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**Baby-Boomer Women's Stories:  
Gendered from primary school to retirement**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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## **Abstract**

Gender inequality has had a major influence on the lives of women throughout history. Along with many western countries, New Zealand women protested for the right of suffrage, battled for decades in law courts to achieve personal autonomy over their own bodies, and played a role in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Their aim was to achieve equal rights and greater personal freedoms, however, sometimes their own life experiences tell a different story.

My research looks at the lives of a group of New Zealand women born into the baby boom generation, from the time they were part of the education system in the 1950s and 1960s, until the present day in their retirement. I examine their state of dependence within a patriarchal society and how feminism has unconsciously aided their journey through to the time they achieved their version of freedom later in life.

The research conducted for this project involved a micro-level qualitative study using informal, semi-structured interviews with a specific group of women born into the generation known as baby boomers.

The thesis shows that some areas of women's lives have not benefitted from the feminist movement. In particular, the power and control that men continue to have over some women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains an under-explored area.

The most significant theme to emerge from my analysis is that the participants were unaware that many of the events that took place during their life course were anything other than specific to them. Being part of a generation where problems at home were never discussed, they deserve to have their stories told.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender inequality; feminism; patriarchy; power and control

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## The origin of the thesis

I begin this thesis with a vignette. It tells a story through the eyes of a young girl, a story that has maintained and deepened its influence throughout my life - an indelible memory in my mind that has remained with me for almost sixty years framing my thinking and influencing the direction of my life since that hot December day in 1963. It's a story that came back to me as I listened to the stories of the women involved in the research for this thesis.

*The early December afternoon is hot as the sun filters into the classroom through the window's half-drawn shutters. The scent of the freshly mown grass drifts inside to overwhelm the whiff of sweating little bodies cooling down after an afternoon of active field-play. The students sit quietly, whispering behind shielding hands. I feel relaxed sitting in my chair as my thoughts drift back to the hours of reading library books, sketching maps of New Zealand, outlining the provinces, dotting in the major cities, memorizing the topography, identifying the climate patterns. John is pacing on the wooden floor at the back of the room. Rusty, our Form Two teacher, has already announced the school dux positions from third place to twenty-fifth and we sit now waiting for 'Baldy Bishop' - the Headmaster - to make the final announcement of proxime accessit and dux. The door at the front of the room opens to the right of the chalky blackboard and Baldy emerges from the dim-lit hallway. Silence. I look towards Rusty standing by the open window, eyes facing down, fixed on the floor. I wonder what it is that has captured his stare. I know I've worked hard and know that hard work is needed to bring the results that I seek. Visions of past spelling bees flash across my mind. Story-writing, comprehension tests, arithmetic rules and examples. It's all there and*



*I feel confident. As the name of the 1963 Dux passes across the Headmaster's lips, my mind freezes. I feel a numbness spread across my expressionless face. I breathe slowly to hold the disappointment inside my gut as I resign myself to the fact that John is Dux and I will only ever be the runner-up.*

*Later in the evening, the feeling of deflation has not left me by the time Dad comes home. His face appears to be reflective of the feeling in my stomach. He hugs me as I hold my disappointment within my crying body. As Dad starts talking, I feel oblivious to his words until I hear the word "Rusty". Dad's been to the pub and has shared a couple of beers with my teacher and suddenly I hear Rusty's words pouring from my Dad's mouth: "I'm sorry June missed out on Dux. She has worked so hard and the award should have gone to her, but I was over-ruled. The Headmaster reckons that "Dux means more to a boy's education than to a girl's." - I was thirteen years old.*

My reflection on this introduction to my secondary education, will set the scene for this thesis. Throughout my life I have been constantly niggled by thoughts of 'not being good enough because I'm a girl'. After three years of college, I left with School Certificate and started in a clerical job that sustained me until I married at eighteen. A year later my first daughter arrived followed by the second, eighteen months later. I have memories of thinking, 'what now?' I needed to satisfy a longing for something to stimulate my intellect, so with two toddlers in tow, I began my second educational journey. First came the freelance journalism course<sup>1</sup> which led me to become the *scribe* for a local newspaper until it eventually closed. A few years

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<sup>1</sup> Run by the International Correspondence School (ICS).

later, the Correspondence School<sup>2</sup> became the vehicle that led me to a University Entrance qualification. Business Management schools satisfied my pursuit of further correspondence qualifications. But the big change came the day I met a young woman who was studying through the Massey University's Extramural unit. Suddenly, at age forty, I began university study, and now, thirty years later, I am working on my Master's thesis. At times, and increasingly as I progressed further up the qualification ladder, I would remind myself that I am that same person who was denied a Dux certificate, because of my gender. As I reach this point in my life I wonder if it was the thirst for knowledge that kept me going, or simply to prove to myself that I can achieve whatever I set my mind to academically, regardless of my gender. When I reflect on this thesis, I am looking for an answer to the question: "How has women's place in a heavily gendered patriarchal society changed in the decades since the post WWII years?"

I decided to select a small segment of the population on which I could conduct this research. I looked at my own position within the New Zealand population and decided to use my own demographic bubble as the basis of my research. And my thesis was born.

### **Why the baby boomer generation?**

I was born in the 1950s into a generation that would be studied, criticised, envied and despised, and is arguably "the most scrutinised in US history" (Gitlin, 2011, p. xi). It was a generation born out of massive changes in scientific discovery, societal acceptance, and new western world thinking. Man travelled to the moon, radical protest movements emerged, and life and love became free and adorned with

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<sup>2</sup> Now known as the Te Aho o Te Kura Poumanu - <https://www.tekura.school.nz/learn-with-us/learn-with-us/about-te-kura/>

flowers, a shift in music and a general feeling that the new generation was out of control. We are the baby boomers.

I have used the concept of baby boomer to create the demographic and temporal boundaries that define this cohort – those born between 1946 and 1964. The cohort has gained notoriety for many reasons and as a sample, they include radicalism, adventurism, privilege, greed, ground-breaking, path-forming and a raft of other descriptors that have labelled us over the decades. And because my participants, at some point have all worn some of these labels, it seemed logical to utilise these boundaries to ring-fence this research group.

Although my own experience of gender inequality ended up being the driving force behind this thesis, I was unsure at the start just what direction I wanted this thesis to take. I likened my thinking at the time to a fishing trip. I knew where I was going and what I was hoping to catch, I just had no idea what to do with any of it once I had it all randomly sitting in my net. At the heart of my thinking was that I wanted to hear of other women's experiences over the course of their lives and see what I could glean from them. In the end I settled on a chronological pathway through their years of education, work, marriage and family exploration, and eventually to their retirement experiences.

From the outset, I underestimated the expansive topic that I had taken on. I thought I would compact sixty plus years of living, by eight different women into a thesis of thirty thousand words. What would be so different when we shared so many similarities? We are all of the same cohort, educated in the 1950s and 1960s, worked for a year or two, married, had kids, thrown in a spousal death or divorce for good measure, and then retired as single women. The demographics, cultural and

geographical aspects, and similarities in upbringing would make it a fairly straightforward thesis, right?

As I embarked on this project, and upon reading an assortment of literature on the subject, I soon became aware that education had not been a serious topic for many women born in the early boomer period from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1950s (Deem, 1981; Griffiths, 1980). It seemed to occupy a more significant position for women born in the latter half of the 1950s and into the 1960s when there became an “increasing need for more clerical, manual and professional labour which could only be fully met by using female employees” (Deem, 1981, p. 132). It seemed too that after years of protest against gender inequality, and as an increase in women’s rights and personal freedoms began their belated appearance on the New Zealand horizon, these ‘average middle-class girls’ seemed to be unfazed by any thoughts of radical women’s movements. They preferred to hold on to their position of short-term employment, a gentle slide into marriage and be ready to fulfil the obligations of wife, mother and everything that a life of domesticity would offer (and demand) of them. I then focused quite heavily, in chapter 5, on the financial side of retirement. For these single women, having the ability to maintain a reasonable state of comfort without the fear of poverty in old age was critical to their sense of security.

While there is scholarship about this generation, it focuses predominantly on how their retirement would impact on the economies of most western countries (Beinhocker, Farrell, & Greenberg, 2009; Ekerdt, 2010; Yoo, 1994). My focus came to be an examination of the gender inequalities that a small cohort of women experienced and how it impacted on their lives. As I was afforded the unique opportunity to analyse the experiences of this group, I chose a feminist lens through

which to examine specific time periods in their lives. That is to see their experiences from a position of gender and a recognition that we are socially conditioned to see things in a certain way. It was important for me to look beyond the ‘normal’ to understand how women were depicted and presented compared to men. I was interested to understand the influence of a patriarchal State whose purpose is to design a system of education and grow a population to ensure the continuation of a capitalist system. The same feminist lens was extended to analyse the years of work and family life where the workforce, according to Marx (1990, as cited in Arruzza, 2016) was engineered to ensure the ongoing provision of labour power for capitalist production.

In my search for a specific theoretical approach for the thesis, I researched the option of “grounded theory” promoted by Kathy Charmaz (2014). This seemed to offer a systematic approach to data collection, analysis of the data and an explorative approach to data interpretations. I decided this structured approach would be my best option if I was to make sense of all of this.

I begin this next section looking back at the school system of my childhood. As a young girl in primary school, for a long time I was unaware of the concept of inequalities between the genders. I recall that purely because of a girl’s physical anatomy, we were restricted to female activities in our sporting options, choices in dress code, and our limited access to ‘male’ school subjects, for example, woodwork and metalwork versus home economics.

## **A gendered school system**

The education system has changed dramatically over the decades from its structured path where educating young girls took second place to the education of boys. Back

in the middle decades of the twentieth century, women could be excluded from some areas of study, in particular, those that led to ‘traditionally’ male-only careers (Walby, 1990). As a child in this era, I was both witness to and victim of this way of thinking. I recall a number of my girlfriends, like many girls of the generation, looking forward to the day they could leave school and take on any job for a year or two until they met the right man, married, and began to raise a family. There were also those who chose teaching or nursing as a career, and in many cases, decided to undertake additional secretarial courses, all of which were the main options for girls during those decades. Occasionally there were exceptions like the armed forces, which one of my participants chose for the early part of her working life. Women’s intake into the professions (such as law and accounting) was minimal and although there was no formal barrier to admittance, the numbers remained low due to the “gendering” of the professions. In accounting in the 1980s, for example, the female membership to the NZSA<sup>3</sup> and ICANZ<sup>4</sup> was as low as 4.23% compared with the year 2000, which was at 30.35% (Emery, Hooks, & Stewart, 2002). This gendering as masculine also applied to medicine and law so they could be accepted as “professions” (Kirkham, 1992; Kirkham & Loft, 1993). While still in school, I often thought about following a career path instead of just getting a job. I attended talks by people from Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA), and I dreamt of being an air hostess (sadly my body weight exceeded the maximum allowable limit). But like most young women, especially those living in rural areas, I took on the first job I could find until I met the man of my dreams, and married. After all, the school curricula clearly showed that the education system was devised for two reasons; the first being

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<sup>3</sup> NZSA - New Zealand Society of Accountants.

<sup>4</sup> ICANZ - Institute of Chartered Accounts of New Zealand

to enable young men to attain the kind of qualifications that would lead to their entry into a male dominated workforce, and second, to groom young women to their inevitable life of being a wife, mother, and homemaker. Women's lives were still under the influence of a patriarchal society. Although they were usually unaware of that reality, their lives were strongly influenced by the era of the 1950s which was still well before any impact of the upcoming feminist movement.

## **Marriage and Children**

As young women married in the 1960s and 1970s in their later teens, their age was never a deterrent to wanting to live a life of domestic bliss. In reality, that rosy image did not materialise for many of them. This was a time, as described by Du Plessis (1993, as cited in Saunders & Dalziel, 2017, p. 203) of the "male breadwinners' welfare state", where women were expected to become full-time home-makers and where no longer having access to their own income to becoming totally dependent on their husband, was difficult to endure. In many instances, their access to money was limited to an (often inadequate) 'housekeeping' allowance from their spouse. For anyone who has not experienced this, it is difficult to understand how debilitating this is to a woman's sense of identity and self-respect. When psychological abuse issues such as spousal alcoholism and infidelity are poured into the mix, there was an obvious spiral downwards. This was the theme that emerged in my work with some of my participants and I believe deserved some further research. I tried to understand what led the women to an increasing dependence on medications simply as a coping mechanism during emotional and stressful periods of their lives. It didn't take long into my research to realise that this was common globally (Friedan, 1963). It was not only the women who were enduring emotional

abuse, but housewives in general were finding their life to be no longer fulfilling. Absent for women during those decades were what are now readily available social services such as child-care, maternity leave, medical leave and flexible work hours, but this was the ground-breaking generation who had to “make it better for those who followed” (Loe & Johnston, 2016, p. 422).

### **As the sun begins to set**

Retirement heralds the end of a person’s full participation in the paid work force. For some, the move is immediate and permanent, while others may drift slowly towards full retirement. The reasons are many and varied why some people choose to remain attached to their previous lifestyle. The idea of breaking away from a network of social contacts can influence the decision making, however, the loss of income often plays a major part in initially rejecting full retirement (Grace, Weaven, & Ross, 2010). Within the retirement process the three phases begin with the pre-retirement experience of accumulating the financial nest egg. The time spent in this phase can span decades or only a few short years. This is followed by the decision-making process of leaving paid employment, and with the goal of achieving the state of *being retired* (Orel, Ford, & Brock, 2004). With the group of women I chose, I was unaware of what stories would come out of their experiences.

I was prepared for a range of stories and encounters and I wanted to reach beyond the act of just retiring. It was important for me to understand how my group of participants occupied their time, and the nature of the activities they found to fill their days. Vaillant (2002), wrote strongly on the importance of leisure activities to successful aging. He espoused the view that the activities should allow the chance to



develop a social network, enable creativity, offer an environment for fun and play, and most important to offer an opening for lifelong learning.

## **Overview of thesis chapters**

*Chapter one* has introduced the aim and purpose of this study. It sets the scene for the discussions with my participants as they set forth on their often-complex life journeys

*Chapter two* presents the design of the research and describes the process of recruiting my participants, collecting and collating data, formulating a system of data security and adhering to any ethical concerns that could arise. It also introduces my participants.

*Chapter three* introduces the early part of the lives of my group of women. In the first section I discuss the literature that is relevant to this chapter. I begin here discussing the gendered nature of the education system of the 1950s and 1960s followed by what could usually be expected of the transition from school to work for women such as those in the research cohort. The women's personal experiences are considered before concluding with an analysis and discussion of the findings from the data.

*Chapter four* is a discussion of the move to the period of the women's lives as they move into marriage and motherhood. As they reported to me, their lives become a mixture of working and not working, happy marriages and rocky marriages, caregiving and sometimes needing care themselves, and at times just fighting for their own survival.

*Chapter five* exposes the view beyond the horizon of mid-life. Retirement is now in focus and the chapter discusses how the participants begin their transition from the paid workforce and move into, and organise, their retirement years.

*Chapter six* draws the themes of the thesis together. Not only does it summarise the three separate chronological time periods in the women's lives, I suggest further research designed to increase the body of knowledge on this retiring generation. The next chapter looks at the methodology and research design for this project.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

I embarked on this research with an idea about the area I wanted to explore but was open to whatever emerged from the interviews as most significant to the women. As it transpired, I have created a narrative about single women who were born into the baby boomer generation and I highlight the challenges they faced from gendered inequalities in the education system in the 1950s and 1960s, through their working life, marriage and motherhood until they reached retirement. In this chapter, I identify the processes, ideas and issues involved in the data collection and analysis phase of this project.

My key method was semi-structured interviews with eight participants who matched my pre-determined requirements. My target group was New Zealand born single women aged between sixty-five and seventy-three years. This age group met the recognised commencement age for baby boomers, all of whom had attained the New Zealand National Superannuation age of sixty-five.

The chapter includes sections on research design, ethical considerations, data collection, my approach to data analysis, and the introduction of my participants.

### **Research Design**

This project has been a creative journey of exploration, not only for me as the researcher, but for the participants who have discovered old skeletons they had long thought deeply buried. Throughout the project I remained cognisant of the emotional

needs of my participants due to some of their personal situations. My decision to adopt an interview-based qualitative approach to data collection is the method favoured by researchers Rahman and Yu (2018) and Van den Hoonaard (2015), rather than the impersonal quantitative approach obliging the participants to complete surveys and questionnaires which would then be “translated into numerical form prior to analysis” (Barfield, 1997, p. 387).

Hendricks (in England, 2002, p. 24), identifies three goals of qualitative research on the subject of ageing: to “elucidate meaning, develop knowledge with a human face, and to engage in social advocacy or the creation of awareness.” This is what I believe I have achieved.

I approached the design of this research from a constructivist grounded theory perspective. By reflecting on my own lived experience as a single, female baby boomer who has retired, I had an intimate familiarity with the topic and could easily relate to my participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My familiarity with the topic and my personal motivation to conduct the research caused me to be conscious, however, that my own views and opinions should not, as far as possible, influence the views of the participants. This was naïve on my behalf especially when I consider myself ‘average’ and expected the participants choices to be average also. In reality, my expectation was that the participants would provide validation for my own thoughts and ideas.

As Charmaz (1995) cited in Winston & Barnes (2007:143) notes:

We start with the experiencing person and try to share his or her subjective view. Our task is objective in the sense that we try to describe it with depth and detail. In doing so, we try to represent the

person's view fairly and to portray it as consistent with his or her meaning. (p. 54)

It was important however, to resist the temptation to seek out data in support of my own theory (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

## **Recruitment of Participants**

Initially, I was unsure how I would recruit participants. During a discussion with other Massey post-graduate students, I received some sound advice on recruiting techniques which I then adapted to suit my own requirements. I first placed a notification on my local Facebook community page, including information about my thesis and inviting women to contact me if they were interested. This was followed by a similar notification on the local Neighbourly<sup>5</sup> website. The women who responded via the websites were keen to suggest others who may also be interested. This “snowballing” type of recruiting involves a participant suggesting a friend or an acquaintance who would match the criteria for participation in the study. Initially, eleven women showed an interest.

With a list of potential participants, I employed a purposive sampling technique when selecting my participants to ensure that their demographic characteristics closely matched my requirements. Like snowballing, purposive sampling is a non-probability technique. It's also known as “judgemental, selective and subjective” (Research Methodology, 2019). Through the website invitations I had five responses from women with a range of background stories, however three of the women did not meet the criteria. Of these, one met all the requirements, but she was living in a

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<sup>5</sup> A free and private neighbourhood website that enables interaction between neighbours and community.

relationship with a new partner. The other two were outside of the age criteria but thought the “research looked interesting”. Of the remaining women, three were born in the UK, and although they did not meet the ‘born in New Zealand’ requirement, I reconsidered this element and considering how well they matched the rest of the criteria, I decided to engage them all in the project.

I presented each woman with a sample question sheet<sup>6</sup> outlining the talking points they would be invited to discuss. These included, but were not limited to, any experiences in their younger working years that stood out in their memories and how they felt they evoked different emotions. These could be feelings of elation, anger, indifference, sadness, in fact any change that challenged their day-to-day equilibrium, and by identifying the “high points” and “low points” as a guide to what is important.

My sample questions were expressed in a way that would encourage an expansive response and allow some meandering of thought, but also to prevent the discussion from veering too far from the main topic. It was only after the first two interviews when some themes emerged that I became aware of their desire to talk of times prior to their working life, and their initial talking points extended back to their years in education. They then progressed to their working years, and later to retirement.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Massey University’s guidelines on ethical concerns include issues of privacy, confidentiality and consent. I was able to reference Massey University’s online *Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human*

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<sup>6</sup> Part of Appendix B

*participants* and I followed up my review of this document by completing a risk assessment on their *Human ethics application risk assessment form*. As the research was deemed ‘low risk’, an application for approval for the research was submitted and approved by Massey University’s research ethics committee<sup>7</sup>.

As each of my participants expressed interest in taking part in the project, I provided them with an information sheet<sup>8</sup> formally inviting them to be part of the project, and outlining the purpose, conditions and methods of the proposed research. They were then asked to sign a consent form<sup>9</sup> if they chose to participate. It was made clear that their identities would be protected by my use of pseudonyms, and if necessary, some family data and locations may be adjusted to avoid identification.

Before each interview I explained the security measures I had in place for the audio files as well as who had access to the information gleaned from the interviews. As well as being available on the information sheet, I discussed this in person with them prior to commencing the interview.

On the matter of privacy and anonymity, three participants are known to each other and another two are colleagues and friends. This situation came about through the type of recruitment process I had used, so I alerted each of them that in spite of my efforts to mask their identities, some of the other participants may be able to deduce from the data, who some of the quotations and life events belong to. None of the affected participants were concerned about this.

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix A - Ethics

<sup>8</sup> Appendix B - Information

<sup>9</sup> Appendix C - Consent

## The Interviews

I decided to adopt a non-hierarchical approach in the interview process. In keeping with feminist research, the aim was to establish rapport with the interviewees, and as I identified with their position, I was able to minimise any feeling of powerlessness on their part (Oakley, 2016, p. 197). The interviews were conducted separately and in the homes of all participants except one, which took place at the home of the woman's son. No other people were present during any of the interviews, all of which ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes long. With the approval of each participant, I recorded every interview, contrary to Glaser (1978, 2001) who argued that note-taking alone could sufficiently allow a researcher to avoid unnecessary detail and capture only essential data. I chose to follow the view of Charmaz (2014, p. 91) who argued that note-taking could not capture the essence of a participants' "tone and tempo, silences and statements, and the form and flow of questions and responses."

I began each interview with the same "grand tour" question, (Spradley, 1979 cited in Leech, 2002):

*I'd like you to start by telling me a bit about your life at school in the 1950s and 60s, and then to talk about the working roles you had when you left school.*

After my first interview, which was with Margaret [pseudonym], I realised that it was possible that the participant was keen to discuss topics of an extremely personal nature, so I made an important change to some of my questions. In particular, I made some amendments to my line of inquiry where the questioning could be intrusive.



Instead of ‘Tell me about...’, I modelled my questions according to Rosenblatt (1995):

- I don’t know if this is an appropriate question or not, but...
- I feel like maybe all these questions are too personal. You can tell me to shut up anytime you want.
- Could I ask you? (p. 148)

As I completed the interviews, I transcribed the recordings as soon as I could. No software was used in the analysis. Once each transcription was completed, and I had identified the salient points of the discussion, I emailed or posted to each woman a copy of their transcription. As well as providing an option to add or delete any comments made, I asked them to submit any suggestions that would enhance the clarity of the discussion and eliminate any ambiguity. I received feedback from two of the participants. One participant was concerned that a comment she made could be interpreted several ways and wanted to ensure her meaning was recorded. The other response did not elicit any amendments, but rather drew the comment, “Good god, I bloody ramble on when I get going”.

As I began the process of analysing the data from the first interview, I realised that my inexperience as an interviewer had garnered some conversations that were unrelated to my research. I began to isolate these discussions and set them aside for future analysis in the event that they later became relevant. This became a helpful time-saver in an otherwise time-intensive function of the data analysis. Despite Glaser (1978, 2001)’s view of the benefits of note-taking to avoid capture of unnecessary detail, I am more convinced of the value of recording all conversations

as one does not necessarily know at the point of interview, what data is going to be relevant and what is not. I found that with the slight topic change for my research I already had recorded conversations I could refer to.

When approaching the collection of data, and remaining sensitive to and maintaining the dignity of the participant, it is useful to remember the words of Charmaz (2014, p. 33), “Interpretive qualitative methods mean entering research participants’ world.” This contrasts with the findings of Dey (1999, p. 119) who believed Glaser and Strauss (1967) adopted a ‘smash-and-grab’ approach to data collection and dispensed with any notion of rapport building between the researcher and participant.

At the conclusion of the interview process and the transcribing of the data, I was satisfied with my decision to record the conversations, when I considered how many subtle differences in meaning, tone, emphasis and emotion I had captured during subsequent reviews of the recordings.

It was important for me to maintain an audit trail of my reading material, notes and interviews, and to record any changes to my decision-making, prompted either by unexpected outcomes from the interview data, or by my own epiphanous revelations, should they occur throughout the process. It enabled me to remain abreast of new developments resulting from subsequent interactions with my participants, and to prevent unnecessary backtracking and inevitable confusion. Cutcliffe and McKenna (2004) believe that audit trails do not provide any credibility to the findings of research. On the other hand, Nancy Burns (1989) believes that in-depth audit trails are necessary in qualitative research to an extent that would enable a second researcher to “use the original data and decision trail and arrive at conclusions similar to the original researcher” (Burns, 1989, p. 49).

## **Data Analysis**

Once each participant interview transcription was completed, my data analysis process was a mix of learning by doing whilst simultaneously being guided by the ‘grounded theory’ teachings of Charmaz (2014); Glaser and Strauss (1967); and Strauss and Corbin (2008). In addition I drew on many YouTube videos, and several in particular, reinforced my understanding of Kathy Charmaz’s ‘grounded theory’ principles (Britsoci, 2013; Gibbs, 2015). The analysis involved reading through the transcripts and formulating a system of coding which incorporated both the interview data and noted visual observations. From the various codes, themes were identified.

The key to identifying the themes for analysis and discussion in the thesis was the various time periods that were covered during the conversations. The women’s stories began during their schooling and teen years, evolved into their marriage and family years, then began the transition towards retirement. Within each of these sections of time, a developing pattern emerged of external influences that shaped each of these periods over a span of some fifty years or more: a gender-structured education system, the effect that the women’s liberation movement had on some aspects of women’s marriages and family life, and the emergence of women into a different lifestyle of greater, although not complete, independence.

As there were three participants who fell slightly outside the initial qualifying criteria in that they were born in the UK, I was able to gain some insight into any variations between a UK childhood and those of New Zealand born baby boomers. In addition, due to the age range, comparison was also possible between women born at the start of the baby boom (1946) and those closer to the end of the ‘leading-edge’ of baby boomers (1955).

## Participants

Initially I thought that I could achieve a comprehensive data collection with six participants, but with the additional contacts that I had, and after hearing their stories, I increased the number to eight. I failed to consider the increase in effort required with an additional two participants. A quick calculation of perhaps an extra one to one and a half hours, multiplied by two of interview time did not seem excessive, and I would have the added benefit of additional data to work with. What I failed to consider was the transcription time which adds a significant amount of time to the project.

The women were all between sixty-eight and seventy-three years of age. All lived in Auckland, five were of European New Zealand<sup>10</sup> ethnic background and three were born in England. Seven women have had children and one is childless. The status of single includes; separated, divorced, widowed and never married.

My desire was for at least half of them having already retired and the other half having attained the required age to access New Zealand Superannuation, but still not retired completely from the paid workforce. On reflection, this was an extremely ambitious expectation due to the limited uptake from my recruitment efforts.

The occupational spread of my participants is narrow, which was unforeseen. On reflection however, when using snowballing as a recruitment method it stands to reason that there would be some similarities in their backgrounds such as being work colleagues or having family or friendship connections. The recruiting process drew four former nurses, two who had been teachers, one journalist and one clerical

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term “European New Zealand” rather than “Pakeha” to distinguish between New Zealanders with European ancestry and recent immigrants from England.

worker, which represents fairly middle-class, employees rather than self-employed, and pakeha.

All the women had coped with varying levels of hardship at some point in their lives. For some of them, the hardships began in childhood and continued into their adult lives, and for others they were brought about principally through their current single status. Although at times they struggled emotionally to tell their stories, they assured me they were genuinely interested to talk about their experiences, both positive and negative.

Several of the participants had initial reservations about being involved in the project as they assumed that I would be wanting to discuss personal issues such as child and sexual abuse. I immediately allayed their fears, confirming that those issues were not the focus of my research and that if the issues arose at all during the interview, it would be at their absolute discretion and not from any prompting by me.

I have produced the following set of participant summaries based on information gained during the recruitment process, from the stories they told me and from my own observations of the women and their home settings during our interviews.

### ***Margaret***

My first participant, Margaret, responded to my post in the local Facebook community page. I had known Margaret already for approximately nine years in her capacity as a home-help nurse in my neighbourhood. I had spoken to her occasionally when she visited her clients, but I possessed only limited knowledge of her personal history. I was extremely pleased when she volunteered to take part in

my research. Margaret suffers from COPD<sup>11</sup> and emphysema and is gravely aware she is in the later stages of the condition. When I spoke with her in April of 2019, she had purchased, wrapped and labelled Christmas gifts for all her family members for the end of the year. Margaret is seventy-two years old, divorced and has been on her own for thirty-one years, raised four sons and lives in her own two-bedroom sunny unit in Auckland city. She resigned from her position as a *Home Help* when her emphysema advanced to a stage where she was unable to carry out the physical duties of the job.

Slight in stature and with a life story that reads like a psychologist's encyclopaedia in verbal and emotional abuse, she is a survivor. A woman whose only wish was to get married and raise a family, which was common for baby boomer women, she endured bullying by all the men in her life. It began in childhood by her father, carried on through her marriage by a husband and ultimately by the sons she bore and raised. Enduring years of familial abuse was destructive. She self-harmed and underwent many surgical procedures and laser treatments for scar removal. So much pain, so much anger and so much soul destruction, but this woman has strength and she found a way to survive. As she began the process of rebuilding her life through her love of her work caring for the elderly and infirm and a commitment to her Church, she says she has learned to forgive. The gift of strength taught her how to survive, to prepare for her retirement and transition to her own *happy home*<sup>12</sup>. Sadly, she is on borrowed time with an illness that threatens the longevity of her now serene

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<sup>11</sup> COPD – Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

<sup>12</sup> After years of bullying and emotional abuse, Margaret refers to her home as her 'happy home', the place in which she is safe and free from hurt.

life. She is prepared for her end, physically, mentally and spiritually. But in the meantime, she pushes the boundaries of her predestined life expectancy every day.

### ***Karen***

Karen also answered a Facebook post on the community page and was keen to take part in my research. As an early baby boomer born in 1948 (now seventy-two years of age), she admits to being born and raised into a life of privilege and displays a personality that can only be described as strong and resilient. Turning her back on formal education as a teenager, with plans to stay home and be looked after, her parents rejected her plans. Her mother's forcefulness strongly steered her towards various employment opportunities. Eventually she stumbled into a nursing career which somehow ignited within her a drive to learn, to explore and to achieve. In her pursuit of a career, she was fortunate to work in several countries around the world while all the time, learning and passing on her knowledge to others. She never allowed her marriage, the role of motherhood, and later a divorce to put the brakes on her career.

On the death of her father, she received a substantial inheritance and with those funds, combined with proceeds from the sale of her home safely tucked away for investment, she continued to work overseas and broaden her knowledge and experience within her chosen career. When she decided to return permanently to New Zealand, she found that all her investment funds had been lost in fraudulent activities. At the time she was forty-three years of age with no home and no financial backup. It was a devastating time of her life, but she knew she had to grow from the ashes of her despair. She said she struggled at times to make sense of her life, but with strength and resilience she worked to get her finances back on track once again.

Now, at age seventy-two and semi-retired, she looks forward to the day when she can retire permanently.

### *Nancy*

Nancy responded to a message I had posted on the local *Neighbourly* website. Being born in England, she was unsure if she met the criteria for my research but was satisfied that she met all other requirements. My decision to include her as a participant was based on the fact that much of the literature I had reviewed, applied to other western countries such as Australia, England, Canada and the United States of America. I was curious to know if I could find any differences between the New Zealand profile and those from similar countries. Nancy is a Mancunian, born in 1952 and the younger of two daughters. She had decided to train to be a teacher, a choice she believes at the time, was “sort of second class” as her parents wanted their children to go to University, and at that time teachers were trained in ‘colleges’. A last-minute decision saw her enter into study for a Bachelor of Education degree in Physical Education.

She arrived in New Zealand after a marriage breakdown taking some time out for a holiday with friends. And she never went back. Employment opportunities soon knocked at her door and before long she was continuing with her chosen career of teaching.

Being guided by her father’s thriftiness, and her own desire to live quite simply, homeownership was something that came to her early in her working life in the UK, and she fulfilled that desire again soon after her arrival in the antipodes.

I interviewed Nancy at her comfortable two-level home on Auckland’s North Shore while being entertained by a tui feeding on nature’s bounty of a flowering tree just



outside the garden-facing window. The significance of their cohabiting in the same environment was not lost on me as this captivating avian native foraged and flitted with confidence, existing in harmony with this foreigner who had become embedded in this suburban enclave. Her love of nature was reflected in her home setting, in her lifestyle activities of hiking in the bush, volunteering at a native plant nursery and swimming in the ocean a short walk away. Retirement has brought new opportunities for Nancy. She is learning piano, she sings, she runs, she volunteers, she is busy, and time is now on her side.

### ***Maria***

I was introduced to Maria through the snowballing recruitment method. She is a friend of another of my participants and I was keen to know her story.

Maria turned seventy-one early in 2020 and after a three-decade career in geriatric nursing, she now considers herself to be in a very comfortable place. Throughout her more than thirty years as a divorcee she has endured periods of loneliness and depression which are in contrast to the many hours of joy generated from her aging charges. She has, however, always maintained a strong drive towards self-preservation.

I interviewed Maria in her home, a spacious one-bedroom unit which looks out across a parkland. The sun was shining on a gorgeous autumn day, and children's voices filtered softly across the public green space beyond the garden fence.

Coming from a working-class family, Maria left school with her School Certificate at the end of the fifth form<sup>13</sup> which was the acceptable school-leaving standard in the

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<sup>13</sup> A 1960s 5<sup>th</sup> Form equates to a modern-day Year 11.

1960s. From there she immediately started an apprenticeship in sewing. The working side of her life, however, was soon interrupted by marriage at age nineteen and the birth of a daughter a year later.

For seventeen years, she endured an unhappy marriage and ultimately decided that the union was no longer tenable, and in a radical move to raise herself from the misery of its collapse, she embarked on a new career. Nursing had always been “in her blood”. Her Mum had nursed in a registered home and hospital for the elderly in Auckland. Maria had often thought that maybe, one day she too would get to live her dream and fulfil her desire to work with the elderly. She ultimately dedicated the rest of her working life to looking after the care and needs of some of the aging within her community. At the same time, she built her life up so that she would eventually be independent and mortgage free. She now dedicates her life to helping others. She volunteers on a large scale with several local organisations and charities. Her daughter, an only child, has never married and she has no grandchildren. She has owned several homes in the area and at one point in the interview, as she sits relaxed and looks around the room, she tells me “I’ve gone full circle and come back to where I belong.”

### ***Shirley***

I first encountered Shirley in the supermarket. As we shared our first conversation, it was raw and down to earth. In this retail setting we bantered among the brassicas, chuckled beside the carrots and courgettes, and shot the breeze over bins of leafy greens. Our chatter covered the current price of vegetables and other consumer items. From the many tell-tale signs of her situation, I noted she was retired, and our

line of discussion led me to believe she had a ‘gold card’<sup>14</sup>, and was living in her own home on her own. A spark of opportunity ignited in my head as I slipped a fancy segue into our conversation. We were soon discussing my studies and before long I was asking if she would be interested in taking part in my research. She was. Shirley left England as a nine-year-old and came to New Zealand with her mother and brother in 1959. Her father had arrived a year earlier and worked to pay the passage for the rest of his family to emigrate at a later date. Growing up in Lower Hutt, her childhood was unhappy and confusing. Her parent’s relationship was strained, and she learnt from a young age to be independent and relatively self-sufficient.

She began her working life in hairdressing before deciding to save for a move to Australia. A change to factory-work closer to home, which significantly reduced her commuting time and travel costs, enabled her to amass sufficient funds within a few months. After two years in Australia and following the unexpected death of her father, she returned to New Zealand to be close to her mother.

Her first marriage in her early twenties produced a son and daughter, however it was not until her second marriage, that saw her move to Auckland, where she found happiness. She was widowed in 2003, but now finds it a struggle to cope with the financial problems of a home that is potentially a leaking building<sup>15</sup> and watching her savings being whittled away by the day. She believes too that she has become very isolated since her husband died as a result of the friendships they had as a

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<sup>14</sup> The Government’s SuperGold card is free to all New Zealand residents aged 65 and over. It entitles the bearer to a range of discounts from various retailers, utility companies as well as free off-peak public transport.

<sup>15</sup> The leaky home crisis in New Zealand concerns timber framed homes built from 1988-2004 that were not fully weather-tight (Building Performance, 2021)

couple, being her husband's friends, and not hers. Being reluctant now to make new friends, she sees herself putting up barriers to avoid being hurt by possible rejection.

In spite of her struggles, Shirley has a striking sense of humour. She can always find something to laugh about, in a black-humoured way, which raises her spirits. She lives in her large three-bedroom, two-level home of 1980s vintage, but expresses her need to relocate.

### *Sylvia*

I first made contact with Sylvia through the snowballing method of recruitment. She had been approached by a friend to see if she was interested in taking part in my research. A New Zealander born in 1946, her ambition was always to be a journalist. Although discouraged at school to follow this 'unladylike' path, she persisted. At age seventeen, equipped with shorthand-typing credentials, she became a cub reporter for a large city newspaper. From this point her career proceeded until she married at age twenty-one. Her husband's career saw them relocating to various towns and cities around the country for a number of years before finally returning to their original home base. Sylvia returned to her chosen career and continued in the industry in various high-profile positions until she pulled back significantly from her work when her husband retired. In the meantime, she has authored a number of books and is currently researching for another.

The concept of retirement has never sat well with Sylvia especially in her younger years. She would often ask herself "what does retirement mean?" and would answer her own question with, "It's putting people out to grass isn't it?" She admits to getting slightly more used to the concept now that she is seventy-three. When I asked her to describe to me what a normal day for her looks like, I realised that her days

are never 'normal'. Every day is a working day. She does some paid work, however most of her time involves volunteer activities, and occasionally, but not often enough according to her, she works on her latest book.

Until recently she lived with her husband in a large 3-bedroom home in one of Auckland's outer suburbs. Having recently moved from an even larger home, they considered this to be their final retirement base. Sadly, her husband passed away in 2019 and she is now faced with the need to down-size once again. She has some ideas of what the change may look like but in the meantime, she is still adjusting to widowhood.

### ***Barbara***

Barbara was born in England and emigrated to New Zealand with her parents and older brother when she was seven. She claims to have had an idyllic childhood being close to her parents, especially her father who is still alive today. He lives independently, still drives his car, continues to be involved in community affairs and is 101 years old.

Barbara was married at twenty-two years of age, raised a son and daughter but parted amicably from her husband after twenty-eight years of marriage. Trained as a teacher, she has worked most of her married life, sometimes full-time, mostly part-time and occasionally on contract if she chose to take a break for any reason. She believes that the most important part of her life has been "the child-rearing thing." She found that being able to dedicate that part of her life to her children was extremely satisfying, and being a part-time worker, enabled her involvement in many parent and child organisations, often as an organiser or office bearer.

She still lives in the large three-level home that her husband and father built for them in 1977. It sits on a hillside with an extensive view across the Auckland Harbour and she has no intentions of moving to anything smaller. She knows that if she was no longer able to manage stairs, the house is designed to accommodate her on the second level which is fully equipped and has its own entry from a side-street entrance. The remainder of the house could accommodate tenants or a boarder if she so decided, but she prefers to put those ideas aside until she is required to give them her attention.

### *Cynthia*

Cynthia is another participant I was introduced to through the snowballing recruitment method. She is now aged seventy-one and was born in a small rural town in 1948. The eldest of four children, she joined the New Zealand Armed Forces as a teenager. She went on to marry a fellow serviceman when she was nineteen. As there were rules at the time preventing married couples serving in the same arm of the services, she retired back into civilian life after only two years. She worked in a range of different jobs over the next five years and eventually started her family with the first child being born when she was twenty-four. Two more followed when she was twenty-seven and thirty years of age.

She describes being born to parents who were “saints and the most wonderful parents” and to living through “the most wonderful childhood”. Her dream of a happy life soon turned upside down once she realised that her husband’s career would subject her to long periods of loneliness when he was away, but to being totally controlled by him when he was home. It took twenty-three years before she

could extract herself from a torturous marriage that was laden with her husband's dishonesty, manipulation and alcohol problems.

At forty-two years of age, Cynthia began the long struggle to rebuild her life, to regain her self-esteem and begin to live her life on her terms. Although she still works part-time, she now devotes much of her time being the best Nana to her grandchildren that she can.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methods used for this project, including my approach to recruiting my participants, the interview process, how the data was analysed and all while ensuring a continued adherence to the Code of Ethics surrounding human participant inclusion in research. I have introduced each participant with the aim of capturing their character and some key experiences. Their stories of their experiences in education, work, as wives and mothers, and in their retirement, are recorded and analysed in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 3. The sound of women's silence**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I start to weave a tapestry of the lives of my participant group. While keeping gender at the forefront, and against a Marxist-feminist backdrop, I navigate my way through the adventurous but socially structured years of their education, and the life-changing panorama of their working years.

I begin their narrative as schoolgirls and follow their progress through an education system that offered only limited choices of study, as the State had a predetermined goal in mind. Nursing or teaching had become the primary career options for girls with the required qualifications for progression into tertiary study (Park, 1991).

Alternatively, secretarial work, factory work or retail jobs were thought to suffice until marriage and family became their priority. The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was not yet on the horizon, but change was coming.

In the meantime, girls' education continued to follow a structured path built upon an ideology where most occupations were pigeonholed as either masculine or feminine.

### **Literature**

Women's exclusion from some school curriculum subjects often deprived females of perceived male-only professional career opportunities (Walby, 1990). In order to fully understand the way a girl's education was structured in the immediate post-WWII years, I discuss some literature to aid understanding of the system as it was then. Being an insider to this time in history has not only assisted with my interpretation of the events that forged the life-stories of these women, it has helped me to understand many of the events that took place in my own life.



## *Gendered lives*

There is a body of literature that strongly indicates that education experiences are gender-based. Jones, Marshall, Matthews, Smith, and Smith (1995) for example, looked at the various feminist discourses to analyse the education of girls and to understand the reason for the gendering of the New Zealand school system. Dating back to colonial times, the schooling system was heavily influenced by conservative views. The 1877 Education Act provided girls with the opportunity for a primary school education, but not necessarily the same curriculum as for boys (Fry, 1988). New Zealand education historians agreed that because of the importance of women being strongly established in their domestic role to ensure society's desired improvement, girl's schooling experiences were especially limiting (Fry, 1985; Jones et al., 1995; Rata & Sullivan, 2009). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, not only was there a push to retain a domestic focus on women's education, this was further reinforced by beliefs that education could work against women's health and reproductive capacity (Paechter, 1998). Medical experts railed against higher levels of education, believing it could lead to "sterility" (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 302), and "mental overstrain" through becoming over-educated which could affect their ability to breastfeed (Dyhouse, 1976, p. 43).

According to British educational commentator, William W. Bird (as cited in Simon, 2000), the development of New Zealand's education system in the late 1800s was guided by the principal ideals of "egalitarianism and racial harmony" (p. 25).

However, Simon (2000) defines egalitarianism as "relating to the principle of equal rights and opportunities for all" (p. 25). Over the subsequent decades it is clear that the term 'egalitarian' did not underpin the characteristics of the curriculum that was offered. The inequality stemmed not only from a class or race standpoint, but also

from a gender perspective where the opportunities offered to boys and girls were notably different.

As I worked through literature relating to girls' education in the mid-twentieth century, I was initially frustrated by the lack of research relating to my topic. An article by O'Connor and Goodwin (2004), *She wants to be like her mum*, piqued my interest when I realised it was based on a recent analysis of a data set of male and female interviews that had been gathered in England in the 1960s<sup>16</sup> but had been set aside without analysis. The data formed part of a collection of school student interviews (on their transition from school to work), conducted between 1962 and 1964. The initial notion to exclude girls from the interviews was overturned when a female researcher joined the team. Following a period of disagreements over methodology, and team member resignations, the project halted at the end of the data collection phase. In 1971, a small sample of the boy's data was analysed by two of the original researchers Ashton and Field (1976), and the rest of the data was archived. It remained unanalysed and unpublished for nearly forty years. In 2000, the data from the archived 851 interviews was uncovered, including 206 girls' interviews. The subsequent analysis of the girl's data revealed that they had been socialised by their home and school structures and were not encouraged to expand their horizons. At this point their ambitions were stifled by the belief that their paid work was less important than that for men. They were "pushed towards low status and low skilled jobs by teachers, youth employment officers and their own families" (O'Connor & Goodwin, 2004, p. 116). This was not unlike the economy's secondary

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<sup>16</sup> The data was collected for the "little-known *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project carried out by the University of Leicester [and lead by Norbert Elias] in the early 1960s" (O'Connor & Goodwin, 2004, p. 96)

labour market<sup>17</sup> that Maori were over-represented in during this period (Easton, 1994).

The data also revealed that although the job market was buoyant when the young women left school, their lack of qualifications and their inadequate knowledge of places beyond their local environment prevented them securing the type of positions to which they aspired. The outcome was they often ended up employed in the local factories. Similarly, a study by Willis (1978), *Learning to labour*, which included working-class children and how they got working-class jobs, included only data on the experiences of boys. It was clear from this small selection of articles that the study of girls' experiences of the school to work transitions was considered both unimportant and irrelevant to the interests of researchers at the time.

### ***The sexualisation of female accomplishment***

There has been a change in the twenty-first century to education patterns of both males and females, in that there has been recent acknowledgement that girls are outperforming boys in many areas of study. Several pieces of research on this topic attracted my attention when I read the titles of the work. They included the Skelton, Francis, and Read (2010), *"Brains before 'Beauty': High achieving girls, school and gender identities*, and Renold and Allan (2006), *Bright and Beautiful: high achieving girls, ambivalent femininities and the feminisation of success in the primary school*. Now that girls are being recognised for their educational achievements, the researchers still deem it necessary to include the words, beauty and beautiful. Not only have their achievements been feminised, but it appears that their efforts have

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<sup>17</sup> The secondary labour market involves low quality jobs, in terms of remuneration, working conditions, career opportunities and job security (Easton, 1994, p. 206)

now also become sexualised. Throughout my research on literature associated with the gendering of education, to date I have not found any reference to the educational success of male students being attributed to their physical strength or handsomeness.

### ***Are women producers or reproducers?***

Women's health, and factors that affect their physical ability to reproduce, have been a source of ongoing discussions since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dyhouse (1976, 1978), for example, discussed the impact of education on women's health and how it affected their reproductive capacity, and Manthorpe (1986) suggested that it was the future role of wife and mother that shaped women's education because "childrearing was seen as a national duty" (as cited in Paechter, 1998, p. 12).

Sue Middleton (1988, p. 72) conducted a wider feminist study<sup>18</sup> of teachers born and schooled after the second world war. In particular, she discussed how the education system from the 1950s to the 1980s was designed to meet the needs of women's roles as "workers and homemakers". She looked at the way women's lives and their education were structured to meet the needs of what Marx had previously identified as the 'reserve army'<sup>19</sup>, but in this particular instance, a pool of married women in the post-war years. She drew on a framework for analysis constructed by Foucault, (Giddens, 1982) who argued that sexuality has acquired:

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<sup>18</sup> S. Middleton, 'Feminism and Education in Post-War New Zealand: a Sociological Analysis', DPhil thesis (University of Waikato), 1985. This thesis is summarized in S. Middleton, 'Feminism and Education in Post-War New Zealand: an Oral History Perspective', in R. Openshaw and D. McKenzie (eds), *Reinterpreting the Educational Past* (Wellington, 1987) (Middleton, 1988, p. 204).

<sup>19</sup> Marx (1867) saw the expansion of a reserve army of labour as an inevitable outcome of the process of capital accumulation (*Capital*, Vol. I). (as cited in Bruegel, 1979, p. 12).

specific political significance in modern times because it concerns characteristics and activities that are at the intersection between the discipline of the body and the control of the population (p. 219).

The themes identified by Foucault as “medicalisation of sex” and the demographic rhetoric of “manpower planning” (Middleton, 1988, p. 73; 1993) have been shown to have characterised the social constructions of female sexuality during the war and the years of post-war reconstruction. These assumptions also shaped the thinking of the researchers and policymakers who created the plans for women’s education in post-war New Zealand. Middleton’s research included the analysis of many of the documents written during the war and the period of post-war reconstruction. In particular she critiques the Thomas Report<sup>20</sup> which prescribed a curriculum to cover across-the-board education for secondary schools, which Middleton described as “overtly political” in many ways, and in the process of educating, it was preparing girls for a life of domesticity. She concluded that in her opinion, “The ideology of domestic femininity was clearly embodied in the thinking of educational policy-makers” (Middleton, 1988, p. 79).

In the 1980s, Ruth Fry (1985), a teacher and school principal in the 1950s, conducted a New Zealand study of the curriculum for girls from the beginning of the twentieth century and up to 1975. She reported that in spite of high-performance successes of female students in mathematics, there was a common view that maths were not offered to girls as they “lacked the innate ability to cope with the subject” (p. 47).

Fry also noted that it was well documented<sup>21</sup> that the founder of the Plunket Society,

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<sup>20</sup> Department of Education, *The Post-Primary School Curriculum* (Thomas Report) (Wellington, 1942) (1959 edition).

<sup>21</sup> Documented by Erik Olssen, ‘Truby King and the Plunket Society: an Analysis of a Prescriptive Ideology’, NZJH 15:1, pp.3-25; Margaret Tennant, ‘Natural Directions’, NZJES 12:2 (1977), pp. 142-153.

Dr Truby King, opposed higher education for women in the early part of the century as he believed that their mental health was damaged by excessive schoolwork and maintained that “brainwork...sapped girls of the strength they should be storing for motherhood” (Fry, 1988, p. 35; Ritchie, 1988).

There were economic reasons too why girls’ access to some areas of study were unavailable. In Ruth Fry’s (1985) research, she noted that another reason that girls were not given the chance to study in the physical sciences was lack of funding for subjects like chemistry and physics that required specific equipment. She concluded that girls were “doomed to live as the poor sisters in an increasingly scientific and technical world” (p. 53).

### ***Patriarchy- it’s a man’s world***

In her book, *Educating the Other: Gender, Power and Schooling*, Carrie Paechter (1998), confronts some of the hegemonic discourses which have shaped the approach to girls’ and young women’s education. In particular, the discourse overlooks the existence of the profound male dominance, not only in education but also in the traditional professions and in the senior levels of business and industry. She supports her arguments with references from various academics, for example, Fletcher (1984) who noted that the pioneers of women’s education designed systems to either suit men, or were adapted for women but having reduced status.

In Sherry Ortner’s renowned research of 1974, her goal was to explain women’s world-wide secondary status. In *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* (2006), she “[tried] to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women” (2006, p. 72). Whereas she rejects any suggestion of ascribing the idea of biological determinism as an explanation, she suggests that there not only

needs to be a transformation of cultural assumptions, for example, a change to educational resources and the male-centric imagery of the media, but also a change to the social institutions that would underpin the transformed cultural view.

### ***Women's labour – a patriotic duty***

Jones, Marshall, Matthews, G. Smith & L. Smith (1995) in *Myths & Realities: Schooling in New Zealand*, conducted a review of the historical perspectives on New Zealand educational policy. They covered the period from the early twentieth century until the 1980s. While changes that were sanctioned were always presented as inevitable and with a message of positive progress, the structure of the schooling system from primary school, high school/college through to tertiary level, have all been designed to meet a market driven economy. The structured institutionalisation of the education system and its manipulation of the population, in particular the female population, was evident in instances such as arose from the outbreak of WWI. Initially women were educated to take over the jobs made vacant while the men were serving in the armed forces. On their return however, the women, who in some cases were of the generation of my participants' mothers, were encouraged back into the unpaid domestic labour force. Following WWII however, with the shortage of teachers, coupled with the high birth rate of baby boomers, female school leavers were targeted in a recruitment drive by New Zealand's Education Department to undertake teacher training. The lure of attending teacher's training college on a salary was an attractive proposition for families who were previously denied such opportunities, but the fact remained that their careers would always take second place to their domestic life once they married. The Late John Watson (1966),

ex-Director of the NZCER<sup>22</sup> described the position of a girl's teaching career as “a short adventure between school and marriage” (p. 159).

### ***Where to for the future?***

The literature shows that women were always considered to be in the lesser role. This is at least from a feminist perspective. And why would you not be perceived as a lesser person if your life-course was pre-determined to inhabit a role of service provider, caregiver, of always doing for others, to find some kind of fulfilment, to be rewarded only with your own perceived sense of gratefulness and being pleased to serve? Young women began to reflect on the domestic lives of their mothers and “the ghost haunting these young women, wore an apron and lived vicariously through the lives of husbands and children” (Rosen, 2000, p. 39). On the home front, questions were asked as young women of New Zealand began to examine this legacy (Brookes, 2016, p. 340). By the early 1970s, Australian feminist and activist, Germaine Greer asserted that:

Women were already sniffing the breeze, they're already saying, ‘why am I not happier than ...I am supposed to have everything I want, why do I feel dissatisfied?’ (Brook Lapping Productions, 2006: 20.36 mins).

## **Findings**

In this section, I present an analysis of the conversations with my participants. I asked each one a similar open-ended question: *Tell me about your life as you grew up in the 50s, 60s and 70s, and when you left school, what were your first working*

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<sup>22</sup> New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). John Watson was Director from 1968-1984.



*roles?* Their most common reactions were to take a deep breath, heave a sigh and look wistfully into the distance as they began to recall the still vivid memories of their adolescent years. I had no prior knowledge of the women's personal backgrounds and had no preconceived ideas about the information that would emerge from their stories. Armed only with the memories of my own childhood, it soon became apparent that their individual journeys differed significantly from any of my own experiences. Each woman's conversation gravitated towards a specific event or time-period in their lives. Some spoke widely on the themes of education and working life, whereas others were more inclined to talk about their marriage and families, or their transition into retirement. I preferred to let their emotions shape the conversations rather than allowing my own preferences to steer them towards another topic. My aim was to gain an understanding of the important issues in each of their lives. As a result, some interview excerpts in this chapter are brief and with only minor discussion points, whereas others spoke more in-depth according to the impact and importance of the experience in their lives. This pattern of participant driven thematic analysis continues in each subsequent chapter of this thesis.

## **Earliest years**

### ***Shirley's shaky start in the Shaky Isles***

Shirley was one of only two participants who began their narratives by recalling their earlier school years. She described her immigration from England:

I remember it was about 1958 when I was eight years old and my parents decided to emigrate from England. My father came out to

New Zealand and because he couldn't get on the scheme<sup>23</sup> because his job wasn't a required job in New Zealand, he had to get the ten-pound assisted passage. So, he came to New Zealand first and got a job. And a year later, we came out. He obviously saved the money and brought us out. So that's me, and my brother and Mum.

*And is your brother younger than you?*

No, he's two and a half years older than me, and we arrived in December 1959 to quite a different lifestyle altogether.

*Do you remember much about the journey and what it was like when you arrived?*

I remember everything about it because it was a very traumatic experience. I've never got over it.

*Why, what happened?*

Well, oh jeeppers, my mother had an affair with a man on the ship. I caught them. I didn't know what I was seeing but I did know what I was seeing wasn't right. I've thought about it a million times since. What hurt me was the fact I was the apple of my father's eye. He was everything. My Dad and I were very close. And one day a letter arrived at my aunt's place for my mother [from the man on the ship] and I rushed down the road to give it to my mother and Dad was home and saw it. Then all hell broke loose. Screaming and fighting over the letter. So, I went to the bedroom and curled down in my bed and just

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<sup>23</sup> Assisted Immigration Scheme – 1947-1975 which focused on attracting single people with practical skills to New Zealand (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020, July 8).

stayed there. Well, their marriage was never the same after that and I always felt like it was my fault because I took the letter inside. From there, my life was a nightmare and my brother just ignored it all, he lived in a fantasy land where, as far as he was concerned, he was like 'My mother's a princess'.

She continued to describe some of her experiences that followed:

We moved house quite a lot after that. Sometimes I would share a room with my brother and my father slept on the couch. At other times I would sleep with my mother during my early teen years and I could never have anybody home because I didn't want them to know. I didn't want them to find out. Oh, that's awful isn't it?

She paused momentarily as her cheeks flushed a blush pink while her eyes sought my reassurance to continue. My facial response was intended to show empathy and Shirley interpreted it as a signal to continue:

I had the most awful teenage years. Nobody took any notice of me about how well I was doing at school or anything. But just before I started college, I think I was twelve or thirteen, I got rheumatic fever and I'd been really sick for a while with pain in my back and I couldn't sleep. Mum took me to a couple of doctors, but they just said I was a bit anaemic but had nothing really wrong with me and that I was 'putting it on'. Finally, she took me to a specialist who took one look at me and said "I'm putting her in hospital straight away cause I think she's got rheumatic fever". It was just before the Christmas holidays and I was actually starting to recover. Our family had

planned a cruise around the islands along with Mum's sisters and husbands, but I had to spend Christmas in hospital. So, they all merrily went off on the cruise around the islands and left me alone in hospital over Christmas.

***Who needs an education?***

At this point, Shirley began to talk about when she left school and started work:

I started work when I was fifteen because it didn't matter about education for a girl because they would get married and some man would look after them. I was actually told that, and I believed it. I never really took an interest in whether I was intelligent or whether I was doing any good at school or anything else. It was all about the boys.

Shirley was dismissive of her need for an education which resulted from the ideas that had been instilled in her regarding the role of young women in the 1960s. Her comments echoed the widely-held belief of daughters of war-time and depression-era affected parents, and it was a life where girls "wanted to get married, have four children, and live in a nice house in a nice suburb" (Friedan, 1997, p. 18).

Shirley's working life began in typical style for many girls at the time. She explained to me:

So, when I was fifteen, I went hairdressing because I used to do all my family's... I used to comb their hair and they told me that I would be a hairdresser. So, that's what I thought I was good at and, in actual fact, I was useless at it. I had no creativity. I don't know, I was just no good at it.

*How long did you stay there?*

I stuck it for a couple of years and all my friends were going overseas so I decided I would save up and do it too.

Shirley continued to talk about her working experience once she decided to follow her friends overseas. She had become very independent in her thinking and was not deterred by any issues of gender crossover in her choice of work.

*Crossing the gender divide*

Shirley worked in a stereotypically male occupation for a short period of time in her late teens. As she described to me, she was a slight anomaly in her new choice of industry:

So, I got a job in a factory, and that didn't go down very well with my family at all, but I'd started to become a bit more independent. I went to work in General Motors and I was a welder. And I was there for, I suppose, about 18 months.

General Motors was located close to Shirley's home and she was able to eliminate the travel time and cost of her long daily commute to her hairdressing job. With a goal of saving quickly for her move to Australia, she was prepared to step outside the gendered boundaries of women's work. Her growing confidence enabled her to reject the norms of female work, and the employment practices of the factory facilitated her cross into the male domain of welding.

*And how did you feel as a woman working in that environment?*

It was ok, it was a job, and the money was good. I didn't really think about it too much. But after I met my first boyfriend, it turned bad after a while. And I left.

Shirley later explained to me about her boyfriend, and that being a woman working in a male environment was not the reason she left the job. She was readily accepted by all the other employees and was treated accordingly but she had become afraid of her boyfriend, who also worked at General Motors. He had become very manipulating and threatening. I will expand on this aspect of Shirley's life in the next chapter.

### ***Barbara's paradise***

Another one of the interviewed women talked about her younger years and her immigrating experience. Barbara was also born in England but arrived in New Zealand with her parents when she was a young child.

I had an idyllic childhood and my memories of living in England were lovely too. I was born in London, but my father found that the work he was doing was stultifying and that it was all very depressing in Britain after the war. So, he started looking and got a great job over here. We were living in Auckland in a brand-new house [provided with his job] right on the water. Dad built a playhouse out of the packing crate that the furniture was in, and then built a little boat that we had at the bottom of the garden. A primary school was across the road. I had a horse in a paddock close to home and I learnt piano and singing and got involved in all those sorts of things.

Barbara had started to talk while I was setting up my voice recorder and I had to back-track and ask her to elaborate on her career decision:

*You said earlier that you trained as a teacher. What made you decide on teaching?*

Well, I suppose the last couple of years at school, I did holiday jobs, in an office and in a factory. Then I got a studentship to go to university. I actually had money in hand, but I worked holidays and Friday nights in a bookshop in the city, it was Biglows Bookshop in Shortland Street. It was a long history family firm. It was just lovely. A three generational thing, just lovely. Now long gone.

She continued to talk with enthusiasm about her attitude to life as a teenager:

When I was a teenager, I cut a piece out from a magazine and it says, “You have to make things happen”. It was a headline and I stuck that on my wall. It’s a philosophy I’ve always had. If I wanted something to happen, it was always going to be up to me.

As Barbara continued, I recognised her eagerness to jump forward to more current day events. I concluded that she had a greater sense of pride in her later achievements which I will refer to in subsequent chapters.

### ***Karen’s journey***

As the discussions continued with the women on the subject of their education, I became aware of the lack of interest several of these women had in their time at school, in the education system and the idea that it would be the foundation of their futures. I interviewed Karen, a seventy-one-year-old divorcee who recounts her

childhood in a life of privilege. She was an only daughter with a brother who was ten years her senior, and her commitment to education was barely lukewarm:

I had no desire to take any form of employment whatsoever. I just wanted to stay at home and be looked after. And this disagreed with my parents.

She never excelled academically and was only interested in continuing her indulgent lifestyle at the expense of her wealthy parents:

*What was your level of achievement when you left school?*

School Certificate.

*And did you get that easily or did you struggle?*

Second go, and I got it by one mark because I was the naughtiest kid at school. Absolutely the naughtiest kid at school. Obviously, I had incredible intelligence potential but really couldn't be bothered at all. I thought it was extremely infantile.

At the time when Karen was at college, progression into the sixth form<sup>24</sup> only occurred if a pass was gained in the school certificate examination. A pass required a total of two hundred marks in your top four subjects, one of which must be English. If the student failed to achieve the required marks, a full repeat of the fifth form<sup>25</sup> year was required. As she said, Karen gained her pass credit by a bear mark in her second year.

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<sup>24</sup> Year 12 in current terms.

<sup>25</sup> Year 11 in current terms.



After a small foray into Milne and Choyce<sup>26</sup> shoe department from which they were not very pleased with me, I think my arrogance overtook them, so I finished that and stayed back at home.

Karen's work as a shop assistant in the city was a common option for untrained young women with no career aspirations. She admits that she never had the right attitude to the work from the start. Although Karen decided she just wanted to stay home and be looked after, her mother had other ideas:

My mother frog-marched me down to a friend of hers who had a rest home for psycho-geriatrics where I was going to be a nurse aid. The woman who ran the facility was an absolute firebrand and within nine months, I found myself, once again frog-marched into starting a nursing course at Greenlane.

Her experience at this point typified the life course of many baby boomer women who fell into a career that was never their carefully considered profession. Karen was strong-willed and her life of privilege had enabled her to live without any sense of responsibility, however her approach to life took a radical turn once she was presented with a structured environment:

I found myself absolutely delighted with the boundaries, the formality and the discipline that a nursing course allowed me.

She found her niche in a nursing environment which was (and still is) another female-dominated industry. Although it was at that point she began to thrive, she attributed her success more to the boundaries than to the role of nursing. I was

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<sup>26</sup> Milne and Choyce was one of New Zealand's first major department stores and was established in Auckland in 1867 and operated until 1970 at which time it was sold, restructured and renamed, Milnes.

surprised to hear of Karen embracing the boundaries that had become an important part of her life. This was at a time when many young women were trying to break free of the structures that constrained their life options.

*Margaret – women as caregivers*

My next interviewee was Margaret, an acquaintance I had come to know in recent years through her work as a home-help for the disabled and elderly. When I arrived at her compact and sunny home unit, we chatted for a few minutes about her failing health before she settled down to tell her story. She told me:

I couldn't wait to leave school [be]cause I wasn't any good at it. I started very badly. I was teased and I was bullied [be]cause we were in a very small town. And I was very unhappy at school, but I got out.

As she described it, her decision to leave school was more motivated by a need to escape from physical and psychological harm than from the process of learning. Her education had been an unhappy experience which was marred by years of abuse by her fellow students. The school environment was an extension of her abusive life at home, a life in which she felt trapped and for years had wished she could escape:

I urged her to continue her story:

I went nursing and absolutely loved it. I only did that part-time at first because I was too young. I worked in the local telephone exchange for a year then went to work in a little shop that sold stationery.

She paused to draw a laboured breath which she did often, an indication that her emphysema was ever present. She continued:

And then I got a call to go in for a local maternity hospital live-in job, and after a year I was transferred to Christchurch where I worked in a hospice for three years. Then [breathing pause] I came back to Auckland and worked in a rest home for a year.

By this time, Margaret was experiencing the freedom to make her own choices and to be working in a career that she loved. Therein lies a paradox. She believed that she had the ability to think for herself and make her own decisions, but in fact she had swapped one form of domination for another, albeit in a work environment. Nursing as a career was firmly embedded in a male dominated industry, where the power was in the hands of the mostly male administrators and doctors, and nurses were placed below them in professional status (Corley & Mauksch, 1988), and pay scale (Greer, 1993). And in Germaine Greer's opinion, "Nurses are skilled menials, and as such they fall into line with the dominant pattern of female employment" (Greer, 1993, p. 146).

***Maria's story – is it a career or just a job?***

Seventy-year-old Maria also turned to nursing, however that only happened many years after leaving school. She left school after her fifth form year and began a sewing apprenticeship. She worked full-time in the industry until she married in her late teens.

I stayed at school to get School Certificate then I left and did an apprenticeship in sewing, and I really liked that. I worked locally and started in a factory that did men's trousers. Then I moved to a factory that did men's fancy trousers and you had to be really good to do the real fancy stuff. But I didn't stay there long [be]cause I wasn't really

happy there. So, I changed to doing knitwear. But those factories have gone now.

As a married woman and mother, she changed to working part-time and continued to do so for the next seventeen years.

But I'd always wanted to be a nurse. When my marriage broke up...I decided I would do a new career and I went nursing.

*And, so what made you choose nursing?*

[Be]cause I liked people, so that's what I did. And that was good for me to get me back on track again.

After an extremely unhappy marriage, Maria decided to pursue a nursing career in her late thirties. It was a move that enabled her to rebuild her life from the strain of a broken marriage and start her journey to independence.

### ***Sylvia writes her own story***

My oldest participant at seventy-three years of age, Sylvia, was encouraged by her parents to follow a typical female path in education which paved the way for her progression into the workforce. This was in 1962 when Sylvia decided to reject the opinion of her school advisers that journalism was not 'ladylike'.

There was no overt encouragement for me to go to university and I was keen to start work. I think my parents thought it was a good idea to learn shorthand because I went to somewhere called 'Ladies Business College' in Auckland. God what a terrible name. And I did do that, shorthand and typing, because I wanted to be a journalist. Although I had been told at school that it was not a very ladylike

occupation, I still wanted to do it. So, I left school at sixteen, did the shorthand and typing course and at seventeen I was a 'cub reporter' - as they called them then - for a major newspaper.

### *Nancy's journey*

For many young women leaving school in the 1960s, the move into a female-centred career seemed to be a natural progression. Nancy, who was born in England in 1952, decided while still there, to pursue a teaching career:

I left school in 1970 [at 17 years of age] and went down to the Midlands to teachers training college, which was at the time sort of second class. You know, parents wanted you to go to University and it was almost as if I felt a little bit of a failure. But then made a decision for myself at what I was going to study because I was passionate about sport. So, I went down to a college [University]. It was very much last-minute but I managed to do a Bachelor of Education degree in Physical Education. I never really looked back from that.

Nancy was very independent and sufficiently knowledgeable about the career options available to her. Prior to moving into a teaching role, Nancy benefitted from the education system that existed in England at that time:

It was a really good college that I attended, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. And I think I was very lucky because all of that teacher education was paid for, the basic education and accommodation.

This led to her easy progression into employment:

And then, because I'd got a degree, well, partly... I hope I got some references from the college. I was offered a job in the local authority [teaching at a state school] which was what happened at the time.

### *Cynthia – sailing away*

I interviewed my final participant, Cynthia, at her son's home. She had just finished helping with getting her grandchildren to school and was happy to finally sit down for a cup of tea, and talk:

I left school at 16. My first job was as a proof-reader on the local newspaper purely because I was very good at English and could spell very well, so you had to have that qualification. But I was hopeless at maths and everything else. I always wanted to join the police force. It was my dream, but in those days, you had to be twenty-one and I couldn't wait till I was twenty-one. I just couldn't.

*How long did you work as a proof-reader?*

Oh, not long. I was on the train with Dad one day when I saw all these Wrens<sup>27</sup> and sailors on the train going on leave and they were having a ball and I thought, 'Oh, that would be quite a good life'. They looked like they were having a lot of fun. If you take this through the eyes of a sixteen-and-a-half-year-old. So, I joined the Navy in 1966 [aged seventeen] and I loved it. But as happened with so many of us in those days, I met a sailor and got engaged and got married. And I was engaged and married at nineteen which is like 'whoa!'

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<sup>27</sup> Women's Royal New Zealand Naval Service

*How long did you stay in the Navy?*

When I married him I had to come out. But we had to in those days, leave the Navy [be]cause they wouldn't let you stay in there when you married. I did do a few different jobs, helping friends in their shop and things until I had my first child four years later.

The strict rules in place at the time, prevented married women from remaining in the service. Not only were the structures such that they were forced to resign, there were no avenues at the time to even make a case for change.

Women who lived through those early decades were aware of the societal expectations placed on them, but only a few, including the women I spoke to, asked the question, *why?* Most accepted it as their lot in life, and there never appeared to be any overwhelming desire for these women to question or defy the rules that would determine the life course ahead of them. These influential years were still devoid of any feminist influence as the Women's Liberation Movement was still in its infancy in the USA, and non-existent in New Zealand. I could see a pattern of gender inequality starting to manifest, a deep-seated inequality built upon a patriarchal<sup>28</sup> ideology that legitimises a system of domination of women by men. Another issue that remained an irritation for many women at that time, was why people in positions of power and influence such as teachers, parents, and the business community, continued to promote a prescribed life-course of gender inequality onto those under their influence.

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<sup>28</sup> Patriarchy is discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have talked about a small group of women who were educated in the 1950s and 1960s in a gendered school system that was strongly focused towards the careers of boys rather than girls. Higher education featured for only one of my participants who was not educated in New Zealand, but on her migration to this country, became an employee of the New Zealand education system. I captured the women's individual transitions from a variety of educational experiences and into a workforce that was also defined along gendered lines. The more common careers for women were teaching, and nursing, along with a limited range of occupations that were understood at the time to be suited to women's caring nature. Other work choices such as factory work, shop work, clerical based occupations and in one case, an apprenticeship dotted the landscape of work choices. In all except two of the cases, there was no evidence of a crossover into the male work domain. Two of them did step outside of the established norm for girls with one embarking on a journalism career and the other working for a short time as a welder.

The findings gleaned from this small sample of stories, however, showed that they mostly adhered to the gendered norms of society in the area of education, followed by a short working life before committing to marriage and eventual motherhood. It is important to note however, that these women are not representative of their generation as a whole, but rather are likely to be typical of their small sector of the country's 'unofficial' social class.

In the next chapter, I continue to follow the journeys of my participants as they eagerly embraced their societal obligations of marriage and motherhood. New Zealand was entering into a period that was being influenced by the women's



liberation movement that inspired some women and frightened others. Some of the women in my study were suddenly confronted by the harsh realities of a patriarchal society, which was coming under threat from women's growing agitation for equal rights and opportunities and rejecting notions of gender inequality.

## **Chapter 4. Mountains so high – valleys so deep**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I look at the next phase of my participants lives, when they married and began raising a family. The experiences that these women had is quite unlike anything experienced by previous generations of young women going through the same phase of their lives. They were leaving behind a period of systemic institutionalised patriarchal control in the education system, and the expectations for short working lives. They were now moving into a time where they had reason to be somewhat heartened by the dizzying optimism of the 1960s popular culture<sup>29</sup>, and were taking note of the influences of the women's liberation movement. The movement primarily emerged in the United States but was gaining momentum across the western world. As I bore witness to their stories which described periods of brightly lit highs, and distressingly dark lows, I began to understand that not all women's life journeys are filled with uplifting times with husbands and families, but in fact, are often torn apart as their whole being appears to collapse into despair

### **Literature**

#### ***Marriage and children***

As I prepared to interview my group of women, I wanted to understand what other researchers had found about women's lives in the 1960s and 1970s as they married and entered motherhood. How were their experiences recorded as they lived the years as housewives during the rise of the women's liberation movement? Finding

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<sup>29</sup> Term used to describe a culture based on the tastes of ordinary people rather than the educated elite (New Zealand History, 2018, 9 May).

literature produced at that time was difficult, however, writings began to proliferate in the 1980s as researchers started to reflect on events of several decades earlier.

In Barbara Brookes' (2016) book, *A History of New Zealand Women*, of the period pre-1814 to 2015, she discussed the lives of young New Zealand women born after the end of WWII. In particular, she drew attention to the young age of marriage in the 1960s and 1970s, and their growing disillusionment with their married lifestyle. As they threw themselves into the role of wife and mother, she suggested that they were becoming aware that they needed more out of life than was described in a Listener<sup>30</sup> article about life in the suburbs, "isolated in their houses 'listening to childish prattle' all day" (Brookes, 2016, p. 332). As they tried to fill their days with activities involving voluntary work in church, community groups, playcentre groups, school committees, and other parent-focused organisations, they were aware of "a strange stirring sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning" (Friedan, 1963, p. 15).

A study was conducted in England by Kiernan and Eldridge (1987) on a cohort of women born in the late 1940s (early baby boomers) to identify the age at marriage of the women. The longitudinal study<sup>31</sup> followed the lives of 5,362<sup>32</sup> female babies born in Britain in a single week in March, 1946, and data was collected biennially for thirty-two years. The researchers established that by the time these women were marrying in the 1960s, there were strong societal norms that influenced the timing of marriages. Their data indicated that young women were expected to be married by their early twenties. However, by the 1970s, there were strong indications that the

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<sup>30</sup> New Zealand Listener (1967, 14 April)

<sup>31</sup> The Medical Research Council's National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD), (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1987, p. 49)

<sup>32</sup> At each two-year period, often between only 70% and 90% of the total number of individuals were contactable (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1987, pp. 49-50)

age when young women first married was starting to increase. This mirrors a similar pattern in New Zealand where the mean age at first marriage in 1960 was 22.8 for males and 20.3 for females. By 1971, these ages had increased to 23.5 and 21.2 respectively, and by 1995 had increased significantly to 29.9 for males and 27.8 for females (Stats NZ, 2006, 22 May). Kiernan and Eldridge observed that further into the 1970s, compared to those who were marrying at a higher age, cohabitation rates were also beginning to increase. That more young adults were beginning to remain at school longer in order to gain qualifications was another indication that young women were delaying marriage. Changes to the work environment were also occurring as women as well as men found it necessary to build up a working history due to the reassessment of women's lives in relation to work. Women were becoming less inclined to consider "marriage and parenthood, and employment outside the home as mutually exclusive" (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1987, p. 62).

### ***Power and control***

As my interviews progressed, I identified the power and control that some women experienced others exercising over their lives. This control covered a range of areas from financial control, control over work choices and places of employment, to a deep-seated psychological control which involved verbal abuse and the playing of mind control by the husbands of several of the women. These experiences in the women's lives was not something I had *expected*. In order to *better* understand their stories, I sought literature on the types of behaviour the women had experienced. Material that helped me understand and analyse their stories, included work by Gelles (1976), Ulrich (1991) and Kutin, Russell, and Reid (2017).

A study by Richard Gelles (1976), *Abused wives: why do they stay*, looked at why women remained in or left abusive marriages in the 1970s. His findings were based on unstructured informal interviews with members of families who had suffered various degrees of family violence. He found that in those earlier post-war decades, the reasons many women remained in marriages related to factors such as: negative self-concepts, a belief that their husbands would reform, reliance upon their husband's economic support, doubts about surviving alone, fear of the stigmatisation of divorce, and the difficulty for women to get work (Gelles, 1976, p. 660). Gelles' study concluded that the less access a woman had to resources outside her marriage, the more "entrapped" she was and more reluctant to seek outside help in any form (Gelles, 1976, p. 664). Any study in the area of spousal violence was timely at that juncture as according to a much earlier essay by Dexter (1958 cited in Gelles, 1976) that questioned the reluctance of scholars to study some areas focusing on social problems, he believed that topics had long suffered from "*selective inattention* by both scholars and the research community" (Gelles, 1976, p. 661).

Fifteen years after Gelles' research, a study was carried out by Yvonne Ulrich (1991) asked the question, "What are the women's salient reasons for leaving the physically abusive male partner?" (p. 466). Her interviews with a sample of formerly abused American women from both rural and urban areas, found that more than half of them left their marriages for reasons relating to their own personal growth. These encompassed such realisations as, "[I] woke up" or "like a little light bulb [moment]" and that they had reached the point of "being through with the excuses" (Ulrich, 1991, p. 470). A fear for their own physical safety was identified among the key reasons for leaving abusive marriages, however the emotional toll on their own sense of self suggested a greater need for them to leave.

Later again, Kutin et al. (2017), researched economic abuse between intimate partners in Australia and forty years after the Gelles (1976) study, they found that women continue to suffer various forms of IPV<sup>33</sup>. Kutin et al. (2017) focused on behaviour aimed at “manipulating a person’s access to finances, assets, and decision-making to foster dependence and control (p. 269). Although this study looked at both men and women, the data overwhelmingly indicated that women were twice as likely as men to experience economic abuse by their intimate partner, and especially within the age ranges of 40-49 (20.9%) and 50-59 (19.7%) (Kutin et al., 2017, p. 270). As those in these age groups begin to seek their freedom from the economic, emotional and psychological abuse, they are now tasked with not only getting their own lives back on track, but also face a looming retirement that they need to prepare for financially.

### ***Feminism fights back***

By the 1970s, signs were emerging of a fight-back that could be attributed to the influence of the Women’s Liberation Movement, or other radical movements at the time. There were also indications that patriarchy’s influence on the lives of both women and men in the Western world, was being challenged. I examined literature on this topic specific to New Zealand, expecting that the country trailed the rest of the world in its awakening caused by the feminist movement. New Zealand was at the same time experiencing other local protest movements which drew some attention away from the feminist issues.

According to Helen May (1992), who wrote *Minding Children, Managing Men*, the 1970s already involved protest movements against South African apartheid policy,

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<sup>33</sup> Intimate partner violence.

and the war in Vietnam. 1970 also saw the formation of the country's first groups supporting women's liberation. It was a tumultuous decade marked by a variety of events, all seeking equal rights and opportunities, along with greater personal freedoms for women. May reported that the political right opposed abortions, homosexual rights, sex education in schools and sexual diversity, however a rising tide of young women began to challenge the roles of men and women on the domestic front, in institutions and the workplace. May's coverage of the women's movement talked on one hand, about the style of radical activism displayed by the Australian author and activist, Germaine Greer and on the other, the more subdued style of New Zealand activist and politician, Sue Kedgley.

Jacqueline O'Neill (2012), in her doctoral thesis, *Men's violence against wives and partners: The State and women's experience, 1960-1984*, discussed in depth the genesis and power of the feminist movement in New Zealand. She suggested that the main conflict that emerged from a series of United Women's Conventions during the 1970s, was between "libertarian positions and what were later to be judged as politically correct feminist positions" (O'Neill, 2012, p. 270). She reported that some women's rights groups espoused a "liberal feminist focus", intended for an orderly transition for change. The dichotomous women's liberationists assumed a "radical feminist analysis of the situation of women" and supported a militant push for change (2012, p. 270). Positioned at the heart of their ideological thinking were the influences of "radical feminism, socialist feminism and the gay liberation movement" (2012, p. 271). According to O'Neill, the power of men was reinforced by a silence that reflected women's own powerlessness. Women adopted the slogans "break the silence" and "speaking out" which gave them voice both politically and psychologically.

As I transition into the analysis of my women's interview data, I look at the ways in which events in their lives are supported or rejected by the literature of these scholars. I begin with the age of marriage for five of my participants, followed by the experiences involving some form of control in the lives of four of the women. Finally, I identify any instances that show a positive move towards gaining or regaining their own power and move towards recognizing their own agency.

## **The women speak**

### *Marriage and children*

The average age of marriage for young women in the 1960s and 1970s was the early twenties<sup>34</sup>, and although some of the participants now agree that it was extremely young, at the time they did it because, as they expressed it in various ways, that's the way it was back then. Maria talks about her decision to marry:

I met my husband and got married young at nineteen and had my daughter at twenty. But I was too young. It was too hard, hard yakka. We were both totally different people. I was very shy and quiet in those days. And then my marriage broke up seventeen years later.

When Maria married in her teens, she was prepared to embrace marriage and motherhood. In retrospect, however, she is aware that although marriage as a teenager was not uncommon at the time, some young women were not prepared for the responsibility of marriage:

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<sup>34</sup> The "mean age of first time brides in 1971 was twenty-two" (Statistics New Zealand, 1993, p. 39)



Cynthia was more expressive as she threw her hands in the air in a display of pseudo-shock as she explained her adherence to society's norms of that era:

I left school at sixteen and I was engaged and married at nineteen which is like 'whoa'. I said to everyone 'Don't ever do it!'

*We all did in those days.*

Yeah, we did, we did. I had my first child at twenty-four. My next one at twenty-seven and my next one, which was my surprise element, at thirty. I spent most of those years raising those children on my own.

A rapid move into motherhood was not always the norm. Occasionally a couple would delay the arrival of children although they were married at a young age.

Barbara explains:

I got married when I was twenty-two (in 1970). In 1977 [son] was born in December, and [daughter] was born in 1980.

Barbara talked at length about her husband's and her decision to delay starting a family. It was primarily due to wanting to build their home first. They spent most weekends and some evenings on the project while working full time in paid employment. The beautiful brick home that she still lives in sits on a hillside with unlimited sea views which is testament to their efforts and the time taken to complete the project. They were clearly focused on the home prior to committing themselves to raising a family.

Shirley and Sylvia were married in their early twenties and made no comments to suggest that their marriages were anything but standard for the time.

Shirley:

*And what age were you then when you got married?*

Twenty-three, and that lasted ten years

Sylvia:

I got married early at twenty-one and had my first daughter when I was twenty-four and had a second daughter about three years later. I was an at-home Mum through those years

Sylvia spent her early years as a parent, fulfilling the domestic role as a stay-at-home mum before eventually returning to the workforce. Shirley had several years of settled married life before she became embroiled in a power struggle with her husband. The detail of this struggle is discussed later in this chapter.

### ***Experiencing power and control***

As my interviews progressed, I became aware that a degree of trust had been established between us and it was contributing to some sensitive and open dialogue that I was keen to pursue. I felt extremely privileged to be entrusted with such personal stories. The topic of marital problems was generally kept private and behind closed doors during the years that the events took place.

### ***Financial Control***

A common theme through the interviews was that some of these women never experienced (or had lost all) control of the finances during their marriage. In many circumstances where the women were raising children and unable to work, they became totally reliant on their husband to pay them a housekeeping allowance, or in some cases, to completely manage all the finances. Margaret told me of her experience:

When I was with him, in seventeen years, he never paid me housekeeping. I never saw a pay cheque. He earned big money, but there was never any money. Because of his important job and the type of people he associated with, he would eat out all the time, eat crayfish because others were having it. But the meals weren't paid by the job. Yep, never any money for me and the kids.

Margaret was a stay-at-home mother who had no access to money, and her husband managed all the household expenses. After she told me of her circumstances, she followed up with her reaction when she eventually had money of her own:

*So, how did you survive when you left?*

When I got on the benefit<sup>35</sup>, I was so grateful. I'd never seen so much money. I got about \$300 a week. I couldn't believe it. I was virtually a millionaire overnight. And I'm looking at this bank balance that was in my bank book and I had tears pouring down and I'm a millionaire. \$300. I was so excited.

In other instances, and even after a marriage ended, women's attempts to find work were occasionally thwarted by their ex-husbands. Margaret described how she was affected in this way:

When the kids were in their teens, they'd complain [be]cause I didn't have dinner on the table early because I was at work. One day one of my boys said, 'we've been to see Dad about you. We've had a

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<sup>35</sup> Domestic Purposes Benefit (DBP). Introduced in 1973 during the passage of the Social Security Amendment Act to give wives and children some protection from failed relationships and potential harm (New Zealand History, 2019 19 Aug).

meeting behind your back'. And I said 'ok, what's this all about?' He said, 'you're too fucking lazy to clean the lounge'. They'd all sat there watching tv with their girlfriends waiting for me to get home from work. Then I found out their father had been to my work to say I can't do the housework, can't look after the kids.

*How did you feel about that and did anything happen?*

Yeah, the next day they fired me.

*When shock replaces trust*

Cynthia's husband left her in a difficult position financially when he made plans to leave the marriage:

At one stage we had this little fruit shop and I used to run it seven days a week. I'd also run the house and I'd sit up 'til two or three o'clock in the morning doing all the book work... and he had this little business that would make a few dollars. I'd do the books for both businesses, GST, the wages and everything else. One day he told me I needed a bigger car. So, he said, 'I'll sell the little car and get a new one next week'. I should have seen the writing on the wall. I never got the new one. And a week later I still never got the new one but the little one got sold. And then he just said to me one morning, 'I'm leaving you today', and I said, 'What?' And he said again, 'I'm leaving you today'. Then I realised the car got sold to pay for him to move into a flat. I shouldn't have been surprised, but it comes as a shock, you know. But I knew the marriage was *it* prior to him leaving because I felt trapped, I was trapped. And all of a sudden, you've got

no money, you've got no car and you've got a big mortgage and you don't know what to do.

Cynthia's husband had previously taken away her access to the cheque account. Although he owned a half-share of the business, he had never participated in its operation. Ultimately, his agenda was to force his wife to sell the shop.

### *Institutional power*

Not all the financial control was through the actions of their husbands, however. In some instances, the control was wielded through the power of bank managers, lawyers and the good intentions of well-meaning fathers. Margaret told the story of her anguish after she suggested to her husband that they approach the bank manager to sort out their bank accounts:

I said we'll go and see the bank manager and tell him that our marriage is over. But he [bank manager] didn't want to hear our domestic problems. I said we've got to discuss our bank accounts with you and make sure the overdraft is paid. He took me completely off [the bank's] books because I was a woman without a job. I told him that I'm going to go on the benefit, I'll need a bank account number, but he said, 'just try another bank.' Then he gave my husband the bank account and \$3,000 overdraft and we walked out the bank, him with his nose up in the air laughing and I walked out crying.

### *Innocence, ignorance or blind faith*

Karen learned an expensive lesson when she decided to put her trust in her lawyer to manage the inheritance that she received from her father after his death in 1988:

When Dad died, I had inherited a significant amount of money. So, I went back overseas and the money was kept in New Zealand for me.

When I came back to New Zealand, unfortunately I'd been defrauded by the lawyer and lost it all. It was in the vicinity of \$1.5 million.

And later in our conversation, Karen talked about her feelings now as she reflects on her father's efforts to protect her from all things financial:

I never really did anything with money. Tax returns or anything like that. And so therefore was significantly handicapped. Because I was never taught. My brother and father did it all. You know, it was done. You know, 'your brother will look after you, don't worry about that.' And I found that incredibly handicapping.

*Do you think it was a gender thing or an age thing because he was older?*

Yes, older.

*So, if you had an older sister?*

It would be the same. Yes, my father took care, made sure my brother, you know, 'absolutely look after your little sister. If you're making an investment, look after your little sister'. But he passed away knowing he was going to leave me and my brother very comfortable. You know, our own homes, money to see us through without working. And that didn't happen.

## *Emotional control*

### *Emotions torn apart*

When a couple get married, there is a level of assumption that the marriage will last for-ever. Many women will admit that their dream was always to get married, have kids and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for many couples and the resulting level of divorce has been increasing steadily since the 1970s<sup>36</sup>. There are many reasons why a couple decides to end a marriage and one described by several of the women was some sort of abuse that they had experienced. Only one participant stated that she had, on occasion, been physically abused, however her and three others related their experiences of emotional abuse. All of them expressed the fear and lack of self-worth that they were left with.

Margaret relates her story:

My boys didn't give me a very good life. They were bullies and they bossed me around and they were demanding, and they were twenty and I was still doing their washing and ironing. And cooking their meals. And then they all got girlfriends and instead of going flatting with their girlfriends, they brought all their girlfriends back home to me which gave me eight teenagers, which was an absolute nightmare. And I still say to this day that I was a verbally abused slave.

*I don't know if you want to go into it or not, when you say they were bullies, was it a physical bully or did they just...?*

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<sup>36</sup> In 1971, the divorce rate in New Zealand was 5.15 decrees absolute and dissolution order were granted per 1,000 estimated existing marriage. By 1991 the rate had increased to 12.28 estimated existing marriages (Statistics New Zealand, 1993, p. 39).

Verbally. Verbally. They'd say "oh come on you fucken ugly lookin' bitch. Come on hurry up, you're just a fucking alcoholic." And all the 'F' words they could think of, they would bad mouth me to all their friends. Saying what a horrible home I had. I worked all day. Was at the bus stop at six in the morning. Get home at half past four and then I had to wash and iron and cook and do the dishes and, I had no help.

*Was this after your husband left?*

I left him, yeah I left him, I couldn't take any more.

During her marriage she was unable to rely on her mother for support. It was obvious by the sad tone of her voice that she felt let down by the one person in her life who should have been an ally.

My mother wasn't a good person to be involved because she was so old school. 'It's a man's house, he is the man of the house.' He'd trip me up, push me over, shove me when going down the stairs.

One day she come out with something that terrified me. This was the thing that made me leave him instant, straight out. I didn't have time to plan it, I just had to go. She said that while you're under his roof he can do anything he wants to you. And he was there. And I saw this dirty smirk on his face, and I thought, 'I'm dead. I've really had it now.'

*How did you cope with that?*

I couldn't go any lower. But there was nothing I could do but kill myself. And I tried overdosing myself and I stuffed that up too.



The sadness in her voice continued as she told me with much certainty that there would never be another marriage for her.

I knew I would never get married again. It was so important to me to have children but now I look back and think, what the hell did I want them for. They were so nasty.

*Do you still feel that same way now?*

No, I had to forgive them to take the pain away from me because I was hurting too much. I was broken. When he was abusing me, I even started cutting myself and I cut my face so badly that I had to wear scar makeup for years. Many times I had facial work done through cutting myself so much, because he broke me into tiny, tiny little fragments of pieces. I couldn't glue myself together.

*The public image versus the private reality*

In public, their men would usually behave like the *perfect* husband and this often resulted in the wife being blamed if things were not right within the marriage. A mixture of infidelity and alcohol featured in several of the cases, however all of them related to the hidden trauma that too many baby boomer women across the western world have endured: emotional abuse, verbal abuse and economic abuse (Kutin et al., 2017; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004).

Cynthia recalls a time when she questioned her own behaviour when she became aware of her husband's infidelity and a developing alcohol problem:

This wasn't the first time he'd been unfaithful either. So, you question yourself and you say, 'where have I gone wrong, was it my fault?'

On one occasion towards the end of her marriage, she attended an alcoholics' clinic because of her husband's drinking issues:

I went to this alcohol clinic place at the hospital and this woman looked at me and said, 'It's your fault he's drinking. You're an enabler!' And I'd gone there for help and I come out of there thinking 'FU. Now it's my fault again. It's my fault again. It's my fault again.'

As she continued to relay her experiences, Cynthia lifted her chin and her jaw jutted forward in a show of defiance.

He'd come home, open up the oven and say, 'What's for dinner?' I'd tell him we're having a roast and he'd go, 'I'm not eating that shit, come on kids, we're going out.'

I could see that her defiance only reflected her current mood. In fact, as she continued her defiance turned to defeat.

There were so many things that happened, but he never laid a hand on me. Never, he never hit me, but I didn't need to be hit because I'd been destroyed enough. When he'd say, 'I always wanted a woman with a flat stomach, and look what I got,' and that sort of thing. And that abuse is still going on now. He is still commenting about me twenty-seven years later.

Maria vividly recalled the emotional turmoil she endured at the end of her marriage:

I was very happy and busy with my daughter and then I found out he had someone else. I got a shock and other people knew before me. Yeah. I was a mess. It was horrible. [Be]cause we'd been together for

twenty years. Was it me? I didn't know what I'd done wrong. It was devastating, horrible.

*And how did you feel after that?*

Terrible, I had to go and get counselling. It was awful. And I did lose a lot of friends out of it. Most of my friends were his friends and when you're single again they don't want to know you. Still, a couple of them were good to me. I think they felt sorry for me.

Another factor for some was the partner who has a manipulating personality.

Shirley's first encounter with a controlling partner was as a teenager when she met her first real boyfriend:

My first real boyfriend was the most manipulative, overbearing... I can't even think of the right word. He was someone who was a, you know those women, they're afraid of their husbands. What's that word? They're like controllers, they're controllers. Yeah, that's that personality trait.

And that sense of being controlled soon turned to fear.

Well, he decided we were going to get married and blah, blah. And one day I thought, I'm not happy in this relationship so I told him it was over. He just said, 'Ah, no it's not. It's never over. I'll tell you when it's over,' and that kind of scary stuff.

Shirley had become aware that she was a victim of manipulation and control and recognised it as a behaviour that should not be tolerated by a woman. She then turned the conversation to the relationship between her and her first husband.

Believing that a marriage should be an equal partnership, she began to talk about her husband's reaction when, as a stay at home Mum, she undertook some university studies:

I did a part-time course at university and did like two lectures a week.

It was psychology. And yeah, it was really interesting. But my controlling husband... Number one, didn't like me doing that. Kept telling me all the time we were married, 'We'll never have anything until you go back to work.' But the minute I started to move towards being able to get another job, he didn't like it. 'Oh no, you don't really have to go to work,' and he'd start to think that he's losing control.

See I picked another controller. Total controller.

Her self-blame continued further into our discussion when she spoke about how fearful she was of her spouse as well as the fear she had of her mother for most of the years that she lived:

I was afraid of him. He never laid a finger on me; he didn't have to. I was scared stiff of him, just like I was scared of my mother. Terrified of my mother. Mum didn't have to say anything to me, I'd just get the look and the silent treatment. He did exactly the same. I choose these people.

His form of control was not only limited to blaming her when anything was wrong, it extended to all parts of their marriage and their social life.

He didn't even like me having friends. I'd go down the road to visit my girlfriend and he's ringing me, 'When are you coming home? Why are you down there for so long? What do you talk about?'

And when they were home:

‘Why are you on the phone all the time? Who are you talking to on the phone? What do you say?’ He’d be watching my mouth on the phone all the time. And trying to lip-read what I said. If we went to a wedding or something, I couldn’t talk to any men. And if somebody asked me to dance and he was off talking to somebody, I could feel the...he was very possessive and jealous.

Shirley believes there came a time when she began to feel numb about everything.

So that was sort of the start of maybe, and when somebody is jealous and possessive with you... after a while you stop being hurt and you stop crying and you stop feeling. And instead of feeling sad and awful about this person who you think should love you, you start to feel nothing. Nothing at all. And life just went on.

### ***The influence of the women’s movement***

When Shirley decided that the marriage would one day be over, she knew that her children would be her first consideration:

And all I could think about was that when my children are older, I’m gonna leave. I’ll just bide my time and as soon as my kids are older, I’ll be out of here.

As she gained emotional strength, she began to take back some control, albeit very surreptitiously:

I got a part-time job 'cause he kept telling me we'd never have any money till I got a job. So, I got a part-time job... but it paid me a little bit, so I had a bit of money of my own, which he didn't like. You know, that money was 'our' money. So, I squirreled some of it away.

When Shirley finally made the break from her husband, he still controlled her through having access to the children. So, she took further action:

I'd got a job and bought him out of the house. But when I met my second husband I decided to sell. Cause I got sick of him (1st husband) walking into the house at any time to check if I had anybody there. He still controlled me.

I deduced that the women either had a desire to speak to someone who was keen to listen without judgement, or they wanted to release the floodgates on a part of their lives that had been dammed up. Cynthia, was keen to share with me her previous reluctance to talk with people about the experiences that she describes further in this and subsequent chapters:

I've never talked about this with anyone before because I think people just don't want to listen to you.

My willingness to talk openly with Cynthia about some of my own experiences reinforced my position as an 'insider' of the subject group which I had initially selected based on my age, gender, cultural background and my level of self-identification with the group (Hayano, 1979).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter was to firstly identify the marriage patterns of my participants and see how they compare with studies in the 1950s and 1960s.

Secondly to look at the experiences of several of my participants who were subjected to various forms of domestic abuse which caused them to leave their marriages. I compare them with the women whose marriages ended for other reasons such as mutual agreement or death of a husband. Finally, I look for any signs that the growing activities of the women's liberation movement was starting to have an impact on their lives.

### ***Age at marriage***

My main findings revealed that women continued to marry at a young age, mostly in their late teens, or early twenties. The findings supported Brookes (2016), in her idea that although there were signs of a change in the teenage lifestyle which focused heavily on the new music and clothing fashion influences out of England, they continued to marry at a young age, "to the right boys, [and] have one or two children" (p. 344). The research carried out by Kiernan and Eldridge (1987), was focused entirely on young women in England and found that the same generation were generally following societal norms in regard to their age at marriage. As with the case in New Zealand, young women were still predominantly following the norms of the pre-women's liberation movement.

### ***Domestic abuse***

The findings of this section of my study, which identifies reasons abused women stay with their abusive spouses, partly support the findings of the Gelles (1976) study. He identified three reasons for this as; severity and frequency of abuse, the

amount of abuse the women suffered at the hands of their parents, and the amount of resources that the wife has at hand. My study identified that only one of the women suffered physical abuse, and she was also abused by her parents and sons. Primarily, the kind of abuse suffered by my participants was verbal and psychological in nature. The key finding of my research, however, was the amount (or lack) of resources that the women had available. In the three cases identified, (Cynthia, Margaret, and Maria), they felt their only source of survival once away from the marriage was the financial assistance of the State in the form of the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB). Prior to the introduction of the DPB in 1973, women had limited choices available to them as a financial safety net. As stated by Walby (1990), it was not until intervention by the state in the provision of an *income* to replace that of the husbands pay packet, that victims could escape various forms of domestic abuse.

In the Ulrich (1991) study, financial dependency was one of the reasons women do not leave relationships, but she found personal safety was the more critical issue for her women. My study identified Margaret as the participant who felt most in danger physically. Neither Cynthia nor Maria considered a threat to their personal safety as a major issue in their marriage. They were more concerned about potential psychological damage to themselves resulting from their suffering. Both women were prescribed anti-depressant medications by their doctors as a coping mechanism.

### ***Influence of the women's movement***

This final section of this discussion will be examined in depth in the next chapter. In this current chapter, my aim was to open the door to the influence of the women's movement, however the next chapter will examine how the movement's influence shaped the lives of my participants in the succeeding decades.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have journeyed with several of the women into their early marriages, and caught a glimpse of their transition to motherhood. Some paint a picture of the fulfilment of domestic expectations, and others of a time that crushed the very spirit and soul out of them. Some of the women who were married at a young age, now freely admit that it was *too young* and they *weren't ready for it*. Some of these women experienced spousal and familial abuse, loss of control of some or all financial aspects of their lives. Others expressed in their own ways, how they were *broken into little pieces*, or made to feel all the problems in their marriages were their fault. These women have struggled to put their lives back together and faced seemingly insurmountable challenges along the way.

Not all the women in my research talked of such dramatic challenges with abuse in their marriages. Four, so half of them, did talk freely about such experiences though, and tragically this figure lines up with the country's statistics on domestic violence. According to a New Zealand study of abuse of women by their partners, conducted by Leibrich, Paulin, and Ransom (1995), 62% of men in their 2,000 man study had committed some form of psychological<sup>37</sup> abuse against their partners.

As the women's stories continued and our discussions moved forward, I will show in the next chapter, how these broken spirits found an inner strength to rebuild and traverse the next part of their lives leading up to their retirement.

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<sup>37</sup> As a comparison, the rate for physical abuse was 35%.

## **Chapter 5. Journey to retirement**

### **Introduction**

As the year 2000 welcomed the new millennium, the oldest of the baby boomer generation were approaching retirement. This cohort who led the charge into women's paid employment outside the domestic environment, were also the first to retire in significant numbers (Kopanidis, Robinson, & Reid, 2014; Ray Karpen, 2017; Seaman, 2012; Winston & Barnes, 2007).

In this chapter I relay how my small sample of women fared in the later years of their working lives and into retirement. The dominant theme to emerge from their accounts of this time was their concern about financial survival in retirement. They expressed anxiety due to the permanent nature of leaving the workforce, and the inability to acquire further savings following, for example, an unforeseen crippling expensive event. Initially, I highlight how well prepared they believed themselves to be, both financially and emotionally for this transition. I follow this with a second theme about their post-retirement activities and include stories about the primary activities they perform on a regular basis, beyond their daily cooking and housekeeping.

The chapter contains discussions to help answer these research questions: (i) What characteristics define the transition from work to retirement for women of the baby boomer generation? (ii) What type of events in pre-retirement influence their retirement decisions? (iii) What needs are satisfied by retirement leisure activities?

A key goal of this chapter is to ascertain if the women are still affected by gender inequality issues, or whether they have managed to cast off the shackles of patriarchy that has held them in its clutches throughout their lives.

## **Literature**

The concept of “women’s retirement” had been all but ignored until the mid-1970s according to Dailey (1998), in her study, *When baby boom women retire*. She concluded that these women would never encounter the same retirement as their mothers, a retirement based on the structure of a man’s working experience; his role as the traditional and lifelong breadwinner with her retirement being dependent on the income of her husband. She had observed that for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women’s retirement had been a subset of the retirement experience of men, and a labour survey by the U.S. Department of Labour in 1994 (cited in Dailey, 1998), found that the pattern of participation of women in the labour force was beginning to take on similar characteristics as for men. Many women researchers challenged the notion that women’s retirement experiences would replicate that of the many generations of men before them (Calasanti, 1993; Dailey, 1998; Mavin, 2001; Moen, 2016; Price, 2000). Dailey believed that redefining the meaning of retirement was imperative. This proved to be the case according to Winston and Barnes (2007), in their study, *Anticipation of retirement among baby boomers*. The generation had in general chosen to abandon traditional retirement frameworks in favour of lifestyles which integrated work and leisure with a strong focus on self-fulfilment.

### ***Planning the nest egg***

Although scholarly research on women’s transition into retirement is limited (Pruchno, 2012), there has been significant forecasting about how financially secure baby boomer women could expect to be in their retirement (Grace et al., 2010). In the 1990s, a number of scholars, Easterlin, Schaeffer, and Macunovich (1993) and

Andrews and Chollet (1988) as cited in Dailey (1998) argued that baby boomers in general would retire under secure and favourable conditions. Easterlin et al., argued that baby boomers had adapted well to economic challenges such as reduced family size, and married women entering the workforce. In addition, Andrews et al., believed that due to women's participation in the labour force coupled with wage growth, any dire financial predictions were unwarranted. Excluded from their positive predictions, however, was one group of the cohort; "baby boom women who are single at retirement" and cautions that "poverty is an enduring problem for single elderly women regardless of work history" (Dailey, 1998, p. 82). According to Ray Karpen (2017) and Dailey (1998), economic forecasts show that less than twenty percent of women will look forward to a financially secure retirement. Ray Karpen qualifies this forecast as she highlights that studies focus primarily on married, well-educated and highly paid women and when gerontologists take into account, "race, class, ethnicity, education, health, work, and family histories", many women will experience financial struggles (Ray Karpen, 2017, p. 103)

Duberley and Carmichael (2016), in their research on *Career pathways into retirement in the UK*, revealed that many women are fearful of their financial situation on retirement. This was supported by one of their respondents who admitted she is, "hanging on by the skin of my teeth. So far as financials going forward there is a scare... You know day-to-day living I am sure I could do it but for me to continue to do the things that I want to do I have to continue working" (p. 592). Selene (2005) concluded that the key factor in the accumulation of a retirement fund is income, and suggests that before monies can be invested, they first, have to be earned. A key detail often overlooked focuses not so much on how much money is earned, but rather on a person's ability to earn the money. The idea of predicting

how much future income will be required to survive for an extended period is pure conjecture, just as there are the unforeseeable life events, such as illness or divorce, that will affect a woman's earning potential (Grace et al., 2010).

### ***All things are not equal***

There are many reasons why women are at a distinct disadvantage to men when they consider their options for a workable savings plan. According to Sawyer and James (2018), one of the main causes for women's lower success rate in amassing significant retirement capital is the heterogeneous nature of their work models. These models are marked by indicators like lower pay rates for women across their working life (Cruikshank, 2013), times in and out of the workforce (Slevin & Wingrove, 1995), work being part-time or casual which reduces the number of benefits included (Williamson & Higo, 2009), and a greater likelihood that they shoulder the responsibility for raising children as solo parents. A further point and key to the retirement landscape is that women's life expectancy is greater than men's by an average of at least five years (Hunter, Wang, & Worsley, 2007).

### ***The pleasure of leisure***

As women leave the full-time workforce in greater numbers due to the aging of the baby boom generation, there is more scholarly attention being paid to their post-retirement leisure activities (Everingham, Warner-Smith, & Byles, 2007; Liechty, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2012; Scherger, Nazroo, & Higgs, 2011). The last three decades have seen a greater focus on activities external to the household than previously (Nicolaisen, Thorsen, & Eriksen, 2012). They also suggest that there is a period of life when people consider themselves elderly but not old, and not yet at the stage where they become frail and dependent. The term for this period, "the third

age” was coined by Laslett ((1991) as cited in Nicolaisen et al., 2012) and represents an important new phase which, in some instances, may be short-lived and for others can often last up to twenty years or longer. As their health, mobility, and mental acuity remain sufficient for independent living, many seek a variety of new activities in addition to continuing with their previous leisure pursuits no longer affected by time constraints. The activities chosen are designed to meet many of their requirements; in particular, volunteering in community activities to satisfy a perceived societal obligation, taking part in studies or book writing as a means of mental stimulus, or involvement in sports or activity groups to meet their social needs.

How women approach their retirement activities is often dependent on their motivations to retire and this can depend on many factors. Shultz, Morton, and Weckerle (1998) theorise on the push and pull factors (work dissatisfaction or being pushed out of a job versus the attraction of personal *me* time), whereas others are more influenced by “so-called “jump” factors: leisure interests and hobbies” (Nicolaisen et al., 2012, p. 243). According to a study of British civil servants by Higgs, Mein, Ferrie, Hyde, and Nazroo (2002), they identified a probable jump factor being the desire to spend more time grand-parenting as a key reason for women deciding to leave the workforce.

Whether the plan is to spend time as a community volunteer, or learn to play a new instrument, or just to while away some time chatting to like-minded people, the freedom to choose their own activities is often the first time they feel a loosening of the binds of patriarchy. The reality is, however, that many covert signs of patriarchy remain. These are discussed later in the chapter.

My participants tell their own stories of their economic preparation for, and transition towards retirement and finally about what leisure time means to them.

## **Personal retirement experiences**

### ***The financial road to retirement***

When Shirley was widowed at the age of fifty-five, she was comfortable in the knowledge that she could retire in financial comfort within the next ten years. Unfortunately, she encountered a few problems (some of her own making) that would erase her sense of security:

When my husband died thirteen years ago, he said, ‘You realise you won’t have to go back to work.’ But the thing is, the money that was there, there was a time you could have lived on interest. But you need one hell of a lot of money now to live on interest.

Her money began to dwindle when she decided to travel to England for a working holiday. As I listened to her continuing narrative, I realised this was her self-reward for the twelve months she had cared for her ailing husband.

He [husband] was sick for nearly a year and it was hard for me as his full-time caregiver. So, after he died, I decided to visit England for six months. And I worked over there for a while, but I also spent a bit of money. I spent more than what I earned.

During my conversation with Margaret, I asked her how she had planned financially for retirement:

Raising four big boys on my own was a real struggle financially. But later I got into...started KiwiSaver<sup>38</sup> and then I had to give up work, which was very sad at sixty-seven, [be]cause I got this lung disease. And I just couldn't work any longer. I had pneumonia in both lungs. And I just went down overnight. I knew I had emphysema. I woke at 3 o'clock in the morning and I could only breathe in, I couldn't breathe out. And I was just gasp...gasp.. and lucky they had me on record with St John with 111.

*Was that a bit frightening for you?*

Terrified, I thought 'I'm gonna die'. But I wasn't scared [be]cause I'm in a good place. You know, I'm outside, the sky's up here, [she glances upwards towards the ceiling] I've got fresh air. 'Take me, I wanted to die'.

Karen never thought about retirement until she turned sixty-five. Throughout her career she felt she had achieved all of her goals, but it was only when looking at her finances that reality hit her:

I didn't even think about retirement at all, not for a long time. I did decide at one stage to get into KiwiSaver, but I still had my mortgage. It's not until then that I sat down and even looked at what I was going to do for my retirement. I had no funeral insurance. And no health insurance at that time because health insurance was far too expensive

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<sup>38</sup> KiwiSaver is a voluntary, work-based savings initiative with a range of membership benefits (KiwiSaver, 2020)



at that stage. So, I thought long and hard about it and discussed it with my daughter.

*And did you come up with a plan at that stage?*

Yep, she said ‘ok Mum, you retire, you know, officially, but what we’ll do is open a company, the two of us, and we’ll work it together...and that should bring us sufficient money for you to be able to save for your ultimate retirement.’ So, this is where I am today.

And at age seventy-two, in order to meet my mortgage, I have taken part-time work until the business pays us enough so I can retire.

Her lack of forward thinking during her work years and those when she was raising her family, reflect the views of Brucker and Leppel (2013) that procrastination and inertia were often the main contributors to a woman’s lack of financial planning.

Among my participants, Maria’s financial path to retirement had been carefully crafted with her progressive house purchases throughout the years following her divorce at age thirty-nine.

*Had you been preparing financially for retirement?*

I did, I had Kiwisaver and it would have been... um, I had it going for six years. But I’ve been really good with money. And of course, when I bought my first home, I only paid a pittance for it, see. And I sat on it for seventeen years, then when I sold it I did really well. After a couple of other homes I’ve bought and sold, I’ve come out with money and I own this little place now, no mortgage, nothing. So, I can have my pension once a fortnight and pay the necessary and that’s my money.

### *Thrift is the key*

One characteristic that has helped this next three women succeed in their quest for financial security is their thriftiness and their claimed savvy when it comes to managing their finances.

Nancy attributes her own saving habits to her parents who grew up pre-war in the United Kingdom, and who carried their need for frugality into their post-war life. Her smile broadens as she speaks fondly of her father's influence on her understanding of monetary matters:

They never had a lot of money but were always very thrifty post-war. And so, everything was about being very careful and about being very thrifty in your spending. If the building societies had a good offer on, he'd [her father] say, 'Oh you should put some money in this'. So, I'd started to save right from the word go when I'd started earning money as a teacher.

Nancy told me she has always been thrifty. She had no children and once her marriage came to an end, she only had herself to finance through life:

When I started teaching in 1974, there had been a big pay rise for teachers which I wasn't really aware of. It didn't really mean much to me. I spent very little money and lived very simply. I've never had an extravagant life. Very basic needs but it was nice to be able to afford a house. Rightly or wrongly. You've always got bills and worries.

Although she has lived a frugal life, she carries some guilt about the fortunate financial position she is in where she has her own mortgage-free home.

I do feel lucky and people complain about baby boomers. I can see where they're coming from and it was just the situations and the timing of things but, I'm glad that I made those steps when I did.

Recently widowed Sylvia had the advantage of a 'couple' relationship to build what was supposed to be their retirement nest egg but ultimately ended up being hers alone:

We were fortunate in that [my husband] was well paid and my own job was well paid, and between us we were putting in quite a lot of money, so when we retired we were able to do so without worrying too much about the future.

Barbara has now been divorced for twenty years but she and her husband were very frugal in their spending. That provided her with a strong foundation when she became single again:

My husband was an accountant, but we ended up with a mortgage of \$14,000 so it didn't take long, in a time of escalating incomes, to quickly clear it. But we were always quite frugal anyway. You see I worked, and we just saved. We had the odd, interesting trip, but not like the people now who go all over the place. We just really worked hard at saving. When we separated, we had this home, plus a rental and a holiday home, so I was able to keep this house. Then about fifteen years ago I bought a rental with my daughter. So that's my little nest egg and as a woman on my own, it's been easy to manage my money.

### *Coping with stress*

When events occur that create financial upheaval in mid-life, the window of time ahead to recoup lost monies is limited and a re-focus on financial survival techniques is necessary. Karen suffered a tremendous financial loss through the fraudulent activities of her lawyer:

*How did you feel about that [the fraud and loss of all her money]?*

At first, I was catatonic for a good four days. I couldn't even speak. I just lay in bed with tears pouring out of my eyes.

*What was the thing that worried you the most? Was it the fact that you'd been let down or suddenly you felt destitute?*

No, the betrayal was the worst, especially with a really, really good friend.

Margaret's working life came to an unplanned and abrupt end that had its own struggle and stresses:

*So, you had been ill for a while and continued to work. When you ended up in hospital, was that the end of your working life?*

Oh no...well almost! I'd just come out of hospital and they wanted me to go straight back to work. I said that I was too ill to work, and I didn't know if I'll ever work again. She [boss] started screaming at me 'You've just had three weeks rest in hospital, how long more do you want off work?'

*How did that make you feel when she went on like that?*

I was angry. I was angry [be]cause I was so sick. However, I went...so I said alright, I said F-you, but in full. And I said I'll start work on Wednesday. Which I did. I started on Wednesday and I was back in hospital by Sunday. When I finally got out of hospital again in another two weeks, I rang work and had pleasure telling them they'd worked me into the ground and I'm not a carer anymore, I'm a client.

Not all decisions to retire were entirely in the hands of the women themselves. It is one of the issues that elderly men and women often face as they approach retirement age. Shirley's plans were derailed when she was approaching her retirement. She planned to work until she turned seventy, however, her transition from work to retirement bore no resemblance at all to her intentions:

I stopped working when I was sixty-eight. I was going to work until I was seventy, but we got a new manager and she made life so difficult for me.

*In what way was it difficult?*

The area of the building we worked in was like a dungeon with no daylight, and a lot of women worked there. So, not the healthiest atmosphere. And then we were expected to work overtime as well. So, for once in my life, I really stood up for myself, and actually that was a bad move, [be]cause they don't like you standing up for yourself. I wondered at the time, if I was a man, would they have treated me the same.

*So, how did you handle the situation from there?*

She made life so difficult that I went to the Union and that made her even worse. I went to see a lawyer and he was near to useless. And all this time I was fighting on my own, with what seemed like no support from anyone. The lawyer told me I had real grounds for personal grievance but it's going to cost me x-amount of dollars and I may be lucky to get x-amount of dollars back.

*How were you feeling at this point?*

I'd gone on sick leave. That's what I'd decided to do. That's what the lawyer told me, 'Go on sick leave. Don't go back in there because they will hound you.' So, I went on sick leave and my doctor was very sympathetic and she said, 'Look what it's doing to you. Do you really need that job that much?'. I told her that I didn't have much money and she just said 'Well really, is it worth it? It's going to kill you [be]cause you're in a state.'

She continued with further details of the experience and then finished with:

So, I went back to the Union and laid out some figures of what I would walk away with which included all my accrued sick leave. They negotiated with the company and I got paid out. I just wanted it finished. I just wanted it done. They gave me a confidential pay-out in a lump sum, so I upgraded my car.

*So, that would have left you with some funds left in the bank for your retirement?*

Well, not really. I was booked to go on a cruise, but I thought I really shouldn't be going because I really needed that money. It was quite a

bit of money [be]cause I was going around Central America. And I thought bugger it, I'm going, so I did. I went and started the New Year with an upgraded car and that's when I sat down and thought, 'God, I really don't have a lot of money'.

As the retirement preparations were being completed, or the true reality of minimal retirement funds was realised, the move away from the paid workforce began. Now faced with a period in their lives where leisure hours needed to be addressed, the women discussed their thoughts on retirement.

***It's not leisure, it's purpose***

Sylvia is fortunate to have a financially secure future. She is not prepared however, to live a life in retirement without a purpose. She continues to work part-time in paid employment, along with many hours of voluntary work for worthwhile causes. To satisfy her own need to be mentally active, she is researching a new book that she has had in the pipeline for at least a year. For her, the desire to work is not for any monetary reward, but rather to benefit from the mental stimulus that she enjoys.

I would go nuts if I wasn't actively involved and engaged in learning something new or doing some research. I mean I love doing the book research but if I was just getting up in the morning and thinking, 'What am I going to do today?' Oh god, it sounds like hell to me, a life of inactivity or a life of, what's the word I'm trying to think of? A non-purposed life I suppose, where you're just frittering away your time.

Sylvia has experienced a physically and mentally active life, especially considering her career in journalism. Having moved away from the stress and pressure of her

corporate life, she fully intends to find purpose in her retirement activities. We talked about an innate desire to ward off the progression of time and aging by maintaining a high level of mental acuity and keeping the brain stimulated. She then offered the following observation:

I think it's more prevalent in women too. I know of a lot of couples where the woman is bright and busy running around and the husband's pretty moribund.

I discussed voluntary work and leisure activities with all of the participants and each one had their own approach to their post-retirement activities. Nancy put a lot of focus on her life as a single woman and how she can pivot in any direction on a whim with her choice of activities:

Being single I can do things without having to consider another person. I love bush-walking...I sing in a choir...I volunteer a couple of days a week at a native plant nursery, and also sometimes at an off-shore bird sanctuary and those aren't necessarily the things a partner would want to do...oh, and I'm learning to play the piano...

Maria's life story tells of a woman who has worked relentlessly in her career as a nurse and she shows no signs of putting her feet up in retirement. As I listened to her talk about her "work" since she left the paid workforce, I could see the joy on her face as she spoke proudly of her weekly activities:

I volunteer quite a bit at the RSA when they put on morning teas and lunches for different groups, and we often do the refreshments for funerals. I always make the fruit loaves when there's a funeral. But I spend most of my time volunteering at a local op-shop and I do that



most days of the week. I could never do that if I had a husband here. I just love being independent.

I saw a look of guilt on Cynthia's face when I raised the subject of volunteer work. Once I heard her response, I could see she was explaining her lack of commitment to the community:

I spend lots of time looking after my grandchildren while my son and his wife work. I love being with the kids, I enjoy playing the grandma role, and they give me a bit of pocket money too so that helps a lot.

Shirley unashamedly admits that her volunteering days are in her past:

I used to do a lot of Plunket stuff when the kids were small, but I don't really volunteer now. I answered an ad a while ago to help stroke victims with conversations which I thought I'd like, but trying to contact the organiser was a nightmare, so I gave up. Mostly it's just being free to do whatever I want, whenever I want without having to think of anyone else.

But for her current poor state of health, Margaret would be highly active in community projects, however she is now limited to activities that minimise the stress on her breathing:

The thing I enjoy most is the U3A<sup>39</sup> meetings that I go to...but the movies, I go to this small local theatre that have some alternative type movies, but mostly just normal movies and I really enjoy it. And I go

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<sup>39</sup> Uni of 3A. The third age is seen as a great opportunity for sharing one's interest and knowledge. It is during retirement that people can put into practice the idea of community of those who seek a greater understanding of life (U3A Birkenhead, 2021)

on my own sometimes, because I know I can go whenever I like. I just pray that my health lets me keep doing it.

Barbara, a strong-willed retired teacher admits to having enjoyed a life of both hard work and raising her children, however on retirement she treasures the freedom to choose how she spends her time.

An important part of retirement for me is the freedom. Freedom of time, freedom of doing whatever I choose to do, whenever I want to do it. I do belong to some singing clubs, especially related to the Church, choir and all that sort of thing. I'm not much into gardening. I just prefer to do things that stimulate my brain. I wrote and published a kid's book once and I've always said I'll write a second book one day. Maybe this interview will give me the motivation to get on with it.

Leisure time for some can seem like a wishful dream, and Karen finds quiet moments very rare:

I don't get much time for leisure. I am still working part-time and trying to get this business with my daughter up and running, but if I do take some time out, I love to curl up with a good book. But that's only me, because I'm the one who sets my boundaries.

### ***If I could turn back time***

When I asked Sylvia if there was one important lesson she learnt since leaving full-time employment, her response reflected a similar attitude to some of the other women I interviewed. They wished they had been more outspoken about their desires to advance in their careers and in other areas. I asked them if they could go

back to age thirty, what would they change? Shirley responded by telling herself “Don’t be such a wimp, Be stronger”.

Karen’s focus was on greater awareness:

To be more aware of the ramifications of providing for yourself later in life. Yeah, just to be more aware that particularly being a baby boomer. Particularly I think that I could have been made more aware of, like the explosion of the ‘grey generation’.

Sylvia’s eyes stared out of the window, she slumped slightly on the couch when I asked her what she might have done different. A look of disappointment spread across her face as she spoke thoughtfully about her working life.

Possibly I didn’t back myself enough in my career. I remember [the project] I was running was immensely successful and I was working in the same building with the guy who ran [a similar project] and I heard at one stage he was angling to be given some shareholding [in his project], which I think he got. And it must have cushioned his retirement quite well. I never knew what he was earning as opposed to what I was earning, but I bet it was more.

*Why did you accept that situation?*

I was a bit too reticent in my life sometimes. I could have capitalised more or pushed myself better or done better if I’d just waved my hand a bit more and said ‘me, me’. Instead of being a bit self-effacing and things. Yes, I could have been a bit more assertive in my life. And I put that down to growing up in the ‘50s and being a good girl. You

know, one was a good girl then and you didn't make noise, you behaved yourself and did what you were told.

*For some the struggle never ends*

Some of my women participants are still coping with some negative aspects of their marriages many years after their marriage ended. The passing of time and their transition to retirement still fails to set them free from their past. Cynthia is unable to break contact from her ex-husband and he continues to taunt her:

With everything he put me through, the abuse is still going on now.

*The abuse you mean..?*

Yes, the mental torture, it still goes on now on a [Services] website that him and I are still members of. I brought it up [the website] the other day and he had made shitty comments about me. And he's just got married for the fourth time. So why is he still commenting about me twenty-seven years later?

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the actions and events that influenced the women as they prepared and transition from the paid workforce to retirement. The chapter compares the retirement experiences of a small group of baby boomer women as it relates to the literature on this generation of women retiring in the twenty-first century.

Also included is a discussion on whether women's freedom from a life of institutionalised patriarchy is myth or reality.

### *Interpretation of the findings*

While the career paths and job choices varied among the women who were interviewed for this study, their retirement pathways were influenced by at least one of the following themes which are described in detail in the following sections.

#### *Financial preparedness for retirement*

Preparing financially for retirement is a concept that many people ignore throughout their working years (Slevin & Wingrove, 1995). For some, it is an unconscious decision to ignore the reality that they will eventually leave the paid workforce and be reliant on the state's "easy palliative [and] secret place for comfort" (Selnow, 2004, p. 46), that is government superannuation, and any small savings they may have on cessation of their employment.

Several of the women I interviewed had moved around considerably over their working lives and according to Brucker and Leppel (2013) the middle working years are "an accumulation phase during which individuals stockpile for retirement" (p. 2). Karen had worked in three different countries as well as New Zealand during which time she had never considered her retirement. "I didn't even think about retirement at all, not for a long time". The death of Shirley's husband after a long period of illness left her feeling financially secure in her mid-fifties, but then she made some unwise decisions to travel without considering her future security. "I went to England for six months. And I worked...but I spent more than I earned". Her funds reduced significantly when she returned home to carry out some home renovations, "[I had a] new kitchen done, new carpets upstairs, tiles and underfloor heating". Selnow (2004, p. 45) suggests that "there is no immediate tangible reward" when saving for

retirement. While both of these women were travelling, and moving in and out of the workforce, neither thought about their retirement

Maria remained aware of her need to build a retirement fund and credits her savings ability with her success. “I was always really good with money”. However, as nurses and caregivers to the elderly, both Maria and Margaret’s work were low on the pay-scale. Margaret’s love of the work was her motive to continue. “I loved working but money-wise, it was a pittance...but it was money for my retirement”.

Being able to retire in relative comfort financially is an achievable target and not necessarily a privilege only for the wealthy. Three of the women interviewed showed signs of satisfaction with their financial status in retirement. These can vary from finding comfort in their post-retirement activities, such as volunteer work, ability to travel at will, or take part in hobbies and activities solely for personal pleasure. Some comments that emerged from the interviews of the happy and contented retirees were, “I have a frenetic life really, I just join more things whenever I get spare time...but it leads to a more satisfying life, I have no regrets”. There appears to be a lot of importance placed on having the ability to choose when and where to spend leisure time, “I love going to the movies or ballet, I can just book a ticket whenever I want without thinking ‘can I afford it?’”

#### *Desire to work beyond retirement age*

There are many motivating factors that encourage women to continue working beyond age sixty-five. For some, it is the fear of loneliness as a retiree, so they choose to retain their work-life social circle. For others it is purely a financial decision. In many cases however, the decision is not always in their own hands.

Shirley’s decision to work until she turned seventy was thwarted by an act of ageism

following a work restructure. Her working circumstances became untenable once her employer increased the working hours expected from the staff, (who were working in dreary and unhealthy working conditions), to where she could no longer carry out her duties. “This new manager made life so difficult for me. I got the union involved and that made it worse.” Margaret, on the other hand, was forced to retire because of poor health. These types of cases are not typical for the majority of retirees, even though two of my eight respondents were forced into unplanned retirement. This may change in the current climate of Covid-19 however, where many jobs have been lost in some industries, and severely cut-back in others. Although the entire workforce will be affected, the older workers may find themselves first out of the door.

### *Health and safety*

When people reach milestone points in their life, understanding their ability to cope with the accompanying ups and downs is critical. One issue that seems to be forefront in the minds of retirees is their current and continuing health status according to Hunter et al. (2007). During the interviews with my group of participants, the matter of their own health and well-being, although mentioned in passing, did not rate high on their list of concerns. Most of the women considered themselves to be in very good health which is in line with the thinking of Drewery and Bird (2004) and this may result from their attitude to not only maintaining a healthy lifestyle, but also simply the fact of still feeling young, “I’m seventy next birthday but I feel seventeen. I don’t feel any different in my brain.” Only one of my group (Margaret) had any health concerns. She had been suffering with COPD for a little over ten years and is now approaching the end stage of the illness. In one way, she feels cheated out of her retirement but on the other hand she has an extremely

calm attitude to what she knows is an inevitable end. “I feel proud that I’ve got as far as I have. I’ve got a beautiful little home that I love...it’s all precious to me”.

Personal freedom is important to my group of women. As single women, they enjoy the benefit of making all their decisions based on what suits their purposes. Nancy volunteers and occasionally travels where and when it suits her. Maria spends many hours each week volunteering for her favourite charity groups, Margaret is a keen movie-goer and enjoys lunching with friends when her health allows. Barbara belongs to many clubs and is always extremely active in her leisure pursuits. Sylvia both works and has been heavily involved in volunteer work since her husband passed away. They all now have the freedom to plan their activities to suit their own preferences. Perhaps they are now freed from the early years of institutionalisation and male dominance. From a personal perspective they may feel this is so, however, they all draw on the government’s superannuation every fortnight, and Karen’s loss of money and Cynthia’s mortgage keep them both under their bank’s watchful eye.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of a standard path to retirement for single women in the twenty-first century is rejected in this study. The idea that they have thrown off the chains of institutionalisation and patriarchy in favour of a truly unencumbered freedom is to a certain degree, a reality. Many gains have been achieved since the 1950s and with a significant injection of help by the feminist movement several decades later. An increasing number of women, regardless of class, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sexual identity, have the opportunity now to determine their own transition into retirement. How they negotiate that transition will depend primarily on decisions made in later life. However, and in no small way, other factors still wield significant



influence, from the many events in their earlier years to more recent external events and circumstances that have shaped their lives.

In this chapter I have concentrated on three themes: a) financial preparedness for retirement, (b) a desire to work beyond retirement age, (c) post-retirement work and leisure. On each of the themes, my participants conveyed a range of thoughts relating to their own paths to retirement.

My research shows that all the participants have trodden a different path in their journey to retirement. Some have traversed a smooth and calm landscape, whereas others have negotiated a terrain dotted with rocky outcrops and deep gullies carved out by the icy waters of discontent. Each had their own understanding of what retirement would mean for them. Although they all see the goal of freedom being the reality, they are all vulnerable to the quirks and foibles of nature and business. The one unknown for all, except maybe Margaret, is their life expectancy. Some may live for four or five years and others may still have several decades ahead. The same applies for their mental and physical health. And along with these uncertainties, they are also faced with a dilemma concerning their finances. Although they were feeling joyous with what they see as their day-to-day freedoms, they are all walking a tightrope of uncertainty as the ageing process continues to follow its natural course.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

### **Beginnings**

I began this research when I realised that for many decades, I had been haunted by an event in a school classroom in 1963. This event was my introduction to an ideology that formed an indelible impression on my mind and journeyed with me through my life. It involved the perception that the role of women was of lesser importance than for men, in education, business, and life in general. Perhaps a thirteen-year-old girl's failure to be appointed Dux of school does not rate as one of the country's great catastrophes, but for that girl, it initiated a life course that would meander through almost sixty years of gendered mixed-messaging. In recent years I began to wonder if the pattern of gender discrimination I had experienced as a child, was similar in any way to the experiences of other women of my generation. It was this nagging curiosity that prompted me to reflect on the lives of similar women who had been born into the post-war baby boom generation, who had negotiated marriage, motherhood, disrupted working lives and ultimately retiring as, or soon to be, single women once again.

I chose to perform semi-structured interviews with the group of women I had selected. Those interviews revealed several themes as they spanned the decades from the end of their compulsory education in their teens, to their current retirement. There is a lack of chronological life-long studies on this generation of baby boomers, and due to the unique nature of life in post-war New Zealand, no other generation will replicate the stories of these women. Unsure of how the discussions would evolve, I allowed the participants stories to develop the thesis rather than to steer the participants in a pre-determined direction.

From the first interview, I was both stunned and saddened by the dramatic stories that began to unfold. Those who experienced childhoods shattered, educations ignored, marriages in chaos, were juxtaposed with happy homelives, storybook childhoods, and happy-ever-after marriages. These extreme contrasts within a small group has sparked my curiosity about the extent of variation across the whole population. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the study, and a brief summary of future research possibilities.

### *The first twenty years*

In Chapter 3, a mix of schooling experiences and early work-life stories emerged to place the issue of gender inequality at the forefront. My initial findings identified an aspect of their lives that was counter to my own. I was surprised to find that none of the participants regretted limiting their education to high school. Save for an apprenticeship and a secretarial course, the only participant who did advance to university study, was educated in the UK. They appeared to accept the premise that women's work on leaving school followed a similar idea that was suggested for teachers by Watson (1966), that being "[a] short adventure between school and marriage". I also thought that the lack of parental inspiration and interest paid to some of the girls' schooling, reflected not so much the post-war societal influences, but the ongoing influence of their parent's pre-war ideology around girl's education. Like many other young women who moved into the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s, their traditional choices of occupations dominated my group of participants. Nurses and teachers topped the list with secretarial, an apprenticeship and the armed services rounding out the careers that they chose. I found that most adhered to the

gendered norms for women of the day. Advancement into higher education was an option for only one participant and the majority worked only for a short time before marriage and motherhood. These findings were in line with existing studies of women's lives.

### ***Dreams and nightmares of domesticity***

An expected life of domestic bliss filled with Plunket-nurse visits, playcentre and kindergarten coffee groups, and school committees began to take shape in Chapter 4, as the women settled into their 30s and 40s. Some of the women's marriage and family experiences matched their expectations, however, others soon experienced the shift from teenage freedoms to a stifled life within a male-dominant marital environment.

As their lives continued, there was a mix of circumstances for the women; some with many years of happiness and stability, while others endured harrowing experiences. This part of their lives was beginning to be influenced by the women's liberation movement, and the changes in Government support for separated and divorced women which provided the financial security to enable them to leave unsafe marriages with their children. The down-side, of course, was the way they were harshly viewed by some sections of society because of their *solo mum* status.

### ***Life turns a shade of grey***

In Chapter 5, I document their move towards retirement. It was difficult to compare the experiences of these women with previously constructed retirement models as these were based on men's retirement. Writing this chapter required examining women's opportunities to amass retirement savings, and create their own course towards their exit from the paid work force. It became apparent early on that this

would not be a “one size fits all” exercise. I found that not only were the working circumstances for each woman unique, but so was their concept of what retirement means. One aspect that I believe has been overlooked, is the disconnect between the way women are supposed to prepare financially for retirement, and the reality of the actual process. Even within the institution of marriage, it is generally the wife’s responsibility to juggle work with childcare, to the ultimate detriment of her long-term earning and saving capacity. And ultimately when they could find paid work, their lack of higher education often forced them into low paying jobs. By default, such work is often accompanied by uncertain security and very few avenues for promotion. This is the position that Shirley found herself in, being forced out of her job at an age where finding replacement work with few skills became extremely difficult.

Even now in their retirement, most of the women have never considered that gender inequality played any part in their current state of preparedness. Those who made good with their lives, totally attribute their success to their good financial and management skills. By comparison, those who are not so financially secure, tend to say that lack of opportunity, or poor decision making on their part has put them in the position in which they now find themselves.

Now as retirees, the research identified the gendering in their retirement activities. I like to think it reflects women’s care and concern for family members (grandchildren), other people in the community (highlighted by the extensive volunteering activities undertaken by the participants), and the environment (volunteering at plant nursery and the off-shore bird sanctuary). Although none of the participants are currently caring for ageing or infirm family members, several have done so in the past.

## *Reflections*

As I neared the end of my analysis of these women's life stories, I came to realise that Sylvia was the only one who had experienced and expressed her views of the gender disparities that had affected her life (for example, in not being gifted a shareholding in the organisation where she worked when her male colleague was). Margaret viewed her experience with the bank manager as a slight against solo mothers and his patriarchal attitude to siding with the husband in a marriage breakdown, regardless of the events that led to their needing to split bank accounts. She never saw the behaviour as an anti-feminist act or was even aware that there were activist groups who were trying to improve women's lives. For her, and many women of the baby boom generation who were parents in the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement was a background rumbling that did not appear to influence their thinking about their own situations, i.e. they accepted the inequality as "natural".

I am surprised to find that so many of this generation of women saw the front line of the women's movement pass them by with seemingly no influence or, in their eyes, no effect on them personally. This of course is not the case as the vanguard of the women's movement definitely paved the way for many societal changes and "consciousness raising" among their less aware sisters. These have benefitted women significantly since the early 1970s.

As I listened to my participants stories, I was surprised by some of their acceptance of the put-downs of women, not only in workplaces, government and banking institutions, and other public spaces, but in their families' acceptance that the wife and mother was not only there to serve, but she was also there to abuse.

I believe the manner in which the interviews were conducted enabled the women to expand on their ideas as they let the conversation move in various directions, but all the time flowing freely from their hearts. By stepping back from a structured style of interview, the participants were able to sense that they controlled the narrative.

Methodologically, this research alerted me to the lack of previous research that followed a chronological path across a lifespan and focusing on gender inequality. Stories of gendered events dotted the decades, but nothing showed how women had coped throughout their lives, always feeling like the illusions of wedded bliss, glowing motherhood, and glass ceiling shattering corporate achievements were something that only happened to other women.

I was expecting to find those women who had cruised through life, to be in a better financial position and have a more positive attitude to retirement. Conversely, I expected those who have struggled through life with unhappy or unfortunate life events, to be really struggling in retirement and have a less positive attitude to life in retirement. What I did find is that there is no guarantee of a straight-forward retirement just because opportunities have presented themselves at opportune times. I also found that those who have struggled through the years of motherhood, and often as a solo mother, have a far stronger sense of independence, feeling like they don't have to rely on other people to help them navigate their retirement.

### ***Limitations and recommendations for future research***

Their stories were diverse for such a small group. Although the participants were randomly selected, I was surprised to see how many of them had been affected by some form of abuse by their male partners or other family members. This had me

questioning society in general. Would a larger sample (say a hundred) of women based on these same criteria have replicated the result in the same proportions, or would findings be randomly skewed purely through the *luck of the draw*?

I understand that the experiences of my participants are not typical of all women of this cohort, in fact if I had included women whose profile reflects differences in class, race, religious beliefs and marital status, the findings would project a different landscape altogether.

As of 2020, the women of the leading edge of the baby boomer cohort have reached the age of 65. Perhaps a further study of the trailing edge of the cohort may produce a variation in the findings than was evident with their *older sisters*. I believe the opportunity exists, and the scope is extensive, for future research designed to include a greater diversity of the population.

### ***Final thoughts***

I have arrived at the end of this thesis with mixed feelings. As I reflect on my own experience, my expectation was that the women who shared their stories would have a similar awareness of the feminist movement's influence and effect on their lives as I have. This was not the case. For some it is as though the movement never existed. Others may have been aware of its impact but were unable to relate it to their own lives. Several were aware of the positive achievements women have gained over the decades since the 1960s and 1970s.

This research has taught me some things that I had never foreseen at the start of the project. When conducting qualitative studies, relying on assumptions or having



preconceived ideas is a mistake. The key is to always have an open mind, and with the only expectation being that you will likely be surprised.

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## Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Date: 05 February 2019

Dear June Terry

Re: Ethics Notification - **4000020531 - MA Thesis - Social Anthropology  
BoomerGEDdon - Myth or Generational Scare Tactic**

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

**A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:**

*"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research."*

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 85271, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)."*

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

**Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise**

Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 F 06 355 7973  
E [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz) W <http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz>

## Appendix B: Information Sheet



MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES  
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TE KURA PŪKenga TANGATA

### Reimagining Women's Retirement: Baby Boomers are Blazing a New Path in the Third Age

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

##### Who am I?

My name is June Terry and I am a Master of Arts student in Social Anthropology at Massey University in Albany. I was born into the baby boomer generation (defined as being born from 1947 to 1964) and am interested in discussing with other women of this generational cohort, several aspects of their lives from mid-life through to retirement.

##### Information about my project

The aim of this project is to understand the experiences of single (includes divorced, widowed) baby-boomer women as they left the paid work force and transitioned into retirement. The experiences I am especially interested in are:

- preparation for [retirement](#)
- [housing situation](#)
- change in lifestyle and identity

Invited participants will take part interviews in which I will ask the following kinds of questions:

- Your working roles, and your various roles as you grew up in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s?
- [How](#) you prepared yourself personally and financially for retirement?
- What is a typical day for you as a retired person?
- Your current home and any thoughts you may have about your future housing options?
- With the benefit of hindsight, what would be the one piece of advice that you could give to your 30-year-old self, and why?

##### My invitation to you

You are invited to take part in my research involving a one-hour interview with me which will take place at either your home or a location of your choice.

The interview will be voice recorded with your permission. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will take notes instead. The interview will be open-ended and based loosely on the above areas, but not constrained by them. If you wish to discuss certain occurrences, [actions](#) or opinions of your experience, you are welcome to do so.

Once I have reviewed the interview data, I may request a follow-up interview to cover any points that I wish to know more about.

In total, participants will be asked to give one to two hours to the project.

¶

### Data management and confidentiality¶

Data from recorded interviews will be used in the thesis; however, to ensure that your privacy is protected, I will use pseudonyms and alter some characteristics to avoid you being identified in the report.¶

Following standard practice, all voice recordings and transcripts will be kept in a safe and secure place. The information may be disseminated through academic conference presentations, and academic and community publications.¶

A summary of the research findings will be made available to you. I will inform you of its accessibility once it is available. We will discuss these details during our interview.¶

### Your rights as a participant¶

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:¶

- → Decline to answer any particular questions.¶
- → Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.¶
- → Withdraw from the study at any time.¶
- → Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.¶
- → Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher.¶
- → Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.¶

### Questions and contact information¶

If you have any further questions on the research project, please do not hesitate to contact either me or my supervisors at the following locations:¶

¶ June Terry¶ 021-441-067¶ juneterry@xtra.co.nz	¶
¶	¶
Dr-Graeme MacRae¶ (09)-414-0800 ext. 43474¶ G.S.Macrae@massey.ac.nz	Dr-Robyn Andrews¶ (06)-356-9099 ext. 83653¶ R.Andrews@massey.ac.nz

¶

*"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, telephone 06-3569099 ext. 85271, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)."*¶

# Appendix C: Consent Form



¶

## *Reimagining Women's Retirement: Baby Boomers are Blazing a New Path in the Third Age*

¶

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet that has been given to me. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. ¶

1. → I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded. ¶
2. → I agree/do not agree to the use of the data in academic conference presentations, academic and community publications ¶
3. → I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet. ¶

¶

### **Declaration by Participant:** ¶

¶

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to take part in this study. ¶  
→ → [print full name] ¶

¶

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ ¶

¶

**Researcher:** June Terry ¶

¶

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ ¶