

Rhondda a Mining Community

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The communities of the South Wales Valleys have their roots in the iron and coal industries that emerged in the early eighteenth century. These industries attracted men from the rural areas of Wales and many from England who joined the local men people to work in the mining industry. These men in search of better wages brought their families with them to cope with many hardships which were characteristic of these industrial communities. While men were the wage earners, women played a key role in these communities, and mothers are cherished in the folklore for the part they played in sustaining families in times of hardship and deprivation arising from lock outs, strikes and unemployment. While the occupations of women were not precisely recorded ; some of them worked in casual and irregular jobs, but by the beginning of Twentieth Century there is statistical evidence that women were well established in the service jobs; according to the Population Census of 1931 there were 4960 women working representing 11.6 % of the insured workers in service and clerical occupations as illustrated in table 1 below : -

Table 1

Rhondda	Men	Women
Total Including out of work	37468	4960
Mining etc	27754	31
Public Admin and Defence	1888	1133
Professions	16133	1049
Entertainment and Sport	362	305
Personal Services	548	1766
Out of Work	13093	524

Source : Population Census, Rhondda Urban District. 1931

Before the second world war some women worked in industry in textiles and clothing and in manufacturing. But during and after the war more women went to work. By 1958 20% of women were insured workers. and by 1991 the number increased to 60% who worked in a wide range of industries.

Now Rhondda is joined with the Cynon Valley and Taff Ely to form the new unitary authority of Rhondda Cynon Taf and while the proportion of jobs have not increased to the same extent as other parts of Wales the big increase has been in part time jobs in the service sector particularly in the Public Services and Distribution. And as table below shows men unlike women are predominantly in full time jobs

Table 2

Rhondda Cynon Taf 1994

	Percent working.	
	Men (16 - 65)	Women (16 - 59)
Full Time	49.6	31.1
Part Time	1.2	18.0
Self Employed	8.5	2.7
	59.0	51.8

Source Mid Glamorgan Update Winter 1994

Today women at work find they are disadvantaged and carry a heavy burden when compared with other women in the UK. While there is an absence of statistics to portray the problems of women, anecdotal evidence suggest that considerable stress is experienced for women reconciling their work commitments with family responsibilities. There is also no evidence to substantiate the optimistic view that women are entering jobs traditionally occupied by men. ¹

To have a full picture of the position of women at work one would like to know if women at work - even in a full time job - can earn as much as their husband who might have lost his job. Virginia Winkler writing about women in south Wales posed some interesting points which are worth exploring. How many women at work are the sole bread winners in the family? How many work to supplement the husband's low wages

to buy some extras for the family? How many refuse low paid jobs because they would have more from welfare benefits? Little is known of the other problems women bear in taking these jobs. It would also be interesting to know how many unmarried mothers are in jobs and how many women work at home for employers doing mundane jobs and work. The long term challenge that women face is how they can fulfil their potential in the workforce and escape from the narrow range of jobs they are trapped in. Broader vocational education and training and more child care support come to mind.

Younger women

There is also special problem for younger women with Mid Glamorgan having 3 % of the 16 -24 age group being unmarried mothers.² Some of these young women and other unmarried mothers have found a home in the ghettos that have emerged in South Wales in the last decade or so. Some people have been uprooted from their homes and communal environment to live in new communities based on housing associations homes far removed from their families. They join the other, so called problem people ; battered wives, long term unemployed. Far too many people who cannot find a home in their local communities are bunched together to form a new community in new housing estates and torn from their old community with its accustomed norms and values to start afresh in a state of anomie to form new communities in housing associations and may not evolve as older communities did in the present social climate.

Bereft of local authority control and administered by housing association people, who have no personal knowledge of the families, who often serve as arbiters in neighbourhood disputes, sorting out problems such as fights, bricks thrown at windows and other forms of vandalism. Soon problems emerge which have their roots in unemployment, and poverty and anomie. Drug taking and peddling, criminal behaviour and truancy are clustered together and the traditional norms and values which held the old communities together are undermined. Panda cars pay frequent visits to attend to disturbances. And so do the taxis to convey people which they can ill afford for shopping clinic or hospitals because the estates are situated miles from the nearest bus stop. They do not conform to the traditional image of choir loving communities or rugby fanatical towns and villages of South Wales.

Older women

Neither do we have enough information on the plight of older women; many of them widows of men who worked in mining. Statistics of occupational death rates for past decades inform us that miners had the highest death rate among all occupation groups, with the exception of the armed forces. The high death rates among miners suggest that there is a legacy of widows who have been left to fend for themselves or relying for help from their families, or the state. Thatcher in 1979 reneged on the pension commitment given by Beveridge and post war governments when the link between earnings and pensions was replaced when it was linked to the cost of living index. Moreover there is some anxiety about the position under a Labour government.

Elderly women have worked hard, enduring, many hardships in the pre-war depression and the second world war and should be valued. Their poverty is hidden from the view of many but can be observed by such signs when they shop at the local store and not at the super market, or seeing that their front doors need painting or the tiles on their roofs need repairing. This poverty is compounded by their vulnerability to callous footloose builders and odd jobbers who exploit their lack of knowledge on household technical matters.

We can discern many of the problems of many older women, by examining the statistics tucked away in the data relating to the plight of old age pensioners presented in table 3,4 and 5 below, especially when most pensioners are women.

Table 3

	Rhondda	Cynon	Taff Ely
Population	78344	65171	95427
Women %	52%	51.5%	50.9%
All Pensioners	16385	12962	15283
Percent	20.9%	19.8%	16.1%
Women pensioners	10943	8481	10055
Percent	66.7%	65.4%	65.7%

Table 4

Percentage of Pensioners experiencing difficulties

One pensioner living alone	17.5%	16.8%	12.8%
two or more pensioners	10.3%	10.1%	8.6%
Pensioners in Households with no central heating	23.9%	25.5%	22.7
Pensioners with long term illness	56.2%	50.8%	47.4%

We can appreciate the problems of the elderly in the Rhondda area which reveals the circumstances in which they live of long term illness there by looking at table 5.

Table 5

Pensioners living alone in Rhondda Wards				
	Treorchy	Llwnypia	Tonypandy	Treherbert
Of pensionable age	25.4	24.36	21.0	21.9
Lonc pensioners households	21.2	20.2	18.3	18.1

Source : Insight Rhondda Cynon Taff publication 1996

Mental Health

Another disturbing problem in the valleys is the state of mental health among women; with isolation considered to be a major cause of depression for women over the age of 60, we cannot be surprised that elderly women are vulnerable to dementia. And this should focus concern on one of the findings of Laing and Buisson's report on Private Care for the Elderly, that by the year 2002 the number aged 85 and over will be a third more than at present.³ According to data relating to Mental Illness in Mid Glamorgan presented in table 6, although pertaining to 1983 suggests the problem of caring for the elderly, and particularly elderly women. will be of special concern to the community.

Table 6

Mental Illness in Wales				
	Number:		Rates per 100,000:	
Wales	Men	Women	Men	Women
All Ages	5196	7521	382	520

Mental Illness for Elderly Age Groups				
	Wales:		Mid Glamorgan:	
55 - 64	706	1206	447	700
65 - 74	617	1269	541	853
75 +	632	1530	1097	1286

Mental Illness in Mid-Glamorgan				
Mid Glamorgan All Ages				
	Number:		Rates per 100,000:	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	809	1151	310	417
Elderly Age Groups				
55 - 64	117	206	389	632
65- 74	106	217	527	813
75 +	107	192	1081	980

Source: Mental Health Statistics for Wales 1983 Source Mid Glamorgan Health Authority.1984

Long term care needed for the elderly and frail presents a challenge to all communities who must respond with urgency to provide specialised care for the elderly and infirm - particularly nursing care. The problem will be particularly pronounced in the valley areas of Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil.

Long term care for the frail and elderly has been mainly provided in the past by a combination of NHS hospitals and private nursing homes for nursing care, and is supported by non nursing accommodation in local authority and private residential homes. Since the Community Act of 1993 the government has adopted a policy of reducing long term beds for chronically ill patients allegedly to prevent bed blocking as presented in the Panorama programme of October 20th 1997.⁴ This decision places, more responsibility upon the local authorities than in previous years.³ The Health Profile presented by Bro Taff Health

Authority in their report of 1996 stated : "Apart from the learning disability patients who are due to move out of hospital into the community by 1999, the main patient groups using long term health care are the mentally ill (including forensic patients) and the frail elderly."

The report revealed the number of NHS beds for these patients in Rhondda Cynon Taff were 7.7 per 10,000 and 22.2 per 10,000 in Nursing homes.⁵ The general argument to support this change is that elderly patients are blocking beds which can be used for emergency and urgent cases. The responsibility for this care shifted to local authorities and in particular the families who have to struggle to pay for their care or part of it. The cost of care for these patients, might be a matter for political debate, but for the family who sees a loved one taken from his or her home it is an anxious time. It is bad enough when one has also to fork out £313 a week to pay for such care, but one can imagine the anguish of the remaining partner who has to face this crisis in their lives. The problem does not end there as there are variations in the quality of care and advice in such an emergency which can create panic and confusion, especially when beds are scarce and more than family is looking for a suitable home for a loved one. In a society where pop stars are making millions and the market value of soccer stars run to thousands a week when people can run two cars and have two holidays a year and we as a nation cannot afford to provide for the elderly who have contributed so much of the nation is regarded by many older people as a scandal.

The cost of care for the elderly is increasing and much more and while people in the community might pay less taxes they will have to meet the cost of private nursing care by paying through the community charges. This change has been met with anxiety and the recent controversy over the payment in nursing homes for elderly patients with assets of £16000 has highlighted the problem of who should meet the economic cost of nursing home care. The costing formula creates certain problems. First, many people with assets over £ 16000 will have to struggle to meet these payments and sacrifice their life savings and all that they have worked for. Second the local authority will have to pick up the bill for those who cannot afford the full cost of a nursing or residential home and this creates resentment within the community between people with assets of and those who don't possess them. A recent observation in the Western Mail said that only 11 percent of

women over 60 in Wales would qualify for a pension and I believe that this figure would underestimate the position in Rhondda Cynon Taff.⁶

There is some evidence of how much savings the people of Mid Glamorgan had in 1983, which suggests that only a small minority can afford to meet the costs of nursing or residential care; but as many own their own homes in Mid Glamorgan, they might have to sell their homes and lose their hard earned assets as well as their pride to pay all or some of the cost of their care.⁷

If we compare the position of the elderly in 1991 when the NHS was mainly responsible for long term ill patients, and the trend promoted by the government in later years ; we can appreciate how the burden of caring for these patients is being shifted financially on to the local authority and to those patients with assets estimated at of over £1600 a year. Table 7 below shows how the private sector has gained

Table 7

Homes for the Elderly				
Patients	1991*:		1996**:	
	No.	%	No.	%
L. A.Homes	520	57.8	269	16.95
Residential	233	25.9	448	28.22
Nursing	129	14.3	864	54.44
Other	17		1.89	
All	899		1587	

Source : *For 1991 Population Census 1991 and for **1996 figures, Rhondda Cynon Taff Social Services Department

In 1995 Rhondda Cynon Taf had many patients in long term NHS hospital beds and even more in nursing homes, and with the government's policy this trend is expected to continue. When one looks at the age distribution of the community the problem of age structure presents us with a cameo of a more general social problem which threatens our traditional welfare system. That is the number elderly who need the support of the working population (Table 8).

Table 8

	Rhondda	Cynon	Taff	Total
16 to 60	62156	51393	74763	188312
Over 60				
Men	7488	6037	7453	20978
Women	10943	8485	10045	119973
Total	18431	14525	17498	50453
Percent				
over 60 of all 16-60:	30	28	23	27
Dependency ratio				
16-60 divided by over 60	3.3	3.4	4.2	3.73

The table above shows the burden that the under 60 age groups have to carry for an ageing population if all the were employed. If, however, we consider that if we excluded the two main groups who are not working - the permanently sick and the unemployed - the burden to be met by the active workforce is even heavier and works out at ratio of just under 2 employed workers to 1 person over 60.

There is anxiety among those in the community who are aware of the implications of the above figures that the burden of care will be too heavy to be borne from community rates as there is still a shortfall of £750000 on payment for the old poll tax. They worry that they will carry a heavier burden for the people who need long term care in the valley than those in more prosperous communities in the United Kingdom.

I have recently visited many homes for the aged and I admire the tremendous contribution made by the staff who care for the patients, but I can also envisage the increasing strain which will be placed on staff in the next five years unless there is radical change in government policy in this area. In my view, this is the most urgent problem facing the Labour Government.

Men and women in Rhondda Cynon Taff face problems of care when they get old and the emerging emphasis on self help will come against difficulties if communities have high rates of unemployment and yet pay proportionally more in community rates. Statistics relating to the number of older people who need to be cared for in Rhondda Cynon Taff by the younger age groups is a problem for others in high unemployment areas. Need one say it is a depressing scenario.

Footnotes

- 1 Victoria (Virginia?) Winkler. Women and work in Contemporary Wales
- 2 Mid Glamorgan Update
- 4 Panorama BBC 1 Monday October 20 1994
- 5 Bro Taf Health Profile 1966
- 6 Western Mail February 4, 1994.
- 7 Household Savings in Mid-Glamorgan 1986 Issues of the nineties
Percentage of Households with savings:
None 54.7%; £1 -£499 17.0%; £ 500-999 - 8.5%; £1000-2,999 - 8.8%,
£3,000 + - 11.0%
- Source : Mid Glamorgan Issues for the 1990s Mid-Glamorgan County Council Policy Research and European Affairs Unit June 1992
- 8 There has been a marked increase in the number of young lone parents in Mid-Glamorgan with the population census of 1991 indicating that 3% of all people in the 16-24 age group were lone parents and this trend seems to be increased.