Chapter 5 - Analysis of the findings

The findings from the fieldwork investigating women’s libraries across the British Isles were presented in the preceding chapter. In this chapter the findings will be analysed in detail, within eight core themes that relate to the categories investigated in Chapter 4. These themes are:

- identities
- structures
- engagement with librarianship
- communities
- space
- engagement with feminism
- current roles and models, and
- conflicts and tensions.

The options for Wales, and the potential for a women’s library in Wales, will be explored extensively in the next chapter, and will be based on the analysis of the findings presented here.

5.1 Identities – origins, aims and names

The sample of women’s libraries was diverse enough to provide evidence from organisations founded over eighty years ago, to some that are only seven years old. Several writers (Ilett, 2003, Kramer, 1993,) link the identities of various women’s libraries to their era of origin and the type of feminism in existence at that time. By applying this chronological framework to my sample of women's libraries it is possible to place the women’s libraries within the three main phases of feminism during the twentieth century, as can be seen in Table 3 below.
Wave of feminism | Organisation (and date of foundation)
--- | ---
1st wave | Women’s Library (1926)

2nd wave | Feminist Library (1975)
Feminist Archive (South) (1978)
Swansea Women's Centre (1979)
Women in Jazz (1986)

3rd wave | Glasgow Women’s Library (1991)
Women’s History Project (Ireland) (1997)
Archif Menywod Cymru/ Women’s Archive Wales (AMC/WAW) (1998)
Women’s Resource Centre (c.2000)

**Table 3: Women’s libraries listed by wave of feminism**

Using the era of origin and related wave of feminism is useful for considering the engagement each of the women’s libraries has with feminism, and for its influence over core identity. Many of the aims of each organisation are grounded in their ideological position, which is often directly influenced by the era of establishment. The significance of this for Wales is whether today’s social, political and cultural climate is propitious for the establishment of a women’s library. Society’s ‘backlash’ against feminism (Faludi, 1992) and the nature of the (disputed, see Giles & Munford, 2003) third wave of feminism suggest that conditions are not as favourable now as they previously have been. Consequently, developments may need to be aligned with current social perceptions rather than striving to replicate processes that were outcomes of different eras, environments and conditions.

Even though the women’s libraries have been established during different periods of feminism and as a consequence of this have different identities, it is possible to discover an element of similarity in terms of their reasons for being established. Each organisation is committed to meeting the needs of women – although this may be interpreted and achieved in a variety of ways. They are primarily services for and about women. This aim frequently underpins their motivation and provides the energy for continued existence; in many of the libraries there appears to be a greater
degree of engagement with feminism than with librarianship. For some, it is evident that they are resources for women that happen to be libraries, rather than libraries that happen to focus on women. This can be seen, for example, in the small number of professionally qualified librarians who work in such libraries, and the relative low priority given to services that are seen as essential in more traditional libraries e.g. computer catalogues and stock checks.

5.1.1 Changing aims and changing times
Over time, some of the organisations have adjusted their aims to suit the contemporary social and economic climate. For example, the Women’s Library has strengthened its academic focus, whilst expanding its links with local communities; “nor have the radical roots of the old Fawcett Library been forgotten” (Purvis, 2002, p. 167). A key issue is how the various women’s libraries have approached this management of change. Some have combined the changes in their aims with changes to their names e.g. from Swansea Women’s Centre to Swansea’s Multicultural Women’s Resource and Training Centre. Others have kept their original name but branched out into offering different services, sometimes with the original aim and name becoming slightly misleading e.g. Glasgow Women’s Library which currently operates more as a resource and training centre than a library. Changes in aims, roles and names have principally occurred when new audiences were sought, or in order to attract new funding. Whilst the ethos of the libraries do not change, adapting to a new social, political or economic climate can facilitate the longevity of the women’s libraries.

In addition to changing names, there has also sometimes been a change from the original (and maybe idealistic) aims and objectives to operating along more pragmatic lines. In the more recently established organisations e.g. AMC/WAW and the Women’s History Association of Ireland, the conflict between ideal and what is possible can be seen in the aim of having their own building and library in situ, or, operating as a virtual archive. A contemporaneous organisation of the Irish Women’s History Association conducted research into the feasibility of establishing a women’s resource centre and library in Dublin. Although they were awarded
money for the feasibility study, the centre was never built. With both the most recently established organisations deciding not to work towards physical women’s libraries or archives, citing constant resource demands, staffing and professionalism as key reasons against such action, it suggests that some see the ideal of creating a women’s space as no longer possible or practical.

Indeed, some of the women’s libraries that do possess their own building face continuous funding and other resource problems. They may also suffer from internal conflict of wishing to serve their community of women as best they can, achieving this in line with their aims and objectives, yet having to exist on limited resources. Thus, the case of providing a specific service (newspaper cuttings) at Glasgow’s Women’s Library even though it was operating on a loss and was a drain on the resources of the library (see Chapter 4, section 4.7.5). It would appear therefore, that the aims, roles and development of any new women’s libraries may well be quite different to their predecessors, given current influences on such institutions.

### 5.1.2 Names

Services are important to any library, not just in terms of resource implications, but also because they reflect what the library does, who it attracts as users, and because they may also influence the name of the organisation. The women’s libraries have often changed their names when there has been an organisational shift in aims and services reflecting changes in society. It was also found in the case of several different women’s libraries that during the processes of attracting grant funding the name of the organisations had been changed to make them more applicable, relevant or current. Thus there are internal and external factors that can affect the choice of name for a women’s library.

The influence of a chosen name extends beyond external funding bodies to potential users. For example, it was noted in Chapter 4 how the use of the word ‘library’ may act as a barrier for potential users of Glasgow Women’s Library. A woman with literacy problems or with poor experience of libraries may assume, on the basis of the name, that Glasgow Women’s Library is not appropriate for her. However, their extensive range of lifelong learning courses and adult literacy programmes are
services that perhaps might be what she needs to develop personally. Women’s libraries therefore need to consider their nomenclature carefully.

Further, whilst their nomenclature may have an affect on the potential users, it also sends out signals to the professional library world. Some of the women’s libraries are not structured along traditional management lines, and the different management styles may be unfamiliar to others working in traditional libraries. In addition, in using the word ‘library’, they are creating an image that they sometimes do not match, and inviting comparisons that may be unfavourable. Although there is very little literature on women’s libraries (see Chapter 2), what does exist within the traditional library field, may expose the weaker ‘library’ elements of the women’s libraries e.g. few computer catalogues, unsuitable storage facilities, out-of-date web pages, and may detract from the valuable services and collections that the organisations do provide. Furthermore, if the women’s libraries are discussed in the field of women’s studies, there may be similar but different problems in that some women’s studies journals are quite philosophical, theoretical and academic in nature, yet some of the women’s libraries represent grassroots elements of feminism, and may not be heavily engaged in theoretical debates e.g. Swansea Women's Centre or the Women’s Resource Centre in London.

Whilst many of the women’s libraries or archive organisations have changed their names over time (see descriptions in Chapter 3), changing names too often can confuse potential and existing users. However, name changes may be necessary so that the aims and services of each organisation correctly match their name and identity. Thus, those whose aims are focused primarily on meeting contemporary women’s needs may well be better named as ‘women’s centres’ or ‘resource centres’ rather than libraries. This might not only overcome some of the potential barriers associated with the word library, but might better describe their services and aims. It may also deflect critical attention away from any services or operations that may not be seen to be relevant or pertaining to traditional notions of libraries.
5.2 **Structures: management and funding**

In a similar manner to the tension between ideal aims and ambitions and achieving what is practical or possible, there is also evidence of conflict between wishing to adhere to core principles or values whilst still offering an appropriate service. These values or principles are often related to structural issues such as the management style of the organisation. Thus, for example, the Feminist Archive (South) was established as an independent feminist collective, but it is currently looking at the possibility of having a more secure basis by becoming part of a local university. This could potentially improve access to the collections (currently only available one mid-week afternoon) and their long-term security and preservation, but, it could also mean a loss of independence and a diminishing of the feminist principles which are closely integrated with the collection. Questions need to be asked therefore as to whether the collections themselves are the most important issue, or, are they only part of what it is to be a feminist library.

Many of the interviewees acknowledged the resource implications of being independent, or operating either formally or informally as feminist collectives. In the early days at one library “people were putting their rent money into the library to pay the library’s rent.” Maintaining a collective can involve a high degree of personal commitment to the organisation, such as unpaid overtime (Oerton, 1997, pp. 214-216), insecure jobs, poor working conditions, and lack of clearly defined management structures.

> ... often what happens with these local initiatives is you end up with people volunteering, which, again, the old thing, women volunteering, not getting paid, the professionalism of the whole thing is lost.¹

A situation where staff are over-working voluntarily or are putting their own money into the organisation is unsustainable, and is highly unlikely to happen within a different library setting e.g. a business or academic library. It is this lack of professionalism that may foster an image of ‘amateurs’ and which may also lead to the image of the collections being of little value. This again highlights the conflict

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¹ As with Chapter 4, anonymous quotes in the text are from the interviews.
between being engaged with librarianship or having a greater commitment to a cause or raison d’etre, in this case, women’s issues.

In addition to the reliance upon volunteer or non-professional staff, Mount outlines how in small special libraries, staff may be expected to fulfil a number of varied duties. Whilst this can provide an interesting work environment, it also can lead to increased managerial responsibilities (Mount, 1995, p. 33). These management responsibilities may include reporting and dealing with a high level of management, planning, budgeting, organising staff, supervising, marketing, public relations and evaluating operations (Mount, 1995, pp. 34-35.) If the member of staff is not qualified in these tasks, there may be operational inefficiency, particularly as:

One of the most important factors in developing successful special libraries or information centers is the quality of the management under which they operate. (Mount, 1995, p. 32)

In the case of the women’s libraries, it is possible to identify where organisations are being run by enthusiastic women who may be unqualified in librarianship or management skills. It is relevant to note therefore that the appointment of the first director of the Women’s Library brought in someone with previous management, promotional and leadership skills.

This change in management style of the women’s libraries from collectives to more traditional structures could be seen as part of the institutionalisation of alternative structures (Bordt, 1997). Bordt argues that although the idea of co-operatives and collectives is not recent, the rise in their numbers in the late 1960s and through to the mid-late 1970s was a result of the contemporary social and political climate. The decline of the Women’s Liberation Movement and political and social ‘backlash’ (Faludi, 1992) challenged the nature of collectives which have subsequently adapted their management styles to suit a different climate. Thus, newer organisations often do not feel compelled to organise along collective lines in order to achieve their objectives (Bordt, 1997, pp. 147-148).

For those women’s libraries attached, or possibly moving into university collections, or funded by local councils, there are other management issues to consider.
universities and councils do not necessarily provide dependable guaranteed incomes. Thus:

Special libraries, ..., are vulnerable to changes of outlook about library services when different people occupy top management positions or as economic conditions dictate belt-tightening in an organisation. (Mount, 1995, p. 6)

Several of the women’s libraries have experienced the effects of such belt-tightening in their pasts (see Section 3.10 in Chapter 3), and thus flexibility and ability to respond to change are all important management skills needed by the staff at the women’s libraries.

5.2.1 Funding
As with management structures, funding issues underpin the nature of the women’s libraries and archive projects.

You can have the greatest will in the world to do it ... but really, it all comes down to money.

Despite the variety in sources of funding found at the women’s libraries, no sources are particularly secure: donations, membership fees, project grants, or university revenue funding all have their own disadvantages. In several cases, the lack of secure financial resources of the women’s libraries has a negative impact on the effectiveness and range of services the libraries can provide. Not all the organisations can afford to pay their staff, or to pay them within recognised pay scales; not all the organisations are able to set aside money for a specific book budget; not all the organisations can afford to implement stock checks or maintain accurate computer catalogues; and not all the organisations can afford to be open five days a week. Without the financial ability to provide easily accessible collections, or to develop existing or new services, the libraries are unable to plan for future growth. It is also questionable how accessible and beneficial they are in terms of their spheres of influence given their limited resources. With such constrained resources, their collections may continue to be underused and undervalued.

As discussed in Chapter 4, there may be an overall decline in user numbers, or a decline in the use of a particular service, but such changes did not appear to have
been evaluated or analysed. And whilst staff in several of the women’s libraries blamed decline in use on the loss of women’s studies course at universities, none suggested that they had done some research to see if this was actually the case.

Furthermore, where project money was coming into the libraries, it was not clear if they had to report back to their funders. In the case of the Feminist Library, they were required to provide minutes of meetings and some statistics to the local authority. However, they did not appear to keep many specific statistics regarding use of the collections, and it may be questioned as to whether the decision by the local authority to withdraw funding the library’s funding was partly due to its lack of evidence showing that it was valuable to either local or national communities. In contrast, the Women’s Resource Centre conducts formal evaluation of its library services in order to provide feedback to its funders.

"[O]urs is more about, our evidence we have to provide to our funders is ‘what good that service did to them’. Not physically ‘how many people did you have through the door?’ but … how else has the library helped? … [O]ur funders are always more interested in, ‘did that person get funding from coming in and using our library?’ Not necessarily twenty people coming in and looking at one book."

This is an important consideration: rather than knowing that 10 people came to use the library, for example, the success of each visit or the type of information that was found and utilised is more useful for the library in its subsequent development of services. No other library gave evidence of similar forms of user surveys. For librarians working in traditional public or academic libraries, this would appear to be at variance with commonly accepted good practice. (For example, Information Services at Aberystwyth University conducts annual user surveys, offering a prize draw as an incentive for completing the survey.)

It is also important to note how funding can influence what services are offered. For example, one women’s library offered services:

... within the limits of what's fashionable for funding and all that kind of stuff, you know, you can't really do exactly what you want but you always try and make it fit in to, you know, sort of broad [rules ?], and making sure that people are coming in the door.
Funding bodies, be they local authority councils, arts and culture bodies or universities have quite a powerful influence over the type of women’s libraries and archive projects that currently exist. Being able to offer projects or services that match the current social and cultural climate is therefore critical for successful funding bids. In 2001 The Scottish Parliament published a report (*Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland*) and began a national initiative to address low levels of adult literacy and numeracy in Scotland. The report found that about 20% of adults in Scotland have ‘poor skills’ and a further 30% may find their skills inadequate in the knowledge economy. This equates to about 800,000 adults in Scotland who have very low literacy and numeracy skills (Scottish Parliament, 2001, section 3.2). The strategy to tackle this includes spending £51m over a 5-year period (Scottish Parliament, 2001, section 3.2). Glasgow Women’s Library, by offering lifelong learning and adult literacy services to a variety of disadvantaged groups (e.g. ethnic-minority women, young female adults, women from disadvantaged urban areas) are thus able to be involved in the national campaign and attract some of the funding. This in turn increases their engagement with the local community – an issue which is discussed in section 5.4.

Given some of the problems with funding bodies, some libraries have sought to stay independent. But is being independent and relying upon fluctuating grant money a viable option for an efficient library or archive service? One participant said

woe betide anybody who would try to do something on this scale and try to be independent. Now there are models of places that are [independent] but, but, they have local authority support so somewhere like IIAV in Amsterdam has very, strong regional support. There are different ways of doing it, but you have to have a revenue stream that is pretty assured I would say for a substantial amount of your running costs.

However, others would argue that

Because we've never been funded by a council, we've always had to get our own funding, it's meant that to survive we've always had to look for different sources of funding from different places, and although that's meant really low wages for a lot of the workers, a lot of the time, er, it means that we're totally independent and that we run our own show, basically.
It is clear that despite the variety in sources of funding, no sources are particularly secure. Relying on membership and services income gives a library a slightly greater degree of independence, but may be problematic if there is a decline in membership over time, and if funds from services also decline. This vicious circle has been experienced by the Feminist Library and eventually contributed to their closure. Alternatives such as project grants or university funding bring their own disadvantages and may not be applicable to all the women’s libraries.

5.3 Engagement with librarianship

There is no doubt, when one considers the range of the collections either housed by the various physical women’s libraries, or referenced on databases of archives, that there are a number of significant and immensely important collections and resources connected to the women’s libraries. (See Chapter 3 Section 3.10). However, as has been discussed earlier, some of the libraries have limited resources (particularly people and money) with which to develop the collections, ensure their preservation, or to promote them effectively. There are also several areas within collection development and service provision that call into question the professionalism of the libraries. This dis-engagement with professional standards and methods is perhaps one reason for their low profile within the library world i.e. among librarians and in the professional library literature.

Although some services may be worthwhile (e.g. a newspaper cuttings service) sometimes the deciding factor on whether a service continues is resources, and ultimately, funding. Although this could be considered to be the same for any library, public, academic or business, it seems that this key issue of what it is to be a women’s library is essential here. What professionally run library would consider continuing a service when it was uneconomical and a drain on resources? In many instances, women’s libraries continue to provide services that are resource-intensive, primarily because of their core values and concentration on women’s issues, as opposed to library issues. That is, there is a stronger engagement to feminism or women’s issues than with librarianship.
Another element of the dis-engagement from librarianship can be seen in the lack of formal standardised classification systems in place in the women's libraries. Of the physical collections (i.e. excluding the work of AMC/WAW and the Irish Women’s History Project, both of which adhere to archive standards), only one library used a traditional classification system (The Women’s Library). One library had partially implemented a system based on the European Women’s Thesaurus, whilst another had devised its own feminist classification system. It could be seen therefore, that there is a double dis-engagement from librarianship in that not only do they not employ ‘traditional’ library classification systems, but they are not overly concerned about applying any other published classification system, even if it has been designed with women in mind. At the time of interviewing Glasgow Women’s Library did not have a catalogue system in place, or a classification scheme, but, in a recent (August 2005) job advertisement for a librarian, it was stated that they were looking for someone who would identify a suitable library management system and to catalogue the collection. It will be interesting to follow the developments to see whether they implement a feminist classification system or not.

The dis-engagement from librarianship however, does not just stem from their identities or aims. It is also related to the lack of financial security. Few of the women’s libraries are able to offer easily accessible, professional services and collections as few of them have secure or specific funding. Few have specific book budgets in order to augment the current collections and few have specially trained professional staff who can ensure adequate conservation measures are practised. They are therefore less able to deliver what might be considered to be a professional service. Their principles, guiding ethos, and restrictive resources all combine in creating relatively isolated organisations, that appear to operate not only outside of library circles, but also do not appear to be within the spheres of influence of women’s studies.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, women’s libraries, whilst displaying some similarities with special libraries and electronic directories (but not the full range of services expected from a digital or virtual library), are not closely integrated into
either of these two sectors, either in the literature or in common daily practices. For example, St Clair argues that there has been a change in the role of a librarian in special libraries from general and traditional services and provision to specific and high-tech information delivery (2001, p. 44). Their key skills now are knowing about the capture, organisation and dissemination of information and an understanding of how information is used, and how the work they do contributes to the organisation’s success (St Clair, 2001, p. 48). Most of the librarians in the women’s libraries are not producing tailor-made, user-focused information services, which often operate on the ‘just in time’ approach (Eastwood & Tompson, 2001, p. 6), whereby materials are not to hand unless (or until) they are needed. St Clair argues that this approach shows that “…special librarianship is less about collections and more about information delivery” (2001, p 56). In contrast, the women’s libraries operate along more traditional lines of collecting and providing information. For many of them, the material and collections are essential to their definition, especially where they have significant archives.

But in other respects, women’s libraries do have similarities with special libraries. Mount describes some typical functions of the latter:

- May be one-person libraries
- Tend to have a very particular or narrow subject focus; specialised collections
- Relatively high reliance on non-book material e.g. reports, slides
- May provide intensive and tailor-made services for users c.f. general services of public libraries with a limit to the lengths gone to to find information for a user
- Very knowledgeable staff on the subject area
- Often at forefront of using technology
- May have higher salaries than public and academic librarians
- Most are voluntary in terms of establishment c.f. public libraries
- Serve small group of relatively fixed numbers of users c. f. public libraries serving wide cohort (Mount, 1995, pp. 4-18).
From this list we can see many similarities, but also some differences, between special and women's libraries. For example, most of the staff of women's libraries are under-paid, if they receive a salary at all, and few of the women's libraries have been able to take advantage of new technologies. Although the focus in the literature tends to be on commercial or 'workplace' special libraries, the generic issues of staffing, funding (the workplace library is often subject to budget cuts, (Mount, 1995, p. 6)), management and low usage could enable women's libraries to forge closer links with special library associations or networking groups, and to try to be represented in this literature.

Given the recent developments in the newer models of women's libraries and archives (e.g. Women’s History Project Ireland and AMC/WAW), it could also be possible for such organisations to develop an engagement with the relatively recent development of virtual libraries. However, as was outlined in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.10) none of the projects studied here could be considered as virtual libraries, and the modest to low-level electronic developments in the other women's libraries leads to a hesitation to refer to these as hybrid libraries. Eastwood & Tompson consider that the digital library, can mean at its most basic, electronic format rather than or as well as, paper format (2001, p. 5). Whilst the women’s libraries all possess web pages, few offer electronic services, or even electronic catalogues. Thus whilst the older women’s libraries appear to be more aligned to special, public, or academic libraries, the newer models are neither virtual libraries or digital libraries, tending, currently, to exist as directories and portals guiding users to the original hard copy documents. Their engagement with librarianship and the archive professional, whilst possessing the potential for development in a variety of sectors appears in most areas to be limited and reluctant.

5.3.1 Staff
It was found during the fieldwork that many of the volunteers and paid staff in the women’s libraries do not have professional library qualifications. Some do possess other relevant qualifications e.g. in women’s studies. But, it could be argued that by having few qualified librarians, the services, collections and overall image of the
organisations are adversely affected. The exceptions to this situation are at the Women’s Library where all their staff are professionally qualified librarians or archivists or are currently undertaking training in these professions, and Glasgow Women’s Library who have recently appointed a qualified librarian. The lack of staff with library qualifications was also found by Illett in her research into women’s health centres in the UK whereby only one out of her sample of 20 institutions had a qualified librarian (Illett, 2002, p. 37).

One possible reason for the lack of formal library qualifications among staff in women’s libraries could be that many of the staff and volunteers join the organisation’s staff team (paid or unpaid) having previously been a user of the library. Thus they are likely to be working out of personal interest rather than a professional motivation. Again, this confirms the finding that the libraries tend to have more engagement with feminism than with librarianship.

However, there is a danger that the attraction to, and interest in, women’s issues can lead to some women investing heavily in the ‘cause’ such as a women’s library. Evidence was given in the interviews of the personal commitment in terms of time, money and energy many women make to such causes: the danger of this is ‘burn out’, and in addition, in small organisations that are dependent upon a few dedicated volunteers or staff, if or when these key personnel leave, there can be a gap that is hard to fill. Not only their knowledge of the organisation disappears, but also the drive and motivation to keep the organisation going. For example:

AT: So the original one, when was that established?
LL: I don’t know, nobody seems to know, there doesn’t seem to be anything...
AT: Nobody’s here that was there,
LL: No, nobody is more than two years in employment here,

CC: They were actually in [name] town hall before that. They were in [place] just before that. They’ve moved quite a lot actually. And it’s quite difficult because there’s not really anybody still around who’s done it the whole way through and there’s not been a great record kept.
AT: So you don’t know how things used to...,
This is a key element of knowledge management, how to capture the tacit knowledge of employees so that the organisation can benefit. “Knowledge is increasingly the most important asset an organisation possesses” (Munn, 2001, p. 164). Competitive advantage for organisations lies in their ability to access and exploit the information and experience (knowledge) stored in employees’ heads (Munn, 2001 p. 159). This tacit knowledge (c. f. explicit knowledge which is recorded or noted somewhere) is lost when employees leave, and without it, organisations can be at a disadvantage.

During the interviews it became evident that there is an element of tension between women who are committed to the cause and the principles of the women’s libraries, and those who work in women’s libraries or archive organisations but who are committed to the job from a library or archive perspective. In unrecorded conversations two women made comments suggesting that some staff at the Women’s Library were mainly there just because it was a job, and were not that interested in women’s issues. Comments implying the reverse were also made by other staff suggesting that some women were more interested in women’s issues than the value of archives or information resources. This highlights the conflict between the engagement with librarianship or with feminism. Should the balance between the two matter? A librarian working in, say, a business library, is unlikely to be questioned on their commitment to that business field. However, it may be possible to extend the ‘commitment’ argument to other ‘specialist’ libraries or resource centres such as charity organisations. For example, the Oxfam library in Oxford may well wish to employ staff or volunteers who are interested in and committed to the principles of Oxfam.

From the interviews and off-record conversations, it appears that there are some hinted-at beliefs that anyone working in a women’s library must be dedicated to women’s issues. This tension causes those more concerned with library issues to refer negatively to those concerned with women’s issues, and vice versa. This
cannot be healthy in the relatively small world of women’s libraries. It may also reflect the broader division within feminism as a whole between academic feminist thought and grassroots feminist action (Kemp & Squires, 1997, p. 5; Evans, 1982, p. 17; Gillis & Munford, 2003).

5.4 Communities
The Scottish Parliament has noted the valuable roles libraries play in their communities:

... libraries have great potential as community hubs and that their outreach and social inclusion functions are vital and often overlooked and [the Scottish Parliament] applauds those libraries that are imaginatively tackling these important issues. (Scottish Parliament, 2003, Section 4)

With government recognition for outreach and other projects, places like Glasgow Women’s Library are able to improve the lives of local women whilst also potentially attracting national funding and support. This engagement with the local community may then create further opportunities in the future. (For example, with reference to Glasgow Women’s Library, they have successfully negotiated a relocation into a refurbished city-centre reference library, thus increasing their public profile, space, professionalism, and long-term security).

It might also be possible to relate the degree of engagement with the local community with those libraries that have the most secure future and the most diverse collections. For example, a library with a large and diverse collection may be able to attract and interest a range of different communities for support and patronage. For example, one interviewee said that

I think this library is very strong because it has a research collection, and collections of national importance, and that combined with, we have those collections but we’ve also very actively been collecting material of, campaigning groups, sort of small organisations, ephemeral materials, things that don’t go into the mainstream, the big mainstream libraries, so we’ve got this nice combination of the historical collection plus a lot of the contemporary and Women’s Liberation Movement stuff.
By being able to appeal to different people, the library may also be able to appeal to
different funding bodies to support different projects, and, should therefore be able
to increase the potential number of visitors. However, the nature and aims of some
of the libraries’ collections precludes such diversity e.g. the WRC whose remit is to
serve women’s voluntary groups, and the Feminist Archive South whose remit is to
collect material only from the second wave of feminism.

5.4.1 Clientele: Users and Membership
Of primary concern to most of the women’s libraries visited is the decline in users to
the libraries, although firm statistics are difficult to obtain, given the lack of
professionalism (see section 5.3), and a degree of secrecy (e.g. one library provided
me with statistics but asked that I did not quote them).

As was shown in Chapter 4, there was considerable variety in the numbers of users
coming to the libraries each week, with the totals ranging from 1 to 100 (see
Appendix 4) Whilst some of the libraries may have fairly buoyant user figures,
personnel at most of the libraries said that there had been a definite decline in the
number of users coming to the libraries. As few of the personnel in the various
libraries were able to provide accurate current user statistics it is debatable whether
it would be possible to trace their usage patterns over time to compare with earlier
usage figures. Without statistical evidence, it is difficult for researchers to fully
understand the situations, and for personnel in the libraries to plan services and staff
provision.

The under-use of women’s libraries in general is an issue, particularly when linked
to their future existence. Observation of the libraries at the time of each interview
revealed that only two of the libraries were being used by other women. Where
libraries are funded by external grants or projects, low usage figures may well
prompt the funders to reduce or withdraw their support.

Low usage figures also raise the question of the continued importance of such
institutions, and their ability to survive on small budgets.
I think part of our problem [of declining user numbers] is that we don't publicise ourselves enough, and that's through lack of resources, and lack of volunteers to do it.

Are declining numbers due to low profiles and lack of public awareness about the resources available? Or is it evidence of a wider problem with women’s issues and feminism, in what some refer to as the post-feminist age? (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, pp. 105-108.) Several members of staff put the decrease in numbers down to the reduction in women’s studies courses.

I think it's basically because women's studies courses don't really exist anymore. I mean there's gender studies and other names for it, but it's very different, the culture's very different than previously, and I think you do have to adapt to that, as well, I don't think you can continue to be your focus on that, if, people aren't coming, I think you do have to do what you can.

BB: I think it's to do with all the women's studies courses being cut, ... It's quite sad.
AT: Why do you think they're cutting them?
BB: It's not fashionable any more, [maybe they] want to save money, and if they do have a course now it's more likely to be called gender studies, and have a different emphasis, a more sociology emphasis, than original women's studies courses.

... we did have quite a lot of visitors, ... in the years before the courses were cut, and before that it was women who wanted to read books and were more likely to identify as feminists.

Glasgow Women’s Library acknowledge that they had seen a decline in numbers, but this has been reversed with the provision of a number of lifelong learning courses, adult literacy courses and other outreach schemes. It could be seen therefore, that the traditional ‘library’ services are in decline, possibly as a result of the decline in women’s studies courses, but that there are still instances where individual women today are seeking information or resources in a female-only environment.

The widespread decline of visitor numbers attributed to the cutting of women’s studies courses and the subsequent focus on gender studies in academia needs further investigation. As few of the libraries have kept user statistics or conducted user surveys, the reasons for the use in previous years can only be guessed at, based on what users asked for or what services they used. Thus, the staff may be able to
conclude that in the past they were, for example, used primarily by students of women’s studies courses. From my research it seems that there are still a number of women’s studies, women’s history and gender studies courses across the British Isles (see section 2.3.9.1 in Chapter 2). It is interesting to note that in Wales, whilst former women’s studies courses have closed, two institutions still offer this subject at Masters level. The University of Swansea’s Gender & Culture MA course started in 2004 (see Appendix 6).

However, whilst the provision of about 20 different courses may seem adequate, this is considerably fewer than in the mid-late 1980s or in the 1990s\(^2\). This decrease in the number of courses offered, and shift in focus to gender studies, matches the overall (public) decline in interest in feminism within society and a concurrent move away from notions of separatism and an absorption of women’s issues into the mainstream (Hudson, 2001, n. p.). For example, the independent feminist publisher *Virago* has become part of the Times Warner publishing/media conglomerate. The decline in provision of women’s studies courses is also evidence for the debate over whether we are now in a ‘post feminist’ period or a third-wave of feminism (Gillis & Munford, 2003, pp. 1-2; Redfern, 2001, n. p.) where separate organisations for women are no longer needed. Both are severely contested notions and the subject of much debate (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, pp. 147-151; Wolf, 1993).

There is also the question of who are the users of women’s libraries. Whilst several of the women’s libraries said it would be difficult to define a typical user, they do tend to fall into two categories: either researchers (private or academic) or ‘contemporary’ users accessing courses or training sessions. This matches, to some extent, the two main models of women’s libraries. But without accurate or regular user surveys it is difficult to fully categorise the users. It is important that libraries know who their customers are, and what they want.

*To serve a population group effectively, information workers must understand its information needs and its information-seeing habits.*

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\(^2\) Griffin & Hanmer cite a 1993 handbook of women’s studies which listed 74 women’s studies courses in the UK, 47 of which were full degree programmes (Diploma, undergraduate or postgraduate level). (Griffin Hanmer, 2001, p. 24)
The role of research in establishing the information needs of women cannot be overemphasized. (Mbambo, 1995, p. 47)

Knowing the users is essential if the most appropriate services are to be offered. Few of the women’s libraries know who their customers are and unfortunately, few of them have the necessary resources to conduct customer surveys. In terms of increasing user numbers, they might also be interested in non-users, particularly from the local community, who could be attracted to the organisation. A lack of resources for research, marketing and profile raising however, makes both of these difficult to achieve. Research into the use made of all the different women’s libraries is therefore a potential area for future investigation.

Different libraries have different experiences with regard to their membership numbers. The importance of successful membership schemes is not just the financial contribution to the libraries, but also their wider influence, and the picture they reveal. Buoyant membership figures suggest a successful library, and this can influence funding decisions. Likewise, the reverse can equally apply. The individual members may also have important connections or networks and may be able to raise the profile of the library within their own circles which may bring wider cultural and professional recognition. For example, the Association of the Women Barristers holding meetings at the Women’s Library (Ilett, 2003, p. 239). With friends and connections such as these, the Women’s Library is able to distance itself from the typical image of women’s libraries, which has been described by The Sun newspaper as “wacky” (Howarth, 2002, n. p.), and thus create a more professional image for itself.

5.4.2 Networks
At a keynote address at the 2002 Kampala Know How conference, Devaki Jain noted the importance of women producing and sharing their knowledge. She emphasized that networking was a special feature of the feminist movement that brings collective perspectives of issues and gives a collective voice (Know How Conference, n. d., p. 28). Despite an active international network of women’s information services, there does not appear to be active networking in the British Isles.
The disappointing lack of networking among the various women’s libraries was discussed in Chapter 4. It is, unfortunately, not a recent occurrence as Renshaw, conducting Masters level research in 1989, found a similar lack of evidence of linkage (Ilett, 2003, p. 282). There are several possible explanations for this. One is that there are greater expectations of women’s organisations to network together as women are often seen as good networkers (Rhys, n. d., n. p.) and with only a few players in a small field, it could be expected that there would be well-established links. In addition, the degree to which each women’s library is engaged with feminism varies across the organisations. Those that perhaps have a closer attachment to feminism or women’s issues (such as the Feminist Archive, Glasgow Women’s Library and the now closed Feminist Library) do appear to have maintained low-level networks, with exchange of newsletters and some of the staff knowing each other. The libraries that are perhaps more engaged with library (or archive) issues, are thus one step removed from the women’s networks and may see it as being more important to establish links within the relevant profession than with other women’ libraries or archives. An example of this is the Irish Women’s History Project which is hosted by the National Archive of Ireland.

Again, the common thread of the conflict between being a library or being a resource for women is critical here. Being outside formal library networks, the women’s libraries have few other structures on which to base networking or sharing information about their collections. Although collaboration would be resource intensive, and in their current circumstances, few of the libraries could begin to establish a nation-wide networking project, in remaining relatively isolated, each library is left without a wider support structure. The diversity of the collections is also an important consideration. Whilst they all can be loosely termed women’s libraries or women’s archives, many of them see themselves as lone inhabitants of a particular field, thus reducing the potential for networking.
One possible reason for the lack of networking may be that although the various women’s libraries all have specific and different collection scopes, they are all interested in broadly similar resources.

I suppose they’re in competition. For funding. For materials. … Do we put it here or in London? And my own preference is that it should be kept locally. But the trouble is that people are more likely to donate something to the Women’s Library than they are to the local library here.

In addition, “the subject area is so big, and because a lot of women's activities happens on a regional or even quite a local level” it may be difficult to see how a national network of women’s libraries in the British Isles would operate. Nationally relevant material could be shared across a network of women’s libraries.

But one potential problem with resource collaboration is the diversity in the libraries’ aims and roles. As one staff member said:

We’re not collaborating on a collection development level with the other women’s libraries because none of them [have] quite the same collection scope as us, as far as I’m aware.

But the reverse could easily be argued: because their collection scope is different, there is considerable potential for greater networking and combining of resources. As many of the women’s libraries are small, poorly financed and with limited human resources, working together could provide a practical solution to some common problems e.g. inter-library loans.

Identities and era of origin can also influence the type of and intensity of networking. Thus, the more middle-class, academic, equality-driven Women’s Library has long established networks within certain women’s circles, especially as it used to be attached to the Fawcett Society. Thus it is likely to attract, and be sought by, similarly-minded organisations who wish to develop links with it, and perhaps deposit their archives there e.g. the Women’s Institute or the Townwomen’s Guild. In contrast, the Feminist Library was directly connected to the second wave of feminism, and has long established connections with key women involved with creating much of the literary and campaigning output of this era. Organisations such as Women in Libraries (who retained a separatist stance as a group and did not join
the Library Association) deposited their archives at the Feminist Library, as the library’s identity and other collections reflected their own identity.

One woman interviewed in Wales raised the idea of having an umbrella body that would facilitate the sharing of information and networking across Wales among a range of women’s groups (see quote in Chapter 4, section 4.10). A virtual directory or database might be sufficient for this umbrella role, in order for individuals or groups to look up a particular resource. However, whilst this kind of facility may improve networking, it would still need funding and resourcing.

Another angle that could be investigated is the active use of mailing lists within the library sector. There are many hundreds such groups, particularly hosted by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), for all the different sectors, and typical postings are for examples of best practice, answering queries, evidence from trials etc. A similar approach could be used among the women’s libraries and could help foster a greater sense of shared communities.

Networking could be seen as the link between the archive-research model and the social-contemporary needs model of women’s libraries in that it facilitates cross-domain connections and can possibly overcome the division between the two models. One of the committee members of AMC/WAW highlighted the difficulties of achieving a balance between having a social/community element, and an academic approach. She pointed out that to win certain funding, reaching out to the community and undertaking projects with social benefits were required, but, to gain recognition in the archive world in Wales and to win other funding, a more academic approach was needed.

I mean that is always a sort of contradiction, between academic and community. [...] ...we need the academic side as well, as that gives it credibility.

This highlights the dichotomy discovered within the existing women’s libraries and archives, their difficulties with their names, and the cross-over between providing a social role and an academic role.
In summary, on the surface there are elements of networking but the desire by each institution to create the definitive collection of women’s resources may interfere with more constructive networking. The creation of Genesis, the online database mapping women’s collections in the UK is a positive step towards greater networking and collaboration. Whilst it is not intended to facilitate actual sharing of resources, it raises the profile of all the constituent partners and may create a definite network for future collaboration. Whether it will provide a space for discussing common issues such as collection development policies, preservation, user figures etc, is an issue for future examination and further research.

5.4.3 Relationships
Power and influence is possibly the most important factor when considering the current relationships between the various women’s libraries in the British Isles. It was acknowledged in Chapter 4 (see Section 4.10.1), that during the 1970s and 1980s, the women’s libraries generally experienced similar difficulties: shoestring budgets, volunteer staff, and crowded unsuitable conditions. Although the Fawcett Library became attached to a University in 1977, it did not develop a high profile until the mid-to-late 1990s when it was campaigning and fundraising for its (successful) Heritage Lottery Fund bid. The awarding of £4.2 million, along with various other financial contributions and support, radically altered the dynamics between the various libraries. The Women’s Library re-positioned itself as the National Library of Women, during and after the bid, until persuaded from various quarters that this name was not acceptable in a country of separate nations. Despite adopting a replacement name, it has essentially become the Women’s Library. Ilett argues that this has led to Glasgow Women’s Library temporarily shelving its plans to become a national Scottish institution (Ilett, 2003, p. 330). It could also affect any developments in Wales.

Combined with this is the closure of the Feminist Library, and (at the time of writing) the uncertain future for its collection. Whilst the Women’s Library has the greatest capacity to acquire the collection, it appears reluctant to do so, citing a number of different problems.
AT: ... would this library be able to take things or, is a lot of it duplicate anyway?

FF: Well I suppose a certain amount of it might be duplicate material. The er, we’re also organised on quite different principles, for example, we admit anyone into this library. And the Feminist Library only admits women. And some of their, I believe some of their archives have got restrictive clauses, so they can only be viewed by women. And they’re run as a co-operative, and clearly we aren’t! So there are all kinds of issues of taking on a big library, which is run very differently, and the way that we operate here might not be acceptable to the Feminist Library. And then of course there is a question of quite a lot of material I would expect would be duplicated, and what happens to that itself. It’s a huge undertaking,...

Whilst some of the smaller libraries have informally offered to take the collection, given their already over-stretched resources, would this be practical or possible? Relationships appear to be rather strained which is disappointing given the relatively small number of related organisations in the British Isles.

5.4.4 Marketing

Given the low profile of many of the women’s libraries, it is perhaps inevitable to find that their marketing is often low-key or aimed only at local groups. Few are able to afford to conduct large marketing campaigns that would attract visitors from around the country, yet their collections often have national appeal. The organisations that operate membership or ‘Friends of –’ schemes may be able to conduct some marketing directed towards these members, but this is inevitably ‘preaching to the converted.’ As was explored in Chapter 4, few of the organisations have effective up-to-date websites, which are vital marketing tools.

AT: And so how have they [the users] found out about you?

DD: There’s a range of things. I mean quite a lot of it is word of mouth, or just knowing us... when we started up. We go out to a lot of voluntary sector events and activities, promote ourselves, ... [we] have our posters and leaflets in the obvious resource places that are to do with the voluntary sector.

The organisation that has the most widespread and high profile marketing campaign is the Women’s Library. It maintains email and postal databases of interested people and sends out information in these formats on a regular basis. Their public profile
has been dramatically improved with the winning of the HLF award, and no other women’s library can emulate their marketing strength.

Staff at Women in Jazz felt that whilst their profile in Wales was very low, they had a substantial international image and reputation.

*But we seem to have a huge reputation in America, and Wales is only just, maybe, wondering, well, what's going on down there?*

This may be because jazz has particular significance to America where it emerged out of a combination of black and Creole music, predominantly in New Orleans, Louisiana, and has its roots in the plantation songs of black slaves. Thus, whilst the Women in Jazz archive is able to link up with the national and international jazz network, there is no specific network for women’s libraries to join. They may fall between both the library network and the women’s-interest network, and given their relative disengagement from librarianship, and the lack of attention to them in the library and women’s studies literature, it is possible to understand their low profiles. Marketing could help raise their local and national profiles, but as has been established, the women’s libraries frequently lack the human and financial resources to undertake a comprehensive marketing campaign, or to deal with subsequent increased demand upon services.

### 5.5 Space

Virginia Woolf argued that men had much greater access to education, resources and private space. In order for a woman to have adequate personal space and time to write she would need to have a ‘room of one’s own’ where she would not be disturbed by noise or family members (Woolf, 1928). Women’s libraries provide that space, which, despite being a public space, may offer women the resources and facilities to write, learn, or personally develop. The physical existence of women’s libraries as well as their collections and resources is an important consideration. This is because:

*the spaces in which social practices occur affect the nature of those practices ... . But the spaces themselves in turn are constructed and given meaning through the social practices that define men and women as different and unequal.* (McDowell & Sharpe, 1997, p. 3)

Thus, the library space has an impact on behaviour and practices of users.
Whilst women sometimes were provided with ‘women’s sections’ in some public libraries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Baggs, 2000), the creation of separate women-only spaces was particularly important during the various waves of feminism in the last 100 years. For example, in the 1930s the former incarnation of the Women’s Library, the Library of the London and National Society for Women's Service, was once housed in a multipurpose women’s centre that comprised café, theatre, lecture theatre, library etc. (Ilett, 2003, p. 240). Within the co-operative movement there was a separate Women’s Co-operative Guild, founded in 1883. Bailey notes that although there was a National Co-operative Men’s Guild established in 1911

\[\text{there were no barriers to break down similar to those facing women [and] ... therefore there is not the same impulse towards separate organisation. (Bailey, 1955, p. 125)}\]

This necessity to break down barriers was felt particularly in the 1970s when the creation of women’s spaces was connected to the ideology of radical feminism and separatism (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, pp. 147-151). Women who believed in separation from the mainstream agenda felt that it was extremely important to create women-only spaces that would enable women to become empowered and enable personal development and reflection within supportive, friendly, welcoming and accessible environments.

The atmosphere and environment of such women-only spaces is therefore an important issue. This can be shown in the following quote about a recently closed women’s bookshop in London (which on closure was bought as a going concern by Foyles bookshop and now occupies the top floor of this mainstream bookshop)

\[\text{But Silver Moon was so much more than a bookshop. We were an advice centre on everything from women’s holidays to rape crisis centres; we ran writing courses; we were a meeting place for lesbians and feminists. (Cholmeley, 2004, p. 23)}\]

Women’s spaces therefore, take on roles beyond the description of their expected duties. Women’s libraries could thus be expected to fulfil a number of different roles for women, and the space would need to be appropriate for these uses.
Within the fields of feminist geography and architecture it is acknowledged that much of the built environment is male-orientated (Matrix, 1984). How then, do women-only spaces overcome this? In section 4.11 in Chapter 4, the design and feel of the physical environment of the libraries was discussed. The pictures revealed very different styles, from new, modern and in-keeping with typical images of libraries, to rooms with comfy sofas, log fires, and cramped bookshelves. Discussions during and after the interviews with staff at the women’s libraries also revealed that not only is the design of women’s space important, but it is a very personal issue. Different people react differently to different interiors and exteriors.

Ilett links her own (negative) reaction towards the environment of the Women’s Library to its identity as an academic institution and also as an organisation that arose out of white, middle-class, equality-orientated first-wave feminism (Ilett, 2003, pp. 240-245). She found the atmosphere to be unwelcoming and intimidating, with the reception area acting as a gatekeeper to the collections and exhibitions (Ilett, 2003, p. 243). Although I too found there to be a degree of formality and severity with regards to the atmosphere and design of the Women’s Library, as has become clear throughout the analysis, the Women’s Library has a longer history of links to formal institutions (e.g. a university) and has had fewer links to grassroots feminism. The newly designed building is therefore in-keeping with the library’s history and nature, and reflects to some extent the prestige associated with winning a substantial HLF award. Despite this, perhaps the negative reactions towards the new building reflect a disappointment that environmental conditions often associated with feminist spaces such as being friendly, close-knit, welcoming and approachable have not been obviously incorporated. Interestingly, when the Women’s Library was housed in a basement, users complained about the cramped and difficult conditions (Blagden, 1985, p. 11).

To some extent, the spatial constructions of the various women’s libraries visited fall, again, into the two dominant models of women's libraries: academic and research orientated libraries, with designs similar to traditional libraries, and community resource centres designed to be non-intimidating to those unfamiliar
with libraries. This leads to the wider question as to what design Glasgow Women’s Library will create when they re-locate the library into a newly refurbished city centre library in Glasgow (the Mitchell Library, see Glasgow Women’s Library, 2005). This could be of relevance to Wales, if it is found that the establishment of a women’s library is appropriate.

The contrast between the Women’s Library and the other women’s libraries buildings is stark. They, without exception, exist in small, cramped conditions, and may be slightly inaccessible or unwelcoming e.g. down a dark alleyway (Glasgow), or in a run-down building with male security guards (now-closed Feminist Library). Their interiors may be friendly, welcoming and homely (e.g. sofas, a wood-burning stove and free tea and coffee in Glasgow Women’s Library) and thus in-keeping with their identities as women-only spaces, but the conditions may not be the most appropriate for the material, especially delicate or sensitive archive material.

The reaction to physical space is a personal one and although the Women’s Library building may not meet some people’s expectations of a women’s space, it has to combine the roles of being a university library, a library open to the public (which is unusual for most university libraries), and a women’s resource that is also open to men. The built environment must therefore reflect all these identities, whilst also being appropriate for the housing of precious archives and resources.

These spatial tensions are further evidence of the conflict between being a library first and foremost, for research and study, and being a women’s space, a resource centre for women to come and use, whatever their information needs. Some women may be put off from visiting a women’s library due to the very nature of these institutions – not only because of their library status, but also because of their more unusual women-only environment.

... the concept of a library is terrifying for some women. And the concept of women’s space is terrifying for some women as well ... [her emphasis]

Further, anecdotal evidence (low usage figures of the women’s libraries and the lack of other users in the libraries whilst the visits were taking place) would suggest that
women’s spaces are currently not greatly in demand. At variance to this is the belief held by all the staff interviewed in the women’s libraries that there was a need for women’s spaces:

*I think that women don’t even know that they want it [a women-only space], but then when they come they really enjoy the space and they really appreciate how safe they feel and how supportive it is, ... a lot of women aren’t aware of even, they’re still coming in and going ‘is that not sexist?’ and it’s just like, there is a ... feeling [of] ‘why do we need our own space?’, ‘why is that important?’, but it’s just a matter of coming in, and then they realise.*

*I still think physical space is important. ... a women’s space, is a really important statement, and again politically, it’s important, practically it’s important, and what you signal by having that space is important as well for women, because there are so few women’s spaces.*

Thus one of the problems for raising user numbers is how to overcome the vicious circle whereby the potential benefits of women-only environments are often only realised when a woman has experienced a women-only space and overcome any barriers or prejudices she may have had about such spaces.

### 5.6 Engagement with feminism

Ilett found that women’s health centres and the library profession as a whole were not deeply engaged with feminism, despite the high percentage of women in librarianship (Ilett, 2002; Ilett, 2003). The same is true of women’s archives and libraries. And the reverse is also applicable, in that women’s studies and feminism does not appear to engage with the women’s libraries. Many monographs in the diverse field of women’s studies, or women and ICT, or women’s history fail to mention women’s libraries, despite these organisations being crucial in terms of research material. Frequently the terms ‘women’s library’, ‘library’, ‘information’ or ‘women’s archives’ do not appear in the indexes of such books (e.g. Beddoe, 1993; Pugh, 2000; Rowbotham, 1999), although authors of some monographs do acknowledge the staff of some of the women’s libraries, principally the Fawcett Library (e.g. Barrow, 1981, p. ix; Pugh, 2000, p. v; Rowbotham, 1999, p. xiii).
As has become apparent during the preceding discussion, women’s libraries, for various reasons, appear to operate without close engagement with feminism. Only one library created their own feminist classification scheme (which Ilett regards as a key indicator as to the level of feminist engagement, Ilett, 2003). The Women’s Library has various projects that reveal its developing links with feminist and women’s networks (e.g. Genesis) yet the director acknowledged in her interview that the campaigning element of the previous Fawcett Library had diminished.

This is perhaps evidence of the wider shift within the women’s movement from active grassroots engagement with feminist concerns, to a more theoretical or mainstream approach. As was discussed in relation to women’s studies courses (see section 2.3.9.1 in Chapter 2), this movement from practice into theory has not been without critique and debate (Kemp & Squires, 1997, pp. 13-16). This may also suggest that women’s libraries that remain engaged with local communities and campaigning (e.g. Glasgow Women’s Library or Swansea Women’s Centre) may find it harder to be seen as relevant, by funders, women, and society as a whole. Whilst the closure of the Feminist Library would be an example of this, the continued success and development over time of Glasgow Women’s Library, including their imminent move into rooms within a city centre reference library, defy this generalisation.

It must also be noted, that although the various women’s libraries do not always appear to be closely engaged with feminism, feminism does not always appear to recognise them. The lack of discussion about the existence, value and theory of women’s libraries from within feminist studies is difficult to explain or understand.

5.7 Current roles and models

I think there is a difference between archives and libraries.

This quote by one interviewee captures the essence of the findings in terms of the conflict between women’s libraries and women’s archives. However, the debate
goes further than a difference between libraries and archives because there is also a
difference in what it is to be a library, as opposed to being a space for women.

In Chapter 4, a dual model concept arose when discussing the origins and the aims
of the various women’s libraries and women’s archive organisations. The dichotomy
appears to be focused around those that provide an academic research role, and those
that serve contemporary and social needs. However, it is clouded by the use of the
word ‘library’ when the institution is perhaps more closely aligned to an archive, or
perhaps when it is more similar to a community resource centre. If one considers the
mapping and distributed approaches adopted by Ireland and AMC/WAW
respectively, the model divides into three different concepts.

Throughout the findings in Chapter 4, and the analysis here, the evidence frequently
returns to the central dilemma of the role or model that the organisation emulates i.e.
its identity. The division in roles is interesting and one of the key questions it poses
is: is it possible, or desirable, to combine the role of being a reference (and/or
lending) collection, a resource for academics and researchers, with that of addressing
social needs, direct community involvement and offering support services to local
women? In addition, is it possible or practical to delineate between research
libraries, archives, and resource centres? Many public libraries hold some
collections that could be classed as archives; they also have material that is useful
for researchers, and, they often meet local community and contemporary
information needs through local information services. Given this cross-over within
public libraries, is it unfair to expect women’s libraries to fall neatly into distinct
categories? Whilst the quote at the beginning of this section implies that it is
possible to delineate, there are too many exceptions blurring the evidence, even if it
would be easier for the libraries themselves to focus on one role or the other.

Evidence from Glasgow suggests that even in the years leading up to the formation
of Glasgow Women’s Library, personnel were aware of the differences between a
community space and a formal library.

As part of Women’s House’s evolution we had visited the Women
Artists’ Slide Library in London where information on the
Californian and English womanhouse models were available. It was sensational to see such a volume of stuff on women artists but that model wasn’t particularly appropriate to Glasgow, being solely academic and research-centred. We had seen a huge traffic of women who wouldn’t normally use libraries come into our original Women in Profile premises. We wanted to combine those two elements, of collecting relevant information mainly made up of things that women might donate themselves, but also making it as accessible as possible. (Women still in profile, n. d., n. p.)

The current aims of Glasgow Women’s Library confirms their continued commitment to both academic and social aspects.

In Wales, as has been discussed in section 4.2.1 in Chapter 4, early ambitions of AMC/WAW were for a women’s building, which would combine both the research and the social role.

DD: ... We wanted our own library,
EE: A building,
AT: Bearing in mind what you’d seen elsewhere,
EE/DD: Yeah.
EE: I don't know how we thought we were going to fund it, but we had these ideas that somehow we would, I think,
DD: Yes, you had very charming ideas, and we all wanted it. And I think there were social reasons as well as historical record reasons lying behind this. We thought, our own archive, library, and [X] always said the key thing was the café! So it would have been, that would have been delightful, but, to have an archive you have to have money, you know, to ensure its continuance,
EE: Yes, that's it.

Practicalities have forced a scaling down of this vision. With this came a realisation by committee members that the two roles, whilst possible to combine, might not be achieved concurrently.

AA: I think the social and community aspect of it is extremely important, but I think for, for continuity, we need the academic side as well, as that gives it credibility. That is the hard base of it, whereas, if you see what I mean by hard and soft, and I think,
BB: Oh we need both of them,
AA: if you have academic recognition then you can soften it, and go out in the community as well...

Certainly, AMC/WAW have found that they have had to establish their academic credentials in order to be taken seriously by existing archive and library networks in Wales, and now they are trying to broaden their appeal by bringing in social elements, such as the Roadshows.
Regarding the concept of different models of women’s libraries it is possible to see how the role of the social or community libraries, or resource centres has diminished over time.

*...that kind of social thing, that can be met by quite a lot of different groups now... Maybe the time has passed for that kind of model.*

Indeed, the organisations that have more of a social role have continuous problems with funding and security.

*I think sometimes they can certainly get the funding to get going, but then after that, ... how do you sustain the funding? Because these are not places that are very heavily used, you know.*

As was discussed in Chapter 4, Glasgow Women’s Library has problems with its current name essentially because “…a Women’s Centre is really what we do.” Resource centres are often connected to local community activism, grassroots origins, and direct campaigning for improved conditions for various groups.

*A lot of women’s collections, particularly the ones that grew out of the 1970s and 1980s, did start as resource centres. How did you get contraception, how did you get an abortion, what do you do about violence, etc, and the resources kind of grew round that...*

The favourable conditions for such resource centres may be passing, or may be being absorbed by Citizen’s Advice Bureaux, and possibly public libraries. Certainly, in terms of the socially-orientated Feminist Library in London it would appear that the local council thought their time had passed.

Whilst approaches of women’s resource centres may seem to be in direct contrast to archive and library developments, it is possible to see how the more traditional (academic) women’s libraries and archives do also have connections to social or community developments. For example, the Feminist Archive (South), a specific collection of material for researchers, private and academic, was set up in order to preserve and document the output of the second wave of feminism, which is credited as being very much a grass-roots movement (Radstone, 1992, p105). Further, the Women’s Library was founded in order to help women enter into newly opened up professions, and although this was inevitably of benefit to middle-class women, its aims were socially orientated. It was also founded on the basis of a range of
collections donated primarily from the suffragette and suffragist movements, both of which are excellent examples of women’s direct campaigning.

Not only do the academically-orientated women’s libraries have social connections, the socially-orientated women’s libraries have academic credentials, as can be seen in the range and extensiveness of their collections. Thus, there is overlap between the library/archive model and the socially-orientated model of women’s libraries. However, this division, that is still deployed by the women in the various women’s libraries, sometimes serves to not only create the notion of each women’s library as being quite different or separate, but it also underpins some of the tension between the various women’s libraries. For example:

...we have a role as a research library but they have quite a different role don’t they? They're more of a community centre, in some ways, so, I think you know, we all have to find our own ways of surviving, as things change around us.

... [the community libraries] provide support for people who need a place, you know, something to be attached to, belong to, and that is very different from running a professional, academic library. It doesn't of course mean that they don't have things in those collections that are of great historical significance, and that's certainly true of the Feminist Library and Glasgow, you know, all those small libraries have, you know, things that are very significant.

so Glasgow still has this, I think, promotes itself as a kind of drop-in community centre, and I do think they're different things, personally, either a kind of, you know, archival resource, or, you're providing a service to people, and you can't, they're very different kinds of things.

And you need it all, ..., you need the white gloves and the brush and all that stuff, you really need that but you also need, like, women’s stories, and also everything like fanzines and stuff that women make and care about just to get a broad picture... .

I think that the Feminist Library come from one point of view and the Women's Library are managed, they're librarians, who are paid to run a library, and are part of a university, do you know what I mean, and are, just a bit, well, some of them might go and work for a public library somewhere along the line if they get a pay rise.
The difference between the two types of women’s libraries in some ways echoes that of the conflict between academic/theoretical feminism and grassroots feminist activism (Gillis & Munford, 2003). As can be discerned from the above quotes, there is some antagonism between the models, and how they are envisaged. Some people in the academic libraries feel that they offer the better service and those in the community resource centres believe that they provide the best options for women. Both are equally valid. For example, benefits from the social resource centre model include the visible personal development of the clientele. A woman may come to the library for a lifelong learning course and end up trying things she wouldn’t have thought of doing before she visited the library\(^3\). Academic benefits from the ‘social’ libraries are obvious in the range of resources they offer to women and the importance of their archives to women’s history.

The pattern of a division between the socially- or academically-orientated women’s libraries in the UK is mirrored in the Republic of Ireland. During the early 1990s a group of women were keen to establish a women’s library and resource centre in Dublin. They were awarded money for a feasibility study of the scheme, and created an exhibition about the project and produced a report (not available to the public). Their vision was for a building that would hold resources for and about women, contain a café, meeting rooms etc. This is similar to the early vision of AMC/WAW. However, another group, the Women’s History Association of Ireland were concerned about these plans for a Dublin women’s centre and were worried that such a centre would be unsustainable in the long term, putting important documents and material in danger if they were housed in such a centre. The Women’s History Association of Ireland therefore created their own proposal, and were awarded money for the mapping of women’s archives across Ireland. Whilst this scheme has been successful in raising the awareness of women’s history and of archives in

\(^3\) An example of this was recounted to myself whilst walking to the train station with a member of staff from Glasgow Women’s Library. A woman had come to the library for one particular reason, although she had literacy problems and was not confident at reading or writing. After participating on several literacy courses run by the library (which was not her original aim in coming to the library) she went on to be involved with making a video for the library promoting the value of lifelong learning and the library’s services.
general in Ireland it does not include the social aspect of a women’s resource centre or library. Whilst some women may feel that there is little need for the social resource centre model, others may feel that creating such spaces for women is very important.

AT: And, do you, think there should be more women's libraries in Britain?
FF: It would be nice to have a women's centre in every, area, town, I think there is a need. I don't know about a library, but definitely a women's centre...
AT: And what sort of facilities would they have?
FF: Erm, just a place where, women can connect with each other, and get help with, whatever, information, to find things out, learning things.

Thus, it appears that there a number of conflicting issues to consider regarding women’s libraries and their roles in the British Isles. Should they gear their services specifically to one type of customer and one type of need? Is it actually possible to offer resources that attract both academic researchers and women with contemporary social needs? Has the era of women’s spaces and separate resources passed? These questions are considered in relation to Wales in Chapter 6.

5.8 Conflicts and tensions
Throughout the findings and analysis it has become clear that there are various conflicts or tensions that permeate the women’s libraries. These conflicts can be summarised as:

- the conflict between the ideal aims and objectives and the reality of what is possible
- the desire to adhere to core principles or values whilst still offering an appropriate service
- the tension between being a women’s resource or being a library that happens to focus on women, which in turn relates to:
- the tension between being engaged with feminism and/or engaged with the library and archive professions
• the conflict between being an archive, a library or a community resource centre

It is interesting that the newer organisations (e.g. AMC/WAW and the Irish Women’s History Project) have overcome some of the potential problems by concentrating solely on one issue. For example, the Irish Women’s History Project does not concern itself with providing services for contemporary women, and is solely an archive project. Although it has an engagement with feminism in that it is raising the awareness about the importance of women’s archives, it is more closely linked to the professions than to local grass-roots women’s organisations.

It is not possible to say how each library should resolve these conflicts, as they manifest themselves in different ways in each library. For the now-closed Feminist Library, the tension and conflicts have been experienced many times in their 25 year history. When they lost previous funding in 1988 they were approached by various academic institutions, but at that point in time they decided that they wanted to keep the collection and collective independent, and they continued, on a reduced and voluntary basis for another 15 years. However, they are now in the same position again, and the collective may decide this time, that to secure the future of the material, depositing it in an academic institution may be the only option. Ironically, one of the institutions that approached them in 1988 was the Polytechnic of North London, which later became London Metropolitan University when it merged with London Guildhall University. London Metropolitan University is the ‘owner’ of the Women’s Library, as the Women’s Library was housed by London Guildhall University. So, these two very different women’s libraries could have ended up in the same place if decisions in the 1970s and 1980s had been different. Such a merger would have enhanced both collections and created an even larger difference between it and the remaining women’s libraries. Whether the Women’s Library is able to now absorb the now-closed Feminist Library remains to be seen, especially given the financial and resource costs that would be involved.
5.9 Conclusions

AT: Do you think there is, a sort of future for a place like this?
GG: Definitely. I think there’s a lot of women who really, benefit, from being here.

I mean it would be lovely to have a centre with accommodation as well, ... , so you could go and ... use it, ... it was always there, that it was always on view, it was always on show.

AT: Do you think there is a role for women’s libraries and women’s resource centres?...
HH: Definitely. I think there are a lot of women, who are almost coming back to that. I think there was a phase when women felt it was a sign of weakness, or a sign of something negative to want a women’s only space, to access and read women’s books. I think certainly in the private sector there’s quite a lot of pressure on women and things, and I think...it’s important to be there when women need it, ..., if you do the survey in the street I would imagine most people would come out negative [i.e. do they want a women’s space?], but go and ask them when they’re in the middle of a crisis if something was useful, people’s attitudes, and things change quite a lot, and I do think there is a huge need out there. But I think it needs to be better publicised, less cliquey, and somewhere where women, all women, would want to go. But that’s very difficult.

The future for women’s libraries and archives depends not only upon the demand for such institutions by women, but also upon the ability of the women’s libraries to raise their profiles so that more women know that they exist and can see the potential and benefits of using them. And although most of the staff interviewed knew about some of the other women’s libraries, few had made visits to the other institutions or knew much about their roles and objectives. This raises a key issue of each library being relatively alone in the field, not part of a wider network of libraries, or women’s issues. Although many of their identities point to an engagement with feminism, they are not extensively using women’s networks to develop. If there was a more active women’s information network across the British Isles it might not only foster positive working relationships between the various women’s libraries but it could jointly raise their profiles and possibly usage.
The lack of direct co-operation between the various women’s libraries visited could be considered to be surprising, considering that many women’s organisations try to foster links and co-operation as part of the ethos of being committed to women’s issues. Apart from low-level exchange of newsletters and some support between the smaller ones for each other, there did not appear to be much collective working, perhaps in terms of profile raising or sharing resources. For example, staff at the Feminist Library, in a discussion after the tape was turned off, mentioned the value of having somebody to go through the daily newspapers to collect articles on feminism and women’s issues, but, due to lack of resources they had never been able to do this. Glasgow Women’s Library provides exactly this type of services to paying customers, and potentially, the database could be shared across women’s libraries (if it was computerised instead of being on cards, and if they had sufficient staff to resource it).

But, several of the libraries are quite different from another, with different aims and roles, and the potential for networking or collaboration might be limited.

[T]he only real equivalent to us [the Women’s Library] is the Schlesinger library in the States which has the same historic collection base, so we’re comparable with that rather than any other women’s library in Europe or in this country so it is difficult to make comparisons.

The libraries feel that they are the only ones doing exactly what they do. They feel that they are on their own path and quite different from any others. To some extent this may be true, but it also masks the similarities between the women’s libraries which could be developed more to facilitate networking and co-operation.

Another finding from the interviews was the low profile of the libraries. Many appear to serve a local audience, with some regional spread, but in terms of national profiles, few are well-known institutions. Thus, whilst their collections could be considered to be of national importance, their presence is often only known within limited geographic or subject-specific networking circles. Again, this raises the question of the potential for national collections be they in Scotland, Wales or England.
Their low profiles, and in some cases declining usage, may be symptoms of wider problems in society with feminism. The media portray society as post-feminist (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; World Association for Christian Communication, n. d., n. p.): women’s studies courses are fewer in number than gender studies (see Section 2.3.9.1 in Chapter 2; BBC, 2004, n. p.); and ‘chick-lit’ -where 30-something women are generally obsessed with finding a husband or shopping in order to be happy- is popular in film and book charts (as epitomised by Bridget Jones, McRobbie, 2004, pp.261-262). But, chick-lit itself, whilst not feminist in nature, could also be interpreted as evidence of women seeking out literature for and about women (see also the Girls’ night in and Girls’ night out short story collections). Amazon now uses the category of ‘Chick Lit’ as a sub-heading to search fiction.

Figure 9: Screenshot from Amazon.co.uk showing sub-heading of Chick Lit

Other evidence suggests that women still want and seek out women-only spaces, women’s courses and have specific women’s information needs. For example, an article in a Glasgow Women’s Library magazine describes the call from members at the Northern Older Women’s Lesbian Conference for a resource and advice centre in Leeds for services and information to such women (Glasgow Women’s Library, 2003b, p. 8). In the same issue of the library’s magazine, many courses for women in Scotland on International Women’s Day 2003 were over subscribed (Glasgow Women’s Library, 2003a, p. 5).
Glasgow Women’s Library is the prime example of the library that has kept abreast of societal changes and has adapted as necessary:

I think we’ve survived, and hopefully grow and develop and expand and hopefully continue to do so, because we’ve responded to what we see as necessary changes. So the whole, and also tuned into a bit of what’s happening in, you know, jargon speak, in local government and central government as well, so I think it’s important that we’ve responded to the lifelong learning needs of women. But the library’s also, has always developed according to the state of needs of women, there’s no doubt about that.

A further consideration is the finding from the literature (see Chapter 2) that most women use networking, informal sources and groups to access and find information that they need. They tend not to use formal institutions, such as resource centres or libraries. This presents the libraries with a problem, especially those that are run along the community centre model. Do women consider approaching these institutions when they require specific information, support or advice? If the profile of a local women’s library is sufficient to have permeated into the awareness of many local women, then the women’s libraries as resource centres may still have a role. Given this finding from literature on information needs, it may be that a women’s library is likely to have more success in terms of visitors and longevity if it is geared more towards academic resources than social needs, even though some may consider it to be a sad reflection on contemporary society if women’s social spaces are no longer needed.