this is a neglected area may be due to the diversity in focus and international scope of the literature on women’s information needs. The research tends to be geographically focused and relate to specific groups of women. When presented as a list (see below), the range and amount of research into women’s information needs could in fact be seen as fairly substantial. It includes (amongst others) (in broadly chronological order):

- information needs of battered women (Harris, 1988; Harris and Dewdney, 1991; Harris et al. 2001; Dunne, 2002)
• community information needs of urban black women in Pretoria, South Africa (Fairer-Wessels, 1990)
• information needs of older women (Chatman, 1991)
• information needs of rural women in Nigeria (Nwagha, 1992) and information needs of women in agriculture in Nigeria (Oladokun, 1994)
• information needs of women with multiple sclerosis (Baker, 1996)
• how rural women communicate in Kenya (Mutua, 1997)
• health information seeking by older black African women in America (Gollop, 1997)
• information access by interdisciplinary women’s studies scholars (Westbrook, 1997)
• information use by women in Rourkela, India (Panigrahi, 1998)
• information needs of lesbians (Whitt, 1993; Stenback & Schrader, 1999)
• information needs of rural women in Tanzania (Kiondo, 1999)
• information needs of women in small businesses in Botswana (Mchombu, 2000)
• the state of gender information in Botswana (Rathapo, 2000)
• information needs of women with breast cancer (Brown et al, 2000; Rees & Bath, 2000; Chalmers et al, 2001)
• European Union information needs among women in Scotland (Marcella, 2001)
• information provision to women in rural Kenya (Mutua-Kombo, 2001).
• information needs of women artists in Wales (Tyler, 2002a)
• health information needs of Somalian women in the UK (Davies & Bath, 2002)
• use of women’s groups as sources of information in rural Botswana (Mooko, 2002)
• information seeking by women expecting, and with, twins (McKenzie, 2003)
• information needs of female police officers in vice work (Baker, 2004)

This diverse body of research reveals the inter-disciplinary approach to women’s information needs, and the international context. What is also evident from most of
these studies is that the women under focus are often in a minority group already, marginalised socially, economically or health-wise. As the primary focus of this thesis is not women’s information needs per se, the above literature will not be analysed in relation to information needs models and theories. Rather, broad summaries will be made, focusing briefly on the methods, the key findings of the literature, and the relevance of the findings for women’s libraries.

2.4.5 Findings from the literature - methods

Many of the research studies into women’s information needs have used interviews as a means of data collection, either face to face or by telephone (e.g. Harris, 1988; Harris & Dewdney, 1991). The numbers interviewed have ranged from 10 women (Stenback & Schrader, 1999) to 40 (Harris, 1988; Mchumbu, 2000), 80 (Fairer-Wessels, 1990), 543 (Harris & Dewdney, 1991) and 773 (Kiondo, 1999, p. 20). Whilst interviews have tended to be favoured in the recent past by researchers within the women’s studies discipline, some female researches have noted problems with this method (see Oakley, 1981). (For a complete discussion on methodologies and feminist research see Chapter 3.)

The next most popular research method in the field of women’s information needs is use of a questionnaire. Again, the total number of women surveyed varies from 100 replies (Panigrahi, 1998) to 141 (Whitt, 1993), 179 (Marcella, 2001) and 193 (Oladokun, 1994). A few studies made use of the time-line approach or critical incident e.g. Stenback & Schrader, 1999; Harris 1988, whilst one study employs the Delphi technique (Westbrook, 1997).

The similarity in research design among the various studies facilitates greater comparisons between the research, and also provides continuity and possibilities for replication of similar studies in different contexts.
2.4.6 Findings from the literature – results

2.4.6.1 Preference for informal sources

Much of the research concurs with the finding that women generally prefer to seek information through informal channels or from informal sources such as friends, rather than from formal sources such as an agency, library or official documentation. For example, one study of 105 women who had suffered from domestic abuse found that “only one woman specifically mentioned visiting a library for assistance in coping with abuse” (Harris et al., 2001, p. 135).

Kiondo’s research into the information needs of rural women in Tanzania found that “friends and relatives are the prime source of information for the majority of respondents” (Kiondo, 1999, p. 22) but she also found that there is also a “problem of lack of access to information by the majority of rural women in most developing countries” (Kiondo, 1999, p. 18). In rural Kenya the same preference for using informal sources was found (Mutua-Kombo 2001, p. 194) and also in urban Pretoria, South Africa (Fairer-Wessels, 1987, p. 54) and in an industrial town in Eastern India (Panigrahi, 1998, p. 115).

The preference for seeking information through friends and informal sources has been confirmed through an action research project with African-American women in the USA. Bishop et al found that women often act as “intermediaries, looking for information on the Web that they then pass on to a friend or relative” (Bishop et al, 2000, n. p.). This does not just apply to the Internet, but is true for many methods of finding information.

Nwagha explored the information gap between rural and urban areas of Nigeria (Nwagha, 1992). She found that the main source of information for the women was via radio or community leaders and friends (Nwagha, 1992, pp. 78-79). This confirms the oral tradition of passing on information in Africa (Nwagha, 1992, p. 80). Mooko found
that although women were aware of women’s groups, they tended to use informal networks to find information (Mooko, 2002, p. 110).

A similar finding of preference for informal sources of information was found by Oladokun who conducted research regarding women in agriculture in Nigeria. Although no respondents stated that they visited an information centre to find agricultural information, Oladokun recommends establishing rural information centres to improve the distribution of agricultural information (Oladokun, 1994, p. 322). As many rural women may have very low literacy levels and are less likely to have spare time (since they are responsible for the production of food – growing and processing – for the family, whilst the men either migrate to the cities and send money home, or grow cash crops for export, Nwagha, 1992, p. 76) rural information centres may not meet the needs of the rural women and do not take into account the oral tradition and low literacy among women in rural areas of Africa. (According to the IIAV’s Mapping the World database, Nigeria currently has eight women’s resource centres, IIAV, 2005, n. p.).

2.4.6.2 Mis-match between services provided and services sought

Combined with the finding of a preference for informal information sources, much of the literature also concurs in there being problems with existing information services. Frequently there is an information gap between what is sought or needed by women, what is actually provided and what is accessed. For example, in examining the information seeking behaviour of women in Ontario, Canada who have experienced domestic abuse, it was found that there was a mis-match between where people thought women might go to seek information and help, and what help was actually available (Harris & Dewdney, 1991, p. 409). The authors concluded that there was a gap between expectations and actual services, and that there should be greater communication and co-ordination of community information.
Mutua-Kombo looked at what factors affected the provision of information to women and found that the manner in which the information was disseminated, and by whom, played a crucial role in whether the information was communicated effectively. For example, many women did not trust government agencies and felt that they censored information (Mutua-Kombo, 2001, p. 194). Furthermore, many of the information providers were male and were seen as having little or no understanding of women’s information and communication needs. Other cultural issues, such as women’s preference for informal networks, their busy working lives and the predominance of the English language in the media all contributed towards creating a situation of poor communication and information flow (Mutua-Kombo, 2001, pp. 194-5). To counter this Mutua-Kombo suggested using small women-only community groups, village committees and other informal networks for improved information flow (Mutua-Kombo, 2001, pp. 195-6).

Nwagha identified an “information gap between the urban and rural areas” (of Nigeria) where women in the rural areas were significantly lacking in information compared with women in the urban areas (Nwagha, 1992, p. 77). Her findings also highlighted a potential gap, or mis-match of information in rural Nigeria as most of the agricultural information is disseminated via hardcopy documents and libraries, yet most women sought information via informal channels e.g. friends or local networks. In Tanzania Kiondo interviewed information providers as well as rural women (the recipients of information) and highlighted the discrepancy between channels of information dissemination and channels for information seeking (Kiondo, 1999).

Mchombu’s research into the information needs of women running small businesses in Botswana found a similar discrepancy. Whilst the women noted that they got most of their business information through informal channels or extension workers, staff at business institutions which provide information tended to disseminate their information through workshops and seminars (Mchombu, 2000, p. 55). Thus, a “communication gap exists between women and institutions that offer support to women” (Mchombu, 2000,
To overcome this problem, Mchombu recommended establishing an information service for businesswomen (Mchombu, 2000, p. 67), although this could be seen as perpetuating the gap between information provision and how information is accessed.

Furthermore, not only might there be an information gap between information provider and information seeker, the information provided might not be adequate or appropriate. For example, Whitt’s study of lesbians in North Carolina, USA found there was generally a low level of satisfaction with the services provided to lesbians in public libraries, and concern regarding out-dated material, meagre collections, and judgemental and prejudiced staff (Whitt, 1993, p. 278, 283, 286). She therefore made recommendations for public libraries to improve their services to such communities. A lesbian librarian’s group in the UK in the 1980s also found poor support and lack of information for lesbians in public libraries (Rolph, 2000).

In her study of women’s reading habits and information seeking behaviour in a steel town in Eastern India, Panigrahi highlighted suggestions to help meet women’s information needs. One recommendation was that all major companies should have a library, but also, that there should be a women’s library in the city (Panigrahi, 1998, p. 117). However, given that many women, across the world, tend to seek information through informal channels, it is reasonable to question the role, objectives and potential use of such an institution.

2.4.7 Summary of findings from women’s information needs literature

It is possible to conclude that despite the large variety in types of research, groups of women studied and geographical settings, there are common findings with regard to how women find information and further, what approaches might be suitable to improve their access to information. Much of the literature concludes that women prefer to seek information through informal channels, through their own networks and groups. In addition, many of the recommendations are to improve and enhance existing community or local information services. It is also possible to see a potential
‘information gap’ between the dissemination of information through formal channels (e.g. printed documents, libraries, agencies), and between the sources women generally utilise in order to find information. The international examples from countries in Africa and Asia are just as relevant to my research as those from the Western world: despite the differences in women and situations, the information needs of women across the globe appear to be similar.

2.5 The situation in Wales

2.5.1 Empirical research

As may be expected, there is little research in the field of women’s libraries and women’s information needs in Wales. A useful early document showing the extent of women’s groups and women’s resource centres in Wales is the Wales Women’s Directory produced in 1984 by the Bangor branch of Women’s Enterprise Bureau; a group set up to provide information for women on establishing their own businesses. The impetus behind the directory was to facilitate networking and to help women in business (particularly self-employed women) in Wales and

“[h]aving found it difficult to track down women’s organisations and businesses in Wales, we realised that a directory containing this information would in itself be a useful publication.” (Women’s Enterprise Bureau, 1984, p. 2)

From the entries it is possible to see that there is evidence of Welsh-language involvement with some entries being bilingual (entries were reproduced in the manner in which they were received). Although there are still organisations concerned with self-employment and women in Wales (e.g. the Women’s Enterprise Wales project of Chwarae Teg) there have unfortunately been no subsequent editions of the directory. Evidence from the interviews in Wales for this thesis found that many of the women interviewed would welcome better networking and sharing of knowledge, and the idea of a directory was also welcomed (see Chapters 4 and 5).
The booklet contains details of three women’s centres in Wales at that time (1984): Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea. There were also 17 Women’s Aid groups across Wales, some of which maintained small information resource centres. From these and other entries it is possible to develop an appreciation for the level of engagement with feminism and the women’s liberation movement in Wales in the 1980s.

A more recent and in-depth survey was conducted thirteen years later, but this time geared towards academics, researchers and those interested in the women’s movement in Wales. The Guide to Sources for the Women’s Liberation Movement in South Wales was produced in 1997 by South Wales Feminist History Project and edited by two women currently involved with AMC/WAW (Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive of Wales): Avril Rolph and Ursula Masson. This three-volume guide is a useful directory of material pertaining to the WLM in South Wales. Divided into Events, Media and Collections, each volume has detailed entries, including extracts from the material so it is possible to evaluate the contents, before perhaps seeking the original document. The authors took the decision to do more than just list items, as they felt that because much of the material is in private hands and thus inaccessible to researchers, providing very detailed summaries would arouse interest and facilitate research. They note however, that the Guide is not definitive and is the result of only one year of research. It would therefore be useful for researchers if the project could be extended to include North and Mid Wales. A related component of the research project was a series of oral history interviews with women who were involved with the WLM in South Wales. These interviews have been transcribed and semi-indexed but are not available publicly. This type of work is important because although the WLM is a fairly recent movement, much of the history about it is in danger of being lost, particularly as much of the information exists either in private collections or as ephemera which frequently is not collected by libraries.

Women’s history in Wales was the focus of the annual conference of Llafur: Society for Welsh Labour History in 1983 (Beddoe, 1996, p. 56). Despite this achievement, Beddoe
notes that it is still hard to find evidence of women’s history outside of traditional history journals, independent film companies, or small feminist presses (Beddoe, 1996, p. 59) and thus women’s history in Wales still “inhabit[s] the fringes” (Beddoe, 1996, p.59). A decade earlier Beddoe had also stated that “Welsh women are culturally invisible” (Beddoe, 1986, p. 227). In some respects it could be argued that they still inhabit a low profile in history and culture, despite their involvement in all circles of social, economic and political life.

2.5.2 Information needs research
There have been very few investigations of information needs within a Welsh context. One piece of recent research was an investigation into whether there was a need for a visual arts magazine for Wales which was commissioned by the Arts Council of Wales. Hourahane found that only a few respondents indicated that they used the Internet, or used online arts sites (Hourahane, 2001, n. p., Section 3.3.3) but that “there is a great desire for a vehicle for networking and communication” (Hourahane, 2001, n. p., Section 8.1). Her research was not investigating information needs along gender lines, but it is significant that among a group of people brought together by type, informal networking is again seen as being vitally important for the dissemination of information.

This finding was confirmed by my earlier research into women artists’ information needs in Wales. I used a postal questionnaire to contact women who had attended a conference for women artists in Wales. The research investigated what information key arts organisations in Wales provided to artists, and how such information is disseminated as well as the information needs of the women themselves (Tyler, 2002a, p. vii). I found that many women artists in Wales felt socially and culturally isolated, often lacking the necessary ‘know-how’ to find relevant information that would help them with their artwork (Tyler, 2002a, p. vii). Further, they tended to use informal networks in order to find information, such as social groups or word of mouth, but, much of the information was disseminated via the Internet. Most of the women also
noted that time pressures often prevented them from accessing the information they needed, and few of them used the Internet as a source of information (Tyler, 2002a, p. 48). This mis-match between information dissemination and accessing information is confirmed by much of the other literature and is a cause for some concern.

2.5.3 Monographs and articles

Women in Wales have been the focus of several monographs since the mid 1980s, particularly since the rise in women’s history and women’s studies. For example, *Our mother's land: chapters in Welsh women's history 1830-1939* (John, 1991), and the second volume *Our sister's land: the changing identities of women in Wales* (Aaron et al, 1994). However, these books are historical in nature and cover a wide range of topics, none of which relate to information needs. Dee & Keineg’s 1987 book *Women in Wales: A documentary of our recent history* profiles a range of women’s activities and experiences in Wales in the 1980s e.g. women and publishing, and inspired a similar book to be produced focusing on Scotland (Henderson & Mackay, 1990, *Grit and diamonds: Women in Scotland making history 1980-1990*). When used in conjunction with the previously mentioned directories and guides, these sources provide useful documentary evidence of women in women’s issues in Wales.

Despite social and cultural achievements, women in Wales are not always fully equal with men. For example, in a recent book entitled *Wales Today*, only seven out of 25 contributors were female, and only one chapter specifically focused on women (Rees, 1999). Furthermore, this chapter was one of the last four chapters, along with one on black issues and two general all-Wales chapters. Should we conclude therefore that women and black issues are less important, to be put after all other considerations?

A less academic (self published and containing no footnotes or references) monograph on women in Wales is by Draisey which focuses on women in Wales from the Celtic era to the present day (Draisey, 2004). Chapters deal with a range of issues from marriage traditions and the early legal status of women, whilst the last three decades of
the twentieth century are covered in one chapter (Draisey, 2004). Unfortunately, although there are some useful current statistics such as the number of women working in Wales and birth rates, other sections could have been expanded. For example, he states: “small action groups sprang up in many towns all over Wales, but only the Swansea group needs to be mentioned here” (Draisey, 2004, p. 180). There is no indication as to why only the Swansea group should be mentioned. (It may be pertinent to note that the author is based in South Wales near Swansea.)

Despite extensive searching, I could not find any literature discussion the establishment, relevance or significance of AMC/WAW and their distributed approach to women’s archives.

2.6 Summary

Not all the literature within the field of women’s information and women’s libraries is explicitly located within feminist theories, but it can be considered feminist in that it explores areas previously ignored by research from a women’s perspective (Harding, 1986, p. 245). From the above discussions, it is possible to see patterns in the research. The research into women’s information needs tends to fall into two categories: those that focus on specific types of women (i.e. users) e.g. older women, black women, lesbians, rural women; and those that focus on specific types of information that women might need e.g. health information. Despite the different approaches and methods used, most studies conclude that women use informal channels for finding information, but often the information they need is disseminated primarily by formal means. This creates issues of an information gap, or a mis-match in communication which can lead to the women lacking the information or the know-how that they need. Therefore, what is important to consider is that research into women’s information needs should explore not only what information women need, how they find it, and how it helps them in their worlds, but should also explore any potential gap between women and access to the
information they need, and provide recommendations as to how information services can overcome such gaps.

The literature on women’s libraries is also international in nature, yet it presents us with similarities across the world. Women’s libraries tend to be underused, unknown, underfunded, disengaged from both librarianship and feminism, yet despite this they are dynamic and focused institutions.

Although I have brought together these two areas of research here, little other research appears to link these related areas. However, the success of women’s libraries and resource centres across the world must surely depend upon meeting the needs of the communities they serve. Therefore, understanding the needs of their users is vital. It is also important to take into account the preference by women across the world for using informal information channels. Women’s libraries therefore need to somehow accommodate this general preference for informal sources within their naturally relatively formalised structures.

The literature also highlights the growing recent international recognition afforded to women’s information needs, and information about women. The global network of women’s libraries, and the requirement for the production of gender disaggregated data helps support the existence of women’s resource centres and women’s libraries. It is therefore valid to question whether it is timely for Wales to develop a women’s library or women’s resource centre.