GIRLS INTERRUPTED

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES THAT WOMEN FACE WHEN RE-ENGAGING WITH 'INTERRUPTED' EDUCATION?

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my late sister Mary Kelly, who always led by example, achieving her master's degree in 2010 and who had against all odds embarked on PhD research in recent years. I thank Mary for her assertion that education is not about intelligence, it is about opportunity. I know she would be proud that I have now taken my educational opportunities all the way to master's level.

ABSTRACT

The objective of my research was to uncover the challenges and barriers encountered by women when re-entering education after interruptions. The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of women's lives and the factors that often contribute to their unequal access to educational opportunities compared to men. Qualitative data was collected through nine interviews with women who returned to tertiary education at a non-traditional age, and these accounts were analysed through a feminist perspective. The intention was to elucidate how various forms of oppression and disadvantage intersected to create a non-linear educational trajectory for women. By adopting a feminist standpoint, the study recognised the participants' unique positioning as returning learners and highlighted the valuable insights their perspectives, opinions, and experiences provided regarding the gendered power dynamics that influence women's educational outcomes.

The research findings revealed that patriarchal gender norms, class-based stratification systems, and insufficient support to address disadvantage converge to impose limitations on women, often resulting in interrupted educational journeys. The results shed light on how women's private and societal status influences their access to and involvement in education. Women's education continues to face challenges and barriers caused by a classist, patriarchal society.

This suggests the presence of a power dynamic within the social and structural framework that adversely affects women. While policy changes have acknowledged the necessity of establishing a more equitable educational path for marginalised groups, deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and inequitable class practices hinder their complete realisation in the educational sphere. The study emphasised the importance of recognising and acknowledging the burdens placed on women, the resultant challenges to achieving educational equality at both personal and institutional levels, and the need for governmental involvement. This thesis contends that despite the existence of policies and procedures aimed at mitigating educational disadvantages in marginalised groups; for women class, and gender-based disparities persist.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This research set out to investigate the nature of the barriers and challenges that women face when re-engaging with 'interrupted' education. The motivation for the study was borne out of my own experiences of returning to education as a mature student and of my observations of women's lives as we juggle multiple gender and class-based roles in the pursuit of education. The significance of this research lies in the fact that three decades since my own experience of interrupted education, it is evident that women continue to encounter inequality within the educational domain. I believe that there existed a traditional life course trajectory, which saw education take a linear path from primary to secondary school and on to third level, before employment. I suggest that in recent years this has become more fluid, with women often returning to education later. My primary interest lies within a female context, largely due to my own lived experiences, the experiences of many of my female peers, and an awareness of the disadvantages experienced by my research cohort who have fought to for their education within the Irish system. I also wished to give a voice to mature student women in Ireland because during my research I found there exists a dearth of these stories from a student population that is now more diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity.

The study findings demonstrate that women's education is hindered by patriarchal gender norms, class-based stratification, and inadequate support. These factors create barriers and interruptions in women's access to education. Although policies aim to address educational inequality, deeply ingrained attitudes and class disparities prevent their full implementation. The study emphasises the significance of recognising the challenges women face and the need to strive for educational equality at personal, institutional, and governmental levels. However, despite existing policies, class and gender disparities persist in women's education.

In this chapter, I provide the rationale and overview of the study, my methodological approach, and the thesis structure.

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Rationale for the Research

The motivation for this investigation emerged from my own personal experience of being a mature student multiple times on my educational journey towards a master's degree. Among my female peers, I noticed a commonality experience as we navigated lives impacted by relationships, children, work, and education. It became evident to me that various forces, stemming from structural and societal power dynamics, converged to interrupt women's preferred path to education.

As a student teacher enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Further Education in 2021, and as a mature student myself, I observed that my classes were predominantly comprised of women who were pursuing education and qualifications long after completing their secondary education. This led me to question the reasons behind this phenomenon and the factors influencing our collective pursuit of education at a non-traditional age.

Elman and O'Rand (2007) suggest that educational attainment is deeply rooted in early life experiences and influenced by intergenerational transmission of resources and circumstances. I found resonance with this notion and believed that education ideally follows a life course pattern, where university studies should follow secondary school without interruption by barriers or life events that take precedence over learning. However, my anecdotal perspective as a woman in the field of education revealed the existence of barriers that hindered a linear educational trajectory. While I witnessed and personally benefited from improvements in women's educational opportunities, I remained aware that obstacles to a seamless educational path persisted. This study aimed to uncover and explore these barriers and challenges.

Overview of the Study.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the challenges and barriers, stemming from structural and societal factors, that contribute to women experiencing interruptions in their educational journeys. To address this research question, I opted to employ semi-structured qualitative interviews with nine women who had returned to education at a mature age. Through these interviews, I aimed to ascertain the significance of education in the participants' lives and enquire about their ambitions and plans after completing secondary education. This

information helped me determine if the participants had encountered a lack of access to education earlier in life, which potentially motivated their decision to return at a later stage. Once their motivation to return had been established, I posed questions regarding the barriers they encountered and their educational aspirations. To maintain neutrality and avoid leading the participants, I saved a question about their experiences as women in education for the end of the interview. This question sparked extensive discussion about the inequality most participants faced due to gender role expectations. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to explore the challenges they encountered in accessing and engaging in education, as well as to share their subjective thoughts, feelings, and opinions on the personal and societal factors that influenced them. These discussions yielded several themes, which are further discussed in Chapter Four: Thematic Analysis of the Research, revealing both structural and societal influences on women's educational journeys.

Methodological Approach

My thesis is putting forward the argument that women experience inequalities in their ability to pursue education in a manner and time of their preference. My very premise then is predicated on an assumption of a systemic and cultural inequality between the sexes. The research data further proposes that socioeconomic or class backgrounds play a function in this experience. My research then, needed to address the intersectionality of class, race, gender, age, disability and how these factors meet to disadvantage women. To this end I employed a feminist theoretical and ethical framework that is discussed in Chapter Three: Methodology. Adopting a feminist standpoint methodology led me to prioritise and give prominence to women's narratives, resulting in the decision to include each woman's story in much detail. Although this has resulted in exceeding the thesis word count, I believe it is important that the participants are adequately represented, rather than parts of their stories being excluded due to word limitations. Although, this is not a biographical work, I wish to borrow from Ware, in the assertion that "… the personal is political, and that same attention must be paid to the daily lives of [of women] as to their more public achievement" (2010, p. 414). To do otherwise would have compromised my epistemological belief that the truth lies in women's lived experiences.

I employed Feminist Standpoint Theory to access women's stories and reveal how their lives are constrained by forces outside their control. I was drawn to highlight the importance of individual private life stories in my research by a recollection from my grandmother's funeral when someone commented how she "had lived a very quiet life but her children were a great consolation to her". Knowing the circumstances of her life that included control from her husband, society, and the Church, I felt a rage that her whole life and potential should be reduced to *her finding consolation in her children.* I believed that despite sites of feminist progress, in their daily lived experience many women have limited means to oppose the powers that prevent full agency and independence. Feminist standpoint theory provided a way to access and privilege women's voices and stories.

I knew that a woman's social position often determines to her life choices, and I believe that education is a means to realise potential and to mitigate the negative effects of structural and societal power. For progress to occur and continue in women's access to and experience of education, it was important to me that I contribute research that critically considers the structural and power inequalities which create and perpetuate dominant patriarchal structures and cultures that cause disparities and challenges in women's educational journeys.

Structure of the Thesis

In this chapter I have introduced the research proposal and the rational for the study. I have discussed how my interview questions sought to elicit the participants' subjective thoughts and opinions about their education. I have explained my personal motivation for employing a feminist standpoint theoretical approach to the research.

Chapter Two: The review of the literature explores theories and concepts relevant to why and how women's educational journeys are impacted by gender-based roles and expectation, and class-based structures. Is also reviews the status of supports that exist for women's education. It further details, debates, and discusses the literature that informed my use of a feminist standpoint approach to the research.

Chapter Three: This chapter details the methodological approach taken in this research. It outlines the ontological and epistemological perspectives used in the study. It discusses the research process, including the means of participant selection and data gathering. This chapter closes with a discussion of consent, privacy, and ethical issues.

Chapter Four: This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the findings that emerged from the interview process. It engages the data with the literature presented in chapter two to achieve an enhanced understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by the research cohort in their pursuit of tertiary education.

Chapter Five: This chapter offers a conclusion to the overall result of the research question after careful consideration of all that was discovered during the research. It will detail the strengths and limitations of this study and suggest possibilities for future research.

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CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

My research sets out to explore the challenges and barriers that exist for women who re-engage with interrupted education. As such, my study is predicated on my belief that mature-aged women continue to experience multi-faceted barriers in their pursuit of tertiary education. The literature I have chosen to examine centres around the structural and societal factors that lead to a disrupted educational journey for women. Literature surrounding gender-based barriers to education is discussed to explore the debates around a patriarchal system of inequalities that combine to prevent a linear educational path for women.

This chapter also examines the literature surrounding class barriers that cause, for example, 28.8 percent of high aptitude students from a lower socio-economic background to earn four-year degrees compared to 74.1 percent of high aptitude student from a higher social class (Kraus & Park, 2017). I argue that educational disadvantage begins in early school experiences and can initiate specific learner identities that affect learners throughout their lives.

Harding posits that research about women's lives should begin in women's lives, their lived experience and she acknowledges that there is not one universal women's experience (1992), therefore, I review the literature that debates feminist standpoint theory and through the literature I argue that returning women offer insights that unveil gender and class-based injustices in the private sphere, the education environment, and in policies and practices.

The Status of Female Education – Why and How Women go Back to Education.

My research is grounded in my belief that gender and class prevent some women completing third level education after secondary school. My observation and experience of tertiary education is that historically, it usually and ideally occurred concurrently with life events such as the cessation of second level education. However, life course patterns have shifted over recent decades "revealing a heterogeneity in the timing and sequencing of developmental transitions" (Hostetler *et al*, 2007, p.85). This is due to changes in the economy and cultural norms which have caused delays in the age of first marriage and family formation. Traditional notions of a continuous, upward education and career trajectory have been subverted. For Hostetler et al, this has increased the number of non-traditional age students who return to education after a significant break in their post-secondary education (2007).

A *triggering event* such as divorce, children leaving home or starting school can be catalysts for change in women's lives which may include a return to education. In Ireland, reflecting a period spent child-minding, women from the age of thirty-five are more likely than men to attend higher education for the first time (O'Shea, 2021). Hardison suggests that motives for starting college range from "a life crisis, such as the death of a spouse, to self-fulfilment … to the sudden realisation that a change in their lives is necessary" (2004, p.114). Fairchild too, examines the motivation to return to education among a cohort of women returners and finds it to include seeing their own children's graduations, and the pursuit of personal accomplishment (2017). The older woman, as a learner has economic motivations, is a role model to children and grandchildren and shares a social value of being an educated member of society. However, women in European countries are as "almost twice as likely as men not to participate in adult education for family related reasons" (GEM, 2020, p.2).

Intersectional Feminism

As an intersectional feminist bell hooks states that social classifications such as class, race, gender and sexual identity are interconnected sites of oppression. For hooks we must understand sexist oppression at an individual level and structural level to mobilise feminist led change (2000). Crenshaw posits that multiple intersections of race and gender highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (1991). Recent governmental awareness of disadvantages as overlapping intersections which affect individual outcomes has led to "class, community, family, policy and school", as factors which must be considered individually and intersectionally, "in the reform process" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020, p.20). To examine inequality in women's educational circumstances I adopted a feminist approach to the research. According to van Wiljen and Aston, "For decades, feminists have worked at dismantling patriarchal structures and influences through theory, research and action in order to seek emancipation" (2019, p.62.) Much of the work of feminists is political; contemporary feminism draws on its roots as a political movement, heavily influenced by the Women's Liberation in the 1960s. Feminism acknowledges the role of gender in shaping the experiences of individuals, and the pervasive influence of sexuality, power, and politics in our daily lives (Aranda, 2006). For hooks, feminism attempts "to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (2000, p.1).

Feminist Standpoint Theory

My review of the literature focused on theories surrounding the position of women in relation to education, gender, and class. Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) stood out to me as an approach to knowledge that could explain how to discover what women know and experience on a local, private level and then relate them to a more national, political scale. For this reason, I include a review of the literature surrounding FST. I discuss also discuss FST in Chapter Three: Methodology.

Clayton and Crosby cited in McHugh, suggest that many women may be aware of female disadvantage but may not be aware that they are personally affected by it (2017). Yet I suggest, what women know and how they know it, is a direct reflection of their life experiences. Feminist epistemology encourages women to become more self-aware and allows them to place themselves in a position that better reflects their gendered predicament. Harding states that the homogeneity of the scientific community omitted the perspectives of minority groups. Sexist, racist and classist theories developed from this. FST attempts to redress this imbalance. FST highlights the structures of male domination at a macro-level and micro- level. For example, inherent in antifeminist beliefs is the assumption that work is equivalent to employment, which makes the reproductive work, and I suggest, the household work of women, invisible (Borderias & Carrasco cited in Cabrera *et al*, 2019). However, standpoint theory "may rank as one of the most controversial theories to have been proposed and debated in the 25-to-35-year history of second wave feminist thinking about science and knowledge" (Whylie, 2003, p.27). For early proponents of FST, knowledge is socially situated, marginalised groups are socially situated with access to knowledge that the more privileged do not have, and research should begin with marginalised groups (Bowell, n.d). Rejecting positivist concepts of traditional objectivity and truth, FST asserts that the standpoint of women, as a marginalised group, is a special vantage point that reveals social reality, they have a *situated knowing* (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). However, care must be taken regarding the notion of "groups". Whylie contends that for FST to be viable it must not assume or imply "essentialist definition of social categories…and it must not align itself with the notion of automatic epistemic privilege, knowing more or better by virtue of social, political location" (2003, p.28). Hartsock, Collins, Harding and Smith all express a disagreement with the frequent reduction of standpoint to just the social position of individuals …but according to

Whylie this will happen if critics of the theory fail to realise that "social structures, institutions, or systemically structured roles and relations can shape what epistemic agents can know" (2003, p.29).

As the theory advanced it was necessary to develop a more nuanced view of social positionality and its automatic creation of knowledge. Dorothy Smith describes the idea that knowledge is attributable to its social location alone, as "ideological", for her it is *social practices* not *social positioning* that lays the ground for attainment of knowledge. When social practice is privileged above social position, as a grounds for knowing, dialogue can take place between people from similar social positions, who share social practices and with people from different social positions can share similar practices, goals, and values (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

Hekman challenges the claim that women hold a privileged standpoint because of their situated knowledges. She is dissatisfied with Harding's view of the epistemic advantage of standpoints that produce less partial, less distorted knowledge. Whylie states that for Hekman "talk of better and worse knowledge can make no sense unless we have a firm grip on notions of truth and objectivity that are robust enough to anchor epistemic justification, standpoint theorists have invoked, but failed to deliver, epistemic foundations" (2003, p.30). For Hekman, the concept of a "reality that grounds knowledge" has been challenged by the" linguistic turn" of the twentieth century which saw a critical focus on the relationship between philosophy and language (2003, p.349). Hekman further cites hermeneutics, postmodern and post structuralist notions regarding the objectivity of reality as challenges to FST's epistemic advantage and situated knowledge. Postmodernism rejects ideas of rationality and universal truth, instead it emphasises the diversity of human experience and multiplicity of perspectives. Post modernism adopts a relativist perspective, where there are no absolute truths and that holds that "the narrator can shape any preferred version of reality" (Skovlund, 2011, Abstract). Similarly, Leavy and Harris state that postmodern opinion "wants to undermine the stable, coherent subject and say there is no certainty or master narrative" (2019, p.47). However, such perspectives can be accused of ignoring issues of "power abuse, and cultural and political discrimination" (Skovlund, 2011). Essentially, postmodern positioning that suggests people are free and can make anything they wish of their lives fails to acknowledge that oppression and power are real factors in the lives of people.

In her criticism of FST, Hekman cites Hartsock's contentions that reality is socially and materially constructed and that some perceptions of reality are partial, (those of the privileged),

and others are true and liberatory (those of the oppressed) as a "fault line" that runs through Hartsock's standpoint theory (1997, p.343). She reacts against the idea that reality will be perceived differently as material situations differ, and that the dominant ruling group will call its own perspective "real" and reject other positions. Hekman further deconstructs Hartsock's notion that material life sets limits and constructs social relations, that the ruling class structure the material relations of society and so decide what is "real" and that the vision of the oppressed must be achieved by struggle. For Foucault, she says, all visions are partial and perverse because all knowledge is grounded in a perspective; opinions, knowledge and beliefs must come from somewhere and that somewhere is what makes up our knowledge. Here, I contend that Hekman fails to take account of a commonality of experience among the oppressed. While all vision can be said to be from an individual perspective, the oppressed continue to labour under shared social conditions, that inform a group standpoint that has something to say about living an unequal life, where power is exerted on them, in a way that the visions of the privileged cannot do. Hill Collins suggests that Hekman's argument "misses the point of standpoint theory" as it was never meant to be argued as a theory of truth or method, instead in decontextualising standpoint theory from its knowledge/power framework Hekman succeeds only in depoliticising its radical content (1997, p.375).

Intemann holds that it can easily be deduced that the oppressed may have a less accurate view of the world due to their internalised oppression and possible lack of education which prevents their access to certain knowledges (2010). Yet, Bowell contends that FST can be mistakenly understood to espouse such essentialist universalism and can be misunderstood to be as proposing a single monolithic feminist standpoint (n.d.). For Intemann, FST has become more nuanced since its initial introduction in the 1970s and 1980s (2010). Proponents of FST have been charged with reinforcing gender stereotypes and assuming a shared opinions among the oppressed, through the notion of women as situated knowers. FST's claim of epistemic advantage arising from oppression has been challenged in so far as it assumes that all women or oppressed people have this advantage. For example, for Saint-Croix "epistemic privilege is a murky concept" that fails to specify how standpoints quantify their benefits; what the benefits are, how they are conferred and why specific social positions produce them (2020, Abstract). Indeed, the term "privileged" may engender discussion about how an oppressive social position could be associated with any form of advantage or entitlement. Saint-Croix approaches privileged in line with Harding and Collins; "privilege is the product of a particular way of understanding experiences that are (largely) unavailable to those who do not inhabit the

relevant social location" (2020, p.4). Under this definition, I suggest the term privilege can be juxtaposed with the word "advantage". The oppressed who are in possession of insider knowledge are not strictly "privileged" to know what they know but they earn an *advantage* in knowing it if the knowledge leads to a form of conscientisation. Or as bell hooks put it; "Living as we did, on the edge, we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out…we understood both" (1994, p.20).

According to Miller, feminist standpoint theorist Dorothy Smith's goal was the development of an alternative feminist sociology, a sociology "freed of its patriarchal anchorage" (1989, p.521). Smith coined the term "bifurcated consciousness" to describe the "contradiction that exists for women between the discourses of the relations of ruling with the actual activities of their lives which these discourses supress" (Clough, 1993, p.173). Traditionally knowledge in the social sciences has been derived from the views of white, western, adult, bourgeois males. This has led to the neglect of the female perspective or as Cabrera *et al* maintain, this "reductionist perspective has distorted the social sciences in their content, their selection methods and in their analysis and interpretation of the data (2019, p.308). Cubillos suggests that all views, aside from those of the aforementioned, were "subalternized" (Cabrera *et al*, 2019, p.309). The *subaltern* is a term devised through the study of Marxian writings by Spivak, to mean "where social lines of mobility…do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action" (2016, p.476). For Spivak, a lack of social mobility equals a lack of agency.

Ultimately, FST appealed to me in my research because I believe that the private/personal sphere of individual women, whilst seeming to contain choices for her, is controlled at a macro-level by societal structures and expectations and that women hold unique vantage points because they live the experience. I concur with Leavy and Harris' assertion that FST has done much to advance women's perspectives in research. FST has enabled a move away from a positivist evidence based, objective means of knowledge production and embraced an epistemology that championed "non-masculinist and lived women's experiences" as valuable sources of knowledge (2019, p.). I agree with Hartsock that the vision of the ruling gender controls the relations of both groups and vision of the oppressed comes about [only] through struggle to change these relations and education. A feminist standpoint highlights the inhumanity of real relations between the oppressor and the oppressed and "carries a historically liberatory role" (Hartsock, 2004, p.285). It is that liberatory role I hope to realise through my use of FST in my research.

Barriers to Education

An Overview of Barriers

Jacobs and Stoner-Eby state that a significant portion of education now takes place in adulthood, and this makes the investigation of barriers which impede progression to learning imperative (cited in Elman & O'Rand, 2007). Parental socioeconomic status is a critical predictor in educational attainment by adulthood. Consistency in childcare, nutrition, housing, and support affect education (Hallinan 1988, cited in Elman & O' Rand, 2007). For Home and Hinds whilst women are dealing with multiple challenges to education "the lack of financial resources makes their situations most difficult" (2000, p, 183). Poverty and domestic violence limit choices for women. Women receive lower wages and so have less incentive or ability to pay for costly higher education. A shift in societal norms and perceptions dictates that women are now expected to contribute to household income. Social class, different mechanisms of socialisation, and social control steer women into different educational strata (Ishikawa & Ryan 2002, cited in Elman & O' Rand, 2007). For women there is more limited access to high quality post-secondary education by adulthood and women are more affected by macroeconomic factors and job displacement rates (Elman & O' Rand, 2007). Often pre-degree qualifications can be stopping points for women, and these reduce the odds of re-entry for higher level degrees. Maynard and Pearsall describe how women negotiate with their entire family before arriving at a decision to go back to education and postpone this decision based on their children's age and developmental requirements (1994). Although progress has been made in achieving educational equality for women, current trends demonstrate a regression in patriarchal norms and attitudes that continue to hinder women and girls (Unsteroetypealliance.org, 2022).

Class as Barrier to Education

Bell (1973) cited in Liu holds that colleges and universities are the "gatekeepers of class position and access to them determines the future stratification of society" (2011, p. 384). For Kraus and Park, "individual merit-based accounts of social class are popular, but incomplete" (2017, p.55). For them class is not formed by individual agency but instead by the structural

dynamics of society. Inequalities in economic resources, and unequal access to powerful networks and institutions, shape the environments to which people have access, and this in turn impacts self-image and motivation. For Kraus and Park, the dynamic between an individual's personal characteristics and social structural forces, coined *structural dynamics*, "best captures how social class context interact with individuals to shape their cognition, emotion and behaviour" (2011, p.55). This method of discussing social class then takes accounts of both structural factors and individual factors in social mobility. Individual agency and merit-based narratives in education fail to recognise how educational systems have structures, and, I would argue, cultures and attitudes that favour those higher in the social class hierarchy. For example, as borne out in my research Naomi felt she was passed over when college application forms were being distributed because she was from a working-class background and "college wasn't for the likes of" her. Around the time of Naomi's experience, the late 1980s, Hannan and Boyle discussed a lack of policy to address the social inequality in education where there was no active governmental policies or urgency to pursue "egalitarian rights" in education (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021, p.2).

There exists a myth of meritocracy whereby success is earned and allocated based on individual achievement, whilst ignoring factors such as social position. It is a societal system that reinforces the notion that individual hard work results in rewards such as "power, authority, status and/or wealth" (Liu, 2011, p.384). This view fails to consider that structural inequalities act upon people resulting in inequitable educational outcomes. For Bourdieu, in this way the education system perpetuates socioeconomic inequality by legitimating the existing social hierarchy by transforming it into a hierarchy of merit (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

In Ireland since the 1960's, the expansion of the education system has been a means for successive governments to ensure economic growth and equality through social policy reforms and political discourse (Fleming *et al*, 2017). These reforms aimed to address unequal participation of under-represented groups in the higher education (HE) system. Irish education policy on lifelong learning encourages citizens to partake in a continual education to compete in with the market demands of the workplace. *The National Development Plan 2007-2013* advances the idea of state investment in education that will increase productivity, innovation, employment, and revenue returns ((Fleming *et al*, 2017).

A recent Aontas report *Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland* describes lifelong learning as having a "host of positive benefits, both at individual and societal level" (Meyler *et al*, 2022,

p.4). The report, which assessed the participation of marginalised and vulnerable groups in lifelong learning, outlines how Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate of 13.1 percent falls short of the EU2020 lifelong learning target of 15 percent and the EU2030 target of 30 percent (Meyler *et al*, 2022). Fleming *et al*, acknowledge that the government has successfully introduced measures to increase participation rates in higher education by those in under-represented and disadvantaged groups i.e., working class, people with disabilities and mature students (2017). Fleming *et al*, however, assert that lifelong learning is "seen as narrow and economistic and the potential to respond to the learning needs of active citizens has been neglected" (Fleming *et al*, 2017, p.26).

A National Office of Equity Access was established in 2003 to oversee access policies. As a result, access programmes were "mainstreamed" and grants, bursaries for students and an increased range of points to third level were introduced. Since then, non-traditional student participation has increased. Now 25 percent of new entrants to higher education in Ireland come from the non-manual, manual, semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic group (HEA 2015d cited Fleming *et al*, 2017). The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) to third level provides reduced point access and extra college supports for Leaving Certificate students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In 2020, 3548 students received an offer of a place in HE, with 2933 accepting their offer. 1579 reduced points offers were made to students who had not met the points requirement for their course of choice.

It can be argued that funding in the form of student grants has somewhat levelled the playing field in terms of how class disrupts educational attainment and outcomes. Introduced in 2012 the Student Universal Support System Ireland (SUSI) provides funding for qualifying students for full-time post-leaving certificate courses, undergraduate and postgraduate courses. SUSI funding rates are categorised in bands from a Special Rate, Non-adjacent figure of €6, 971 and adjacent rate of €2,936. Through to Band 4 with a part-maintenance, non-adjacent payment of €1,051 and €556 adjacent rate (Citizen's Information). These figures are increased in Budget 2023 by 14 percent for those in Band 1, and by 10 percent for all other bands (SUSI).

However, in a submission to the independent review of the Student Grant Scheme by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Barter *et al*, contend that financial support measures do not meet the goal laid out in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2021) to adequately improve success for underrepresented students (2020). It is suggested that the SUSI scheme should undergo funding

reforms to enhance its responsiveness to the diverse needs and unique learning paths of underrepresented students. This concurs with Fleming (2017) and Meyer *et al*, (2022) who find that although educational disadvantage has been addressed to some extent, room for improvement remains. Economic inequality then, continues to influence participation rates and considerable obstacles still exist for socioeconomically disadvantage groups (HEA 2104 cited in Fleming *et al*, 2017). Furthermore, those with *stigmatised experiences* such as those affected by addiction, imprisonment, older learners, migrants, lone parents and people with disabilities are continuing to face unequal access to education. (Meyer *et al*, 2022).

Money Worries

Mistry and Elenbaas found that young people who worry about their family's economic situation have lower academic achievement and those who worry about their subjective social status have lower academic motivation. (2021) Wealth and family income affect children's well-being through the parents' ability to provide resources and opportunities, their psychological well-being, and relationships within the family unit. My research findings showed that Jane and Orlaith's concern about family finances was a barrier to third level education. The Family Economic Stress model holds that difficult financial family circumstances and/or perceptions of economic pressure can cause parental stress and worry which may induce emotional distress. This in turn may then interfere with relationships and parenting practices (Elder 1974 cited in Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021). Recent studies have shown that adolescents' own perceptions of economic hardship through parent and family adjustment, impact their academic outcomes (Delgado *et al*, 2013). There is a class divergence in the understanding and information that working class parents possess when compared to middle class parents (Lareau, 2011). Working class parents are more likely to rely on the expertise of school staff to direct their children to third level education, as Tara recounts in this study, her parents "certainly didn't know how to get there". For Lareau "with the exception of the financial costs involved [working class] parents know little about the transition from school to college" (2011, p.287).

The Impact of Streaming and Teacher Attitudes

Banks *et al* report that middle and upper-class socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in college-bound tracks whilst those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds

are largely found in the general or vocational tracks (2014, p.367). In Ireland, track placement is directly affected by "practices such as streaming and assessment in lower secondary education…" (Banks *et al*, 2014, p.368). Streaming is the practice of placing children in specific base classes according to their academic test performances. This causes a hierarchy of ability that I would argue, children are aware and self-conscious of. Streaming can cause those in lower ability streams to become disengaged and negative about school, have negative relationships with teachers and peers, and experience a climate of low expectations (Smyth & Byrne, 2010; Smyth, 2018).

Those placed in lower streams feel they are treated less well than higher achieving students and believed that their teachers were more likely to neglect them or "to give up on them" (Smyth & Byrne, 2010, p.93). This impacts behaviour and attendance. For Ali *et al*, "effective teaching and learning environments have a direct relationship with the mental and relational behaviour of students (2019, [no pagination]). Blazar and Kraft state that "high-quality teachers not only raise test scores [but also] provide emotionally supportive environments that contribute to students' emotional development…" (2017, p.146). The influence of teachers on student attitudes and behaviours is instrumental in shaping the development of student attitudes and behaviours that are relevant for success in life. This becomes important when it is considered that previous experience of education shapes a *learner identity* that continues into adulthood (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986). Consequently, it can be argued, those in lower streams are predisposed to reach a level of underachievement that they feel is expected by their placement in a lower stream. Also, curriculum differentiation and its inherent differences in the complexity of material students are exposed to "influences their access to particular pathways in upper secondary education and beyond" (Smyth, 2018, p.38).

Smyth and Byrne link streaming, among other factors, to early school leaving (2010). A 2006 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment report found very little opportunity for mobility between streams and the "cementing of students' position in ability groupings [has] the most negative consequences" (p.3). There exists some flexibility within the streaming model, in that students may be streamed into all higher or all ordinary subjects or they may be in a more flexible setting where they may take some subject at higher level and some at the ordinary level. The use of streaming has declined over time from being used to place 60 percent of first year pupils in 1980, to 30 percent in 2001/2002 (Smyth, 2018).

Social inequality is reproduced by streaming because working-class and minority groups are more likely to be placed in lower ability classes (Oakes, 1990) and schools in disadvantaged areas, with a concentration of working-class pupils are twice as likely to use streaming than other more advantaged schools (Smyth, 2018). Such classed-based geographical areas of inequality continue to exist. For example, Kearns shows that participation in higher education in Dublin 17 stands at 15 percent, while participation on Dublin 6 stands at 99 percent (HEA, 2014). Areas with low participation are described as "deep reservoirs of educational disadvantage, mirroring…economic disadvantage" (HEA, 2014, Foreword). According to Skeggs "geographical referencing is one of the contemporary shorthand ways of speaking class" (2004, p. 15). Clear parallels can be drawn then, between class, ability streaming and access to third level education.

Questioning Belonging

For Bourdieu the concept of *habitus* is embodied, it is an expressed through "ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby thinking and feeling" (cited in Reay, 2004, p.432). Habitus dictates how people behave, including a rejection of certain practices that are unfamiliar to the cultural grouping to which the person belongs. Within class habitus, people act out of the factors that have formed them, both past and present within the social structure "in the forms of dispositions which are so many marks of social position" (Bourdieu cited in Reay, 2004, p.434). Within habitus Bourdieu allows for the possibility of transformation. Not simply confined to "reproducing its own dispositions" a habitus can be reconstructed through a process that "either raises or lowers an individual's expectations", allowing for a "social trajectory that enables conditions of living that are very different from original ones" (Reay, 2004, p.435). As will be noticed in Chapter Four, the research revealed that Naomi and Moira had been caused to question their belonging in education via interactions with teachers. Similarly, Orlaith and Maggie questioned if they were fully equipped to use their education in the workplace. Class and gender may contribute to women in academia feeling that they are "…somebody who enters a space with a marginal sense of membership" (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984, cited in Johansson & Jones, 2019, p.1528). I suggest that as women from working-class backgrounds in academia they may have experienced *imposer syndrome*; misplaced feelings of self-doubt, feeling like a fraud or feelings of shame or guilt about the position they have attained. Similarly, Johansson and Jones employ a feminist standpoint perspective in conjunction with a

Bourdieusian framework to scrutinise the concept of the *interloper*; a form of social dislocation brought about through gendered and classed inequalities (2019). The concept of the interloper is a historicised, reflexive, and socially situated analytical tool that allows for the interrogation of the "betwixt and betweenness" of women who step outside of class and gender norms (Johansson & Jones, 2019, p. 1540). Here, I agree with Thompson's assertion that,

> "The task remains a collective and political imperative, concerned with dismantling the economic, social and cultural capital which goes with middle class status; with redefining and liberating knowledge; and with redistributing educational resources to the underprivileged and poor, in all their diversity, as a principled act of commitment to the working class as an entirety" (2000, p.7)

Career Guidance Counselling in Secondary School

A lack of appropriate and timely career advice in secondary school is a barrier to tertiary education. The guidance policy framework for the post-primary sector is provided for in Section 9 (c) of the Education Act (1998) which requires schools to "ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choice" (Indecon Review of Career Guidance, 2019, p.5). Although Ireland's career guidance system has elements of an effective, lifelong, and life-wide system, currently gaps exist. Career guidance teacher roles encompass many areas; social/personal counselling, vocational guidance counselling and educational guidance counselling. The Indecon review showed that 43 percent of secondary students surveyed had one-to-one career guidance appointments in the year before publication. These appointments ranged in duration from a maximum of 180 minutes to four minutes, with an average of 33 minutes. The number of appointments per student ranged from a maximum of 60 to a minimum of one, with an average of three career guidance appointments in the previous year (2019). I would suggest that disparities exist with the school career guidance system which may disadvantage some students in their knowledge and skills regarding access to third-level education.

Disability

In Ireland those with disabilities are less likely to attend higher education compared to their peers who do not have disabilities (Watson & Nolan 2011 c in Bell *et al*, 2016). Students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face additional barriers to accessing further or higher education. Whilst students can have positive relationships with career guidance teachers there can exist "serious gaps in the knowledge of these practitioners that could have serious consequences for the success of the transition process for students with ASD" (Bell *et al*, 2016, p.66). Successful adaptation to post-secondary education for students with disabilities requires more than "simply informing them about existing opportunities, the jobs for which their studies will prepare them, and the requirements they will have to face by entering a new level of education" (OECD, 2011, p.31). An integrated support system could prevent their marginalisation and exclusion in education. Such a system requires the existence of guidance services and tools which would provide suitable interventions to ensure at each stage of the transition process (OECD, 2011, p.32).

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme aims to address inequality of access for those with disabilities. Those with disabilities and from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with disabilities plus sensory issues (deaf/blind/hard of hearing) are prioritised by HEIs. In 2020, DARE saw 4012 individuals received an offer of a place in HE, with 3146 accepted offers. There has been a 220 percent increase in the number of students engaging with Higher Education disability services in the ten years preceding 2019. This represents 15,696 students registered with a disability among the total higher education student population. 6.9 percent of these students have a diagnosis of Aspergers/Autism (Ryder, 2020).

Women as Primary Care Givers and Sexual Division of Labour

In seeking literature to interrogate why the role of primary family carer and the unequal division of labour, affected women's education, I was drawn again to FST. Devault suggests that for Smith beginning inquiry in the lived bodily experiences of women as caregivers (or other subordinate positions in the social division of labour) "provide a point of entry to investigation that is superior to the starting points derived from abstract reasoning" (1996, p.40). Hartsock

interrogates the notion of a sexual division of labour rather than a gendered one because she believes that this division cannot be reduced to social dimensions but instead one must be conscious of those aspects that can and cannot be changed. For example, biologically speaking, women carry and bear children whilst men cannot. This is "not (yet) a social choice" (2004, p.289). For Lewington *et al* "hegemonic masculinity creates conditions whereby traditional gendered parenting roles are encouraged" (2021, p.257). Women predominantly rear children in a male dominated society and this is a choice of a patriarchal society. bell hooks advocates for an acute critique of domestic relationships and marriage in a patriarchal society, because it was within private bonds and domestic interactions that "women of all classes and races felt the brunt of male domination, whether from patriarchal parents or spouses" (2000, p.78).

The notion of the *good mother* can be said to be evolving away from the purely private and towards the public sphere. According to McDowell, in addition to fulfilling the ideals of femininity, domesticity and motherhood, labour market policies state that all women should enter the labour market regardless of their domestic obligation; "paid work is now a moral obligation" (2008, p.155). Emerging from this is a new discourse on motherhood in which "striving, personal achievement, and a commitment both to employment and lifelong learning are paramount" (McDowell, 2008, p.156). Yet according to Rubin "The notion that mom should be there for her children always and without fail…is deeply embedded in our national psyche" (Williams, 2000, p.49). The experience of motherhood then is a disrupting factor in a woman's life both enroute to third level education and in the workplace. In Ireland 61 percent of females have a third level qualification and as new graduates, females have similar earnings to male graduates. However, a substantial gap in their pay appears quite early on in their careers. Doris et al, discuss how for example, female Business and Law graduates experience a 28 percent gender pay gap within ten years of graduating (2022). This "motherhood penalty" sees weekly pay for women drop by 26.8 percent following the birth of their child and remaining low eight years later. There is no such pay reduction for fathers. Reducing hours of work, restricted job mobility, a move to family friendly lower paid jobs and discrimination among the reasons for these findings (Doris et al, 2022, p.20).

Caring for Adult Dependents

Closely aligned with the ideas around motherhood, the caring sphere has been traditionally, seen as belonging to the female. Whilst 45 percent of women and 29 percent of men provide

daily care for others, women perform 7.2 hours more of care work per week than men (Russell *et al*, 2019). Women's higher involvement in care work in Ireland is attributed to a to relatively low State involvement in support for caring. The gender gap in unpaid worktime in Ireland is seventh highest among the EU28. According to Russell et al, "Irish social policy has been characterised as being a liberal modified male breadwinner regime, in that provision of care services by the State is relatively low, leaving households to provide these services themselves or to source them out to the market if they can pay" (2019).

Spousal Relationships

Swidler posit that there exists a polarity of views in terms of love and relationships. They can be viewed as impermanent and hard work but can also be idealised and feted (cited in Hull *et al*, 2014). Theses authors hold that the "romantic love myth" is a deep-seated societal norm which enables the ongoing institutions of marriage to remain culturally relevant (2014, p.34). However, Giddens puts forward the notion of a changed landscape of relationships, love, and sexuality. For him a "pure relationship" refers to a relationship that is undertaken for its own sake, for what each partner can derive from "a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992, p.58). This restructuring of romantic relationships is based on sexual and emotional equity and is a result of social change, availability of contraception, feminism, self-discovery, and equality (Hobbs, *et al*, 2017). Jamieson suggests however, that this "transformation" of romantic relationships, is idealised. A change in heterosexual relationships as posited by Giddens, would not "shatter the interconnection of gendered labour markets, gendered distributions of income and wealth, and gendered divisions of domestic labour" (1999, p.482). In reality then, personal lives and intimate relationships remain structured by gender inequalities.

Domestic Duties

Although it is increasingly acknowledged that males and females should equally share household chores, for hooks, it remains contentious that women see no need to make sharing household tasks an issue and accept it as normal when women do most of the work (2000). In agreement with hooks, Morel and Carbonnier, 2015 (cited in a Gender Equity Index Report, 2021) state that gender differences in household chores are entrenched from childhood. 91

percent of women (with children) compared to 30 percent of men (with children) carry out at least one hour per day on housework. Employed women give 2.3 hours per day to housework, compared to 1.6 hours daily for employed men. This imbalance in unpaid care responsibilities within families differs according to the education attainment levels of women. The likelihood of spending time on housework decreases in accordance with the level of education attained. For example, 81 percent of women with a low education level will spend an hour a day on housework compared with 74 percent of those who have a high level of education. The slack is not taken up by men. Highly skilled employed women outsource domestic labour to migrant women or poor women, a move which transfers gender inequalities within the home "into the global care chain" (Morel & Carbonnier, 2015 cited in Gender Equity Index Report, 2021).

Guilt and Emotional Toll

Women often feel that their studies have a negative impact on family members and feel they are choosing between spending time on assignments or time with family. This is a source of guilt for women returners but not necessarily for men who are more likely to feel responsibility around their role as family breadwinner (Thomas *et al*, 2021). Stone and O'Shea recount how an adult learner in their study felt "guilty and selfish" for prioritising her studies (2013, p.109). Women appear to cope with such feelings by minimising their difficulties (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Study is acceptable only when family commitments are first met, and women downplay the efforts required to complete the double load of family and education expectations. Furthermore, Johansson and Jones hold that for working class women, the move into academia comes with it a risk of destabilising the family unit and alienating herself from her community through social mobility and the acquisition of forms of social capital that are not valued in her working-class sphere (2019). Similarly, Bourdieu contends that the family is dependent on an "affective principle of cohesion" and that gendered expectations of women's physical and emotional availability can be compromised by her move into the educational realm (1996, cited in Johansson & Jones, 2019, p.1530).

Once in the educational realm, I suggest there is not only an expectation on women to perform the physical and emotional labour of the home and family, but they must also retain a positive outlook regarding their time in education. Rodriguez states that "Higher education is a space where objective and rational thinking is privileged over emotions, yet emotional labour is increasingly important in the corporate university" (2019, p,1). Originally discussed by Hochschild, *emotional labour* refers to the self-regulation and suppression of feelings and

emotions so that they align with expected, acceptable, and socially admissible etiquette of the workplace (1983). Emotive dissonance can occur, this is a discrepancy between how one is expected to feel to conform to outward expectations, and how one actually feels. Emotions are "situated within gendered and sexualised hierarchies through moral and social arrangements that dictate what is normal" (Rodriguez, 2010, p.2). Although Rodriguez's study pertains to university administrative staff, I contend that such expectation also occurs in an educational setting, where often a student must present a public image of happiness and capability which may mask true emotions and feelings of stress or worry. More recently, Hochschild's concept of *emotional labour* has undergone a revision and extension to include the unseen work of women, the unequal burden of childcare and housework (Brooks *et al*, 2013).

Since 2015, the term *emotional labour* has entered feminist public discourse but has undergone a process of reinterpretation which has altered Hochschild's original meaning (Stulikova and Dawson, 2022). Haslam's notion of a "concept creep" (2016, p.2) provides an accessible way to understand the adjustment of Hochschild's terminology. A new public parlance regarding *emotional labour* now includes challenges to the additional mental load carried by women as they micro-manage the invisible and unrewarded tasks within the family. Hochschild is horrified about how the term emotional labour is now being used (Beck cited in Stulikova & Dawson, 2022). The new lay definition of *emotional labour* is less workplace, public sphere, and class related but instead has now also been adopted to include feminist, private sphere, gendered issues. I believe that both the older and newer interpretations of emotional labour remain of value. In its new iteration the concept of emotional labour has provided an accessible discourse in which women's daily experiences can be colloquially discussed and challenged. I believe this has opened an avenue of possible change.

Time Poverty

The result of time spent on relationships, caring, domestic labour and work is a reduction in time available to women for education. For Hyde et al "time poverty is a symptom of a more fundamental problem, gendered social norms that give men power over women, assign lesser value to women and their contributions and maintain the current inequitable distribution of power and wealth between men and women" (2020, [no pagination]). Women have fewer hours to devote to paid labour and are five times as likely to work "in occupations with poverty-level wages" than men (Hyde *et al*, 2020). The literature illustrates that time poverty affects women's health outcomes. From lacking time to attend medical appointments, to poorer food choices

and less exercise, time poverty can be responsible for self-neglect, leading to mental and physical stress on women and girls (Hyde *et al*, 2020). I suggest that inherent in time poverty is economic consequences when domestic responsibilities limit time to partake in education and paid work. Similarly, for Hartsock, women's activity centres around a contribution to subsistence and childrearing, and there are "commonalities present in the institutionalized sexual division of labour which make women responsible for both housework and wage work" (2004, p.293). Galvez and Modrono hold that women's disadvantaged position is due to three factors, patriarchy, a subordinate position in society and the responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work (Diaz-Himeniz *et al*, 2022). Women's domestic, childbearing and childrearing unpaid care work is invisible but contributes to the health and wellbeing of society, as well as supports the financial economy and productivity of society (Carroll, 2014).

Bro Culture

According to Miller *et al* gender and sexuality-based oppressions are a persistent reality on contemporary college campuses (2020). "Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) have consistently been proven inhospitable to students with minoritized identities – most notably, for women, people of colour, and people with disabilities" (Miller *et al*, 2020, p.340). The phrase "bro culture" was introduced to this study by Julia. For Krasteva, bro culture refers to a "type of organisational structure that emphasises differentiated status based on gender characterised by aggressive behaviour, hyper-masculinity, and disrespect towards women" (2019, p.5). Although female participation in STEM is encouraged and increasing, it can be argued that STEM environments centre and prize cisgender men and heterosexuality above all other genders and sexualities. Persons who do not conform to this ideal are often treated as inferior or invisible. Women in STEM courses and workplaces are often the subject of objectification and sexualisation. Essig holds that *bro culture* is a toxic masculine culture where boys teach one another the "guy code" and have a constant need for approval from their male peers (2018). Such a culture can lead to women feeling marginalised and unwelcome in the technology field. Similarly, Miller et al describe a phenomenon of the "brick wall" put up by men sitting together with their backs turned to physically exclude others within so called "dude culture" (2020, p.345). The interrogation of such patriarchal societal structures is considered a starting point to illuminate the "relations of power that subordinate the interests of women …to the interests of men" (Weedon cited in Van Wijlem & Aston, 2019).

Age and Gender

I suggest that a further barrier to education can be found in the attitudes and perceptions of age that learners can be subject to, or expectations learners can have about themselves. According to Moen "Societies, institutions, and groups develop expectations or cultural schema about behaviour associated with particular positions and specific age groups" (Carr & Komp, 2011, p.13). Expected life course trajectories are culturally and institutionally both gender and age graded. Although a feminist frame alone would emphasise women's gendered positioning and de-emphasise age as a factor in their interactions with institutions, to interrogate both age and gender, allows me to consider the intersectionality of these categories in women students' lives. In Ireland, a mature student is a person who has attained the twenty-three years on January 1st of the year of their admission (HEA, 2014). Traditionally, university is seen as a site for young people and mature students may be seen as incapable of academic performance. Older learners reported a sense of alienation, lack confidence, and doubt their academic performance capabilities. Students discuss how they are rendered impaired if they cannot keep up. For Fairchild's cohort, issues such as academic writing caused feelings of alienation, but more positively they reported the value and importance of bonds that were forged with other women (2017). Abbott-Chapman *et al,* for example, found that "mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures problems associated with giving up full-time employment" (2004, p.114). Financial hardship, lack of geographical mobility, academic and social difficulties integrating into university life are common challenges among mature students, including lone mothers (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Mature-age women students are more likely to be living in lower income households, be older, be working, have children and be single parents. Time, finance, and childcare are regular issues that need to be juggled by mature-age students who experience multiple responsibilities with minimal supports (Stone & O'Shea, 2013).

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been shown in the literature to be a barrier to women's education. IPV is described as physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. The World Health Organisation states that IPV affects women's mental health, economic security and/or academic underachievement (Klencakova *et al,* 2023)

Economic dependency can cause the cycle of abuse to continue. This can be partly addressed through educational attainment, leading to financial independence for women. For Sterne and Poole (2010) education can become a safe harbour for women experiencing violence, others may disengage. (Klencakova et al, 2023). Pertinent to Julia, who described her experience of being a child who witnessed domestic abuse, studies show that adverse child experiences in relation to IPV have a negative impact on academic performance (Karatekin & Ahluwalis, 2020; Symes *et* al, 2020 cited in Klencakova *et al*, 2023). I suggest that intimate partner violence stems from patriarchal cultural beliefs and traditions that prioritise male assertiveness and influence perceptions of masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity embodies the "currently most honoured ways of being a man, it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). In practice, hegemonic masculinity dictates how men should behave in both the public and private spheres. Masculinity is enacted through dominant behaviours like aggression, independence, invulnerability, and a rejection of the feminine (Klencakova, et al, 2023). Berg suggests that hegemonic masculinity encourages the persistence of traditional gendered parenting roles (Lewington *et al*, 2021). Magodyo, (2013) and Naidoo, (2018) hold that education can be a means through which men may choose to define themselves that are free from notions of cultural masculinity construct (cited in Mshweshwe, 2020). By facilitating men to reimagine their understanding of masculinity and adopt positive expressions of manhood, education can serve as a channel to promote values that reject cultural stereotypes such as aggression and entitlement to dominance over women.

Women in Education – An Improved but Imperfect Landscape

Unequal gender norms in society continue to prevent parity of opportunity for females. In 22 countries, fewer than 80 girls complete upper secondary education for every 100 boys (GEM, 2020). Despite this the literature reveals that based on data from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, there is no statistical evidence to show that being female, having children or marrying increases or reduces the likelihood of women returning to education (Elman & O' Rand, 2007; Russell & O'Connell, 2004). Astone *et al* find that adult school participation rates increased in

samples of adults who left education due to marriage, children or dropping out (2000). The literature suggests then that early disadvantage in social origin may promote late life educational attainment.

Opportunities for women to combine family life with professional life have increased in recent years. More women are enrolling in tertiary education as they expect high returns from a degree and can now combine work and family life, although I would argue this does not come without its challenges. Females account for 54 percent of the new entrants in tertiary education in OECD countries (OECD, *Education at a Glance,* 2008). The children of mothers with at least some college education, are more likely to value education and seek tertiary education for themselves (Astone *et al*, 2007). According to these authors, life course events that initially impede education, can increase the likelihood of those adults returning, but at a later stage in their lives.

A reasonable connection can be made between an increase in women returning to education and an increase in women in the labour force. Russel and O'Connell hold that improvements in the Irish labour market have substantially increased the numbers of women in the labour force and "re-entry to the workforce and length of leave is strongly related to women's human capital in the form of education … and work experience" (2004, p.2). Similarly, human capital theory posits that the more highly educated a woman is, the more time she will spend in the workforce (Hank, 2004). According to Russell and O'Connell, age and educational attainment, partner's employment status, children's age, previous work experience and the incentive structure of the social welfare system are all factors on which women's re-entry into work depend. Women returners with tertiary level education are twice as likely as those with a lower education to re-enter the workforce, while those with a Leaving Certificate alone were more likely to seek out temporary employment schemes, education, or training. This illustrates low educational attainment is a barrier to the workforce. Having pre-school children and lack of affordable high-quality childcare are seen as further barriers to the workforce. However, for women re-entering education or training, the provision of part-time education options and childcare supports for trainees, meant that these factors do not prevent entry (Russell et al, 2002, cited in Russell & O'Connell 2004). Here though, I include mention that in Ireland funding for part time courses does not exist through the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant scheme.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined literature on women's motivation for returning to education and justified my research approach within a feminist paradigm by drawing on feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality. I have explored past and present barriers related to class and educational attainment, as well as gender-based obstacles as highlighted in the literature. Despite some progress, the literature consistently demonstrates that women continue to be affected by gender-based social roles and expectations, both in the home and society at large. Women's educational opportunities remain fragmented but adaptive to accommodate life events. Based on the literature review, I argue that the delayed or interrupted education of women carries significant personal, emotional, educational, and financial consequences, with gender and class being causal factors in educational inequality for women.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Research Study

This thesis explores the question of what are the barriers and challenges that women face when re-engaging with interrupted education? The overall aim of my enquiry was to form insights around gender and class disparities that may inform my future teaching practice by providing me with answers as to why education is not accessed equally by all. This chapter will outline the methodological approach I took in my research. It will explain my preference for the ideals, principles, and techniques of feminist research before discussing my ontological and epistemological outlook. My means of data gathering, and my participants are discussed, followed by an overview of the ethical considerations concerned with this study.

Methodological Approach (Methods Of Knowing)

The methodological approach to this research requires me to have a clear understanding of my ontological and epistemological stances in relation to how the world works. This was my first encounter with trying to look at my own position within a philosophical framework and as such was quite daunting. I was aware that to elicit the types of data I was interested in, collecting the stories of the women affected would be most effective. I chose to employ feminist research techniques and feminist standpoint theory as elements of my methodological approach, based around my own feminist leanings and the belief that women's research can be consciousness raising and lead to empowering and emancipatory change in women's lives.

Feminist Research Methodologies

My research into feminist methodologies and a summary of what attracted me to their use can be summed up in Waller's synopsis of what separates feminist methodological characteristics from traditional methods. Feminist researchers pay attention to marginalised people, taking the focus away from traditional research methods which was based on the male experience, the feminist researcher seek out women's stories and experiences. Feminist researchers are

conscious of the relational aspect of the research. They consider the ethics of friendships that may develop during the interview process and consider the care of the participant after the research has ended. Feminist researchers dismiss rigid objectivity and recognise that all research interactions are subjective and inherently political. Women's stories and experiences, considered *anecdotal evidence* by traditional researchers, are valued as meaningful and powerful. Finally, feminist methodologies seek to challenge the status quo; they seek to elicit change in unequal social institutions, structures, and cultures (Waller, 2005).

Feminist Approach

My thesis is putting forward the argument that women are in some way treated as less than men when it comes to the ability to pursue education in a manner and time of their preference. My very premise is predicated on an assumption of a systemic and cultural inequality between the sexes. It further proposes that socioeconomic or class backgrounds play a function in this experience. My research then, needed to address the intersectionality of class, race, gender, age, disability and how these factors meet to disadvantage women. In searching for an appropriate feminist research method, I became aware that it can be argued that no one method or methodology is in itself feminist. Instead, "a feminist theoretical and ethical framework distinguishes feminist research from other forms of inquiry" (Kirsch, 1999, p.1). I sought readings that would help me establish how to make my research true to feminist principles. Feminist research aims to empower women and to challenge their oppression (Gorelick cited in Kirsch, 1999). Some characteristics of feminist research that I utilised during my data collection included:

A) *Reflexivity*; this calls for researcher to reflect upon the research, be introspective and to adjust and refine the research goals during the process (Fonow & Cook, 1991). I did this when unexpected issues arose from the interview process such as disability, intimate partner violence, and age.

B) *Attention to the effective components of the research act*" was included as a feminist principle in my data collection. This included a refusal to ignore the emotional dimensions of the participants' lives. Fonow and Cook link this to the female researcher's greater familiarity with the world of emotions and their meanings which can be "analysed for the purposes of scholarship and innovation" (1991, p 9). Kirsch adds that if the emotional dimension of the

research is ignored then researchers are likely to disregard the participant's lived experiences and may "miss crucial interpretations of interviews and other data" (1991, p.4).

c) *Making use of the situation at hand* in feminist research means being cognizant of common environments such as domestic settings and factoring in everyday events in the participants' lives which according to Kirsch can help to value their lives and their daily lived experience (1999). I found being aware of this feminist research principle of use when interviewing women in domestic settings where there were often interruptions from children, phone calls from schools and the everyday tasks that call on women's time, attention, and physical and emotional labour (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

D) *Action-orientation* in the research is a new awareness I have from reading about feminist research methods. It presents me with a focus and a challenge going forward as to what use to make of my findings in the real world. *Action-orientation* emphasises the emancipatory goals of the research, allowing the feminist researching to engage in political action, to influence public policy and to create "the potential ability of the feminist research to change the lives of women" (Mountford cited in Kirsch, 1999, p.3).

Throughout my research I also held closely to the principles of Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) to understand the social and political power play that has led to marginalisation in some women's educational journey. I agree with FST's position that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups are in positions that equip them with the ability to make enquiries from an insider point of view. What they know and how they know it is a direct reflection of their life experiences. Grasswick and Webb refer to this as the "social situatedness of knowing", the epistemological significance of identity and social location in what one knows (2002, p.190). FST then, allowed me to acknowledge that my participants have lived the experience and are therefore better positioned to know intricacies of existing in a marginalised realm. By interviewing women who had been excluded from education at some points during their lives, I was afforded an insight into how this occurs and the effects it has on individuals.

I believe that women's exclusion from education is related to societal power relations. Those without power have a vested interest in understanding how their lives are impacted by imbalances of power, they were the *ideal knowers* I wished to interview. Feminist epistemology envisions such knowers as women because they are positioned in social strata that place them in unique sociological positions. I wanted to prioritise the views of such women. Utilising

feminist research techniques and FST allowed me to redress this imbalance between the genders. This is important to my research because I am seeking answers to questions that I believe to be, primarily grounded in gender inequality.

Feminist standpoint theory's position on objectivity was a further draw to its use in my research. In her contributions to FST, Harding enquires how the notion of objectivity can be made useful for contemporary knowledge seeking projects (1995). I believe that as a woman researching an issue which is close to my heart, I cannot remain fully impartial to the research, but I can employ reflexivity to assess how my own stance on the subject will affect it. Harding suggests that neutrality is not necessary or helpful but "an obstacle to maximising objectivity when knowledge-distorting interests and values have constituted a research project" (1995, p.331). By framing my research through a feminist standpoint, I could acknowledge that my own beliefs, values, experiences, and attitudes would naturally colour my research methods, findings, and analysis. Being aware on my own involvement, interests, and experiences of an interrupted education, I was able to develop a stronger objectivity than if I left these areas unchecked.

Viewing the world through the eyes of my research participants was paramount in my decision to choose FST for my thesis. Having had my own educational journey disrupted, I was looking for a theory that would help me to explicate the relationship between women's experiences and flawed societal structures and norms. The impetus behind my research is to bring to the fore the reasons women find themselves back in education at a mature age and to add credence and value to their daily experiences. FST provides me with a way to directly value women's opinions and experiences by acknowledging the epistemic privilege they hold, as oppressed members of society. I posit that their exclusion affords them a unique world view that can be used to challenge the status quo.

At times self-doubt led me to wonder if there was any value in researching the experiences of women like me. I wondered if it held any relevance or was of interest to anyone else? Was there a sound ethical reasoning for asking women to examine elements of their lives that it may be too late to change now? Fonow and Cook however, state that "theoretical advances in ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and dramaturgy have made it possible, as well as legitimate to study the taken-for-granted, mundane features of everyday life" (1991, p.11). The routine aspects of everyday life help to sustain gender and class inequalities and therefore must be addressed in my research.

Ontology

According to Jacquette, "pure philosophical ontology deals with such questions as what is meant by the concept of being, why there exists something rather than nothing and why there exists one logically contingent actual world" (2002, Preface). I understand this to mean that it is the study of being and existence, what it means to be and for things to exist in the world. Learning about ontology caused me to consider questions such as, is reality independent of my knowledge and do I participate in the construction of that reality? It is the way in which I see, experience, and understand the reality of the world. Investigating an appropriate personal research philosophy led me agree with the social constructionist model which holds that there are multiple realities which depend on the interactions of individuals and social world and are created, articulated, and can be changed through discourse. Social constructionism gave me a frame on which to hang my belief that the meanings my participants derived from their life and educational experiences, and perhaps oppression, were shaped through cultural and structural power.

I found that a feminist ontology does not seek to reify 'experience' as lying beyond culture…but rather seeks analytically to come to grips with the cultural specificity of experience, and thus with the medium through which all experience is channelled – the body/mind/emotions" (Wise & Stanley, 2002, p.193). Traditional epistemologies see emotions as "disruptive and subversive" forms of knowledge, uncontrollable, unreasonable, and unreliable for research purposes (Bordo, 1986 cited in Wise & Stanley, 2002, p.193). Given the nature of my research, I anticipated encountering intense emotions among the participants. It can be argued that the reality experienced by each participant resides within their own individual perception. This realisation allowed me to appreciate that while we shared similar experiences of oppression, each person interpreted and experienced it in a distinct manner. Here, I agree that our realities change because they are "historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than external truths of some kind […] and that at different times and in different places there have been and are very divergent interpretations of the same phenomena" (Crotty 1998:64 cited in Moon & Blackman, 2014). This came to the fore during the interview process when participants from different cultural backgrounds reported different feelings around similar events.

Epistemology

Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that looks at how people come to know things. Hetherington describes it as a collection of theses or beliefs about knowledge, who has knowledge, how does it come to exist and what forms does it take (Aikin &Han, 2020, p.93). Simply put, epistemology is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p.3). In beginning my research, I needed to think about how my data collection methods would tally with my ontological view. Crotty says "We do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world" (1993, p.44). As this quotation from Crotty illustrates, the creation of knowledge is built around the subjective meanings we derive from our lived experience.

For my study I relied upon the subjective knowledge of my participants so that I could create content and findings that were firmly based in their experiences, emotions, and beliefs. Without my participants' efforts to makes sense of their lives and share this with me, I would have no basis for my engagement with them and my interpretation of their experiences. Constructionist epistemology does not accept the notion of an objective "truth" that exists and is waiting to be discovered. Bruner contends that truth/meaning comes into being via human engagement with the realities in the world, he believes no real world exists without human activity or language (Moon & Blackman, 2014). This epistemological position assumes that different individuals construct meaning of the same object or phenomenon in different ways, therefore how my participants understand their lives is based on their cultural, historical, and social perspectives and meaning arises through an interaction with a community (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2009).

Constructionist epistemology sees knowledge as co-constructed, the researcher is not separate from research participant, Instead, the researcher is inherently involved in the research and sees the participant as almost co-researchers. I found this interpretation of the research process helpful when one of my participants assisted me with my research by unexpectedly forwarding me some government policy documents that related to our earlier interview. From this action I became aware that my research was being co-constructed with this participant and was perhaps having a transformative effect on her thinking. Therefore, together we constructed meaning out of our similar experiences and became "…humans engaging in their world and making sense of it [within] a genuinely historical and social perspective" (Crotty, 1998, p.54).

Data Gathering Method & Participants

How I chose and accessed my participants.

Initially, I planned to use convenience sampling when selecting participants for my study. This approach seemed straightforward as it would allow me to gather data from individuals who met certain practical criteria. Convenience sampling is often referred to as "accidental sampling" because elements are included in the sample based on their proximity or convenience to the researcher's data collection location (Etikan *et al*., 2015, p.2). However, I soon realized that randomly selecting a group of women from my social circle would not address my specific concerns. There was a possibility that they may not have experienced an interrupted education, or as Etikan *et al* stated, they "may not be applicable to the research problem" (2015, p.2). Such an approach could lead to poor-quality research outcomes due to inadequate data collection decisions.

I used purposive sampling to select women with interrupted education for this study. Purposive sampling involves deliberately choosing participants based on specific qualities they possess, allowing me to gather valuable insights from their experiences and knowledge. I had limited prior knowledge of the participants' circumstances, but their status as mature students indicated their relevance to my research. Purposive sampling also enabled me to include women from diverse backgrounds. The process continued until no new substantial information emerged, which occurred after nine interviews, at which point I gained a comprehensive understanding of the women's perspectives.

Why I chose Qualitative Interviews

I chose qualitative interviews for this study to gain detailed insights into why and how women were prevented from pursuing tertiary education immediately after school. Initially, I considered using a mixed-method approach to gather both numerical data and participants' narratives. However, due to the limited timeframe and word count of my thesis, I decided to focus on the participants' life stories rather than obtaining an overview of the prevalence of similar experiences among women in Ireland. Qualitative interviews allowed for in-depth exploration and understanding of the participants' perspectives, connecting their localised knowledge with theoretical concepts in feminist inquiry. It also provided a safe and confidential

space for open and honest discussions. Overall, qualitative interviews provided a richer understanding of everyday life, participants' experiences, social processes, and the meanings they generate.

My Research Participants.

All nine of my research participants were or had been mature students. All were women who have entered education whilst juggling the practicalities that come with being a mature student. They range in age from 26 years to 56 years. Three nationalities were represented: Irish, Brazilian, and Moroccan. Six of the participants are mothers and all are involved in homecare duties as well as outside study or work. All have attended Irish universities.

Coding, Analysis and Data collection

Following the collection of and my familiarisation with the data, I began the process of coding and analysis. I used open coding, a grounded theory method of analysing qualitative data, to identify themes contained in the data. Grounded theory enabled me to identify key elements from the interviews and organise them through a process of open, axial, and selective coding to create and connect with theories based on the data provided by the research participants (Cascio *et al*, 2019). I familiarised myself with the initial transcripts and broke them up into individual sections which were grouped into codes. I then compared subsequent transcripts which provided more data for these coded sections and provided new information as well as additional codes. I did this with all nine transcripts. These open codes were then grouped into axial codes, which identified connections between them so that they could be grouped into categories. Selective coding then identified core categories that allowed for identification of themes.

I recorded the interviews on two pieces of equipment. I used the *Otter* application on my mobile phone and as a back-up I simultaneously used a digital voice recorder. I used both in case one failed. I offered to send the interview questions in advance but just two participants required this. These were sent via email. During and immediately after the interviews I made brief notes as reminders to myself. These notes were destroyed once the transcription was successful and complete.

Ethics – Care of my Participants

My ethical concerns for my participants began before I first contacted them with an invitation to take part in my study. I agreed with Rolland et al that the interviewer has a different level of responsibility towards the interviewee if the enquiry is of a personal nature (2019). I was aware that by asking friends to participate I must consider ethical dilemmas such as the unintended but possible exploitation of participant trust and vulnerabilities (1999). Kirsch discusses the traditional hierarchy of power relations that is dismantled when the researcher/friend relationship becomes disordered. There already existed trust and mutual respect in the relationships that would contribute to a comfortable experience for my participants. In line with Finch and Ribbens, I found that the participants were willing to talk with me based on our shared position as women who had similar backgrounds and/or shared similar perspectives of playing subordinate social roles and gendered experiences (Kirsch, 1999). I was aware that there could be an imbalance of reciprocity if the participants were sharing information and I was not, therefore I was open and honest about my own position as both a researcher and mature student during the process.

Whilst framing my research within a feminist tradition, I paused to consider an ethical accusation that has been levelled at feminist research that it sets out to portray women as victimised, oppressed, and helpless. I contend that this is not the goal of gender theory application in my research, rather gender theory is used an analytical tool that explains how the social, cultural, political, and material conditions of women's lives contribute to their unequal treatment. As Kirsch states, "such analysis …reveals and does not invent institutional structures the perpetuate gender inequality and social injustice" (1999, p.21). Here, I connected with Kirsch's assertion that she selected her participants not based on their "failures" but on their successes. I chose nine participants who have all successfully overcome systemic, cultural, financial, and familial obstacles by ultimately managing to progress in their educational journeys and to achieve personal and academic goals despite many challenges and barriers.

Informed Consent and Protecting Privacy

I obtained informed consent by providing each participant with a copy of the consent information sheet and by inviting discussion and questions they may have about participating

in my research. I also proffered a list of the interview questions prior to meeting. I was aware that the semi-structured nature of my interviews placed me in the position of *taker* of knowledge *from* my participants, so I remained entirely respectful of any limits they wished to place on what or how much they wished to divulge to me.

I limited the collection of personal data and anonymised the data by giving the participants pseudonyms and alternative geographical information when writing up the data. I was careful to ensure participant well-being by being sensitive and responsive in my questioning and by being participant-led in the interview. Ethically, I was adamant that any interaction that I believed compromised their happiness or well-being was not pursued. Collected data was stored on password protected devices i.e., my telephone and laptop, that only I have access to. It will be destroyed was destroyed in May 2023.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Research Participants

This chapter outlines the findings and themes that emerged from the research and analyses it against the theoretical ideas from the literature review. Here, the application of feminist standpoint theory allowed me to place the interviewee's marginalised voices and experiences at the centre of this research and direct the research towards the social structures that shape their lives. To this end, I include short biographies of the women participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research:

Cosmo is 51 years of age and has returned to education with a view to completing an honours degree in social work. She has lived abroad for much of her adult life, resettling in Ireland in 2012. Cosmo is a mother to three children, and she currently works in the service industry while attending a university access course three evenings per week. Cosmo is motivated to return to education by an altruistic desire to help other people. She asks, "what other reason is there for us to be around as humans". After school, a love of opera led Cosmo to a "five or six year" theatre role, backstage doing make-up and costumes. Cosmo then left Ireland to live in Southeast Asia.

Jane is 51 years and returned to education in her mid-twenties to do a degree in business administration. Immediately after her Leaving Certificate Jane completed a secretarial course which she describes as a very practical course that equipped her with the skills necessary to get a job. Jane had a plan to go to college, but it was necessary for her to work so she hoped to go to college part-time. Jane secured an office job which offered paid training in supervisory management. At the age of twenty-three Jane received a green card and emigrated from Ireland to America and "secured a job with a good company". Jane had an awareness of the need for higher education; she states, "I knew if I wanted to progress career wise and/or eventually move back to Ireland with better job prospects I should consider starting a degree".

Julia is 26 years of age and is currently studying Computer Science in a large city university. Julia says that she has always had an awareness of the importance of education because her

grandfather had low levels of literacy and as a result her mother "drilled into us the importance of finishing out college, getting our Leaving Cert". Julia was also aware how badly impacted her father was by not having a Leaving Certificate whenever he went for a job, she states, "it was always in the back of my mind to go as high as I can". Julia reports a mixed experience of the education system and has just completed the first year of a four-year degree and plans to work as a computer programmer upon completion of her studies.

Maggie is 56 years of age and came back to education as a mature student in her forties. Maggie is divorced and has one grown-up child. She is a native of Brazil but "around 1994 political troubles started" and she emigrated the USA before settling in Ireland in 2000. After secondary school Maggie felt it "was more relevant to get a job" than to go straight to university. When After some years in Ireland Maggie was given a leaflet about a local Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) which she found assisted her with improving her English language skills and introduced her to academic writing. This was vital to her educational journey because although she could speak English, before VTOS she "was not even able to write in English". Maggie progressed to a large university and now holds a Level 8 Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and History and a Level 9 master's degree in business management.

Moira is 47 years old and returned to education in her thirties. She has been back to education several times since completing her secondary education and has a long-held love of learning. Of education, Moira says "it's been a hugely important part of my life because when I was a child, I thought I was stupid". Moira feels this affected her confidence in early education. She is married and has three children. Moira's journey back to education was ignited by an interest in psychology. She completed a certificate course through a university, one night per week and "realised I like this!". Moira then progressed from a level five qualification, through to a level six, seven, eight and nine over the course of the next ten years.

Naomi is 50 years of age and returned to education two years ago to fulfil a lifelong ambition. For her learning is "not necessarily formal education, but I've always liked to learn". Naomi did not enjoy secondary school as much as she now feels she should have. Looking back Naomi feels school was a place of both subtle and blatant discrimination. Travel was a source of

education for Naomi, and she has visited most of the countries in the world and has been involved in setting up a charity in India. Naomi is about to complete second year of a four-year social care degree and has undertaken the role of mature student mentor.

Orlaith is 42 years old and recently returned to education to obtain a teaching qualification to enhance her employment prospects. Orlaith has been involved in education for most of her life, both as a student and as a teacher. Orlaith is married with two children. Coming from a rural background and having attended a small primary school Orlaith had a difficult early school life where negative experiences with "cruel", strict teachers caused difficulty. Of this time Orlaith says "I remember not learning an awful lot". Although she feels she wasn't well prepared for secondary school, her memories of it are mostly positive. Despite having a degree in fine art, Orlaith work for some time as a bookie, her rationale was that she did not feel competent enough at that time to teach and she could not make a living from art alone. Although Orlaith had a recent negative experience during a Springboard course, she persevered in education and has recently completed a Higher Diploma in Further Education. Orlaith now successfully combines teaching with brining up her two girls.

Salima is 46 years old and began her return to education five years ago. Originally from Morocco, Salima was brought up in the Muslim faith. Salima believes her religion and culture influenced her educational journey. Salima relocated to Ireland where she met and married a man from a relatively small town and had two children. After some years as a homemaker Salima was spurred on to take up education to be better equipped to help her son who has disabilities. Salima's entry route to higher education began with a post leaving certificate course in a local further education college. She is now in her final year of a four-year degree course in intellectual disability nursing.

Tara is 42 years old and was motivated to return to learning when her son began primary school. Education became important to Tara as an adult but when she was younger, she "just wanted to get out of school and go and earn money". Tara is the first in her family to attend university and feels a source of pride in her accomplishments. After school, college was not an option for Tara because she says, "I didn't know how to get to college and they (her parents) sure didn't know either". Marriage, a move away from the city and the birth of her son then saw Tara become a fulltime mother and homemaker. Tara undertook a pre-university course at

her local VTOS centre, a move which she says was not just about education but also had a social aspect to it. Tara recounts the many friendships and laughs she had on this course and how it led to her filling out a CAO form and applying to university. Tara now holds a level 8 honours degree in history and geography.

Findings and Analysis

The Value of Education

The research began by exploring high value placed on education by the women but discovered how its importance lay within different contexts for each woman. In line with Hardison (2004) and Fairchild (2017) the motivation to return to education in the research cohort varied from factors such as self-fulfilment to specific life events or circumstances. For example, Jane explained how from a young age she equated education with career prospects. She stated:

> "I was not the best or most dedicated student in secondary school, but I knew education was important if I wanted to get a good job. I felt it would open doors, lead to career opportunities and ultimately independence for me".

Similarly, for Maggie there was "a desire to get a job, [a] desire to improve my life". The advantage of having an education for some then, was led by a desire to enter the workplace to support themselves financially and to have a good career. Economic necessity may instigate a need to upskill. Women may seek to enter higher and further education to advance a career goal, to increase their earning potential or after being made redundant from employment (Aslanian, 2001; Fairchild 2017).

Going back to education was a form of validation for some participants who had had negative early experiences where they felt undervalued or excluded by the school system. Moira recalled how education had been:

> "hugely important part of my life because in my in my younger days I would have gone to what we used to call remedial maths and remedial English. I actually sat in the slow row and things like that".

Education was also a way in which women could prove their worth to others. It was seen as a way to step outside the perception that women should only be mothers and wives. Salima who was in her final year of nursing said:

> "Especially as a woman with kids. So first, like as a woman … my family say you will never make it, it's too hard for you".

An important aspect of education then, was that it gave Salima validation and reassurance in her ability to exceed the expectations placed on her by family. Cosmo, too felt that becoming educated was a form of outside validation or approval:

> "But to know that somebody thought, yeah, you're more than capable of this. Isn't that it like? And I think that's for me education has been partly that somebody is saying, yeah, you're capable".

If, according to Fairchild (2017), the motivation some women give for returning to education is the fulfilment of a personal dream, of some of my research participants it can be said that this included being considered an "educated person". They dreamed of an external acknowledgment of their intelligence, abilities, and talents.

The interviews revealed that third level education was also seen by some to right the wrongs of secondary school. Even if time in secondary school was described as a very harrowing, there was an expectation of third level that it would be better. Julia who had left school early and completed her Leaving Certificate as an external candidate said:

> "I saw college as a much cooler version of secondary school where you could wear your own clothes and take what [subject choice] you wanted to do so, that was always my end goal, even when I left school, I knew I still wanted to go to college".

Moira echoed a similar sentiment:

> "by the time I got to secondary school I didn't actually realise that I was capable of anything, so I never really bothered so, I kind of just coasted through secondary school. So, I think when I did eventually return, it dipped my toe in that educational water as an adult, as a 30-year-old and I was really very pleasantly surprised by what I could learn and reproduce".

Tara was pleased for her formal secondary education to come to an end so that she could enter the world of work. She then came to an appreciation of the social aspect of adult education after her son began school and she had suffered a miscarriage:

> "I wasn't sitting at home on my own…VTOS was brilliant, I hadn't laughed like that in so long with people outside my family. I got a bit of a social life, and I was a member of society again".

An alternative conception of education was introduced by Naomi who attended secondary school in the Ireland of the nineteen-eighties. While she acknowledges that she had always placed a great value on education, for her it was:

> "not necessarily formal education but includes life experiences and travel. So, travel's been really important to me. That's kind of where I've learned. Well, you see that it's a bigger world than Ireland at time would have been a very insular mentality as an island. By travelling you got to see that there's more to life".

These profound and diverse personal opinions around education, shared by the interviewees strongly affirmed for me the significance of adopting a feminist standpoint in this study. It emphasised the importance of closely listening to women's stories and recognising that their experiences of returning to education have the potential to drive change for future generations of women. In line with Fairchild's perspective, I agree that actively listening to returning women is a matter of social justice (2017, p.3) and contend that those who have directly lived an experience possess greater knowledge than those who have only read about or contemplated it.

Class Barriers

Access

In my research for this thesis class and money related difficulties were cited by eight of the nine interviewees. Financial constraints were both a barrier to education and a motivating factor to gain qualifications. A review of the literature by Fleming *et al*, (2017), shows how reforms to encourage third level education uptake among underrepresented groups have improved participation among students from diverse background. This is borne out in my research in that several my participants, from a working-class background, utilised government grants/funding

to access education. However, my research reveals that power differentials in their ability to fund their education means that current and past class-based inequalities continue to affect many students.

Financial Constraints

When tracing the origins of their late entry into tertiary education, a barrier for many of the participants to accessing education was a lack of money. Both Orlaith and Jane were aware that their parents' income exceeded the income limits that existed at the time to qualify for a grant:

> "I did not qualify for the college grant at the time as my father earned slightly more than the threshold. I did not want or expect my parents to take out loans and financially support me during college years" (Jane)

Like Jane, Orlaith's father earned too much for her to qualify for a student grant. However, exceeding the income limits for a grant did not mean money was in abundance. Orlaith sought paid work at a young age to save for college:

> "I thought I need to get a bit of money together if I'm going to college. I couldn't get the grant because my dad was a farmer".

As outlined in the literature, changes have occurred in government policies and political discourse which has prioritised a more equitable system of access to education. Research by Fleming *et al* details governmental policies that have increased the rates of participation of non-traditional students thus removing or reducing financial constraints as a barrier in the way it was for Orlaith and Jane.

This is borne out among my research cohort in that Julia who is in receipt of the SUSI grant felt there were very few financial barriers to her route to college:

> "I couldn't really have gone [to third level] without funding. I got the non-adjacent, special rate SUSI so that was a great help, my fees were covered and things like books and bus fares and all that".

Coming from a working-class background Julia qualified for financial assistance to fund university. However, measures to assist with her disability were less forthcoming. A diagnosis of ASD, that Julia believes contributed to her late entry to university, was not addressed by the

DARE scheme because it, and the HEAR scheme (outlined in Chapter Two), are available only to school leavers who are entering tertiary education through the CAO points system. Therefore, despite the success outlined in the literature, of these initiatives on improving access to third level for school leavers, for mature learners like Julia they have little relevance. The literature reveals that there exists a failure of many secondary schools to begin planning the transition from school to further/higher education for students with special educational needs (OECD, 2011), I suggest Julia's access to tertiary education may have been improved by early intervention at secondary school level.

Similarly, additional support may have benefitted Orlaith who recounted her experience in recent years, of undertaking a government funded Springboard course in recent where she was forced to leave due to hidden costs associated with the course. Springboard courses are part of the Government's Jobs Initiative, providing free or subsidised courses to offer new skills to people who are unemployed or on a social welfare payment. It aims "to build the supply of skilled graduates to meet current and future skills needs of the Irish economy" (Higher Education Authority). Those meeting the criteria of *Returner* or *Unemployed* have their fees covered in full. However, in practice Orlaith discovered that she was expected to purchase a computer priced at €2000 to complete assignments in her computer animation course. Orlaith became quite emotional as she explained that she found herself unable to keep up with others who had the required equipment and after much deliberation and attempts to purchase a second-hand or reduced-price computer, after six weeks she finally had to leave the course early. Orlaith remarked on the lack of support she felt from her course faculty and the negative affect it had on her self-esteem to have to leave early. She said she felt like a "loser". Here, Orlaith's experience confirms the literature review findings that despite much improvement in access for under-represented groups, a gap remains for many with "stigmatised experiences", including the experience of being a mature student of limited means (Aontas, 2022).

Burdening Parents

The participants for whom class and money was a barrier at a young age had an acute awareness of the strain paying for tertiary education would put on their parents and how extra financial burden might limit their siblings' life chances. Despite mothers' attempts to shield children from feelings of financial deprivation by "pooling resources from additional jobs and help from

family and friends" (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021, p.726), the data shows that adolescents often make choices that they feel will ease the family's financial strain:

> "The decision to not go to third level I believe was mine as I did not want to put that financial burden on my parents. I would have liked to have gone straight to college after secondary school but given I did not qualify for a grant I thought it would be best to do the secretarial course, get a job and go back to college part-time as a mature student. The financial barrier was the primary reason I did not consider college straight after secondary school" (Jane).

> "Well, it would have been lack of money. In the sense of she [mother] would have had to get a loan. She would have had the collateral of her house to be able to do it, but it wasn't straightforward. People wouldn't have had that. It wouldn't have been like here, just take it out the back pocket" (Tara).

For Jane and Tara each being one of three children meant they were conscious that their parents would have to be able to afford the daily expenses in life as well as educating their siblings. Cosmo was also aware of her siblings need for their parents' resources to be targeted towards their needs rather than her education "I didn't want to go to college when I had five younger siblings". She felt it would be unfair for her to have the opportunity of a third level education while her sister was working in a factory at age the age of fifteen. Growing up in a lower socio-economic situation has strong links with lower level of academic success. The data from my research cohort, shows a close connection with Elder's assertion, as discussed in the literature review, that family economic stress and adolescent's perception of their social status, have both a tangible and emotional impact on access to education (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021).

Discrimination: Class

In each interview I asked the participants why they had not continued directly into tertiary education after school. As found in the literature review, Smyth and Byrne's (2010) contention that student's perception of teacher's commitment towards them can impact educational outcomes, Naomi felt that being overlooked by a teacher who was handing out forms for the Central Applications Office (CAO) was a turning point for her:

"I feel on reflection looking back that it was very much class driven, although at the time I wouldn't have had the words for that. I think it was very class driven. I remember we were being given CAO forms and I remember a teacher walking by me, not even asking me If I wanted one. I could tell you the people that got the CAO form that day and without exception every one of them were, uh, in a private house for the want of better word. I mean call a spade a spade, yeah? And everyone else didn't get one, myself included, it wasn't even an option. You didn't even think of asking for one, because it was, it was subliminally or quietly kind of fed back to you that well look, it's not for you".

When asked why she believed this had happened Naomi made a connection between those living in "private" houses and those housed by the council. She described the distance between private and council estates as "a two-minute walk but a two-million-mile quantum leap and [I] think you recognise that education is the key to get out of it, to even the playing field". Here, Naomi identifies her working-class background as having been a factor in her choices around education in 1989 and as illustrated in the literature review, at around the time the Naomi finished secondary school, there was a lack of government policy to address inequalities. Jeffers and Lillis posit that educational policy over those preceding twenty years, favoured the middle-class, farmer class and upper-working class (2012). Tara too felt a class divide in being from a working-class background while attending a "posh school". "I lived in a council place there and I used to get picked on for my accent from the teachers". Cosmo felt *othered* by her siblings' reaction to her when she was perceived to be adopting a "posh" accent. Stepping outside accepted cultural norms was frowned upon:

"When I was 17 or 18, I was in honours English, my sisters used to say you talk snobby. Everyone thinks you're weird. You're trying to act snobby".

Here, I suggest that both Tara and Cosmo experienced Johansson and Jones' (2019), notion of failing to display the correct forms of cultural capital deemed appropriate by those in their sphere. I posit that Bourdieu's *habitus,* as described in the literature review, can be applied to Naomi, Tara and Cosmo's experiences outlined above. Accents, demeanour, and general ways of behaving signifies class. Tara's preference for playing football over hockey was frowned upon in the "posh" school she attended. Her accent was ridiculed. In Naomi's case she believes her working-class background was rejected and othered by a teacher. In Cosmo's case, her accent was ridiculed by her siblings because it did not fit their perception of their working-

class values and roots. Despite class-based discrimination, in achieving access to university, I suggest that the research cohort achieved a form of "transformation" as allowed by Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Here, I draw a parallel with the FST notion of epistemic privilege, in that for these women their oppressive early experiences of difference contributed to the *advantage* they now hold by having access to both perspectives.

Low Parental Expectations

Although working class parents are as keen as middle-class parents for their children to have a third level education after secondary school, they differ in the way go about assisting this transition. The data revealed a class barrier in there being a lack of encouragement by parents about third level education. For Moira's father "education is important because you should never feel that you can't talk to anybody. If you ever meet a solicitor or a doctor that you'd be able to talk to them and that's why education is important". I see a correlation here with Lareau's research about "hidden injuries of class" whereby people "feel a lack of dignity and respect associated with their social position" (2011, p.286). Moira's father felt that education's value was to lift one to a position of equality with the "professional class":

> "My parents themselves who had left school in their in their childhood days, they thought I was flying in school because they went to parent teacher meetings and were told 'ah sure she's great'. I'd say like as an adult now reflecting back, I'd say it was probably they didn't realise that their children could achieve so much. So, I think my parents just thought I'd meet a nice boy and get married" (Moira).

Often parents had a lower level of education themselves and so to finish secondary school was seen as a huge achievement and the ultimate level their child could achieve. That Moira holds an understanding of the effect her parent's social position had on her education, illustrates the value of epistemic privilege when it leads to conscientisation, as proven by Moira subsequent educational attainment and success.

Participating in Education

Lack of Support as a Barrier

Guidance Counselling

The role of career guidance teacher is multifaceted and time consuming with teachers reporting that they spend only fifty percent of their time on career guidance as a large portion of time, (thirty percent) is taken up with personal counselling of students, and the remainder of other duties (Indecon Review of Career Guidance, 2019). Unsurprisingly then, participants cited a lack of career guidance or advice as a reason they felt unprepared for continuing their education from school. Tara states "We'd no guidance in school. There was no choice. I didn't know it [college] was an option".   For Cosmo's ambition to go to Trinity college, career advice regarding the language requirement came too late:

> "My guidance counsellor told me in 3rd year that, 'No, you won't be able to go to Trinity. You have to have French in first year for art', I was like why didn't you tell me?"

Orlaith felt she also lacked career guidance:

> "So, in secondary school I probably needed a lot more guidance and I kind of fell between the cracks. I could have done with a bit more support".

Such experiences show how important timely and effective advice is in assisting school leavers with decisions around going on to further education, yet literature from 2019 reveals that school guidance counsellors remain under pressure to provide counselling services in addition to career guidance, thus reducing the time they have available to support student choices regarding educational pathways (Indecon Review of Career Guidance, 2019).

Teachers Comments and Attitudes

In addition to disparities in the provision of career guidance for the research cohort, a recurring theme that emerged was the influence, both negative and positive of teachers' attitudes. For this discussion, I accept as given that positive teacher/student relationships elicit positive

outcomes for both parties. Consequently then, I suggest that negative teacher attitudes and emotions elicit responses from students that can be destructive. Ali et al suggest that these student attitudes can then be seen in their behaviour or actions (2019). For Orlaith attitudes and behaviour from a teacher resulted in a feeling of unpreparedness as she advanced in education from an early age:

> "I would have seen him slap and hit. He was an ex Christian brother. He was a nice man, but I say he had demons. I remember not learning an awful lot. Then I went into secondary school. I probably wasn't prepared" (Orlaith)

Moira believes that being given encouragement and support in school would have had a huge impact on her decisions post Leaving Certificate, "I think what would have made a difference to me would have been teachers taking an interest in me academically". She recalls an interesting exchange with a teacher in secondary school:

> "One time I wrote an essay. I wrote an essay in English and I forgot to put my name on it and when the teacher handed it back to me there was a B Plus written on the essay. [The teacher said] 'I have this essay here; I don't know who's it is' and I went oh that's mine and she put the paper down in front of me and she smiled, and I remember she went like that [gestures putting down the essay with an amused look on her face] and said 'I'm glad I didn't know that was yours'. That just told me that lady doesn't have any belief in my ability and she's shocked that I could produce such good work. All these little things, they do leave an impression. I mean, teachers don't realise I don't think, that we can remember the exact words they said to us".

This was just one of many examples given by Moira about interactions that left her feeling out of place in education. Here, I refer to the literature review findings of class and gender related *imposter syndrome* and suggest that negative teacher attitudes can also engender feelings of not belonging in students. Johansson And Jones's (2019) concept of the *interloper* may also apply to such students in that they may feel dislocated from the educational space via negative messages they have received about their abilities, attitudes, or selves. I concur with Blazar and Kraft's (2017) research which says that emotion and personality of a teacher can influence educational attainment in students.

As laid out in the literature review, a person's experience of education can be impacted by streaming. Moira was streamed in secondary school:

> "Out of the five Leaving Cert classes. I was in the second lowest class, because in those days they were graded. I was in the second lowest class, so career was never a word that I associated with, I really didn't think of myself as an intelligent person or a smart person or a clever person" (Moira).

> "I did really well in the exams. But for some reason we weren't allowed to move up. I don't know what it was, it was the 90s so you could move down from higher to ordinary, but you couldn't move up from lower to higher" (Tara).

Here Tara demonstrates how, in line with the 2006 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment findings in the literature, there is little mobility between streams in secondary school. Interestingly both Tara and Moira hail from working class backgrounds and so their placement in a streamed class concurs with Oakes' (1990) assertion that such students are more likely to be streamed in this way. A shown consequence of streaming is inequality, again this is mirrored in the challenges faced by both Tara and Moira in their experiences of interrupted educations.

Gendered Barriers

Patriarchy and Gender Roles

Caring Role

In keeping with hooks' (2000) critique of unequal domestic relationships the research found that the caring role, in addition to the role of mother/spouse, impacted women's ability to access or remain in education. In our discussions around barriers to education, caring for a parent or older relative also impacted some of the women's choices and experiences. Tara describes how both she and her husband had parents in need of care while she was a university student. She reports how the role of mother, carer and woman meant that her commitments were greater

than those of her husband. Tara explained that a lot of the care given to her husband's father was given by her husband's sister:

> "I think it's different for men, like when Dave's dad was sick, he wouldn't have done half as much as I did for my mam when she was sick, the stress of her being sick, we knew that it was leading to her dying, so that was stress on stress. it was just a nightmare".

The undervaluation of caring work, the perception of its being a woman's role and the higher value placed on a man's labour, often makes it financially more viable for the man to continue to work rather than take on a caring role. When childcare and care for elderly parents are considered, I suggest that women can be in a caring position for the duration of their adult lives. Providing care across her life course can have serious economic consequences for a woman as they reach retirement age and before. Tara explained how caring for her mother directly affected her grades in university; "Well, in first year I was getting letters telling me I'm the top five percent (of her class) and then my mother got sick, and I didn't get another one of them letters". I suggest that university grades have a correlation with employment prospects. For Russell et al, unbalanced caregiving fuels gender disparities in the labour market, affecting employment, hours, promotions, wages, and conditions (2019). Achieving gender equality requires addressing unequal unpaid work. Without equitable caregiving, full gender equality in the labour market is unlikely.

Domestic Labour

In keeping with literature by Hartsock, and Galvez and Modrono, the research revealed that gender role expectations around household tasks household had a stultifying effect on women's educational choices. This was remarked upon in the interviews not only in relation to women's own homes but was observable in the homes of their peers. Tara recounts how a fellow mature male student she car-shared with could not understand the workload she faced daily. Tara recounts how he told her how he picks his classes according to his own needs and once home from college he could lock himself away from the family to do assignments rather than do housework. Tara commented "but he had a wife there to hand him dinner, look after the children". For Tara the college experience bore a marked difference to her male peer. She felt pressure to fit all her responsibilities into the day:

"it was just never ending and some nights it was 9:00 o'clock by the time I sat down to start the assignments. I was up until 4a.m. Then they're talking about procrastination. It's not procrastination, it's called I am a mother and a wife and I've no time".

As outlined by hooks in the literature review in relation to the unequal distribution of domestic chores "since so many male children are not taught housework, they grow to maturity with no respect for their environments and often lack the knowledge how to take care of themselves and their households" (1984, p.425). hooks contends that men develop a dependence on women in their domestic lives whilst women learn that housework is undervalued and demeaning. For women housework is deemed value-less because if it is considered in terms of exchange value, as unpaid, unrewarded work, it must be worthless. For hooks then the attitude towards household tasks is one of a negative drudgery rather than an opportunity for accomplishment and she proposes a rethinking of housework as valuable to both sexes. Tara's perception that there exists an inequality in the division of household responsibilities is borne out by Morel and Carbonier's (2015) research which illustrates that the most unequally shared forms of unpaid care are housework, childcare and long-term care for older people or people with disabilities and other chronic conditions (cited in the Gender Equality Index Report on Health, 2021)

The data revealed that six of the nine interviewees reported feeling burdened by domestic work. Therefore, I suggest that women often expect and accept this role and the consequences to education this may bring because as hooks contends, it is accepted as normal for women to most of this work. Clayton and Crosby's notion that women may not be aware of their disadvantage can be contested here because the research data revealed a great level of awareness from the interviewees regarding their gendered positions in relation to domestic work (McHugh, 2017).

The constraints of Relationships/Mother Role

The traditional role of the woman, specifically as a mother and carer, curtailed women's options regarding returning or staying in education. The research participants expressed the dilemma of being a wife and mother whilst also being a student. For some this contained an awareness of how societal norms had shaped their dreams and expectations about marriage and

motherhood. Maggie discussed how her dreams when she was a teenager changed once she grew older:

> "you know society is still romanticised about marriage and motherhood and so on and it's something that you are afraid of [not having] since you are very little and that's not the path for everyone. I don't regret my child, but you wonder what…what I would have achieved if I followed a different path. You never, you never know but you wonder".

Here, I suggest, Maggie is signalling Swidler's "idealised and feted" heteronormative version of romantic love, based on traditional gender roles which condition young girls to see marriage as the attainment of happiness and success (cited in Hull *et al*, 2014). Maggie expresses how society's portrayal of marriage and motherhood as ideals led her to question alternative paths her life could have taken had she not been influenced by these societal expectations. Maggie's experience of love and marriage can be said to illustrate that Giddens' (1992) ideal of the "pure relationship", where both parties experience equality, is a notion that is yet to be commonplace in the reality of women's lives.

Moira further illustrates how inequalities exist within marriage when the spousal role takes on an appearance of the mother and child role. This occurred when the woman was expected to carry out tasks that could reasonably be carried out by either partner in the relationship. Here, I purposely include a lengthy quotation from Moira as I feel it sums up women's relationship dilemmas so well:

> "So, he's like my child, he was like my child, you know. I was minding the children, packing, and cleaning and taking care of it, so he never had to. He never had to stay up til one, two, three in the morning to finish assignments that you couldn't get done because you're still linking in with your child who's depressed at ten o'clock at night, do you know what I mean?" He didn't have to worry about Ulster Bank closing. I made all the phone calls. I changed all the direct debits over. I did all of that. When he went back to college he only had to focus on college. He didn't have to do anything else, He's not to wash dishes, he's not to keep house. He didn't have to look after children, after school runs, he didn't have to go to hospital appointments, doctors' appointments. He didn't have to, you know, look after children's social, emotional needs and all the rest of it. He could just focus on his college work, when he had college all he had to do is focus on it. He had nothing else to do".

From a feminist standpoint view, Moira offers an illumination of the experience of women's daily activities that does not merely "uncover or give testimony about experience but [also makes] a place for it in analysis" (Smith cited in Devault, 1996, p.39). I suggest that such findings in my research provide an interrogation of the how the sexual division of labour "which define women as contributors to subsistence and mothers" acts as a barrier to women's education (Hartsock, 2004, p.284).

Intimate Partner Violence

To further consider women's gendered positionality within relationships I offer a view of intimate partner violence (IPV). As outlined in the literature review, intimate partner violence is a barrier to women's education. Related to the constrictions of a marriage or intimate partnership, the research data also revealed that for three interviewees, IPV within the home influenced their decisions and ability to return to education. Although men can be affected to a lesser degree, IPV is gendered phenomenon, that sees one in three women experience IPV in her lifetime (Klencakova *et al*, 2023). Mshweshwe holds that domestic violence comes about through a cultural system that legitimises patriarchy and male supremacy "through embracing and promoting hegemonic masculinity, a configuration of gender practices which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2020, [no.pagination]). Connel & Messerchmidt (2005), Klencakova *et al*, (2023) suggest that hegemonic masculinity can be said to promote ideals around violence, aggression, and a view of the female as lesser. Living with violence meant that for Cosmo education was put aside in favour of concentrating on her children's education. Cosmo recounts her experience of an abusive marriage using the analogy of an aircraft hijacking. She refers to her ex-husband as "the terrorist" with whom she left Ireland to live in Southeast Asia at a young age. Cosmo, who lived for over twenty years within a violent marriage, had hoped to return to education when her children were in school. She describes her marriage as a "hijacking" of her life:

> "I couldn't take that space for myself. Part of it was surviving, The first time I was interested in going back to college was the year I planned to put my last child into school, I had everything worked out. I wasn't going anywhere until the kids were on the way. Access to university in UCD 2015, but then there's the hijacking".

Further connecting with literature review findings from Klencakova et al, (2023), Cosmo recounted how the emotional toll of being in an abusive relationship and the on-going challenges brought to her by her ex-partner were tangible obstructions to her education.

Maggie too recounted how a difficult marriage to a man she referred to as "the monster" affected the course her life took:

> "I had a baby in December 2001. And it [the marriage] didn't work. I didn't work for many reasons. Well, my marriage didn't [go] the way the I planned, eight years of my husband, I decided to...there was domestic violence and I have to decide that enough was enough and I had to run into a women's refuge".

For Maggie domestic violence within her relationship was a multifaceted barrier to education. It restricted her ability to make and act on decisions regarding education. She recalls "everything was pretty painful. Sometimes you have to postpone your dreams". The literature review indicates that IPV is pervasive in our society. Of nine interviewees, three disclosed to this study that they were affected by it. IPV has been shown to reduced women's options with regards to making choices and decisions around their lives and education. When it can be availed of, I suggest that education offers women a means to raise their own awareness by helping them to see opportunities outside of their current experience. Practically, education can raise the financial prospects of women, allowing the possibility of independence.

Access to Education

Time Poor

The research found that time pressure played a huge role in women's educational choices. From making time to attend educational courses to juggling commitments when they engage in a course, time poverty proved a barrier for many of the research participants. For example, Maggie recounted the difficulties she experienced when she returned to college, even having to negotiate issues around sleep, to fit all of her commitments into her day:

> "there was., no space for you, no time for you, no very little time for you. I was fifty years old when I started university and I wasn't able to spend a few nights without

sleeping because you do all your assignments at night-time and then you go to college… you are always so tired, you have to keep all the balls in the air at once".

Women's experiences of spending an excessive amount of time on mothering, caring and domestic labour creates conditions where getting out of the home to attend education is challenging. Moira describes a scenario whereby family commitments led to her attending educational course in the evening, but it was preferable if her child was first asleep before she left the home. Moira describes being able to go out on two evenings per week to a course because her child was a good sleeper and "once he was down, he was down for the night". She explains that her husband took care of their two children on those nights; "there were no childcare issues or anything like that and I know, I know it's not childcare, he's a parent. I know all those arguments". Despite knowing that a parent does not *baby sit* his own children, it can be said that Moira's awareness that arguments exist around the issue, illustrate a deep-seated conception that childcare, in practice, is a woman's problem, This echoes the findings of Ruben discussed in the literature review that mothers are expected to be constantly available to their children (cited in Williams, 2000). I believe that ideas and practice around masculinity perpetuates such thinking. Traditional parental roles place a father in the position of breadwinner who plays a supportive role in his partner's parenting of their children. This finding echoes the research by Crespi and Ruspini which says that hegemonic discourse removes the father from the possibility of being a primary caregiver, instead he is relegated to the position of "helping out" (cited in Lewington *et al*, 2021). I suggest that these are the "arguments" Moira refers to in her deliberations around the sharing of childcare with her husband. I further suggest that the existence of awareness around such issues, unless consciously addressed in practice, leads to the perpetuation of the gendered parenting role status quo that contributes to educational barriers for women.

Orlaith shared how having children affected her education and career. Despite challenges, she successfully balanced childcare responsibilities while returning to education, by finding a course that accommodated her children's schedules, like other participants. For Orlaith returning to education was preceded by a time as a small business owner:

"I got pregnant, and I was in "place of employment" and then I had Lauren…then I got pregnant again with Molly, there was only two years between them and then you know with two kids, I had to give up".

Not alone then can childbirth affect potential earnings upon graduation, the respondents in my study expressed how caring for children and pregnancy limited their choice in going back to education. Also, as outlined in the literature review, women pay a *motherhood penalty* in the form of unequal pay but are expected to contribute to the family income by working outside the home. For hooks this is not a new development, she holds that women of colour and women from lower socio-economic backgrounds were already in the workplace when the feminist movement took hold (1984). Orlaith's experience of education and employment echo McDowell's contention that women are expected to perform in the private sphere of the home and in the public spheres of education and the labour market, despite inequitable circumstances.

Participating in Education

Gendered based discrimination in education can be a challenge women have to contend with every day. The youngest participant in my study Julia, offered a view on how she experienced gender role discrimination in education. She says:

> "I think because I was going for tech courses, I faced a lot of gender-based discrimination and having kind of strange lecturers telling me that oh, I'll have no problem getting jobs just because I'm a woman. Makes me feel very uncomfortable. It's very much a *bro culture* in tech. It was always about being female".

As outlined in the literature, *bro culture*, for Krasteva (2019) and Essig (2018) can be considered a favouring of so-called traditional male characteristics of masculinity and contempt of female participation. Julia described her experiences on a computer programming post leaving certificate course where she was a lone female in a class with thirty males. She recounts a group Zoom call where one of her male peers spoke to her and was derided and called a "simp" by the other males on the call. Julia explained that the term *simp* refers to "someone who's obsessed with girls and just desperately wants a girlfriend". Julia's gender and status as the only female on the course were further used against her when her male peers attributed her academic success to her being the only girl on the course. They regularly described her as the lecturer's "favourite" student. Julia describes their comments:

> "'Yeah, of course she's getting the high marks, she's Brian's (the lecturer) favourite',
> that was the whole attitude. I was doing the work and was that off putting, I know

some days I would be dreading getting a compliment in class on my code and work or on any assignments because they just be like [adopts mocking tone] 'ooooh'". [Julia would think] "is someone gonna be ripping the piss out of me in the background or I'm going to get a vibe at the next group work thing? So, then it was just uncomfortable".

Aligning with the research by Miller (2020) and Krasteva (2019), Julia encountered gender-based discrimination during her involvement in a STEM-based program. Experiencing such discrimination can be argued to create additional challenges for women's participation.

Guilt and Emotional Toll

Participating in education is further challenged by the guilt and emotional labour experienced by mothers who return to education. My research data showed a strong correlation with Stone and O'Shea's (2013) treatise on gendered challenges for mothers as students. Those in my research cohort who are mothers describes a sense of guilt at leaving their children. Salima uses the analogy of "de-cloaking" herself, she wears one cloak as a student and another as a mother. This was often accompanied by a downplaying of the toll this can take on her emotionally. Salima, who as part of her nursing degree is required to spend time on work placement in a hospital, describes that guilt is worse when her children are sick but also:

"I will say ninety percent of the time even when they're not sick I feel guilty. This week I worked Monday to Thursday 12-hour shift. The kids are in bed, for four days, [when] I left; they were still asleep. I kissed them. I come back and I just kissed them and they're still asleep. Guilty, that's it's four days out of seven, you weren't there for them".

Salima's story is consistent with the literature by Thomas *et al*, that contends that despite their awareness of study as a positive thing in their lives and a source of good role-modelling for their children, student parents experience "overwhelming guilt" about the effect the time spent on study may have on their children (2021, p.2). Whist student fathers can experience guilt regarding their role as family breadwinner, student mothers are "much more likely" to feel guilty about childcare. Stone and O'Shea contend that minimising difficulties "is consistent with an acceptance of gendered expectations that women will carry the primary caring role in the family" and that this prevents the woman from feeling entitled to any personal time,

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including time to study and attend college (2013. p.110). Salima describes how she copes with guilt by putting on a brave face; "I keep it to myself for them and I keep saying look how far our life changes and how all our life changes. So, I just have to go, to keep doing what I'm doing". As described in the literature review, I contend that this data aligns with Hochschild's theory that most of the emotional labour is done by women and emotive dissonance can occur in women when feelings of guilt are supressed (1983). It is in "Maintaining [this] difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain" (Hochschild, 2012, p.68). I hold that it is this strain that negatively impacts women's experience of participating in education.

Age and Gender

The literature review revealed how certain life events are expected to take place in line with a person's age and life stage (Carr & Komp, 2011). Age played a significant role for several my research participants. During a discussion on the workplace, age and being a mature student, Maggie remarked "at a young age your degree is the gateway to your future but at my age it is just a piece of paper". Here, I suggest Maggie is mirroring Moen's contention that there exist a cultural schema regarding expectations of when in the life course events such as education *should* take place (cited in Carr & Komp, 2011). Maggie discussed stigmatised aging; she believed that despite having a qualification from an established university, her age was a barrier in using that degree to get a job. Similarly, Maggie lamented that her years spent as a homemaker were devalued due to her age; "my years as a homemaker was not valid in the world of the workplace". Here age and gender roles affected Maggie's choices. For Salima, age was a factor that marked her as different from her student peers:

> "I am actually the oldest. Two of them, I'm older than their mother. So, there is a big gap, at first was a bit challenging because only myself and another fellow have kids. Then you get the group of the 17 and 18 years of age, so the slagging … like I remember when I used my phone to check in and a girl said, 'Oh my God, you text like my granny'".

Salima's experience is illustrative of the work of Fairchild (2017) which describes the traditional view of university as a place for traditional age students where older students can be viewed as impaired or less-than. Mature students have a different set of life experiences to traditional age students and difficulties for women who have enrolled in further education

included marginality and feelings of not belonging due to ageism. Yet Salima reported an eventual improved relationship with her younger academic peers when she became class representative and how she has since become friendly with those who initially viewed her as different because of her age. Again, Salima's experience mirrors Fairchild's view that university can become a site of forged bonds among women (2017).

For Julia gender combined with age to produce a difficult experience in tertiary education. Despite Julia's relatively young age of 26, she too felt a sense of alienation from the traditional age students on her course:

> "They weren't particularly interested in me and it was combined with the fact that I was older than them all in a lot of ways, I think the closest in age to me was a year younger, but because he was mixing with the lads, it was like he could only be seen talking to me on the down- low, but not in front of the boys. No way he couldn't talk to the goody-two-shoes adult girl".

Here, an intersection of age and gender to marked Julia as "othered". This finding illustrates that women's positioning in relation to re-entry to education and their experience once they get there is shaped by societal gendered norms which can intersect with factors such as age to produce specific challenges for women returners to education.

Carrying out research in the year 2023, one might expect to find that decades since the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement, that women would feel less bound by traditional gender role expectations. However, bell hook's assertion that "the feminist movement we dreamed could change the lives of all women for the better has had little impact on the lives of masses of women", is pertinent when seven of my nine research participants reported that they felt they had been affected by gender role expectations. A further two participants acknowledged that whilst their own return to education had not been directly affected in this way, they were aware that returning to education as a woman held specific challenges:

> "Through my volunteer work with a charity, we have female clients who have no partner and struggle in terms of finances and childcare to go to college in order to try and make a better future for themselves and their children. I would love to see more supports in place to help these women" (Jane).

Here Jane identified a connection between education, women, children, support, money, and aspirations in a succinct description of the challenges faced by the women she volunteers with. Women's subordinated position in relation to these challenges appears obvious to Jane. For hooks, women work both inside and outside the home, are paid less for their labour and remain in their roles due to lack of alternative options. She asserts "Feminism promised to show them the way. That promise has not been fulfilled" (hooks, 1999).

As outlined in the literature review, however, some progress for females in education has been made. Described as "a generational leap in girls' education" between 1995 and 2018, school enrolment has increased by 150 million boys and 180 million girls. Globally, in third level education for every 100 men enrolled, the number of women enrolled increased from 95 in 1995, to 114 in 2018. 105 countries have ratified 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education and education ministries sponsored laws regarding gender equality in 50 percent of countries (GEM report, 2020, p.2). Education levels of children are often predicted by parental, especially maternal educational levels. Successful policy interventions that reduce intergenerational educational disadvantage include tertiary enrolment quotas for vulnerable groups, scholarships and cash transfers, and removal of education fees.

Intersectional Nature of Interruptions.

The data produced from the research show a common denominator between all nine participants, that there existed an intersectionality of disadvantages and/or oppressions they each faced. In line with the literature, the participants faced numerous sites of oppression that impinged on them at various stages of their educational path. For this reason, I highlight Julia and Orlaith's stories as two examples of how multiple forms of intersectionality of disadvantages culminated in specific challenges for them.

For Julia, education was initially impacted by an early experience of being the child of a mother affected by intimate partner violence. Julia explained how her school life was affected by worry about her mother and how this caused a deep-seated anxiety around attending school which ultimately culminated in her leaving school early. Intersecting with this was Julia's diagnosis of ASD which she says caused further difficulties with social interaction in school:

> "Secondary school went quite well for me up until I hit about the third year, and I started getting quite badly bullied and I wasn't accepted by my peers at all. And by the end of fifth year, I had decided that I was going to drop out and I had a very bad panic attack".

Social anxiety followed Julia into third level where an added disadvantage she felt was her position as the only girl in both technology related courses she had attended. Gender bias caused Julia to be discriminated against in terms of mixing with peers, being left out of social opportunities, feeling afraid to accept praise and being expected to pick up the slack in group work with male peers. Age was another factor that affected Julia's experience of third level when as the only mature student on a PLC course she was discriminated against by younger students. Julia's experience then, contained elements of several unaddressed inequalities which culminated in a rocky experience of education and a later, than she would have liked, entry to university.

Intersectionality for Orlaith saw issues of teacher attitudes in primary school affect her confidence to the point she felt ill-prepared for secondary school. She said, "If you were bright, she thought you were the bees' knees, but if you struggled or needed help, she'd say you're stupid, I remember the feeling". Orlaith's experience was one of feeling a lack of career guidance in secondary school and of being affected by the financial burdens brought on by not qualifying for a grant because her father earned above the threshold. Orlaith chose to work instead to earn some money, another barrier for her. When the downturn in Ireland's economy came in 2008 Orlaith experienced the disadvantage of parenting alone when her husband was forced to seek work in the UK. Finances again became a burden when Orlaith was expected to purchase a two-thousand-euro computer to complete an animation course. Having to give up this course then affected Orlaith's self-esteem and made her doubt her ability to take up teacher training. With Orlaith's story it is evident how over the course of her life the intersections of teachers' attitudes, confidence, lack of career guidance, support, gender role as primary carer to her children, money and self-esteem combine and interact resulting in a difficult educational journey.

These examples are illustrative of the experiences of all nine interviewees. I consider them to represent the social reality of not just these women but of all women who face various forms of oppression in their education. Criticism of feminist standpoint theory by Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) was pained to highlight the differences between women and their experiences, to prevent a generalisation or reduction of women's lives. However, Hill Collins is firm in her assertion that over time groups have a "degree of permanence that transcends individual experiences" (1997, p.375). In agreement with Hill Collins (1997), I assert that the

prevalence of intersectional disadvantage among the research cohort illustrates that although the nature of each women's disadvantages differ, a commonality of their experiences is that they each faced numerous challenges in their pursuit of education and that these challenges became barriers to their participation which they had to fight to overcome.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the primary research interviews were presented, providing in-depth narratives of the participants' lived experiences and the oppressive obstacles they encountered in their educational pursuits. The objective of this chapter was to amplify the voices of these women and establish connections between their experiences and the existing literature. By doing so, a theoretical and political framework was developed, aiming to elucidate and analyse the circumstances surrounding their educational journeys.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to explore the nature of the challenges and barriers faced by women that re-enter an interrupted education. This final chapter provides a closing remark on the overarching themes revealed by the research process. It is organised according to the study's thematic findings, Value of Education, Class Barriers, Gendered Barriers, and Intersectional Nature of Interruptions. It concludes with an insight into the study's limitations and offers recommendations that emerged from the research.

Value of Education

The research aimed to explore the significance of education for women and found that its importance varied within different contexts for each individual. Motivations for returning to education included personal fulfilment, career opportunities, economic necessity, and redressing negative school experiences. Some participants saw higher education as an opportunity to overcome past difficulties in secondary school. Education was viewed as a way to challenge societal expectations, prove capabilities, and seek external validation. Family concerns also influenced women's decision to pursue education, although it was accompanied by feelings of guilt for being away from home. The research employed a feminist standpoint theory (FST) approach to understand the social context and marginalisation of women in education. FST provided insights into the reasons behind their exclusion and the persistent impact it had over time. By exploring the value of education through a feminist standpoint, the study shed light on the injustices prevalent in the educational environment, policies, practices, and teaching methods from the perspective of marginalised women returning to academia. The research included diverse participants from different ethnic backgrounds and ages, offering valuable insights into shared experiences of educational disadvantage shaped by common social practices, gender biases, and class-based oppression.

Class Barriers

The findings of the study suggest that the influence of social class on education extends beyond individual agency and is shaped by the structural dynamics of society. Economic disparities and unequal access to influential networks and institutions impact individuals' environments, which in turn affect their self-perception and motivation. The interplay between personal

characteristics and social structural forces, referred to as structural dynamics, plays a significant role in shaping individuals' thoughts, emotions, and actions related to social class (Kraus & Park, 2011). Merit-based narratives and a focus on individual agency in education fail to acknowledge the influence of educational systems that are structured by cultures and attitudes favouring those in higher social classes.

The financial challenges faced by children, as exemplified in the cases of Jane and Orlaith, have a profound impact. Working-class parents often lack the necessary knowledge and information to access college, resulting in an uneven distribution of resources and opportunities. Streaming and the rigid assignment of academic tracks limit mobility and undermine self-confidence.

Certain participants in the study experienced direct discrimination based on their *habitus*, leading to negative effects on their self-efficacy and self-esteem. Additionally, parental unawareness or a lack of ambition for their children's education hindered their pursuit of college. Financial support in the form of grants posed challenges, as earning slightly above the qualification threshold did not guarantee sufficient resources. In such cases, women had to seek employment and save money for college. However, for more recent attendees like Julia, the availability of grants such as the SUSI grant, removed financial barriers.

Government interventions and measures have been implemented to address educational disadvantages among minority or underrepresented groups. Social policy reforms and political discourse emphasising economic growth and equality have led to increased state investment in education. However, lifelong learning initiatives have not fully met the EU targets in terms of enhancing participation by marginalised and vulnerable groups, raising concerns about the underlying economic motivations behind these initiatives (Fleming, 2017). The establishment of a National Office of Equity Access has mainstreamed programs and introduced grants and bursaries, such as the SUSI, DARE, and HEAR schemes. While these measures have partially addressed class-based disadvantages, stigmatised groups still face disadvantages. Although improvements have been made in career guidance policies, attention is still needed in areas such as better preparation of students on the autism spectrum for third level, requiring interventions at each stage of the educational process.

While access opportunities have improved for underrepresented groups, it is important to note that the benefits of "free" courses, like the Springboard course for Orlaith, were diminished

when expensive equipment was required. The study also emphasises how streaming, inadequate career guidance, and teacher attitudes collectively hindered educational pathways for women. In summary, society exhibits a power imbalance that favours the wealthy and disadvantages those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As long as class-based discriminatory attitudes and practices persist, educational inequality will continue.

Gendered Barriers

The literature review on women and education highlighted the disruption caused by gender-based oppression in women's educational journeys. Nonetheless, it also revealed that women find ways to overcome these obstacles and return to education. The accounts shared by the research participants further validated these findings. The literature review emphasised ongoing government efforts to address educational inequality for women and other marginalised groups. Despite these interventions, the interviewees reported persistent challenges that hindered their educational and professional lives, including age-related issues, caregiving responsibilities, and encountering the effects of patriarchal norms and values in both private and public environments.

The women participating in this study revealed that achieving educational attainment is more challenging for them compared to men. Moira's monologue on page 61 serves as a representative example of the experiences shared by many women. It demonstrates the personal, emotional, and social resilience required for women to succeed academically whilst shouldering a gender-assigned workload. The research findings show that women need to exhibit high levels of tenacity to achieve their goals, often at the expense of their emotional well-being.

This study confirmed the assertions of feminist theory that women face gendered, inequitable pressures from private and public spheres. It highlighted areas of progress and change that have somewhat improved educational outcomes for women. it also revealed that although women may have interrupted educational journeys, they are more likely to return to learning as mature students. While this is a positive development, I argue that delayed education has ongoing repercussions for career advancement and financial security that are typically associated with early educational attainment. For instance, the research demonstrates how Maggie perceives her degree and master's obtained in her fifties as merely "a piece of paper" that has not yet resulted in stable employment opportunities. Similarly, Moira laments her low income despite

recently making great strides in academia. Here, I am called to consider if the labour market favours work experience *and* qualifications above qualifications with gaps in work history caused by years spent on care and domestic duties.

Employing a feminist standpoint enabled this study to emphasise the emotional and psychological toll experienced by women as they navigate the demands of work, home, and education. Adopting a FST perspective has allowed me to underscore the gendered nature of their life circumstances, which presents challenges in accessing tertiary education. Applying the principles of FST has enabled the research to recognise and value the unique positions and circumstances that grant the interviewees their specific knowledge.

This research both confirms and extends current theoretical ideas about how education remains a battleground for many women, despite some improvements. It delves into the intricate details of nine women's experiences to construct a comprehensive understanding of how women's choices, although expanded in recent decades, continue to be influenced by private and societal forces. Throughout this work, I have argued that women's educational journeys are impacted by daily events and attitudes resulting from the reinforcement of gender role inequalities. I have shown how these influences manifest in both the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of educational settings. Additionally, I have proposed that gender roles are reinforced by patriarchal norms, conditions of hegemonic masculinity and sexist attitudes.

Intersectionality

The research demonstrates how an intersectionality of disadvantages contributes to unequal educational opportunities for women. While only two sample stories of intersectionality (Julia's and Orlaith's) are outlined in this work due to space limitations, it is important to acknowledge that all nine women in the study have faced similar challenges. The findings offer insights into the personal aspects of women's lives where their responsibilities for domestic labour, caregiving, childcare, intimate relationships, and motherhood intersect to create barriers, such as time poverty, that hinder educational opportunities.

The undervaluation of care work, which leads to gender inequality in the labour market, is reflected in women's difficulties in accessing education and the long-term financial consequences they experience throughout their lives. The enforcement of hegemonic masculinity, with its social hierarchy and power dynamics, contributes to gender discrimination

within educational spaces. Additionally, IPV in the home creates challenging learning environments for women, impacting not only their ability to access education but also their academic performance, causing stress, and leading to early withdrawal from courses of study.

Through my study, it became evident that personal challenges, such as the emotional toll and feelings of guilt associated with returning to education, can serve as significant stressors for some women. The intersectionality of disadvantages highlights the complex and interconnected nature of the obstacles they face, ultimately shaping their educational experiences and outcomes.

Limitations of this Study

I acknowledge the limited scope of this study, as it involved a relatively small cohort of nine participants. There is a risk of generalising the findings to all women, and I am mindful of this limitation. However, I remain committed to the feminist standpoint view which suggests that while each woman's story is unique and multifaceted, there is an indication of a shared experience. Therefore, if a commonality of experience exists among these nine women, it can be assumed that their experiences are representative of many women who wish to return to education in Ireland today. A further limitation of this study is the lack of variability in the age of participants. Given the marked contrast in Julia's experience regarding class and financial barriers, a future study could include a broader range of age groups to allow for comparisons.

Recommendations

Despite advancements in promoting gender equality in education, patriarchal ideologies persist, impeding the progress of women and girls. The primary recommendation of this study emphasises the ongoing need for societal transformation in attitudes towards women to rectify imbalances. This entails reducing the influence of patriarchal power structures and fostering a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive society. To initiate this process, I propose starting with the home and community, engaging in dialogue and activism to challenge harmful norms and attitudes towards women. Dialogue followed by political action on gender and power can create broader community change.

It is essential to address the unequal division of labour between genders and challenge existing practices that burden women with most household, caring, and childcare responsibilities. Implementing policies that recognise women's hidden work in domestic and caregiving

spheres, and addressing the resulting time constraints, would help rectify the current inequitable status quo. Promoting revised attitudes around gender equality from an early age is crucial to combat the traditional devaluation of women's labour.

Similarly, it is necessary to question the notion of women as the primary caregivers for children and older dependents. This approach not only promotes a fairer distribution of caregiving responsibilities but also eases the emotional burden on women who feel obligated to assume these roles. One effective approach is to incorporate gender equality into the school curriculum through a feminist pedagogy. Improved policies to address the gender pay gap is also vital to ensure fair recognition and compensation for women's work, thereby reducing the reliance on the concept of male breadwinners. Furthermore, engaging men and boys through participatory group education programmes can effectively challenge hegemonic masculinity, unequal gender norms and behaviours, including the prevention of violence.

Despite achieving qualifications, women express dissatisfaction with the unwelcoming nature of the workplace where their work in the home is viewed as worthless. Measures should be implemented to address this issue and recognise the value of the skills and abilities acquired during years spent on domestic duties. This recognition, which I envision as being similar to policies which recognise prior learning, would provide women who obtain qualifications at a later age, with equal opportunities compared to those who followed a more linear educational path.

In the field of education, it is crucial to address awareness and training for teachers, regarding the long-term effects of negative school experiences on children's future educational attainment. Ageism and ageist attitudes in higher education and the workplace should be actively challenged to ensure equal opportunities for all individuals. Additionally, continued government support should be prioritised to address class disparities, taking care to ensure that seemingly cost-free courses do not come with hidden expenses.

Further Research

Further research could include a follow-up study of the interviewees to assess the benefits they derived from their late entry into education. A comparison with Julia, the youngest participant in the study, could be conducted to evaluate her educational and employment outcomes

compared to the older cohort. Additionally, it would be valuable to assess whether a younger cohorts find it easier than the older cohort to establish careers once all women have attained similar level 8/9 degrees.

Concluding Remarks

Overarching themes of gender role discrimination in a patriarchal society, class discrimination and a lack of effective supports were confirmed as broad causes for unequal access to education, and the participants showed a commitment to highlighting how the fundamental elements of their everyday lives, both prevent admission to education and make staying the course so challenging. Drawing from my own personal experience of returning to education as an adult and employing feminist standpoint principles, I gained insight into the specific challenges women encounter. This personal understanding provided a foundation for my research enquiries and facilitated a connection with the research participants acknowledging both their and my epistemic advantage in comprehending the obstacles of returning to education.

This research has illuminated the challenges and barriers encountered by women who reintegrate into education. It has emphasised how a combination of factors creates unequal educational experiences for women, underscoring the intersectionality of disadvantage. The study has brought attention to the imperative need for a continuous transformation in societal attitudes towards women, as persisting discriminatory social norms and prejudices impede progress towards gender equality.

To address these issues, it is vital to challenge traditional gender roles and the division of labour, both in private and public domains. Modifying attitudes from an early stage through feminist pedagogy and advocating for equal recognition of women's contributions can contribute to a fairer society. Additionally, it is essential to confront dominant masculine ideals and challenge sexist beliefs while promoting shared caregiving responsibilities.

Moreover, this study has emphasised the long-term consequences of negative school experiences and the significance of tackling ageism in education and the workplace. A call for further research is made to evaluate the benefits derived from entering education later in life,

comparing outcomes across different age groups and exploring the career prospects of younger cohorts as educational achievements become more equitable.

Ultimately, my sincere hope is that this research which aimed to prioritise the voices and experiences of women, reinforces the understanding that women's educational journeys are shaped by various societal influences, reinforcing gender role inequalities and class-based oppression. By recognising these challenges and implementing the suggested measures, my hope is that we can move towards a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, ultimately fostering greater opportunities and empowerment for women.

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Chapter Two

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