Chapter 7 Conclusion

Women’s health centres and women’s libraries and information centres provide a dynamic, diverse and pluralist environment for librarians to reflect on theory and practice within a setting where the provision of information is done differently. ... Nevertheless, being beyond the mainstream, and interacting with that mainstream, is characterized by numerous tensions and conflicts.... (Ilett, 2002, p. 40)

7.1 Introduction

Having considered all the relevant factors it is apposite to return to the original research question posed by this thesis, that is, ‘is there potential for a women’s library in Wales?’ This concluding chapter will draw together and summarise the findings from the literature review, the fieldwork in women’s libraries in England, Ireland and Scotland, the fieldwork in Wales as well as analysing the concept of different models of women’s libraries. The chapter will also consider the futures for the different women’s libraries in the British Isles. It will move forward to discuss various themes that are central to the thesis i.e.: the engagement with librarianship/archive professions and the engagement with feminism displayed by the various women’s libraries/archives; separation versus integration for women’s libraries, as well as the separation of special libraries from other mainstream libraries. In considering all these factors it will hopefully provide an answer to the research question, as well as highlighting the potential for further research.

7.2 Related research and conclusions from the literature

One seminar at the Kampala Know How Conference focused on the changing role of women’s information services. Issues from the discussion included:

- the need for women’s information services to bridge the gap between practitioners, academics and policy makers
- the need to develop common standards to enable women’s information services to share information across diverse borders (Know How Conference, 2002, p. 29).
Women’s information services such as women’s libraries, are seen as central to the dissemination of information to women, helping to overcome barriers between women and information. That this is an internationally-agreed issue means that it should be possible to work together across borders to help share information.

The example of shared roles for women’s libraries reflects the international nature of the literature of women’s information services. The last fifteen years has seen an increase in international networking, collaboration and information sharing. This can be dated from 1991 and the First International Symposium of Women’s Libraries. Subsequent conferences have been held across the world in 1994, 1998, 2002, and the next conference will be in Mexico in 2006. Apart from these international conferences, there is little other evidence among the literature of much comparative research. Much of the literature tends to be descriptive narratives focusing on particular women’s libraries that are well-known to the authors, who are often involved with the institution about which they are writing. Consequently, the literature is rich in description and provides a wealth of information about a variety of women’s libraries and archives, thus creating a detailed picture of these institutions. Despite this, few authors address the theory behind the establishment of women’s libraries. As a result, there is some danger that these institutions could be seen to exist and operate in a vacuum, removed from not only library history but also from feminism.

The impact of the nature of the literature on this thesis is that there is very little other comparative research that could provide guidance as to potential research methods, and possible findings. Furthermore, the relative lack of attention to the theory of women’s libraries makes it harder to argue for the establishment of a women’s library in Wales, although this thesis has sought to provide theoretical reasons for the establishment of women’s libraries (see Section 1.4 and 4.2).

One of the prime reasons for establishing women’s libraries is their role in meeting women’s information needs. Given the relative paucity of research and literature on women’s libraries, this related field was also explored. The literature in this field is
also international in nature, but tends to have a more rigorous academic nature. Various methods are used to investigate women’s information needs, and the types of women who are the focus of this literature is highly diverse (see list in Section 2.4.4 in Chapter 2), yet, there are common findings. The research suggests that women tend to seek information through informal sources and networks, and may not use a library when seeking information. This has potential implications for the role and usage of women’s libraries across the world. Unfortunately, despite the close nature of these two fields, and the implications for women’s libraries and resource centres, there appears to be little linkage between the two fields. This thesis therefore attempted to bridge this gap in relating findings from one field to the other, and discussing these in relation to the potential for establishing a women’s library in Wales. It was important to consider the broader and related research as a women’s library could not operate in a vacuum and would need to be engaged with the worlds of libraries and women’s issues to be successful.

7.3 Findings from current women’s libraries in the British Isles

In order to ascertain whether there is potential for a women’s library in Wales, it was important to consider the current position of women’s libraries in the British Isles, to analyse their success, their roles, and their futures. This provided a contemporary comparative context for exploring the situation in Wales.

A central theme that arose from the research was the development of various models of women’s libraries. Their disparate nature generated three core models:

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

Within these three models there are variations but core similarities remain. The importance of understanding the existence of different models is that it is central to the consideration of which, if any, might be most appropriate for Wales. The difficulty is that the concept of a ‘women’s library’ is complex, even for those involved with libraries or women’s issues, and each person may imagine a different
type of institution when faced with the idea of a ‘women’s library’. It was important therefore to discover what these different institutions do, how they operate, who they serve, and what their purposes are, in order to establish the potential for a women’s library in Wales.

The existence of these different models creates a dilemma for Wales as it means it is not simply a matter of assessing whether there is potential for a women’s library in Wales, but, what sort of women’s library would be most appropriate. There are advantages to each of the three types of women’s libraries, but, it is not possible to assimilate all the characteristics of them into one single organisation. From a feminist perspective, it could be seen to be advantageous for all three types to be developed in Wales, but the resource implications for this would be immense. There may also be some strength to the argument that the heyday for some elements of a women’s library have passed. This is reflected in the recent closure of the Feminist Library, and the uncertain future of the Feminist Archive South. In light of these events, the creation of a new physical women’s library or archive in Wales looks less sensible or appropriate.

The origins of the women’s libraries in the British Isles varies temporally and theoretically. In Britain, the two main phases for feminism during the twentieth century provided the context and impetus for establishing women’s libraries. Whilst similar institutions may have been created from the late 1980s onwards (i.e., after the second wave of feminism), they are generally rather different in nature. Rather than campaigning for a physical building for a women’s library or archive, both Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive of Wales (AMC/WAW) and the Women’s History Project Ireland have concentrated on ‘virtual’ collections and a distributed approach. Consequently, it is important to consider whether the time for establishing a physical women’s space is no longer pertinent, and whether alternative approaches to a women’s library might be more appropriate for today’s society, and for today’s technology.
Whilst the women’s libraries all aim to serve women, their objectives may vary from aiming to provide contemporary resources, training and a sense of community and women’s only space, to providing a detailed history of women through archives and research. The existence of three models of women’s libraries in Britain is directly related to the differences in their aims. Thus, it is very important when considering the situation in Wales to establish what sort of women’s library would be desirable or appropriate. Whilst there is an element of overlap in roles, the principal aim of each women’s library influences what type of institution it is. A women’s library is very different from a women’s archive, which is again very different from a women’s resource centre.

I would think Glasgow’s a bit like that, do 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.

Glasgow Women’s Library is wonderful, but it’s completely different from an archive. What they are doing is liaising with local women, they’re doing classes, they’re doing an allotment.

...what’s happening is they’re becoming into a sort of community [pause], not a community centre but very much a community thing, whereas the Women’s Library now, you know, ... it’s the sort of thing that gets taken seriously, whereas the scruffy little room, the standard of the usual women’s centre, we [emphasis] take it seriously, but the great majority of the population doesn’t.

Despite these differences in aims and roles, confusion can arise due to the cross-over of names. Thus the Women’s Library in London is actually more akin to an archive as it does not lend material and is internationally renowned for its important archives and collections about women. Likewise, Glasgow Women’s Library is in fact more similar to a women’s resource centre as it provides lifelong learning training, free advice sessions and IT training. Names are important as they provide signals to potential users as to what to expect, and can influence funding decisions (see section 4.6 in Chapter 4). Having a somewhat misleading name may have negative consequences. Thus, for Wales, it is important to consider not only what type of women’s library might be appropriate, but also what it would be called.
The research also revealed the importance of management issues to the success of women’s libraries. Those with staff hierarchies or more formal structures such as a board of management tended to be slightly more secure in terms of their future position e.g. the Women’s Library, whereas those that operated with less or no hierarchy e.g. such as collectives, tended to face repeated crises in management, staffing, funding and future survival e.g. the Feminist Library. Whilst the success of a women’s library does not solely depend upon having structured management, the tendency to rely upon volunteers or a core collective may lead to an institution being weaker when facing difficult problems, or to difficulties in co-ordinating development programmes. For example, during late 2003 Glasgow Women’s Library restructured their staff to create the post of Strategic Development Worker:

...because we need to move building and we need to massively fundraise. And we need to look at some internal re-organisation issues, so for example, we don’t have a clear ... line management system, so nobody’s nobody’s boss, here, really. But we’re not a collective, so we need to look at bringing in some structure into that, to maybe help co-ordinate the projects...

It is often the case that styles of management suited to feminist principles e.g. no hierarchy, are found in the women’s libraries that identify more strongly with feminism. For Wales, the management structure of any new women’s library, or the development of current relevant organisations would need to be considered. Would the commitment to feminism extend to the management structure, or would it be sufficient for feminism to be the reason for the creation of a women’s library rather than infusing the management style?

To some extent, this issue is also related to the question of ownership or independence. The research found that in general, the independent institutions tended also to be those which identified with feminism, whilst those attached to a university or other institution tended to have more traditional management structures and approaches to organisation. This is an important issue to consider not only in terms of the implications for funding, but also in relation to the idea of separatism or integration, which is a key debate in women’s studies.
Funding is inevitably the most important issue for women’s libraries. The staff all emphasised the importance of sufficient funding to ensure the continued existence of the institution. But funding can do more than just enable an organisation to function, it can also affect its future development. The prime example of this is the change in fortunes for the Fawcett Library from a cramped basement and a relatively low-key profile to a purpose-built building and national attention in the media. Lack of funding can not only curtail services, but it can also force closure, as was the case for the Feminist Library. Consequently, in Wales, the issue of where funding would come from and how secure it would be in the long-term is critical. Without a regular source of income, the creation of a physical women’s library, or the extension of current relevant organisations is highly unlikely.

The strength of the women’s libraries may not lie in their financial situations, but rather in their collections. The quality of library and archive collections is possibly the principal consideration for users. Thus the women's libraries with significant archive collections can provide researchers with excellent resources. The rescuing and preservation of documents relating to women’s lives is one of the key purposes for some of the women’s libraries. Likewise, collections of contemporary material in the women’s libraries that operate as resource centres are also noteworthy for their contribution towards contemporary women’s lives. However, in both cases, the exploitation of the collections may be hindered by the lack of computer catalogues and accurate stocklists. Furthermore, few of the women’s libraries had formal collection development policies, which may lead to haphazard collecting and weeding of material. Many of the libraries were also unable to formalise a book budget, relying on donations or short-term project money to purchase material. This again could lead to gaps in the collection. As most of the women’s libraries see themselves as unique or fulfilling a particular need, it could be assumed that they would seek to provide a definite collection in their field.

For Wales, these issues are important, but perhaps of more importance is where the sources would come from if a physical women’s library were to be created. No only does this have financial implications, but also logistical and practical concerns. As
was explored in depth in Chapter 6, creating a brand new women’s library in Wales could be very difficult, given that important archives are currently housed in other archives and libraries, and it may not be desirable for them to be relocated. Furthermore, creating a resource of contemporary material would be costly and there would need to be consideration of the importance of provision of electronic resources as well as hard-copy material. It is significant that both the more recent women’s archive organisations have opted for virtual rather than physical collections. In Wales, AMC/WAW seek to rescue relevant material and ensure its professional care in established archive or library repositories. Although many of the founding members see a women’s library building as a ‘dream’, they recognise the practical and professional issues involved and have selected a procedure that maximises their resources within current library and archive provision in Wales.

Their current strategy is also suited to the structure of the organisation in that the management committee of AMC/WAW is run entirely by volunteers. This is similar to many of the other women’s libraries and archives, except that the other women’s libraries also manage physical libraries. As was examined in Chapter 4 and 5, relying entirely on volunteers can be a risk. In addition to the voluntary status of many of those working in women’s libraries, it was also found that many of the staff and volunteers did not have professional library or archive qualifications. The Women’s History Project in Ireland made a specific point of employing qualified archivists, in order to gain the respect of the profession. There are two important issues here: one is that the lack of formal professional qualifications among staff may lead to incorrect procedures and inadequate attention to issues such as preservation, conservation and cataloguing; the second issue is that by not requiring workers to have the relevant qualifications, it may send out signals that the organisation is not entirely committed to professionalism in libraries and archives. As will be discussed below, this is one area that reveals the lack of engagement with librarianship and the archive profession. If Wales were to establish a women’s library, it would perhaps be sensible to employ professionally qualified staff, thus ensuring the appropriate standards of library and archive work are in place, and
indicating to potential users, funders and supporters that the organisation is engaged with the relevant profession and should be taken seriously.

It is perhaps unfortunate that user numbers appear to be declining in some of the women’s libraries. However, an accurate picture cannot be fully ascertained as few of the women’s libraries conducted surveys measuring usage. And some of the women’s libraries have seen a recent increase in numbers, due to either expanding service provision (e.g. at Glasgow Women’s Library) or with the opening of a new, large purpose-built building e.g. the Women’s Library. The implications for Wales of declining user numbers could be that these types of institutions are required less now than they formerly were, yet whilst some women’s libraries are growing, it is hard to generalise as to what the current situation may be. In addition, none of the women’s libraries felt that they had specific categories of typical users as they attracted a variety of different women. But again, without formal user surveys assessing who the users are, what services and facilities they use etc, it is difficult to target groups of non-users, and difficult to tailor services to users and non-users needs. In considering the options for Wales, it must be borne in mind that the perception may be that there is no longer a need for a physical women’s library. Furthermore, its usage would depend upon its identity, aims and roles. An archive-based research library would attract different women from a resource-centre community-based women’s space. Thus, the question of identity and aims affects more than just the collection.

Whilst the women’s libraries and archives in the British Isles are diverse in nature and outlook, there is an element of networking and communication between them. However, such networking is often at the level of exchange of newsletters and personal communication, and there is little evidence of larger collaborative projects e.g. inter-library loans. This may be seen as surprising, given their relatively isolated position outside of mainstream libraries. The implications for Wales are that should a new women’s library be created, there may not be an active or strong network across Britain that could offer support and advice. Although there is informal support and encouragement, the lack of an established network may well be due to
lack of resources in order to create and maintain one. However, the Genesis project, recently established by the Women’s Library has provided avenues for links, collaboration and networking and it may be possible to develop further links based on this network.

Relationships between the various women’s libraries also appear to be slightly tense since the awarding of £4.2 million to the Women’s Library. Prior to this the women’s libraries were similarly all restricted by lack of money, and the benefits from the development of one of them do not, as yet, appeared to have trickled down to the other institutions.

The physical space of the Women’s Library is a prominent element that has changed with the awarding of the HLF grant. There are differences in style and spatial issues between some of the research-orientated women’s libraries and those that are more similar to resource centres. Whilst negative reactions to both types of spaces were sometimes hinted at during the interviews, it is possible to see how the different physical spaces are suited to different women and their differing needs. For example, pictures of the new Women’s Library convey and image of a spacious library suitable for quiet independent research and study (see Section 4.11), whereas pictures of Glasgow Women’s Library portray an image of a small community, meeting over a cup of tea by the wood burning stove. As both libraries have aims that are quite different, their physical spaces need to be aligned to these aims in order to attract their target audience.

For Wales, unless creating a physical women’s library was deemed to be appropriate, the issue of the physical space is not of immediate relevance. It is important however, for those women’s institutions in Wales that are open to the public e.g. Women in Jazz and Swansea Women’s Centre. They must also consider access to their building. At the time of interviewing, Swansea Women’s Centre was being renovated to accommodate disabled access, but the current location of the Women in Jazz offices entails going up several flights of stairs. With the recent addition to the Disability Discrimination Act in October 2004, service providers,
including those with 15 or fewer employees and anyone who provides a service to
the public will need to ensure that reasonable adjustments – such as adapting
premises, removing physical barriers or providing the service another way – are
made so that disabled people can use the service. Therefore, not only would this
influence the creation of a physical library in Wales, but, may have already had an
impact on the SWC whose council-owned building was refurbished in summer 2004
to comply with the new legislation. The issue of physical space is therefore more
than the image presented by the actual space, as it can also influence the number and
type of potential users who can access the resources held by an organisation.

7.4 Engagement with feminism and relevance of feminism

The investigation into women’s libraries in Wales revealed more than the existence
of different types of women’s libraries. It also uncovered the varying degrees of
engagement the women’s libraries have with feminism. Whilst they all have roots in
the principles and ideals of feminism (e.g. empowering women, equal rights), they
approach the solutions to social and cultural conditions in different ways. Thus some
of the women’s libraries concentrate on rescuing and preserving women’s
documents and archives, whilst others focus on the skills and confidence of women
to improve their current situations. Both approaches are equally valid, although
some of the women interviewed saw their approach as more beneficial, or more
closely connected to women and feminism.

However, despite the women’s libraries close connections to feminism, this
engagement is not always highly visible or reciprocal. For example, the profile of
the women’s libraries is fairly low, even within feminist circles and they are rarely
mentioned or referred to in feminist literature (see Chapter 2). They may also be
known about within local (geographical) circles, but their influence is rarely regional
or national, despite many of their collections being of national significance.
Furthermore, they could be considered to be under-used, particularly by feminist
researchers. Some of the women interviewed, although engaged with women’s
studies or women’s history, had not been to many, or any of the women’s libraries.
If women who believe in, and are committed to, feminist principles do not use these institutions, then why would a woman with little interest in feminism visit such a library or archive? As a consequence of these factors, it could be considered that whilst the women’s libraries are engaged with feminist ideas, elements of the feminist movement are not always fully engaged with the women’s libraries.

7.5 Engagement with librarianship/archive professions

It is likely that the actual, or perceived, feminist nature of women’s health centres, women’s libraries and others has prevented their activities and developments being anything more than of minor interest to many within the profession. (Ilett, 2002, p. 39)

Despite their unique structure and outlook, women’s libraries and archives are by their nature, part of the library and archive profession. Many of their services mirror services and facilities in academic, public or specialist libraries. Their chosen names also indicate that they are designed and operate as libraries or archives. As a consequence, one would expect to see similar standards and professional engagement in terms of access hours, computer catalogues, qualified staff etc. However, as was discussed in Chapter 4, many of the women’s libraries do not display the same degree of professionalism as public or academic libraries. Moreover, it is possible to see that there is a slight disengagement from the profession, which, as with the links with feminism, may operate both ways. For example, there is virtually no research or references to women’s libraries and archives within the literature of these professions. As with feminism, if the main movement that underpins the characteristics of these institutions is not engaged with or interested in them, it could be argued that they are operating in a vacuum.

One reason for this is connected to the question of separation or integration of matters relating to women. As noted previously, this has been a source for continuous debate within the feminist movement (from the early 1900s) and there is no agreement on which position is best. Should the women’s libraries seek to remain independent, at the risk of being seen as a ghetto, or should they attempt to integrate more with mainstream (mixed) academic and public libraries, at the risk of losing
their unique quality of focusing solely on women? Each argument has its strengths and weaknesses. In the case of the existing women’s libraries, it may be that both routes are appropriate for different libraries given their different circumstances e.g. the Women’s Library to remain as an independent building, yet part of a university, and the less financially- and resource-secure Feminist Archive (South) to be integrated into a local university, perhaps maintaining the collection in a separate room. In addition, whilst the library profession appears to be mostly unaware of women’s libraries, the feelings of those working in the women's libraries suggest that they are more aligned to other networks, and do not always see themselves as librarians or information workers (Ilett, 2002, p. 38-39). This could account for some of two-way disinterest in librarianship.

For Wales, the question of separation or integration is fuzzy. AMC/WAW operate within the mainstream professions of libraries and archives as their distributed approach to collection and deposition of material is based upon the network of local record and archive offices and the National Library of Wales. Yet a key concept of the founding of AMC/WAW is the importance of women’s history, writing the women into the history of Wales by focusing specifically on their lives, and this requires some degree of separation of focus. For Women in Jazz the same principles apply in that the founder believes men need access to the archives and the material in order to ‘re-educate’ them as to the role of women in the jazz movement, yet the work focuses specifically on women.

This division can also be seen within librarianship in terms of the divide between specialist and public libraries, and the different position that women’s libraries occupy, which was explored in Chapter 5. St Clair considers that:

*Special librarians are not only different from others in the workplace, they are different from other librarians and information professionals and, indeed, from others who practise special librarianship. (St Clair, 2001, p. 43).*

Staff and services in women’s libraries may well be significantly different from public, academic and special libraries, but the differences may be being over-emphasised in the above quote, at the expense of isolating these organisations from a relevant and useful corpus of knowledge and contacts. Whilst the daily work of
librarians in different workplaces may vary, the basic premise of their work – to provide information, or access to it – remains common to them all. It is possible that despite various potential cross-sector connections, women’s libraries actually fail to link to any one of them.

The findings from this research are confirmed by other similar research by Ilett who looked at women’s health centres in the UK and Ireland (Ilett, 2002). She found that these centres often had very strong feminist beginnings, but their commitment to feminism diminished over time. In addition, although they are information providers, there is little linkage between the two sectors. Many used inadequate sexist classification tools as they could not create their own, and also did not employ professionally qualified librarians or have staff that were solely responsible for information (Ilett, 2002, pp. 35-37). She states that:

> it is likely that the actual, or perceived, feminist nature of women's health centres, women's libraries and others has prevented their activities and developments being anything more than of minor interest to many within the [library] profession. ... [T]he literature review demonstrates the lack of sustained engagement between feminist theory and mainstream librarianship within Britain. (Ilett, 2002, p. 39)

Ilett’s findings, albeit from slightly different institutions, highlight the findings here – that there is little two-way engagement with either librarianship or with feminism.

### 7.6 Futures of the women’s libraries

The various women’s libraries and archives all have differing futures. As has been noted earlier, one of the sample closed during the period of the research, after 29 years of service (the Feminist Library 1975-2004). In contrast, the Women’s Library has dramatically reversed its cramped and precarious situation through winning a HLF grant, but the director notes that they still have to fundraise continually to keep the library open. Glasgow Women’s Library has grown considerably since its foundation in 1991, and at the time of interviewing was considering the possibilities of becoming a national (Scottish) organisation rather than city-focused. Its funding was still dependent upon short-term grants. The collection of the Feminist Archive
(South) in Bristol may be preserved if a local university is able to assume responsibility for the material. This process was still not confirmed at the time of writing, and without a long-term supporter, the future for the archive is uncertain. It currently offers minimal opening hours, and relies entirely upon two volunteer staff, both of whom wish to step down from their positions. As a consequence, there is some uncertainty about this archive’s survival and future. The Women’s Resource Centre in London continues much as before. It relies upon various grants to keep going, and at the time of interviewing had got...

...a marketing volunteer in at the moment and we’re looking at that, strategy and things like that and there’s talk of what [name] we need to be changed to. Although they have not changed their name, they have expanded their teams, with five teams instead of the three in place in summer 2002 (see descriptions in section 3.10 in Chapter 3). As a result their focus and project work has also expanded. In Ireland, the Women’s History Project is, in terms of active work, static, but the database remains in place, hosted by the National Archive of Ireland, thus hopefully ensuring its continued presence. The director hoped to attract another round of funding in order to conduct further mapping of resources to add information about more documents to the database. In terms of its future, providing the host organisation is able to maintain the database, there are not huge resource implications for this archive.

In Wales, the future for the three organisations is less clear. AMC/WAW have achieved several of their founding aims, but the desire to conduct a mapping exercise similar to the project in Ireland remains. Significant funding would be required to achieve this. Furthermore, only a few local record offices currently house material under the AMC/WAW name. AMC/WAW would like more women and organisations to deposit relevant material and for the importance of women’s history to be acknowledged more widely. They would also like to be able to employ a permanent officer, and to have at least one office in Wales, in order to raise the profile of the organisation and the value of women’s history and archives.
Women in Jazz were successful, during the period of research, in winning a HLF grant for two years, for a full-time heritage development officer. This will ensure their survival for a further few years and enable more research to be conducted on the material in this field. They remain in fairly inaccessible council-owned offices and would like to have a larger profile in Wales.

Swansea Women’s Resource Centre has perhaps the most uncertain future of the three. Although it has a few short-term grants, one of which pays for a part-time officer, their resources are quite limited and their sphere of influence is also restricted to the local region. Although it is the only women’s centre left in Wales, the closure of others during the 1980s and 1990s indicates, to some extent, that there has been a decline in use of these centres, although the online directory hosted by she-bytes has an extensive list of women’s centres across Great Britain (http://www.shebytes.com/index.html). It is difficult to judge therefore, the current position of women’s centres in the British Isles. SWC has extended its services from direct campaigning in the early years to providing training and support services to women in need and works with a number of disadvantaged women’s groups in the area. However, as with all of the women’s libraries, its continued future is dependent upon sufficient, long-term funding.

### 7.7 Options for Wales

The options for Wales are numerous, as outlined in Chapter 6. This thesis has sought to answer the question of whether there is potential for a women’s library in Wales. The potential is dependent not only upon existing resources, collections and organisations, but also upon what approaches are practical and possible. It is also dependent upon the question of national ‘equity’. The idea for the thesis developed out of an awareness of physical women’s libraries existing in England and Scotland and that two of the women’s libraries were seeking to become ‘national’ institutions – one in terms of UK-wide coverage, and the other in terms of Scotland.
With political devolution for Scotland and Wales (of varying degrees), it was pertinent to ask whether Wales should seek to develop a women’s library so as to provide women in Wales with similar access to resources that women in England and Scotland are able to enjoy. This idea of ‘keeping up’ with library developments in England can also be seen in the recent creation of regional (national) bodies overseeing museums, archives and libraries in England, Scotland and Wales. Thus, the notion of Wales matching library developments elsewhere in the British Isles is not unusual or without precedent.

However, what needs to be considered here is how practical and appropriate it would be to match the women’s libraries in England, Ireland and Scotland. As has been discussed, the presence of various models of women’s libraries represents a choice for Wales, although the existing circumstances in Wales need to be taken into account. Although two of the relevant organisations in Wales currently rent offices, and AMC\WAW had expressed a desire for a physical women’s library, they recognised the impracticalities and resource implications involved in such a scheme and it would appear that the time has possibly passed for the creation of a single building housing a women’s library and archive in Wales. However, there could be scope for a building to be converted into offices to rent to a wide variety of women’s organisations in Wales, thus creating a women’s building, facilitating networking and profile-raising, but without the resource implications of creating a women’s library in a building.

The future of the women’s information organisations investigated in this research depends upon securing further funding. It would be beneficial for future researchers and the history of Wales if AMC\WAW were able to conduct a mapping of archives and material in Wales that relates to women, along the lines of the Women’s History Project in Ireland. This could be conducted in conjunction with other archive organisations in Wales to maximise resources. Funding a full or part-time officer for AMC\WAW could also increase membership, funds, awareness of the value of women’s archives and encourage more donations under their scheme. Women in Jazz have been successful in their recent funding bid, and the outcomes of this new
post will need to be assessed in order to establish any future developments. More accessible and suitable office and archive space would be beneficial for the material and potential users of the archive. The option of Swansea Women’s Centre developing a national influence akin to Glasgow Women’s Library is unlikely without considerable financial support and development. Before developments are made here, it may be prudent to undertake some user surveys to establish what women in the region want from the Centre and to develop new services that would match their needs. At present, their information collection is limited in scope and would need considerable investment in order to facilitate greater use.

7.8 Summary and Conclusions

The central aim of the thesis was to assess the potential for a women’s library in Wales. Based on the research and investigation, it is my opinion that the creation of a physical women’s library, in a single building in Wales, is not the most appropriate or practical option for Wales. Instead, the existing women’s information organisations could be strengthened in terms of their funding, paid staff, resources etc, in order to facilitate their development. AMC\WAW could expand their distributed approach to incorporate the Irish virtual model, which was an early aim of the group. Swansea Women’s Centre could be strengthened in terms of its service range, facilities and information collection in order to enhance its regional profile. Women in Jazz could also be developed in order to raise its profile within and outside Wales, based on its unique collection of material.

In addition to investigating the situation in Wales, the thesis also sought to explore related issues. These were:

- What are the roles and natures of current women’s libraries in the British Isles?
- What is the place of women’s libraries within feminism?
- What is the place of women’s libraries within librarianship?
From the research, it can be seen that the roles and natures of current women’s libraries in the British Isles are varied. I have identified three models of women’s libraries, which are:

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

Together they serve researchers, academics, students, ethnic minority women, women’s voluntary groups, women on lifelong learning courses, unemployed women, and so on. For the users who know about the women’s libraries, they are inspiration places:

I first discovered the Fawcett Library when I was doing the research for my book, ‘Women’s London’, in 1986. As with most people, it became an inspiration to me and provided much of the material for another book.... (Murphy, 2002, p. 170)

Yet, despite their unique collections, important archives and wealth of contemporary material, many of the women’s libraries have low user numbers, have low profiles locally and nationally, and are frequently subject to financial problems.

In general, women’s libraries appear to be relatively isolated within their own spheres, and, to some extent, each one sees itself as unique and quite different from any other women’s library. Whilst it is true that they are all different, there are a number of similarities which serve to unite them. A more unified network of such organisations might be able to work collectively to raise their combined profiles and to decrease the isolation from the library and archive profession and the slight separation from the feminist movement. However, these two sectors need also to recognise the existence and value of such organisations if the isolation is to be decreased.

This thesis has found that the field of women’s libraries and archives is relatively neglected in terms of research and literature, and has also highlighted potential avenues for further research. For example:

- mapping of women’s resources and archives in Wales
- mapping of women’s organisations in Wales and creation of a directory
a survey of information needs of women in Wales – leading to improving services for women in public libraries, if necessary, and assessing the potential usage of a women’s library/centre

research into the actual use made of women’s libraries in Britain – user needs analysis.

In conclusion, the potential for a women’s library in terms of a physical building and a single collection is limited, given the existing circumstances in Wales, the current circumstances of similar organisations in England and Scotland, and given the resource implications. Instead, options could be developed whereby existing women’s information organisations are strengthened, and networks of women’s groups are improved. Enhancing information provision for women in the public libraries in Wales could also be beneficial, after conducting a large scale information needs survey to see what their information needs are and how best these could be met. There is also potential for development of women’s archives at the National Library of Wales. In some countries women’s archives have been established in the national library e.g. in Denmark (Holst, 2002, p. 489). However, given that findings from the literature of women’s information needs indicate that women do not generally turn to libraries for information, but use informal networks and friends, other options may be more appropriate. Thus, improving the women’s networks and strengthening the existing women’s information and archive groups in Wales could be the optimal way to empower women in Wales and improve their social, cultural and economic lives.