

'THE GLASS CLASS'
THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR WOMEN AS PARENTS
RETURNING TO EDUCATION IN AN IRISH CONTEXT

BARBARA DILLON

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**Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University**

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Supervisor: Brid Connolly

“One is not born a woman, one becomes one”

Simone De Beauvoir (1949)

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of my thesis is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents returning to education in an Irish context. The title of my thesis implies there is somehow a ‘glass ceiling’ positioning for some women in achieving their educational goals, that is, “the invisible but effective barrier which prevents women from moving beyond a certain point in an educational environment, similar to that of the promotion ladder in an employment environment”. The thesis begins with a biographical narrative of my own educational journey to date as a mother and mature student. The literature used crosses social, cultural and economic spheres including feminist theory. It examines women’s social roles, both past and present, using the ideology of feminism drawing from the main theorist Simone De Beauvoir, her notion of woman’s identity and her ideas concerning gender as a social construct.

Five women participants who are mature students and parents were interviewed using a feminist qualitative research approach to explore their educational journeys. The findings are presented in the form of five core narratives to give you, the reader, a better understanding of who the participants are and their educational story to date. From coding and categorising the data generated, nine themes emerged from the findings and from this a more in-depth analysis of each theme is presented.

The findings in the research study illustrated how access and participation for the participants returning to education took a different turn particularly when these women’s position in society changed. When looking at responsibility and role the study suggested that parental involvement is gendered. Although the study illustrated the diversity of these women’s lived experiences it suggested we may still live in a patriarchal society, with this cohort having the primary responsibility for childcare. The findings demonstrated that even when a woman’s rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long standing custom, traditions and attitudes may prevent their full expression in society. The study suggests the responsibilities put upon this cohort and the challenges this presents need to be better recognised and acknowledged in the discourses around further and higher education at government and institutional levels. In particular the study revealed without the Irish government providing accessible and affordable childcare, it may not be possible for women as parents to progress in their educational journey reinforcing a ‘glass ceiling’ positioning for them.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to Thesis

This research study seeks to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents returning to education in an Irish context. I began this process with a reflective perspective of personal concrete experiences that highlighted challenges and barriers I experienced in my attempt to progress further on my own educational journey to date. From this, I questioned if other women in their attempt to progress and succeed in adult education experience a 'glass class' whereby opportunities of access and participation are limited due to their gender and their perceived role in society. The following contributions to this study intersect with each other and have aided me in my attempt to answer the research question:

- (i) My reflections on discussions with women students I garnered during my teaching practice as part of my Higher Diploma in Education
- (ii) Data acquired from five qualitative interviews on women's educational journeys as part of my research study
- (iii) A reflective diary I kept throughout this process to assist me in challenging my own assumptions
- (iv) Some theoretical perspectives, particularly from educational and feminist theorists regarding themes that have emerged as a result of this process.

1.1 Overview of the Structure of the Thesis

The Thesis comprises of six chapters, beginning with this chapter one, the introduction that includes a biographical narrative of my educational journey to date. This narrative outlines my reasons for leaving formal education, it then moves through time with a brief discussion on my employment journey followed by the impetus for me to return to education as a mature student. The narrative continues with a discussion of my progression from undergraduate student to postgraduate student and the challenges and barriers this progression presented. The narrative then concludes with a brief theoretical analysis of my formal educative experience.

Chapter two incorporates a review of the empirical literature. It begins by exploring both contributions and contradictions by theorists in the field of feminism. The main theorist I was drawn to when reviewing the literature was Simone De Beauvoir, this lure was centred on her assertion that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one", her notion of

woman's identity as 'the absolute other' and her ideas concerning gender as a social construct. Further literature is explored that crosses social, cultural and economic spheres including feminist theory, government policy and educational theory.

Chapter three begins with a description of a concrete experience that subsequently became the impetus for me in choosing my research topic. It continues with a rationale for choosing feminist qualitative research as a methodology for this study including its epistemological focus. This chapter details the research procedure, the methods used and the process of data generation and analysis. It also includes the ethical issues I considered such as the participant selection and the possible implications for me as a novice researcher.

Chapter four presents the findings from the qualitative interviews with the five women participants. These findings are presented in the form of five core narratives to give you, the reader, a better understanding of who the participants are and their educational story to date.

Chapter five presents a more in-depth analysis of each of the themes that emerged in the findings of the study. This analysis will provide more detailed extracts from the interview process and a theoretical analysis of the lived experiences of the participants.

Chapter six engages in a discussion of the findings from a more abstract perspective engaging with the literature. This chapter will then conclude with a reflection of the research study findings from my perspective as a woman, mature student and mother.

During the Literature Review part of this study, what stood out for me the most was Simone De Beauvoir's assertion in her book *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (1949, p. 281). I chose to explore this assertion in greater detail to see how credible it is in relation to the range of challenges and barriers experienced by women in society today returning to education in an Irish context. It is often written in various sociological literatures that education is regarded as one of the primary routes for upward social mobility. By exploring these women's experiences throughout their educational journeys, I will seek to demonstrate how their stories can serve as a key place from which to build knowledge, highlighting what might hinder their route to this aforementioned social mobility. The emphasis in this study really involves a critical assessment of these women's personal stories through an academic feminist lens to examine if gender inequality still exists in Irish society today.

My conviction is that there are certain challenges and barriers that might impede some women as parents, in returning to education and for others, limiting them in fulfilling their true potential in their educational journey. This could further suggest to women as adult learners that in their attempt to progress and succeed in adult education they may experience a 'glass class' whereby opportunities of access and participation are limited due to their gender and their perceived role in society, leading to the reproduction of inequality.

1.2 Biographical Narrative: My Educational Journey

When I reflect back on my education, I remember that I couldn't wait to leave school. I hated wearing the uniform, especially that brown skirt, I just felt so uncomfortable, so out of place. All I heard from the teachers was 'line up, sit down, no talking, do as you're told' etc. Home Economics wasn't for me, I hated baking cakes and had no interest in sewing, I didn't see the point of Irish or French as we all spoke English, I felt history was in the past so leave it there, entering infinite numbers into my copy in a Maths lesson seemed so pointless to me and as for Science, why should I have been impressed when that litmus paper changed colour? As a fifteen year old, I used to wonder why all of this nonsense was being forced on me, I just didn't get any of it. I had become so disinterested in the subjects being taught, the teachers responded by becoming disinterested in me, I then fell behind in my studies. I began to struggle and could not catch up on the workload (even if I had wanted to). My grades, which were quite good to begin with, were gradually slipping, I felt lost and I could not see the point of continuing with my education. I became determined to leave school as soon as I could, much to my mother's disappointment. My parents insisted I could not leave school until I gained a qualification, "You won't get a job or get into college without one" they told me. Third level education was costly, it was for the elite in those days, I was never going to get the grades for entry, and so what was the point? I could hear my father saying to my mother, "There is nothing we can do, you can't put an old head on young shoulders, we will just have to let her leave school". I left when I was sixteen because I knew better, six passes in my Intermediate Certificate and I was good to go.... or so I thought! On reflection, I was so naive, my brother and sister continued with their education but I wanted a job, any job, I knew I was a 'grafter' and I felt back then that I could do well in the outside world and didn't need a formal education. The only experience of gender inequality for me during school was having an awareness at the time that the boys in the school were allowed to wear trousers, take Mechanical Drawing and Woodwork as subjects, while I was stuck baking and sewing in Home

Economics (while wearing that silly skirt). It was the 80's, the discourse at the time was high unemployment, the young people with qualifications had to emigrate to seek employment and I remember the media at the time repeatedly referring to this departure as the 'brain drain'. I proceeded to do what some people referred to as menial work for a few years having emigrated to England after leaving school as there were no employment opportunities at home (especially for a sixteen year old with little qualifications). Fed up with very little money, I then returned to Ireland, did a Computer Applications course, got a qualification, became employed as a Computer Programmer and life was good.

Six years later through a family bereavement, I had to take on the position of managing a Fork-Lift Hire business. Knowing very little about fork-lift repairs, I adapted the company into a forklift training school as the economy was 'booming' in Ireland and industries such as warehousing and construction required qualified forklift drivers. I employed qualified Trainers to deliver accredited courses in this area. This continued successfully over a thirteen year period and during this time FAS (now SOLAS) implemented a policy that all Instructors must obtain an accredited recognised 'Train the Trainer' qualification to continue to provide training to FAS clients. I attended this course (which I thoroughly enjoyed), gained the necessary qualification and it sparked an interest in me to explore how learners learn and provided me with new skills that I could apply within my training role within the company. Ireland was then hit by the economic downturn which led to the closure of many companies including mine. I suddenly found myself in need of a new source of employment (On a personal level, I was single, in my thirties and had just had given birth to twins). When reviewing my Curriculum Vitae, what stood out for me was that big gap in education, I felt I might be regarded by future employers as belonging in a category of 'early school leaver' with very few qualifications, therefore limiting my potential. I subsequently fell into the social category of 'lone-parent' as an unmarried mother of one year old twins. Where could I go from here?

I was encouraged by my sister to attend a talk in a local school, provided by women who were mature students, early school leaver's and some of them lone-parents. During the talk, these women gave their reasons as to why they decided to return to education, what it meant to them and how it changed their lives in one way or another. Some of the talks I found very inspirational and they struck a chord with me and that inspired me to want to return to education, to "bridge that gap" that I subconsciously carried around with me for years. I then attended another talk in my local university for mature students. I applied

for a place on the BSc in Education and Training, this was followed by an interview and I was offered a place on the programme as a result of my work and life experiences, particularly in training. This, I thought would finally bridge that gap and give me the credentials I needed. I was hoping to maybe become an adult educator, for three reasons: (i) I loved the teaching aspect of my work within the training company and wished to qualify as an Adult Education teacher and gain employment in this area in the future, (ii) To provide a better future for my children, (iii) The children's school holidays and my work holidays would coincide and I could spend important time with them. I felt that familiar feeling of determination stir inside me but I also had immense feelings of anxiety embarking on this new journey. I thought my challenges on this journey would be, primarily having an intrinsic disbelief in myself and my academic capabilities due to a twenty five year gap since last being present in an educational environment and of course, the financial strains of living on a tight budget and childcare costs over a three year period whilst studying.

The talks I attended also covered more practical issues. I was told I would receive a 'maintenance grant', my fees would be paid for, that some universities provide crèches and childcare was subsidised by the government. I knew opportunities like this were not available to adults who wished to return to education in the past, specifically women. As I always felt quite independent financially and I didn't want to be classed as a financial burden on the state, I therefore justified, well, convinced myself that the fees and grants I would receive during my educational journey (being classified as a 'lone-parent'), were a tax refund from the government for all the taxes I paid throughout the years when employed and working as an employer. I decided this opportunity was mine for the taking, the time was right to return to education.

During the final year of my BSc in Training and Education, the lecturers informed students that it would no longer be possible for graduates of my course to register with the Teaching Council under Regulation 4 and 5 without a recognised Post Graduate Diploma in Education. The course needed to be increased from 180 credits to 240 credits to achieve recognition. Derogation from these requirements was put in place by the Teaching Council for all students, who like me, were in the process of completing their final year of the course.

I had concerns that the recognition of my degree might be called into question in the future and to address this I continued my educational journey by completing the Higher

Diploma in Further Education. This was not without difficulty as financial childcare support was not made available for postgraduate students.

I started to consider the possibility of undertaking a Masters. I was enjoying my studies immensely despite financial pressures and also wanted to gain a Masters qualification to enhance my employment prospects when re-entering the workforce.

1.3 Biographical Narrative: A Brief Theoretical Analysis of Formal Education

In my narrative I expressed feelings of alienation that led to my leaving formal education: I felt lost and I could not see the point of continuing with my education. I felt somewhat marginalised during formal education and I became determined to leave school as soon as I could. Bourdieu (1973) suggests marginalised students from low income backgrounds are not compatible with middle class students as a child will enter school with a habitus shaped by their home environment. Some children will have a habitus that leaves them with feelings of familiarity and security when they attend school while other children feel completely alienated.

While reviewing the literature, I resonated more with Mill's (2008) article when she acknowledged that although Bourdieu was criticised for his reproductive emphasis, there is transformative potential in his theory that suggests possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of some marginalised students. As a mature student and future educator I now see how some marginalised students are disadvantaged as they have diminished cultural capital in the sense that what they value and have knowledge of, is not being included in the classroom. Mill's (2008) suggests that by broadening the types of cultural capital that are valued in the classroom teachers can act as agents of transformation rather than reproduction. On reflection, I might have remained in formal education if it was an educational environment that valued learning where the cultural capital of the individual was fostered and the teachers encouraged students, promoted learning and engaged with the students thus sharing their own cultural capital. Teachers could have allowed students speak, share their life experiences and therefore enable engagement and inclusion of all students in the classroom.

I have found adult education institutions have some flexibility to tailor/adjust the curriculum to suit the students' worlds bringing in relevant material etc. which students can relate to. For teachers to transform the system rather than reproduce the existing one particularly in formal education, this is no doubt a challenge for teachers, but for equality

to exist for all students, teachers need to recognise where the inequalities in education exist rather than in the individuals they teach and the cultural capital they bring with them.

1.4 Impetus for the Research Study

As a woman wanting to return to education, I had assumed all feminist milestones had already been achieved and all feminist issues had been addressed by Irish women in the past. Then the reality hit me during my return to education of what it meant to be a woman, a mature student, and a full-time mother. The issues I came up against as I attempted to progress further in my educational journey were a mix of Childcare, Dispositional and Institutional barriers. I often wondered, is it just me or are these issues the case for other women, specifically because they are women?

I selected two concrete examples I encountered during my teaching practice that demonstrate challenges and barriers other women experienced in their attempt to return to education that further prompted me to write on this topic:

(i) During lesson time at my teaching practice, some women arrived approximately half an hour late each day. They explained to me the reason for this was that the commencement time of their lessons clashed with the commencement time of the school lessons of their children. A comment made to me by one particular student captured this dilemma:

It's not that I am late today, it's that I know I will be late every day...I miss the most important part of the lesson 'the beginning' and I also feel I am disturbing other students, my stress levels are also up as a result of this, it is making me reconsider my decision to continue with my studies on a daily basis.

This comment was one that really resonated with me. As a mother of young children, like many others, my priority was having my children in school on time and this involved standing in the 'line' at the school awaiting the 9am start. During this time some of my own lectures at university had already begun. This highlighted the issue of conflicting commencement times of educational institutions.

(ii) During an open day which was held in the month of May in a local ETB, tutors could not provide a finalised timetable for their upcoming courses for the following September. This lack of clarity resulted in the majority of potential mature students (mostly women) not remaining in attendance for the rest of the open day. To put this in greater context,

the Methodology section (Chapter 3) of the thesis will discuss this particular example in more detail.

1.5 Conclusion

The concrete experiences outlined in this chapter motivated me further to research challenges and barriers other women experience in their return to education. As I attempted to progress in my own educational journey, challenges arose that became more and more difficult for me to overcome leading me to suggest that a ‘Glass Class’ may exist for women in particular in returning to education and further inspired me to write on this issue. The next chapter will explore literature that crosses social, cultural and economic spheres including feminist theory, government policy and educational theory linked to such experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: MY REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.0 Literature Review Introduction

I am proposing in my research topic that equality of access and participation does not exist for women as parents in an Irish context who wish to return to adult education. The intention of this research is not to reject the idea that men experience barriers and challenges when returning to education, however for the purpose of this particular review of the literature I will concentrate exclusively on women as parents. The main theorist I was drawn to when reviewing the literature was Simone De Beauvoir, this lure was centred on her assertion that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one”, her notion of woman’s identity as ‘the absolute other’ and her ideas concerning gender as a social construct.

According to Machi and McEvoy (2012) ‘A literature review is a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study’. In order for me to achieve this ‘comprehensive understanding’ and to aid me further in underpinning my position, I will begin by exploring contributions and contradictions by theorists in the field of feminism. From this exploration, I will compare and contrast literature that crossed social, cultural and economic spheres including current government policy with themes that emerged during the interview process of this research study

2.1 Feminist Theory

To propose that equality of access and participation does not exist for women as parents, who wish to return to adult education suggests in itself that women must somehow be discriminated against. This suggestion prompted me to examine women’s social roles, both past and present, using the ideology of feminism to determine if such discrimination exists. There are a variety of feminist approaches, perspectives and frameworks discussed by Tong (2009) to help frame this discussion: Liberal; suggesting all human persons to be rational, free and equal, sharing fundamental rights, Radical; providing a condemnation of patriarchy involving male domination and female subordination, Marxist; providing an analysis of women’s work status in order to understand the unique character of women’s oppression, Care-focused; the feasibility of pushing the value of care out of the private domain into the public domain and Third-wave; interlocking forms

of oppression, how gender oppression and other kinds of human oppression co-create and co-maintain each other.

While building on my new found knowledge on the subject of feminism, I found myself drawn to and agreeing with a blend of different feminist perspectives. Although, having reviewed the literature I found myself favouring Feminist Post Structuralism, the reason for this is that it offered me an understanding of gender as constructed in social relations. From this I came to recognise women's multiple positioning's in discourse, policy, economics and legislation. This aided me further in underpinning my position and in my quest for gender justice particularly in the area of access and participation of education for women.

2.1.1 Feminist Theory: Women's Context

When researching challenges and barriers women as parents, might face in their return to education in Ireland, I maintain it is important to begin with a historic look at women's economic and social position and its relevance today. It is here I turned to Simone De Beauvoir's writings, as her key ideas are significant amid her account of the construction of female subjectivity in a traditionally patriarchal society. When looking at women's class, position and social roles, De Beauvoir (1949) maintained in her assertion that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (p. 281). I was struck by this assertion as I felt it had so many layers in relation to both women's historical positioning and subsequently women's present positioning in society.

Historically, the complexities of women's contexts became evident when First Wave feminists were mostly concerned with personal injustices they were experiencing, however I must add, during this period they were not particularly concerned with the injustices of *all* women. For example, De Beauvoir, as an existentialist, tended to sometimes blame women themselves for their subordinate position, she questioned: "if women considered themselves badly treated, might this not be their own fault in some ways, due to their own failure to establish an unassailable individuality of their own?" (p. 87). Just as De Beauvoir's focus at that particular time was mainly to do with bourgeois white women, her position was not dissimilar to Friedan (1963) who, two decades later also had a one-dimensional perspective on women's reality, discussing only a select group of women when referring to the plight of college-educated middle and upper class married

white women who were housewives longing for careers but compelled to remain in the home.

2.1.2 Feminist Theory: Women are in No Way One

De Beauvoir built on her concept “one is not born a woman, one becomes one’ (p. 281) throughout her writings claiming that women have always been subordinate to men through oppression by hierarchy. These ideas are demonstrated for example, when private property appeared, where man became the proprietor of woman. This was, according to Beauvoir ‘the great historical defeat of the feminine sex’ (p.56). The implications of this rooted female subordination rests in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocked women’s entrance and success in the so-called public world. These constraints resulted in women’s dependency on men, they became attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men, whether it was fathers or husbands.

In contrast, bell hooks (1984), in her writings, criticizes the feminist movement’s main focus on male domination, men as the oppressor, their declaration of war between the sexes and ultimately bourgeois feminism’s portrayal of all men as the enemy. She suggests having an anti-male stance may alienate many poor working class women including women of different race and culture who have little in common with bourgeois white women and more in common with their race, class and culture. To position the argument of race in an Irish context, there is a growing ethnic diversity of the population in Ireland today, this is demonstrated by the CSO (2013) that shows the number of immigrants to Ireland in recent decades presently stands at 12%. Therefore the relevancy of the potential alienation of women of different race and culture has to be acknowledged in an Irish context. Women’s contexts continue to be highlighted by hooks (1984) who has more radical views on feminism involving a multi-dimensional perspective on women’s reality that involve gender, race and class and she sees feminism as a political struggle to end sexist oppression. She also suggests that there is a need for solidarity between both men and women to help diffuse the antagonism which already exists between them. I will explore her suggestion in an Irish context at a later stage as this highlights the issue of power, who has it and how is it exercised. It became clear to me when reading different feminist perspectives that not all feminist approaches take into account race, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, religion, level of education, occupation or

marital status and this leads to postmodern feminist's insistence, according to Tong (2009) that women are in "no way one".

2.1.3 Feminist Theory: Gender as a Social Construct

Although, there is a diversity of women depending on their identity etc. there is however a commonality here intertwining these statuses of difference, Gender. De Beauvoir's theories and ideas are concerned with viewing gender as a social construct, this then could pose the assumption, if gender is socially constructed, then surely it can somehow be socially deconstructed. I would suggest this deconstruction may prove complex due to women's diversity that depends on their varying social, cultural, economic and political contexts. To gain more of an understanding of gender as a social construct, I explored the process involved in becoming a woman and the meaning of the term 'gender' in relation to this process. Lorber (1994) describes how "gender is constructed socially starting with an assignment to a sex category, this category then becomes a social status that is created and co-created out of human interaction through for example, the naming, dress and use of gender markers". The term gender is used as a concept to refer to socially created meanings and identities and this begins with childhood and becomes an on-going product of everyday social practice. Risman (2004) suggested the creation of difference is the very foundation on which inequality exists. In an attempt to understand why some of the women I interviewed during my research perceived themselves as getting a 'raw deal' in society as a result of their gender, I began to explore the link between gender and society, more specifically how gender is defining the processes that are embedded in our everyday lives, leading to particular outcomes.

I wanted to explore the thoughts of my peers on this particular subject and an opportunity arose that I could not resist that evidently linked in with Simone De Beauvoir's theory of gender as a social construct and coincided with her suggestion that "girls are manufactured to become women" (1949). As part of my studies I recently gave a presentation on 'How Gender Studies Impacted on my Thesis'. As part of my presentation I included an activity that involved my peers taking part in a discussion on their childhood experiences. We engaged in conversations that centred on mechanisms that helped produce gender outcomes and from this, as a group, we came to three overwhelming conclusions; (i) gender is acquired in early childhood, (ii) there were obvious divides

between the genders stemming from our concrete experiences growing up that were determined by our parents and (iii) our social structure created gendered behaviour in us. The results of this activity led to an overall agreement between students suggesting gender is a social construct.

As we move from childhood to adulthood the process of gendering continues. To distinguish between sex and gender, “sex”, normally taken to denote biological differences between women and men, and “gender”, referring to the social meanings given to these distinctions. Gender creates the social differences that define “woman” and “man” and these individuals learn what is expected of them and act in these expected ways thereby constructing and maintaining the gender order. According to Lorber (1984) “The work adults do shape women’s and men’s life experiences and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills – ways of being that we call feminine or masculine”. All of these processes constitute the social construction of gender and parenting is gendered with different expectations for mothers and for fathers and from mothers and fathers. These processes, however create subordinate conditions for women, some of which have been challenged historically and some of which have yet to be challenged.

2.2 Historical Milestones for Women in Ireland

According to Watkins, et al (1999), “The story of changing the subordinate condition of women begins with feminism”. In the introduction of the thesis, my narrative stated *I had assumed all feminist milestones had already been achieved* and yet I posit challenges and barriers arose for me in my return to education because of my gender. I therefore deemed it necessary to explore a few examples of past feminist issues and the milestones achieved in an Irish context in order to understand the level of inequalities that existed for women in Ireland that may remain linked today. These were; (i) Marital Status, because a woman could not keep her job in the public service or a bank when she got married (ii) Women could not be on Jury Service, members of juries had to be property owners and in effect, male. (iii) Women did not have control of their own reproduction, (iv) Women could not collect their children’s allowance, (v) Women could not live securely in her family home, (vi) Women could not get the same rate of pay for a job as a man.

These examples of feminist issues were addressed through legislation between 1973 and 1991 with the help of women's organisations and also Ireland's membership of the European Union. This membership according to Cassell (2000), "not only transformed the workplace for Irish women but also gave a strong underpinning to the demands from women's organisations and unions for major changes in the role of women in Irish society – changes, which still reverberate with us today". However, this exploration highlighted to me, how recent, difficult and lengthy it was to overcome or negotiate changes in Ireland's gender regime. Maybe even when a woman's rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long standing custom, traditions and attitudes may prevent their full expression in society, I endeavour to see if this is true during my research for women in education leading to them experiencing a 'glass class' particularly in the area of access and participation.

2.3 Access and Participation for Women in Education

Historically, women could only capitalize on increasing educational opportunities if they had the financial resources to do so whether it be secondary or university education. Females (and males) from working-class backgrounds had little chance of receiving a second-level education. The Intermediate exam remained the preserve of the middle class until slow progression led to its extension, as O hOgartaigh writes "The extension of second-level education to females is one of the quiet revolutions of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland" (2009, p.36). Historically, the opportunity for advanced education such as university also proved difficult. Harford (2008) outlined how change occurred when gradually the need to provide higher education for women to equip them with the necessary skills to become teachers and nurses (an extension of the woman's nurturing role) gained currency and the most significant outcome was the inclusion of girls within the remit of the University Education (Ireland) act 1879.

Almost a century later secondary education became available for both male and female students. Coolahan (1981) wrote how, in the 1960's, there was an influx of student attendance in education because of free secondary education outlined in the Investment in Education Report 1965. The Programme for Action in education 1984-1987 also drew attention to 'participation of women' noting that 'all aspects of education must be available equally to both sexes' (Walsh, 2011). However by the 1970's and 1980's the conventional curriculum had not engaged all students therefore there were some who became early school leavers. The European Social Fund (ESF) then intervened. O'

Sullivan (1996) suggests it was a dynamic force in the shaping of Irish understandings on the link between young people, schooling and the world of work. A series of interventions were created such as: Pre-employment courses, Youthreach programmes and FAS courses to target early school leavers. However, O' Sullivan (1996) suggests a social configuration was formed by the creation of these course types and the attendance of them by early school leavers that set apart one school leaver from another portraying them as a 'distinct other' leading to them being perceived as problematic. This can leave some early school leavers somewhat disempowered by these configurations and contributed to them being seen as failures in not completing or succeeding in the conventional curriculum.

Women's opportunities in education have certainly improved since, in relation to access, participation and success within higher education. For example, in 1996 fees for full-time students pursuing undergraduate courses at third level were abolished and a commitment to promote access to the university sector for people from disadvantaged groups was made in the Universities Bill (Kiely et al, 1999). To look at current statistics between gender participation in the seven main universities in Ireland of undergraduate programmes 2013/2014: fifty nine thousand in attendance are female and fifty one thousand are male (CSO, 2015). Mature students accessing higher education was on the increase as fifteen percent (5,944) of full-time undergraduate new entrants in 2010/11 are mature students. This is an increase from thirteen percent in 2009/2010 (HEA, 2011). Taking into account these figures, they do however show a low number of mature students overall in attendance determining them a minority.

2.3.1 Adult Education Policy

The adult education sector emerged from voluntary cultural movements and progressed by playing an important civic role offering adults, particularly marginalized groups such as women a chance to re-access education systems. With this progression came state recognition, funding and the implementation of government policy. The *Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Learning 1998* for the first time in the history of the state revealed a serious reflection of 'the government's commitment to lifelong learning' (DES, 1998). This paper and the subsequent White Paper (DES, 2000) were underpinned by a series of legislative Acts and the relevant amendments from 1930 to 2001; The Vocational Act 1930, The Universities Act 1997, The Education Act 1998, The National Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, Education Welfare Act 2000, and the

EPSEN Act 2004. According to the DES (2008), “all the aforementioned acts include elements that govern policy on adult and further education provision in Ireland”. The Green Paper was then replaced with a life cycle approach to learning in the Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education 2000 (DES, 2000).

2.3.2. Lifelong Learning and Women

The Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) lays out Government policy and priorities on the future development of adult education. However, over the last decade, dominant notions of what lifelong learning is and does and whose interests are now being served have altered and these need to be explored. There now seems a stronger than ever relationship between adult education, politics and the economy that could arguably contribute to the Foucauldian analysis of the neo-liberal governmentality of lifelong learning which suggests ‘it is the population itself on which government will act that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people the direction of the flow of population into certain regions of activities’ Foucault (1994: p217). Adult education is now touted as a form of investment in human capital and it is according to Lynch (2006) ‘dominated by a discourse of economic change through the capitalist structures of globalization and market competitiveness’. By setting as a priority the learning that supports economic development, Grummell (2007) suggests the ‘abandonment of education to the blind workings of the market has profound implications for the public nature of education and for civil society, especially in terms of the distribution of power in society’. To counteract this I would concur with Fleming (2004) who proposes that ‘Lifelong learning needs to be reclaimed from the functional, the instrumental, the economic and the one dimensional to mean a right to learn all that it is possible to learn’. The Adult education sector should therefore help foster and advocate for a strong civil society and commitment to critical citizenship separate from the market in a time of neo-liberal governmentality and away from the flow into certain regions of activities controlled by economic discourse.

In addition, without the proper government financial supports in place for women who wish to return to education, this may suggest the emphasis is on the individual. Lynch (2006, p. 4) argues this emphasis ignores the fact that the majority of citizens in society at any given time are not self-financing consumers. For example, many women are in no position to make active consumer choices due to the poverty of their resources, time and/or capacities.

Many women occupy a distinct position within society, they are typically positioned in lower paid jobs and they carry the primary responsibility for the unpaid work of caring for others. There are particular concerns that arise from these women's experiences, concerns that have always been addressed inadequately in politics that is dominated by men. This may suggest a need for more equality in the distribution of power in society such as an increase in female representation in government positions, leading to more women in politics.

2.3.3 *Women and Politics*

Historically women have largely been excluded from arenas of political participation and this underrepresentation continues for women in Irish politics today. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Oireachtas, 2013), Ireland sits about 90th in the global rankings of female political representation. Ireland presently has twenty seven female TD's out of one hundred and sixty six. However, according to Buckley (2013) candidate gender quotas have now been introduced in the hope of becoming a successful contributor to increasing women's political representation. In July 2012 the *Electoral Amendment Political Funding Act* was passed by the Oireachtas. As part of the Government's political reform agenda, the law provides for a legal candidate gender quota for future general elections in Ireland (Oireachtas, 2012). Some might argue if the sex of political representatives should matter but gender quotas might be seen by others as a matter of justice as it is unfair for one gender only to monopolize representation. The election of more women may not ensure a representation of all women. However it may enable some women representatives to concentrate on policies to enhance for example, child care provision, leading to an increase in the attendance of women in areas of public domain such as education.

2.4 Why Women Return to Education

For many adults, the process of deciding to become a student is not a one-off event and as Osbourne (2004) suggests it is a complex and extended process, and specific factors may have salience at different times, there are positive and negative factors upon making the decision to become a mature student. There are various reasons why women return to education, there are instrumental motivations for example, such as to achieve a particular goal including entry or re-entry into the labour market leading to independence or enhancement of career prospects. Connolly (1999) suggests education can also give

independence to women, a new identity or separate identity from that of children or partner. It can increase women's independence from traditional family structures or offer a new identity for some women such as a role-model for their children. There can also be personal motivators such as self-fulfilment or personal development. Whether the motivations to return to education are personal or instrumental for women they suggest an element of change or transformation is sought.

2.4.1. Transformative Learning

Transformation through learning can occur in many ways. In an attempt to develop a theoretical foundation for explaining how transformation occurs in adult learning, Mezirow (1997) defines learning 'as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action. For transformative learning to occur for many women as adult learners, a transformation of belief and attitude or even a transformation of their entire perspective may be necessary. Senge (1990) suggests learning involves a fundamental shift or movement of mind. This can mean changing an individual's frame of reference. Mezirow (1991) refers to frames of reference as the structure of assumptions that can frame an individual's point of view and influence their thinking, beliefs and actions. The revision of that structure of assumptions with reflection on experience he addresses by the theory of perspective transformation.

The most familiar examples of a meaning perspective and of transformative learning comes from the women's movement (Mezirow, 1990). Within a very few years, hundreds of thousands of women whose personal identity, self-concept, and values had been derived principally from prescribed social norms and from acting out sex-stereotypical roles came to challenge these assumptions and to redefine their lives in their own terms. The women's movement provided a support climate for this kind of personal reappraisal by publicizing the constraints on personal development, autonomy, and self-determination imposed by such stereotypes and by providing support groups and role models. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory is comparative to this. (Kolb, 1984) defines experiential learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'. This is akin to Schon's (1982) description of reflection in terms of knowledge gained from one's own experience, reflection on action. However, Knowles (2005) suggests although experience is an important characteristic of adult learners, sometimes unlearning is required in order for change to occur. Therefore, in

order for women as students to make changes it is necessary to look at their frame of reference, move to a new frame of reference and begin to imagine new possibilities. This is not dissimilar to my experiences of alienation in formal education, revising my interpretation having returned to education as a mature student and moving to a transformation of my entire perspective as a mature student, thereby, giving me, the ability to imagine new possibilities.

2.4.2 Class and Cultural Capital

New possibilities for some women however, might be further blocked due to dispositional barriers and challenges to participation such as class and cultural capital. Class is a key factor in inequality, some women may have a belief that they do not belong in for example, university due to their class. Haralambos (1986) argues that the value system of the lower classes creates a self-imposed barrier to an improved position. For example, he suggests that members of the working class place a lower value on education. I would argue this is a generalised view and would suggest that a more legitimate barrier would be that of economic inequality. Economic inequality is about students from low income backgrounds being unable to access, participate and achieve in education on equal terms with other students and therefore they become more marginalised. A marginalised student won't have the ability to excel as opposed to middle class students who would have the ability to buy into the educational market, for example, through access to resources like private tuition, books, grinds, revision courses and computers. From a Weberian perspective, a marginalised student's social stratification is then limited. In Weber's terminology 'a person's class situation is basically his market situation', (Haralambos 1986 p. 432). Therefore their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining access to higher education.

The Irish educational system is regarded by many in Irish society as a meritocracy. Social class and cultural capital are major determinants of the level of educational credentials any given individual is likely to attain. An important medium of communication and learning is speech and therefore attainment levels in schools or universities may be related to differences in speech patterns. An example of this is the academic language used in some further education settings and universities. Haralambos (1986) outlined how Basil Bernstein examined how speech patterns reflect students' social class backgrounds and how students from working class backgrounds are at a disadvantage because schools and universities are essentially middle class organizations. He distinguishes two forms of

speech pattern which he terms 'elaborated code' and the 'restricted code'. He suggests that, in general, members of the working class are limited to the use of restricted codes whereas members of the middle class use both codes. Restricted codes are a kind of shorthand speech. In contrast, an elaborated code explicitly verbalizes many of the meanings which are taken for granted in a restricted code. This suggests that class stratification is directly related to educational attainment as formal education is conducted in terms of an elaborated code. This places the working-class at a disadvantage because they are limited to the restricted code. Giddens (1997) suggests that learners who have acquired elaborated codes of speech are more able to deal with the demands of formal academic education than those confined to restricted codes.

I would argue therefore that educational institutions normalise the divisions between middle class and marginalised groups. It is common that marginalised people accept constraints and this may cause them to drop out of the education system as they may continue to only identify with their own environment. This holding of middle class cultural capital in higher esteem will result in favouring students with greater cultural capital, who are more economically advantaged and this gives them the power to exercise more choice. Sadovnik (2007) suggests the education system in its teachings assumes middle class culture exists in all students. Surely then there is a dominant culture and this then limits opportunities for some learners and therefore increases the gap of inequality.

2.5 Women and Childcare Responsibilities

Some women, regardless of their class, cultural capital or marital status, in their quest to return to adult education may also carry a large and more complex baggage of commitments and constraints than others, for example they may have primary responsibility for running the home or childcare. The issue of childcare, as a mother and student is one that really resonates with me due to my own concrete experiences.

Beauvoir's (1949) notion of woman's identity as 'the absolute other', is derived in part from what she sees as women's socially imposed child-rearing responsibilities. This prompts the question, if women like her who wish to increase their independence from traditional family structures, giving them this new identity, separated from that of their children or partner were freed from their house labour, who would be called in to take

care of the children and maintain the home and would this lead to the exploitation of other women?

I posit this issue is still relevant today. Tong (2009) suggests that women worldwide are generally society's caregivers, this leads to women disproportionately shouldering the burden of care in virtually all societies as it is commonplace for women to have the primary responsibility for childcare. In returning to education, some women's circumstances may mean that they need childcare this however, according to Connolly (1999), does not mean that women are essentially responsible for it. Surely the issue of childcare should be a family issue, a social issue, or to bring the issue into the public domain, a policy issue and not solely a woman's issue. Nell Noddings (2001) outlines how the issues of care have become part of the public debate due to the continuing need for care as more and more women have now claimed their rights to careers and public roles. Clearly children still need care, and a question arises as to who will provide it. It is easy to respond "the public" or "private, paid caregivers," but neither answer is without difficulties. Noddings (2001) suggests that feminists encounter a paradox here. On the one hand, women in their decision to return to education or as working mothers want low-cost child-care so that their earnings can actually contribute to family income. On the other hand, low-cost childcare implies low salaries for childcare workers. I propose Noddings (2001) answers the earlier question when she states "We can hardly celebrate the liberation of women if some are exploited for the benefit of others" (p.32). Similarly, we have to look at the case that for some women who wish to return to education who need to employ formal support systems of childcare, this may not be possible. This impossibility may stem from one of the effects of the recent implementation of accreditation and professionalization for childcare providers implemented by the Irish Government. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2006) launched *Síolta: the National Quality Framework* in 2006 presenting a vision of professional practice that has the potential to advance the development of professional identity within the sector as well as promoting practical professionalism. Although this implementation led to increased salaries for some women, it also led to more expensive fees for mothers wishing to avail of these childcare services. This implementation could be seen to suggest that the issue of childcare only becomes part of the public agenda and is only addressed through policy if it is profitable.

2.6 Women's Marital Status

Women's dependency on men outlined earlier in De Beauvoir's (1949) writings on oppression by hierarchy may still be relevant in Ireland today as women's return to adult education is strongly related to a woman's marital status whether they be married, single or in same-sex relationships.

2.6.1 Married Women

One relevant example is a married woman's grant application to finance her return to education. The application for government funding is determined by a means test based on her husbands' income. Student Universal Support Ireland, in the application process refers to this position as being a 'Mature Independent Student who will be assessed on the income of your spouse' (SUSI, 2015). This somehow suggests that the income of the spouse is shared appropriately between both spouses.

2.6.2 Lone Parents

Marital status for women cannot be discussed without addressing the concerns of single women as parents. The term 'unmarried mother', in the past, classified women in relation to their marital status and in their relationship to men (the traditional bread winner). 'Unmarried Mothers' were highly stigmatised in the past and some negative attitudes towards these mothers are unfortunately still prevalent in today's society. One-parent families are a growing feature of Irish society. To give a better indication of the volume of one-parent families who are women, the consensus concerning them calculate the number of one-parent families stood at 215,315 in 2011 of which 186,284 were mothers (CSO,2011). One-parent families are the focus of contemporary attention because they are disproportionately subjected to poverty. The majority as we can see from the statistics are women and the discourse that unfortunately surrounds them is they are regarded as a social problem and a fiscal burden.

Unemployed women raising their children without a partner receive a small payment from the Irish government. This payment (previously referred to as 'unmarried mother's allowance') is now referred to as a one-parent family payment (Department of Social Protection, 2015). Women in receipt of this payment are themselves trapped on an inadequate payment, for example, at present a one-parent family allowance stands at €188 for the adult and €29.80 per child, per week (Citizens Information, 2013). Having this

inadequate payment puts a financial strain on these women with children. For these women to return to education based on these figures, without doubt requires a financial investment by the government.

Along with the White Paper (DES, 2000) came the implementation of schemes and grants that helped many one-parent recipients achieve their educational goals, these included free fees and maintenance grants. However, in the Budget 2012, Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton introduced massive reforms of the One Parent Family payment, one of these was to propose to make labour market participation compulsory for lone parents whose children had reached the age of seven years. On 2 July 2015 the age limit for the One-Parent Family Payment will reduce to seven years for most claimants (Department of Social Protection, 2015). These claimants will be given a Job Seekers Allowance when their children are over age seven for the purpose of satisfying available for work guidelines to nineteen and a half hours per week. Changes to the One Parent Family payment designed to incentivise welfare recipients to enter the workforce may drive some low income families deeper into poverty. This could make it impossible for some lone parents to access and participate in education due to the high cost of childcare which many may now face. According to the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS, 2012) the Back to Education Allowance Scheme is available to support unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities to undertake approved second or third level courses. This support was in line with the White Paper (DES, 2000). However, in the Budget 2012, the Department of Social Protection has since removed financial support and specific maintenance grants. These changes are linked with Osbourne (2004) who suggests single parents (predominantly women) who have families to support not only financially, but also socially and emotionally, are increasingly exhorted by the government to seek qualifications as a way out of social exclusion. Yet, these women find themselves in a dilemma in that studying to ensure a better family future proves costly, as does childcare, and the practicalities of this may also have an impact on family quality care. This suggests the reality of this high cost may lead to a barrier for women as parents when attempting to return to education.

2.6.3 Lesbian Parents

Lesbian women during their formal education years may have suffered homophobic bullying. The long-term effects of homophobic bullying during formal education and its consequences can prevail for gay people. These negative effects can extend well into adulthood, for example, for some wishing to return to education, resulting in constant reminders of their negative relationships within educational institutions. While sexuality is distinct from gender, it is intimately linked to it. It involves a social construction of a biological drive (O' Higgins-Norman 2011). There are many influences on an individual's sexuality, including explicit and implicit rules imposed by society (Zeidenstein and Moore 1996). Epstein and Johnson (1998) argue that schools are important sites for the production and regulation of sexual identities, they are significant places where young people create meaning about themselves, their gender identities and their sexualities. Judith Butler (1990) argues that certain constructions of sexuality have become hegemonic and as such produce a world that feels external to most people and somewhat constraining where sexuality is concerned. While the majority of the population who consider themselves to be heterosexual have the support of the dominant sexual culture outside school and in resisting desexualisation within school, those who experience themselves as homosexuals are at risk of experiencing social isolation and oppression of their sexual expression in both spheres. O' Higgins-Norman (2011) suggests a primary function of schools, like other institutions, is the reproduction of the dominant social ideology. Schools legitimate and sustain cultural practices.

Ireland had a significant challenge like any government that wishes to pursue an equality agenda where sexual orientation and sexual diversity are concerned. However, Ireland has addressed many key issues over the years that affect the gay community through law reforms, for example, the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1993), inclusive legislation that prohibits discrimination on nine grounds, one of these being sexual orientation (Equal Status Act 2000) and also the publication of the Civil Partnership Bill (2009) to name a few but not all inequalities and discriminations had been addressed. Discrimination existed for lesbian women as parents, in their decision to return to education that may have for example, financial constraints. This occurrence may come in the form of for example, applying for childcare support. The reason for this is lesbian women who were not the biological parent but may be the co-parent may not have legal recognition as the co-parent of their children. According to Angela O Connell (2008) "Lesbians forming families are faced with laws, policies and social practices that restrict their choices and

silence their voices”. Lesbian couples suffered discrimination of not being allowed to form families with full legal recognition. This continued under the Civil Partnership Bill 2009, which did not allow for same-sex couples who registered their partnership to be considered as potential joint adoptive partners.

The struggle for lesbians wishing to return to education, claiming legal rights to take care of their children now seem possible due to recent legislative changes such as The Children and Family Relationship Bill 2015 and the recent passing of the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum whereby the Constitution will be formally amended signing the Marriage Equality Bill into law in 2015 (Oireachtas, 2015).

2.7 Structures of Adult Education

The difficulty for women in accessing and participating in the ETB (Educational Training Board) courses on offer due to their conflicting commencement time with state primary schools (highlighted earlier), needs to be explored. State run further education institutions and state run primary schools share a common lesson commencement time of 9am. This imposed scheduled commencement time takes very little account of the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of being female in today’s society. This poses the question, why do further educational institutions have this conflicting commencement time and in whose interests does having this commencement time actually serve?

The relationship between the state and the economy can impact on the relationship between the state and adult education. The state pays the salaries of the adult educators who must deliver the curriculum within a set timeframe and the state is also responsible for most adult education funding. According to Fleming (2004), the state has been seduced, maybe corrupted, by the economy to act in its interests, for example, setting as a priority the learning that supports economic development. This may suggest that some adult education institutions are now based on the industrial model. According to Tovey and Share, (2003) ‘The Marxist approach to education reflects an economically determinist approach’. It focuses on how the education system operates as an institution for the creation and transmission of the maintenance of the class system through the rewarding of punctuality, obedience and respect for authority – the very attributes required of a productive workforce”.

My observations of the FETAC timetable, curriculum and accreditation system implemented by the ETB is relevant here. It is regulated by the state and suggests a functional or 'banking model' of education (Freire, 1972). This could be seen to alter the concept of 'lifelong learning' and 'second chance' education. This may further suggest the government look through a neo-liberal lens when it comes to the provision and structuring of adult education. Similar to this, Grummell (2007) argued that recent developments in educational policy-making are increasingly shaped by neo-liberal discourses that adapt adult education principles, such as lifelong learning and emancipation, for its own economic and political logic. While policies are in place to recommend best practice regarding 'equality', 'accessibility', 'flexibility' and 'inclusiveness', outlined in for example the Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000), it is apparent here that they do not always translate well into reality and what is perhaps needed 'on the ground'.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter explored literature that crossed social, cultural and economic spheres including feminist theory, government policy and educational theory relative to a diversity of women as parents returning to education. Some of this literature suggests that equality of opportunity in education seems to refer to those individuals who have the economic, personal and time resources to access educational services. The next chapter will provide a rationale for me choosing a feminist qualitative research approach as a methodology to research the challenges and barriers experienced by the participants in the study during their return to education.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Methodology Introduction

The primary aim of my thesis is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents, returning to education in an Irish context. At the beginning of the research process, I had to make a pragmatic choice between research methodologies according to my research question. The most appropriate methodological approach I adopted for the purpose of this research, as a mode of social enquiry, was Feminist Qualitative Research. The impetus outlined below contributed to the rationale for me in adopting this methodology:

An open day was held by an Education and Training Board (ETB) during my teaching practice. During this time the tutors proceeded to outline different courses on offer to potential mature students, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) attainment levels achievable in relation to the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) accreditation and the module content within these courses. This open day was attended by both men and women who wished to return to education, the majority present on this particular day were women. While in attendance I observed men asking questions relating to job opportunities on completion of the courses, in contrast to this, the women concentrated their questions on the timetabling of the courses. No concrete timetable was available and start times were suggested by tutors to be 'around 9am'. I could not ignore the mutterings of women seated all around me regarding the lack of clarity on timetables, and their concluding statements to each other that time constraints of having to take care of their school going children would ultimately result in their inability to participate in the courses on offer. Before the interview process for course places had begun, these women had left the building leaving tutors questioning at a later stage why so few participants had remained for the interview process. This highlighted to me both a challenge, the issue of childcare responsibilities, and a barrier, the structuring of timetables in further adult education institutions.

3.1 Why I chose Feminist Qualitative Research

My research lies in familiar territory therefore the rationale for choosing this methodological approach was due to the specific task at hand; exploring other women's educational journeys to help demonstrate how their concrete lived experience can serve as a key place from which to build knowledge. Using a feminist qualitative research

approach also helped me in underpinning the participant's position, making sense of their concrete experiences and to create spaces where the personal transforms into the political. This transformation is close to what Hesse-Biber (2012) wrote when she suggested "tracing the discourse surrounding experience provides a method for examining the underlying mechanisms of oppression within society that in fact may provide new avenues of resistance and transformation".

3.2 Epistemology

My epistemological stance is framed by the literature I have read during this study that crossed social, cultural and economic spheres including feminist theory, government policy and educational theory relative to women as parents returning to education. While building on my new found knowledge on the subject of feminism I found myself favouring Feminist Post Structuralism, the reason for this is that it offered me an understanding of gender as constructed in social relations. From this I came to recognise women's multiple positioning's in discourse, policy, economics and legislation. This aided me further in underpinning my position and in my quest for gender justice particularly in the area of access and participation of education for women. The concept of objectivity for me in achieving new knowledge within the research process will be through paying attention to the specificity and uniqueness of women's lives and experiences; this is similar to Haraway (1988) when she suggested that objectivity needs to be transformed into "feminist objectivity, as situated knowledge". I believe that people construct their own reality through their own lived concrete experiences and I also hold an awareness that the reality put forward in this study is filtered through my own interpretation of the participant's story.

3.3 My Ontology

I chose qualitative research as opposed to quantitative. When reading statistical data during my literature review, it left me with feelings of suspicion as it does not tell the 'deeper story' and I propose this can result in cumulative generalizations. I have chosen to use a social constructivism approach which is postmodernist in that truth is viewed as socially constructed between people. My belief is that reality is socially and culturally constructed. This is akin to Crotty (1998), who suggests that social constructionism sees "all reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed" (p. 43). I do regard my lived experience as legitimate knowledge, however, during the interview process, for example,

I kept an awareness of transferring my own assumptions upon my participants knowing that this would only result in an exercise in confirming my own assumptions regarding the issue to hand. Silverman (2003 p.32) suggests qualitative data provides a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data and this choice gives voice to the participants. For this reason I chose qualitative research over quantitative research so as not to exclude interesting phenomena and behaviour in everyday situations to help demonstrate the participant's concrete lived experiences.

3.4 Participant Selection

I purposefully chose five women participants who continued with their education. The reason for this is I felt it unfair to interview women who may have returned to education but dropped out before reaching certain recognised levels of achievement. I felt this would be unfair to them as participants. But in an attempt to give them voice, it is my hope that the challenges and barriers highlighted by the participants who did take part in this study may well represent some experiences of women who had to drop out, who may have faced challenges and barriers and were simply unable to overcome them due to circumstances beyond their control.

3.5 Methods Using Feminist Qualitative Research

My intention during this process was to have an awareness of the analytical, methodological and practical problems that may confront me as the researcher. To avoid my own history and positionality influencing the research questions, I intentionally moved away from leading questions when preparing for the interview process. This aided me in my attempt to be more objective, eliciting a story rather than a response and opened up dialogue between the participant and I as the researcher. The dialectical approach proved helpful in creating useful data although, I do acknowledge that this process involved placing my trust in the participant. I was also drawn to the Feminist Qualitative Approach because of the purposeful avoidance of statistical techniques. For example, I found that using a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach empowered these women as participants and enabled them to tell their story, this approach emphasizes the "flexibility and productive powers of language" De Vault and Gross (1990 in Hesse-Biber 2012, p.175). This approach also aided me, as the researcher, to learn considerably more about my research topic.

The three methods I employed to help me garner the necessary data were;

- Conducting Five Qualitative Interviews
- Transcription of Audio Recorded Data
- Maintaining a Reflective Diary
- Maintaining a Reflective Journal

3.6 Conducting Qualitative Interviews

The primary research was conducted using a method of qualitative informal interviews with five women participants; it emerged that some women shared similar experiences to me whereas, some women had completely different experiences and somehow developed coping strategies to deal with these experiences. For this reason, I did have concerns regarding the sample size of my research as interviewing five women has its limitations in terms of generalising the findings to a wider population. A central methodological issue for quantitative researchers is the reliability of the interview schedule and Silverman (2003) suggests ‘Authenticity’ rather than reliability is often the issue in qualitative research. For the interview process, I used open-ended questions as this was the most effective route towards gathering an authentic understanding of the participant’s experiences.

When arranging interviews, I agreed a time and place that suited each participant. Through email I advanced a copy of my research proposal so the participants would have a clearer picture of the purpose of the interview and I also requested permission from them to use a dictaphone during the interview process. I chose not to send a copy of the few opening interview questions in advance as I took a semi-structured approach to the interview ‘so as to pursue a more conversational style of interview that might start with a few defined questions but be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that might develop’ (O’ Leary 2004). I found using the method of qualitative interviews was the most appropriate as it is a conversation with a purpose and contributed to the increase of the ‘knowledge payoff’. Towards the end of the interview I ensured that I asked each participant if there was any further relevant information that they would like to add. I found this approach to ending the interview worked well in that it prompted participants to reflect on what they discussed. This reflection contributed to empowering participants

somewhat to reveal more regarding their thoughts and feelings on the research topic. The result of this I felt added another layer to the richness of the research data.

3.7 Transcribing Audio-Recorded Data

I used a well-established method of transcribing the audio-recorded data. The process of transcribing helped me to become a more active listener, to identify cues, interesting points or insights that the participants expressed during the interview. Transcribing also helped me capture the nuances of each participant along with capturing conventions such as laughs, pauses and tears. This “radical, active listening” as a key component to feminist interviewing. This is what De Vault and Gross (1990 in Hesse-Biber 2012, p.151) suggest is a necessary augmentation feminists have made to the practice of interviewing to help consider “what meanings might lie beyond explicit speech”. I also began the process of noting gaps in the conversation or what seemed like unfinished points so that I could seek clarification at a later stage from the participant as agreed earlier in the process.

3.8 Reflexive Approach

According to Hesse-Biber (2012) “It is in the practice of strong self-reflexivity that the researcher becomes more objective”. I discovered this as some unanticipated themes emerged when re-reading the transcripts. When using a reflexive practice, I sought out readings and policies to help explore these ideas further, by pursuing new knowledge about a topic and aligning my thesis with new literature.

3.9 Maintaining a Diary

Keeping a diary involved using a cyclical approach of reflecting and recording. This helped me track my thoughts and clarify my ideas. Entries in the diary from previous interviews contributed to altering my approach and in providing me with a clearly more defined and improved approach towards my next interview. From this I began to see progress. New sources of data were recorded in my diary, aided my analysis and brought about change to both my approach to questions and to certain thematic areas. This is linked to Silverman’s (2005) suggestion that ‘what happens in the field as you attempt to gather data is itself a source of data rather than just a technical problem in need of a solution’.

3.10 Reflective Journal

I recognised the usefulness of noting in a reflective journal how my ideas and assumptions changed in response to the contingent factors that arose. I adopted an element of biographical exploration of how my views changed throughout the course of conducting my research as I engaged in the experiences and opinions of others. Real personal learning for me emerged through exploring how my views compared and contrasted with those of the participants over time. Using a reflective journal did however highlight some difficulties when using a Qualitative Approach limiting my field work. For example the participants had their own time constraints where an interview may be cut short as they had commitments such as collecting their children from school or having to leave to look after an elderly parent. Another negative aspect I discovered when initiating open questions was that it sometimes led to the discussion going somewhat off topic due to its conversational style and therefore led to the interview going over time.

3.11 Ethics

The ethical process in my research project involved understanding my ethical responsibilities for the production of knowledge and the welfare of the researched. As ethics is foundational to all research and researchers are unconditionally responsible for the integrity of the research process (O' Leary, 2004), the ethical considerations I applied during my research was to acknowledge that I had a responsibility for the dignity and welfare of the participants, I would respect the rights of others and accept that all research must abide by common law. Two ethical documents I included for my research were:

- A Plain Language Statement (**Appendix A**)
- An Informed Consent Form (**Appendix B**)

I emailed the participants the plain language statement and the informed consent form in advance to outline the purpose of the research and to obtain written permission from them. By adopting a Qualitative Feminist Approach, I came to recognise the importance as a researcher in having an awareness of the extent of my values and of my attitude as I entered into the research process. This awareness, Harding (1993) suggested, "is to practice strong objectivity, to self-reflect on what values, attitudes and agenda" are brought into the practice of the research process".

3.12 Conclusion

During the process of applying a qualitative approach, it was interesting to witness how people narrate their identities and realities. Preliminary findings suggested two further positive outcomes of using a qualitative approach; (i) participants whose life stories may have appeared so similar if 'boxed in' had I used a quantitative questionnaire, had such dissimilar life stories and (ii) when some participants were reflecting on their life stories, an awareness was emerging and evolving for them also as they told their story, these women were perhaps for the first time faced with an opportunity to acknowledge or examine a significant experience (or time) in their lives.

The next chapter presents the authentic findings from the qualitative interviews with the five women participants. These findings are presented in the form of five core narratives to give you, the reader, a better understanding of who the participants are and their educational story to date. It will address my research question by not only highlighting gender differences, but critically exploring aspects of the participant's social status.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

The primary aim of my thesis is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women, as parents, returning to education in an Irish context. I decided to use a narrative approach as it gives the participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and tell their story and to give you, the reader, a better understanding of who the participants are and their educational journey to date. According to Gergen & Gergen (1986) ‘perhaps the most essential ingredient of a narrative is its capability to structure events in such a way that they demonstrate, first, a connectedness or coherence, and second, a sense of movement or direction through time’. Therefore, the format of the participant’s narrative begins with a background of their time spent in formal education, continuing with what motivated them to return to education and finally, their own personal reflections on education. The themes that emerged are outlined in the conclusion of this chapter.

4.1 Introduction to Participants

Amy is thirty six years of age, left school when she became pregnant and describes herself as a lone-parent and a mature student. Amy recently completed a Masters in Equality Studies.

Deirdre is thirty four years of age, is an early school leaver, she regarded formal education as a pressurised environment. Deirdre married young and is rearing four children. She is now in her second year in adult education in her local ETB.

Joan is aged forty four, is married with two grown up daughters. Joan left formal education just before her leaving certificate. Joan returned to education and recently completed a Degree in Education and Training.

Clare is forty eight years old and is a single parent. Clare returned to education five years ago. Clare recently completed a Masters in Intercultural Studies. She spoke of her wish to complete a PHD one day.

Sarah is thirty nine years of age, a mother of two and identifies as a lesbian. Sarah completed her formal education and returned to third level education recently but had to leave due to financial constraints. Sarah hopes to return to continue with her studies sometime in the future.

4.2 Participants Motivation to Return to Education

Amy explained that as a result of her falling pregnant at age eighteen she was unable to continue with education or gain employment due to her parenting responsibilities and spent her early adult years raising her son. During this time she had an altercation with her son's teacher and concluded that it was that unpleasant experience that prompted her to think about returning to education,

Amy: The reason I returned to education was when I went to a parent teacher meeting I was belittled like I knew nothing and I thought you know it was the way she spoke to me like I didn't have a clue.

Amy returned to education by attending a community course for local lone-parents. During her time there, the centre provided crèche facilities for her son that allowed her to attend her course. She completed a number of what she described as 'mini-courses' during her time there. The idea of attending university became possible for Amy one day when a student from a local university visited to give an informative talk on access to university. Amy sensed a similarity between the speaker's life story and her own, a connection, and from this she felt inspired.

Amy: This girl was giving a talk and as part of her course she gave a presentation and she just came in and gave the talk to a group of single parents and she said do you know what, you could all go back to education, you can be like me if you want, she was very inspirational.

The speaker provided information on access courses, funding and the application process for entry into university.

Deirdre describes her role at home as one that has all the domestic responsibilities of the traditional housewife and mother. As the children were getting older, she sought a change in her life, she wanted to escape the house and meet new people.

Deirdre: I also thought, God I could be doing something for myself.

Deirdre emphasised both personal and practical reasons for returning to education, she wanted to meet new people and move away from the isolation of domestic responsibilities.

Deirdre: I also thought by doing this I will get to know new people. I also think what helped was I want to be here, I was not being forced to be here, in other words it was my choice.

Deirdre also felt she needed to up skill to help her children with their homework. But most importantly, for her, the decision to enter into an adult education environment was hers to make.

Joan was a single mum of two girls and her return to education began with her attending a community education programme for lone-parents one day a week. Joan stressed how attending this course helped alleviate the loneliness she was experiencing as a lone-parent and offered her the chance to re-access the education system. Joan became involved in a couple of community education programmes and over time this increased involvement led to reigniting her interest in education and her love of learning. From this, Joan proceeded to find employment but was made aware by her employers that a degree became a pre requisite for the type of job Joan was doing.

Joan: So I was working without a degree and people were letting me know that you don't have a degree.

Due to a restructuring process in her place of employment, Joan lost her job and felt it was due to her lack of third level qualifications, this prompted her to return to education again.

Clare felt a return to education would give her the opportunity to spend more time with her son. When working in the corporate world, time with her son was something Clare felt she did not have as a working mother.

Clare: Education afforded me the flexibility that full-time work didn't.

Clare had challenges to overcome as a lone parent in having sole responsibility for taking care of her child both emotionally and financially. Time with her son became a priority for Clare and she seized an opportunity to change her own career path by returning to education.

Sarah lost her job and had to re-evaluate her employability prospects.

Sarah: The Company closed down due to the recession....it was time to get a proper qualification so that I could be employable again and support my family and that would mean returning to college.

The motivation for Sarah therefore in returning to education was to enhance her chances of future employment by gaining new qualifications.

4.3 Participants Reflections on their Educational Journey

As Amy tells the story of her educational journey, she spoke of emotions she felt as she experienced various challenges in her life during this time, conflicts she had with people and the self-doubt she felt regarding her ability to succeed as she was an early school leaver. She also spoke of the love she had for the ‘mini-courses’ she attended as they were nothing like school and she described how she rediscovered a love for learning.

Amy: I loved it, don't get me wrong I found it daunting to begin with but it gave me huge confidence, , I thought, this is nothing like school.

She became emotional at stages when discussing challenges she had to try and overcome during her educational journey such as having to take on the responsibility of being a single parent, the stigma that came with this as well as financial constraints and the guilt she felt with someone else minding her son while she attended class.

Deirdre reflected on how a gradual progression suited her more, how the positive support she received from her tutors helped her in her progression. She also stressed how returning to education had such a positive effect on her and her children.

Deirdre: I got a distinction and I was thrilled with that... I'm encouraged here, they give you the stepping stones...I helped my son prepare for his course.

For Deirdre, having the position of a mature student returning to education changed her feelings of reluctance and hesitation to feelings of confidence and positivity that involved planning a future in education. Although when contemplating her future in education, during the planning stages, Deirdre explains how she still has to take into account resistance from her husband, what she sees as her domestic and childcare responsibilities.

Deirdre: Do you know, oh maybe I shouldn't be saying this, ah anyway, when I first started this course my husband would not talk to me in the car.

For Deirdre, these are all determining factors in continuing on her educational journey.

As Joan tells the story of her educational journey, she spoke of the negative emotions she felt when she left education due to a lack of support and encouragement, the challenges she faced being a lone parent such as financial constraints and the lack of self-esteem that she developed. However, at different points in her educational journey as a mature student, she experienced huge encouragement which is something Joan felt she needed to help her continue in her educational journey, an example of this encouragement came from a course co-ordinator.

Joan: He said I think you would be great in the classroom, presenting....so I enrolled for that course.

Getting such positive feedback gave Joan huge confidence and during the interview she proceeded to reflect on what life might have been like if she had continued with her education at a younger age.

Joan: I do wonder if I had of done this degree when I was younger, would I even be married now, would I have had children.... But it was hard doing the degree because I had marital problems and then I had my kids going through a very tough time of their own.

Joan highlighted many challenges she encountered in her life that affected her educational journey, such as lack of encouragement from family members, the responsibility of having children as a lone parent and later in life as a mature student, resentment by her husband during this time, financial constraints and the added pressure of obtaining new credentials for future employment throughout these challenges.

Clare weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of returning to the workforce versus returning to education, her decision became that of returning to education due to the flexibility it offered her.

Clare: Going back to education was actually an opportunity to become a better parent....education is a twenty hour week versus a forty hour week.

Having the primary responsibility for childcare had its challenges for Clare as she was a single parent. She also reflected on how she struggled with the loss of her financial independence and the adjustment of having to live on an inadequate payment. Clare discussed how she struggled with the title of single parent, the stigma that came with this title and what she sees as the devaluation of what it is to be a parent by society.

Clare: I think there is a devaluation of parenting.... let's get women out in the workforce and it hasn't done women any favours, somebody still has to be the parent and the role of the parent has become devalued.

On reflection Clare felt on the plus side, returning to education gave her an opportunity to become a better parent, although she continually expressed challenges she faced, having the title 'single-parent', how being a parent is not valued by society and of having no financial stability.

As Sarah tells the story of her educational journey, she reflected on emotions she felt in firstly not achieving as well as she could have during her years in formal education.

Sarah: I didn't apply myself fully because of a number of distractions...being in a building with 1,000 other people was very difficult, especially when they could sense something "not the norm" about you.

Secondly, she expressed how anxious she became at the idea of returning to education as a mature student, of going back into a learning environment bringing back painful memories of the bullying she faced in the past. Although, during her time as a mature student, Sarah's confidence grew, it meant the world to her to be finally studying a subject she was interested in and she was achieving high grades in her assignments. However, halfway through her degree, Sarah's challenges were that her family hit financial difficulties and reluctantly Sarah has had to defer her final year.

Having gathered an authentic understanding of all five of the participant's educational journeys and concrete experiences outlined in above narrative approach, to help me with the thematic analysis of the above data, I sought to familiarize myself with the methodological literature on analysing interview data.

4.4 Thematic Analysis of the Findings

Silverman (2005) posits one of the main Social Science traditions which inform the analysis of transcripts of tapes are Discourse Analysis. During the Discourse analysis of the above findings, the coding of data developed into an iterative process. It consisted of me applying a short code that assigned a summative characteristic to a piece of data. The codes represented the primary content. I then searched for patterns in the data so as to categorize them into themes. This process is similar to what Silverman (2006) suggests (as a methodological principle in qualitative research), to be not concerned with individual elements but their relations. This approach also helped with one of my aims, that was to be open to new concepts or issues that arise that may not have been addressed in the literature.

4.5 Conclusion

I propose the themes that emerged during the thematic analysis are significant in exploring the challenges and barriers that exist for women as parents returning to education in an Irish context.

The following themes emerged during the thematic analysis:

- Gender Construction & Patriarchy
- Childcare Responsibilities
- Why Women Return to Education
- Role of the Role Model
- One Parent Families
- Lesbian Parenting
- Women and Community Education
- Mind the Gap - Absenteeism
- Power, Politics & Educational Institutions

A more in-depth analysis of each of the themes that emerged using detailed extracts from the interview process and related theory will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.0 Introduction

The primary aim of my thesis is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents returning to education in an Irish context. A more in-depth analysis of each of the themes that emerged will be discussed in this chapter. This chapter therefore seeks to look deeper into the findings of my research by relating theory to the lived experiences of the participants. The analysis will provide more detailed extracts from the interview process and a theoretical analysis of the lived experiences of the participants.

5.1 Gender Construction & Patriarchy

To continue the discussion on this topic and explore the value of De Beauvoir's ideas of gender as a social construct, I agree that gender is constructed in social relations in varied and complex ways, such as gendered power relations within the home. This became evident for example, for Joan, regarding a scholarship offered to her at age seventeen by her secondary school. Due to her age, parental involvement and permission was required in accepting the scholarship. Her story tells of how this offer was refused by her parents on her behalf, and it became evident this refusal was partly due to her gender.

Joan: The teachers asked my Ma and Da could I take up the scholarship and they said 'no'. My da said 'give it to a fellah, 'cause she's only going to get married and have kids, so that would be an education wasted on her....whereas I had these teachers...they believed in everything that I had done...but when I went home it was a different story.

The above example demonstrates the complex interplay between gender and families and how gender can be inflected in choice processes within the private sphere. Joan acknowledged in her interview that her father had the final word regarding either the restriction of or allowing of her continued education. This demonstrated how a gender hierarchy prevailed in her home confirming the position of her father within the household as the male superior, the decision maker and the patriarch. In a patriarchal society, the essential underlying gender-based division is that men have the larger share in decision making, and the larger share of continuing with employment due to the majority of women retaining the responsibilities in the home. This pattern is very much in the male interest, and rooted in patriarchal traditional belief. This is akin to Alison Jagger's (1983) suggestion that capitalism oppresses women as workers but patriarchy oppresses women as women, an oppression that affects women's identity as well as activity. Women's

subordination to men through oppression by hierarchy was demonstrated in part in Joan's story and is akin to De Beauvoir (1949) suggestion that women's entrance into and success in the so-called public world is blocked through attachment, demonstrating a secondary status of women. The gender hierarchy that prevailed in Joan's home suggests that long standing custom, traditions and attitudes may to this day prevent full expression of a woman's rights in the private sphere.

Similar to this, when exploring if partners accommodated or resisted women's return to education, as a wife and mother Joan explained the effect her return to education had on her relationship.

Joan: being a wife, it seemed that I had given over my role of being a mother to John and he took that role but he wasn't happy with it. So every day he let me know that he wasn't happy with it....he had to take over 'my' role. I would say it was shared responsibility but he would say he was taking on my work and that kind of left to a near separation for the two of us.

Changes in Joan's relationship with her husband as a result of her returning to education, particularly when there were more demands on her time needed for study were evident here. Joan encountered such active resistance from her husband towards her studies that she felt she had to make a choice between her marriage and her education. This strain on a relationship and the efforts and time required to dilute this strain may lead some academically able and competent women to end up with a lower classification or result from their studies than is justified by their abilities.

Joan: I was made to feel selfish for doing a degree and it kills me that I was made feel that...he felt he was losing his wife.

Joan mentioned how her husband felt threatened by her studies. Changes in the traditional hierarchy within the family were apparent here. Joan's growth in confidence in her own knowledge and opinions, as a result of her studies, inevitably brought about a change in her perceptions of herself in relation to her partner.

Joan: I had become empowered, I was becoming more educated.

Hlupekile Longwe (1998) suggests in her writings that empowerment is the process by which women collectively come to recognise and address the gender issues which stand in the way of their advancement, in Joan's case she came through a process of 'conscientisation' when she immersed herself in studies.

Although, some of the women in the study were very willing to be understanding of their partners' feelings and to tailor their own behaviour in order to avoid conflict in their relationships. This was very much the case for Deirdre when she discussed the resistance to her studies whown by her husband.

Deirdre: So now when I am telling him that I want to further myself in my studies, I think to myself, okay, be nice here, so I have had to break the idea of each course to him gently as it's just not worth the hassle if I don't approach it right.

It is implied in these stories, that there is willingness by these women to accommodate their partners in order to avoid active resistance. The patriarchal values put upon these women and their role in the family created a situation where these women expected to receive little or no support, where they had to judge their husbands moods before broaching the subject of their wish to continue with their studies. As long as men and women see themselves as different kinds of people, then women will be unlikely to compare their life options to those of men, therein, according to Risman (2004), lies the power of gender.

As discussed earlier in the literature review, the term gender is used as a concept to refer to socially created meanings and identities. Gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987). The process of gendering was also inferred during a discussion Deirdre had with her ETB guidance counsellor. The discussion centred on Deirdre's move from a FETAC level four course to a FETAC level five course and the planning of her future course/career.

Deirdre: She [Counsellor} tries to guide you on the what next, the one here tried to guide me to do a child care course, because I have kids they automatically think I would be a good carer (laughs) don't they see I'm already rearing and caring for kids

The counsellor's offer of course/career for Deirdre might suggest the institution itself retains a patriarchal structure. This course offer example could also suggest women are positioned in discourses which construct them as the only sex properly suited to the likes of childcare and domesticity and this is something Deirdre clearly wanted to move away from. Gender affects so many aspects of all our lives both through past experiences and continuing on into the present. In Ireland gender discrimination is discouraged, this is demonstrated as gender is listed as one of the nine grounds in the Equality Act (Equality, 2000). Yet many major roles are still gendered in both the public and private sphere, this includes women doing most of the domestic work as outlined by the participants and having the primary responsibility when it comes to, for example, Childcare.

5.2 Childcare Responsibilities

During the interview process, participants described how their lives in the public arena involved varying periods of absenteeism in areas such as education and the workforce. These women identified the reason behind this absenteeism was their transition to motherhood. Motherhood links in with De Beauvoir's (1949) notion of woman's identity as 'the absolute other' that is derived in part from what she sees as women's socially imposed child-rearing responsibilities. Having the primary responsibility for childcare was without doubt a challenge for the participants when they returned to education.

Joan and Amy began their return to education by attending community course programmes. The course suitability they explained, was the duration, usually two to three hours in the morning, meaning they would not have to pay for formal childcare (as they could not afford it).

Amy: the times of these courses were from 10am to 12, my mother and sister offered to mind my son as it was only two hours a day so childcare was not a big issue to begin with.

Joan: when we had to do things like field trips, we were allowed put the kids in to the crèche facilities there.

These extracts identified how the shorter hours in community programmes suited these women's circumstances more as their need for childcare, although a necessity, it was at a minimum and most likely taken care of by relatives or friends (usually other women).

Becoming a mother can be viewed as a private or personal matter and can therefore be omitted from public discourse regarding the necessity of childcare. This omission links in with Fineman (2004) who writes 'Sociological, economic, legal and political thought has focused on the public sphere, the outer spaces of life, indifferent to the fact that none of these can function without the care institutions of society'. If these women declared their wish to return to the public arena after childbirth, they had the task of seeking childcare whether it is informal or formal supports. The alternative for these women was to remain in the private sphere of the household. Having primary responsibility links to Connolly's (1999) comments that 'It must be accepted that many women's circumstances mean that they need childcare, but that does not mean that we are essentially responsible for it'. For the participants, in their quest to continue on their educational journey, (regardless of their marital status) the primary responsibility for childcare remained theirs.

Joan: My next course was only on in the morning time while the kids were in school. It's like I could do anything as long as it doesn't upset the house, I could go to Australia and back, once it was within those four hours.

As these women attempted to progress to the next level of educational achievement, having primary childcare responsibilities became more of a challenge for them. Amy outlined the change in expectations from tutors when she moved from a community programme to a full time FETAC course at her local ETB centre.

Amy: When it came to my FETAC course the start time is nine o'clock, there is no allowance.

Amy's son was older now and as a single parent she had sole responsibility for dropping her son to school. Amy's situation also highlighted the conflict regarding the timetables in primary school and the structure of timetables in further adult education institutions.

As a mother and mature student the issue of timetabling and having the primary responsibility for childcare is one that really resonates with me. This stemmed from my own concrete experiences and from this I propose there is an unfair gender divide in the approach to adult education. The main contradictions I have observed are that whilst a significant majority of the students in adult education are female, the organisation and provision of lessons by educational institutions such as ETB's takes very little account of the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of being female in our society.

Primary schools, secondary schools and further education institutions share a common lesson commencement time of 9am. This then leads to the impossible task for women with younger children to begin lessons at the imposed scheduled commencement time in their further education settings while standing in the 'line' with their children at 9am to see them safely into school. I posit these scheduled times frequently ignore the reality of adult lives. When the participants eventually arrived from the 'line' to their own education centre they were effectively 'playing catch up' for the remainder of the day and it also contributed to the relationship they had with their tutor.

Amy: You see a good few of us would be late and all because we were dropping our kids to school. You would experience the tutors saying "oh well, I'm not explaining myself again, you will have to ask someone else in the class" very annoying, it really doesn't start your day off well.

Amy felt her commitment to the course was then affected and emphasized her frustration that scheduling was beyond her control. The loss of valuable learning time could

inevitably contribute to some women learners developing a further lack of faith in their academic abilities and in some cases result in an increase in dropout rates.

As Amy, Clare and Joan progressed to the next level of educational achievement by entering into university, there was a further increase in attendance hours. This involved compulsory attendance of lectures, group work, workshops etc. How they were timetabled and the conflict with childcare responsibilities continued. It became more difficult for some of the participants to find solutions. They described this issue as more of a barrier than a challenge, as they felt it could not be overcome. They expressed their awareness that the institution's timetable would not be flexible to mature students as they are the minority. This is evident in the recent figures showing the number of mature students accessing higher education stands at 5,944 in total in Ireland (HEA, 2011).

Amy: We didn't get our timetable until the third week in September...now the hours were longer. I would still have lectures that might go on till six o'clock sometimes...that made it very hard for me.

The first difficulty with the university timetables was their late availability to students, the second was they were prone to change when the first semester began and thirdly there was the conflict with primary and secondary school timetables of the children of the participants.

Clare: all the assignments were in after Christmas...because your child is off for two weeks...so I found the Christmas timetable really awkward.

Children's school holidays such as Easter and other mid-term breaks conflicted with some university timetables resulting in a need for further childcare arrangements to be made by the participants.

Amy: And what about choosing the right course for you?, even a mock timetable, it might help you choose the right course for you.

Amy: See in University they don't allow for single parents...there is no flexibility there....This added pressure could affect the dropout rate.

Joan: I think the university as a whole, as an institution did not recognise my role as parent/wife etc. and all that comes with that.

Choice of course is also affected when attempting to fit in with children's school hours and late provision of a timetable for students has consequences. It can have a negative effect on the commitment and motivation of the student. When a timetable is made available to students as late as a few weeks into the first semester as seen in the above

example, negotiating childcare arrangements with relatives can become difficult not to mention create tension due to last minute notice.

The issue of childcare in the current climate moves beyond the responsibility of the parent, grandparents have become one of the most popular sources of childcare for parents. Given that typical early childcare costs for a two-child family in a full-time crèche costs in the region of sixteen thousand euros per year, grandparents play a key role in easing the financial burden facing many hard-pressed families. A priority here was to save costs, participants spoke of relying on their mother quite a bit for childcare specifically if classes or lectures went overtime, group work or workshops were sometimes held later than expected or on the home front when the children became sick at the last minute. Having this dependency on grandmothers prompted me to think about challenges and barriers that might exist for grandmothers who may themselves wish to return to education.

Amy: the grandmothers are minding the grandchildren and they might want to return to education...everyone should be entitled to an education.

Historically the majority of these women may not have been given the opportunity to continue with their education when they were younger. This could be for various reasons outlined throughout the literature review (Chapter 2); financial circumstances, patriarchal attitudes, the marriage bar and having to stay at home to rear their own children. The marriage bar may have left some with no entitlement to a pension in their own right which they might be feeling the effects of now. Even if these women wished to return to education today, they may now find themselves returning to the position of caregiver for their grandchildren in order to help alleviate the costs of childcare on their children. They may sacrifice this to help their own daughters reach their educational goals and due to little or no pension due to the marriage bar, they may need to earn extra money for themselves.

Ireland trails behind its EU counterparts particularly in terms of affordable and accessible quality childcare. There is a large inaccessible and inequitable childcare market leaving women with limited choices regarding how far they can go in their educational journey. This suggests an immense challenge particularly for women without informal support systems of childcare. O' Connor (2006) highlights a clear ideological contradiction in the Irish Government's position on childcare, on one hand its strategies have consistently reinforced the role of women as primary caregivers by not giving sufficient support for

affordable childcare outside of the home, while simultaneously, on the other side, committing to increases in women's participation in the labour market.

5.3 Why Women Return to Education

The participants that took part in the study gave various reasons for returning to education. For some it was re-entry into the labour market leading to financial independence or enhancement of career prospects, also a new identity or separate identity from that of children or partner increasing women's independence from traditional family structures. There can also be personal motivators such as self-fulfilment or personal development.

Amy: My son was nine, he is going to grow up and leave me in nine years' time and I'm going to be left alone without a job and uneducated so this is my time to learn.

Clare: I chose to return to education to allow me become a better parent.

Sarah: I realised it was time to get a proper qualification so that I could be employable again and support my family and that would mean returning to college.

Joan: I was working without a degree and people were letting me know that.

Deirdre: God I could be doing something for myself as the kids got older...I needed to help the kids with their homework and I hit some difficulties.

In particular, reaching university level was perceived by them as a means to increase the potential for advancement, and a means to secure regular employment in the current economic and social climate. Some participants also saw returning to education as offering them a new identity such as a role model for their children.

5.4 Role of the Role Model

Many of the women interviewed gave one of the reasons they returned to education as being that of the goal of becoming a 'role model' for their children. This seemed especially important to the mothers who described themselves as 'early school leavers'. Some women described themselves as having grown up in a patriarchal home where it was not seen as important for women to have a high educational or employment status. One of Deirdre's motives was firmly rooted in her personal life due to a specific challenge she felt she had to overcome, particularly as her children got older.

Deirdre: I didn't know how to tackle a lot of their homework, especially maths and stuff, it made me feel pretty useless you know.

Educative work in the home is increasingly expected of parents, especially the task of helping with the homework. In relation to parental involvement, it became evident from the mothers I interviewed that they adopted a major role towards their children's schooling by providing the educational support needed at home. This is in line with Mayall's (2002) suggestion that the responsibility for education towards parents has disproportionately increased the workload of women in relation to that of male partners. Deirdre began this educative work by supporting her children's reading and numeracy development from a young age, but as her children became older she claimed the homework became more difficult for her. Women need to feel confident about tackling educational work in the home. Deirdre's position of early school leaver affected her position. This position undermined any sense of expertise for her in relation to academic work and again left her feeling disempowered in relation to education. This also led to an increase in personal feelings of incompetence and lack of confidence. Having this position can also demonstrate how a mothers' own educational history can continue to exert a powerful impact on their involvement into the present day.

The impact of being an early school leaver also affected Amy, as during her discussion on why she decided to return to education, she outlined a concrete example of how she felt when discussing her son's progress with one of his teacher's at a parent teacher meeting.

Amy: when I went to a parent teacher meeting, I was belittled like I knew nothing I didn't want him[son] to ever witness somebody undermining his mother in the future like I was a nobody.

This suggests Amy may have felt she did not have the skills, confidence or knowledge and information about schooling that could have had a bearing on empowering her to intervene in her child's educational trajectory.

For Clare, her return to education positioned her as a type of role model for her son creating an impetus for him to attend university in the future.

Clare: My son already knows he will do third level... I've raised the bar for him.

When looking at responsibility and role, I would suggest that parental involvement is gendered. For example, there may be an assumption that parents have shared involvement in their children's schooling but the process of involvement in children's homework can be very different. Mothers who are lone parents may have all the responsibility as well as stay at home mothers, this may also be viewed as part of childcare that the participants

suggested was deemed primarily their responsibility. This is not to suggest that where a man is present in the relationship they offer no help with the children's academic needs but in the discussions that took place both married women and women in relationships in the interview process made no mention of men supporting their children's educational performance or helping the children with their homework. This links in with Reay (2005) who suggests that parental involvement in schooling could be seen by some as a form of unpaid household labour, both mental and physical labour. The women also mentioned their added responsibility of preparing the kids for school on the day to day, the physical labour involved, washing and ironing uniforms, having sport kits ready based on timetabled activities and making the lunches every day. This additional role also seems to be gendered. This highlights how household labour including educative work poses a challenge in relation to time constraints for these women regarding their own studies.

5.5 One Parent Families

The terminology used by the government to categorize some of the participants who were not married has changed over the years. Although the term 'unmarried mother' has now been replaced by the government with a classification of 'One Parent Family' (Department of Social Protection, 2015). Historically women as lone parents were stigmatised and this is strongly felt by some of the participants.

Clare: I hate being on single parents, it's undignified [The participant begins to get upset, she pauses momentarily, she then proceeds to gather her thoughts and continues] in a way you are sort of made feel ashamed. You see it is the single parent, usually the women who are demonised and not the abandoning fathers.

Amy refers to the constraints she is experiencing having become a dependent on the state.

Amy: See you are under all these constraints...see as a single parent...when I went back to education. I had to rely on government payments.

Living on an inadequate payment (€188 for the parent and €29.80 per child) put such a financial strain on the participants. In their return to education, they had to apply for financial assistance from the government. The participants availed of these government grants that were implemented when they attended University. However, in the midst of their degree programmes, financial cuts were implemented by the Irish government with the gradual removal of grants.

Amy: There's also the money side of things, especially when you are on your own, at the start of my degree there was a grant of six thousand euro, and this was reduced the following year to €2,000 and they [Government] eventually done away with it.

In the Budget (2012), the Department of Social Protection not only reduced the participant's weekly income of the one-parent family allowance, they reduced their child benefit allowance and this was then compounded by a significant reduction in maintenance grants. These financial cuts represented one of the first reactions of the state to Ireland's financial collapse. The changes in the 2012 budget led to further hardship for one-parent families.

Clare: the grant just stopped and the next thing the child benefit suddenly drops and then the grant bloody disappeared...the buffer was gone,

This suggests if more cuts in further budgets are implemented in full, it would undo much of the relatively modest progress made during the time of the economic prosperity. It also highlights the importance in protecting the budgetary allocation for education to the maximum extent possible as the country struggles with austerity measures particularly for the one-parent families.

There are now current planned changes to the One Parent Family payment designed to incentivise welfare recipients to enter the workforce, but this has not addressed the issue of childcare.

Amy: For me as a single parent, let's see, from 2015, once your child turns seven, you are being cut off social welfare...there are not enough affordable crèches

When introducing this change in policy two years ago, the Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton admitted that "safe, affordable and accessible" childcare should be in place before the change is implemented (Irish Times, 2015). This is not in place and yet policy changes continue to proceed. As we have already seen one-parent families affected by these changes, have been forced to give up mid degree, which is counter intuitive to the intentions of the reforms. Some subsidised childcare is available for one-parent families to take up for example FETAC level five and six courses, but there is no childcare support for one parent families who presently want to access diploma, degree or master programmes. This effectively limits their progression.

Amy: Mothers just aren't being listened to or catered for, like we discussed earlier, your child finishes school at 2.30 and you're still in class, how are you supposed to get around this.

To motivate or compel one-parent families to stop relying on government assistance for their families, these women are expected to have found some sort of job to support themselves and their families. Absent from this change in legislation is any acknowledgment that as soon as a woman without a spouse or another adult partner went to work outside her home, there would be no one left behind to drop or collect the children to and from school and ultimately take care of the children.

Clare: All the jobs I have applied for, I have applied for in the hope that they have some flexibility or else part time. I am sacrificing half my wage to be at home and still parent until my child is old enough to go out the door.

The dilemma here is that in studying to ensure a better family future proves costly as does childcare and the practicalities may have an impact on family quality care. There are greater responsibilities on parents who come from a one-parent family, while studying Amy outlined that having these responsibilities affected her ability to attend extra workshops that would help with her studies:

Amy: Now a few of the lads who were mature students I remember attended these extra workshops but for some of the women, sure we had to leave to get home. See the women have one hundred per cent more responsibility than the men.

Similar to Amy, Clare acknowledged she too had sole responsibility for taking care of her child and explained how difficult it can be combining studies with other family responsibilities.

Clare: Just being a single parent you have sole responsibility for the nurturing and upbringing of another human being it's huge.

It was evident these women were under huge pressure as lone parents with financial and time constraints. Also, on a personal level, they felt let down by their children's fathers who they felt had no responsibilities whatsoever.

5.6 Lesbian Parenting

In order to challenge the assumption that women's normal trajectory is toward adult heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood, I wanted to bring into view lesbian difference, to identify where the oppression of lesbians might exist, specifically to explore if there is a difference in challenge and barriers that might exist for these women as parents in their return to education.

Although Sarah completed formal education and began a diploma in DIT, it proved difficult for her to continue with her studies due to her past experiences of having been bullied due to her sexual orientation and she subsequently left the diploma.

Sarah: In short, I was bullied by my peers for being gay and while I made it passed my leaving cert and through my first year of my diploma I couldn't face completing it- it still felt like school and that I was being judged for who I am.

Sarah was determined never to return to an institution that resembled an educational institution due to the bullying she suffered. Achieving equal rights for gay people historically in Ireland has been a slow process. Since Sarah's childhood, there have been major achievements for lesbian (and gay men) through many campaigns for anti-discrimination legislation. Ireland has addressed many key issues over the years that affect the gay community through law reforms. Sarah suggests although these changes were a step in the right direction, it did not cover all the inequalities and discrimination that her and her partner had to experience. Making the decision to return to education was difficult for Sarah due to her position of both mother and lesbian:

Sarah: I was full of dread as every time I pictured sitting in a lecture theatre it brought back painful memories of the bullying I had faced for the majority of my time is secondary school.

Despite the anxiety Sarah was already feeling, she decided at age thirty seven to apply for a place as a mature student on a B.A. degree in Business and Human Resources, although, further discrimination was awaiting her on her return to education as a mature student and mother.

Sarah: When I began my degree in college, I applied to the university through the Financial Assistance Service for the Student Assistance Fund for childcare funding. I met all the criteria EXCEPT I was not the biological parent of the girls....The staff in the college were sympathetic but they said they had to abide by all the guidelines of the application as they had so many applicants. We had some informal supports of childcare from family but this was not enough for me to continue with my studies. I did complete some of the degree but I then had to defer as we could not afford the childcare costs. I found this very upsetting and unfair and hope to return to finish the degree at some stage in the future.

By Sarah not being recognised as her children's second parent, the university's policies were linked to that of an unfair legislative system in 2012 that discriminated against her right to further her education. The effect of this hindered the possibility of Sarah achieving her goal in her educational journey which in turn affects her ability to secure future employment therefore provision for her children. These discriminations also

highlights how lesbians had to familiarise themselves with laws, social, medical and educational policies and an understanding of the social climate they were bringing their children into, when making the decision to have children, one that heterosexual couples take for granted on a day to day basis.

The struggle for Sarah to claim legal child care support may now be possible due to recent legislative changes such as The Children and Family Relationship Bill 2015 and the recent passing of the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum whereby the Constitution will be formally amended signing the Marriage Equality Bill into law in 2015 (Oireachtas, 2015).

5.7 Women and Community Education

Adult education in Ireland emerged from voluntary cultural and agricultural movements. Despite the absence of structural support, organised community groups began to emerge during the 1980s, the two main areas most in need included education for the long term unemployed and women's education. These movements progressed by playing an important civic role offering adults, particularly marginalized groups, a chance to re-access education systems. Joan described how her educational journey began through a Community Education programme:

Joan: I started a community development course in September and that was three mornings a week in the Resource centre and I absolutely loved that and I gave that my all..It was like I got a second chance.

The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation asserts that 'Women's Community Education is committed to four goals: Recognition, Empowerment, Leadership and Equality and oftentimes the goal of recognition is reached through celebration of women's achievements such as a graduation event' (1999 p.42). Joan valued her achievement and having this achievement acknowledged by her peers, children and family members became important to her.

Joan: When we did that course, we graduated, we got a certificate, I brought my dad along, but unfortunately he 'dissed' my course, again. He said 'sure, what's that going to give ya, are you going to get a job out of it?' and I said 'but sure I can't get a job' cause the kids are so small, I felt it was just a pin in my balloon, he just burst my bubble

Joan's father identified that the women's community programme she attended suffered from a lack of state recognition for future employment but in his comments to her, he failed to maybe understand that women's lives are rooted in a political, social and cultural environment that excludes many women from accessing education employment and

fulfilling their potential due to childcare responsibilities. Joan's return to education through the Community Education programme provided a liberatory and participatory alternative for her and could be seen by some as a radical form of education for women. It helped break the cycle of silence, isolation and disempowerment that marks many women's lives and experiences similar to that of Joan's. The women's community education sector however, did recognise that the responsibility for the care of children is still taken up largely by women (again, suggesting this role is gendered) and resources were made available to Joan in this instance. Although it did have its limitations due to the numbers of women attending and government funding.

5.8 Mind the Gap - Absenteeism

Women often consider a return to the public world after raising their children. Many of the participants had left school before gaining university entry qualifications and all had a significant gap between their educational experiences. They felt highly vulnerable to failure and suffered considerable anxiety at the idea of returning to education. During the interview process, participants described how being out of the public domain for an extended period of time, due to childcare and domestic responsibilities, was an immense factor in their decision to return to education. One of the implications during this extended period was the exclusion of women in the home, in particular, with the advancement of technology during our rapidly changing world. The use of new technology involves the process of learning a new language. And a language learned later in life can prove to be a challenge this is an area where Deirdre really struggled.

Deirdre: The use of computers was a struggle. I was terrified that I would look stupid to everyone else. All the young people seemed to know what they were doing. It became a huge challenge...I think the tutor assumes we all know these things but we don't.

There are differences between the generations of learners in the educational institutions. The younger generation have grown up with information and communication technology (ICT) as an integral part of their everyday lives compared to mature students. Prensky (2001) when referring to these learners coined the terms 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants'. The younger students are characterised as 'digital natives' because of their familiarity with and reliance on ICT and their use of ICT significantly differentiates from that of mature students. The participants described how they felt they lacked the technological fluency of the younger students.

Joan: I really felt I was unable to contribute to the group work if it involved finding stuff on the computer and I felt like a dinosaur in the company of the younger students.

The women also felt the educators assumed all students had this technological fluency, this, the women claimed contributed to creating alienation and disaffection between them.

Amy: There was an assumption that we were all up to date with the different applications, like Word, Excel Powerpoint and all that stuff. How could I put a presentation together if I didn't know how to use Powerpoint?

There was a disparity between the technological skills and interests of the younger students and the limited technology experienced by these women. It might just be a case of creating a suitable space to accommodate mature students, giving them the tools to up skill in this area thereby acknowledging their prolonged absence. This could alleviate their frustration and feelings of alienation.

5.9 Power, Politics & Educational Institutions

Looking critically at issues around Power, Politics and Society relative to the field of adult and further education in an Irish context, I would question whether there is a real appreciation by the Irish government or the wider Irish society for that matter regarding the barriers and challenges to access, funding and childcare that influence wider participation for women who wish to return to education. Women have not achieved equality with men in holding positions of power, influence and decision-making.

Amy: As a parent, how is your voice being heard? Not by the government is it..there is only a small percentage of women involved in the government, where is the representation? There are people who just don't have a voice.

Amy's comments imply her voice might be heard if there were more women involved in the government. This was an interesting remark in that it supposes that if more women were in government this may automatically suggest that this will lead to better representation for women like Amy.

Gender quotas have now been introduced in Ireland in the hope of becoming a successful contributor to increasing women's political representation, although, gender quotas will not guarantee a seat. Krook (2010) suggests the political realism is 'When there is a significant under-representation of women at the point of final decision, this can and does have serious consequences', she also highlights the fact that 'women still continue to be involved in large numbers of social movements yet access to political office is still very much stratified by gender' (p. 189).

However some women's 'reality' is not always the same and therefore they may not share the same interests or have experienced the same challenges as Amy. Therefore the election of more women may not ensure representation of all women. This then begs the question, if an increase in women's representation is successful, who exactly is it successful for?

Keeping in mind, throughout this research it has shown that there is such a diversity of women in terms of class, etc. if women had positions of power in politics, this does not necessarily suggest that more legislation would be passed on women's issues.

5.10 Conclusion

The primary aim of my thesis is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents, returning to education in an Irish context. In this chapter I have taken the findings from the concrete lived experiences of the women participants and related these findings to theory and policy keeping in mind women's varying social, cultural, economic and political contexts. In the next chapter I will provide a concluding discussion on the themes that emerged and a reflection on what this study meant to me as a woman, mature student, mother and researcher.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

6.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a concluding discussion on each theme that emerged throughout the research study and their contribution to a glass ceiling positioning for some women in achieving their educational goals. Finally, I will provide a reflection on what this study meant to me.

6.1 Departed from Existing Knowledge

While the experiences of the five women participants who took part in this study should not be generalised too broadly, it is reasonable to assume that their stories are, at least in part, reflective of some women, who are mothers and mature students returning to education in an Irish context. The study departed from existing knowledge by showing that even when a woman's rights are legally recognized in the abstract in the present day, long standing custom, traditions and attitudes may prevent their full expression in society. The findings in the research study illustrated how access and participation for the participants returning to education took a different turn particularly when these women's position in society changed. For some it was their marital status but in particular it was their role of becoming a mother. In some cases this change in position and that of their role of becoming a mother led to a drastic change in their socio-economic status affecting their choice to progress in their educational journey.

6.2 Motivation to Return to Education

For some women in the study, their role at home had become one that has all the domestic responsibilities of the traditional housewife and mother and this was something they wished to move away from. For others it was re-entry into the labour market leading to independence. Sarah: *it was time to get a proper qualification so that I could be employable again and support my family and that would mean returning to college* For the majority of women in the study, reaching university level was perceived by them as a means to increase the potential for advancement, and a means to secure regular employment in the current economic and social climate.

6.3 Women's Diversity

The level of diversity was particularly evident in Joan and Sarah's experiences, specifically during the early part of their educational journey. Joan's experiences demonstrated the complex interplay between gender and families and how gender can be inflected in choice processes within the private sphere. Growing up in a traditional patriarchal environment restricted her choices in continuing with education yet these actions increased her determination to return to education and also to see her daughters fulfil their educational journey later in life. This was in contrast to Sarah's experiences as she was fully supported by her family in all her educational endeavours, however her negative experiences in school due to bullying as a result of her sexual orientation left her determined not to return to an educational institution reminiscent of her school environment.

6.4 Patriarchy

For some women in the study growing up in a in a patriarchal environment also had an effect on their self-esteem, patriarchy oppresses women, an oppression that also affects women's identity as well as activity. Some women in the study although married were left with a situation that while returning to education, they still had primary responsibility for the running of the home and childcare. This was especially evident when Joan described how her and her husband had oppositional perspectives regarding caring for the children.

Joan: I would say it was shared responsibility but he would say he was taking on my work.

The study suggests we may still live in a patriarchal society, all the women in the study were left with the primary responsibility of running the home and childcare. Finding a balance between studies and the added pressure of running the home proved difficult. For some women, there was an ultimatum their marriage or their study. This strain on a relationship and the efforts and time required to dilute this strain led some academically able women to end up with a lower classification or result from their studies than is justified by their abilities. This was evident in Deirdre's case due to the postponement of her continuing with her educational journey. Deirdre described the determining factors for this action was resistance from her husband and her domestic and childcare responsibilities.

6.5 Policy & Funding

The findings in the study would suggest the White Paper (DES, 2000) fifteen years from its implementation is now somewhat an aspirational document, particularly in its core principle of 'Equality'. The findings revealed the removal of Government financial support for students during the economic downturn, such as the Maintenance Grant was a big determinant for the women in the study who are now unable to continue their educational journey.

Clare: the grant just stopped and the next thing the child benefit suddenly drops.... Possibly, possibly people could drop out of education because of this.

Those in one parent families receive inadequate payments and those who are married relied on their husband's wages as income. Some husband's resistance suggested a reluctance to contribute to financially supporting their wife's return to education.

Joan: he would say things to me like, eh you are not contributing to the mortgage, it was like a battlefield at home so while I was loving being educated...I had to leave.

This lack of financial support suggests it is not possible for women to continue with education if left with childcare responsibilities without the Government providing accessible, affordable childcare.

6.6 Responsibility and Role

When looking at responsibility and role within the home, the study suggested that parental involvement is gendered. For example, the process of involvement in children's homework and other unpaid household labour was not a shared responsibility by both parents. The participants who are 'lone-parents' had all the responsibility and the challenge of trying to find the time to get through their own studies.

Deirdre: I'm trying to balance all the homework at night time...rearing kids and I'm still trying to run a home.

This suggests the responsibilities put upon this cohort and the challenges this presents needs to be better recognised and acknowledged in the discourses around further and higher education at government and institutional levels.

6.7 Structure of the Institutions

The individual narratives tell us that women who wish to return to education are constrained by an institutional structure using inconvenient timetables based on the industrial model, leading to a barrier for them in relation to access and participation. There is the impossible task of beginning their own lessons at the imposed scheduled commencement time in their further education settings while having to accompany their young children to their classroom at the same time.

Amy: you see a good few of us would be late and all because we were dropping our kids to school.

The effects of arriving to lessons late for these women learners lead to a loss of valuable learning time, contributing to the development of a lack of faith in their academic abilities, resulting in an increase in potential dropout rates particularly as they advanced in their educational achievements. This suggests that this scheduling frequently ignores the reality of adult lives and there is an unfair gender divide in the approach to the structures of adult education and equality of opportunity.

6.8 Levels of Achievement

The study revealed that Community Education programmes played a big part in offering an opportunity for Joan, Deirdre and Amy to re-access the education system. Without the provision of crèche facilities provided by Community Education Programmes, these women would not have had the chance to re-access the education system leading to further progression. The challenges of continuing with education intensified due to the increase in the hours required to attend FETAC courses or university and how they were timetabled. It became more difficult for some of the participants to find solutions.

Amy: there should be allowances across the board for this because at the end of the day most of us mature students are parents.

They described this issue as more of a barrier than a challenge, a barrier they may not be able to overcome knowing that the institution would not be flexible to mature students as they are the minority.

6.9 Stigma

Some participants see returning to education as offering them a new identity such as a role-model for their children. Other participants see it as an opportunity to move away from the status of one-parent family and the stigma that came with this status.

Clare: For me it's a shame to have that title and it's sort of projected in the media very negatively, you know, the single parents this, the lone parents that.

Taking on the sole responsibility of being a parent proved difficult for some women in the study, the stigma that came with being a single parent, the negative way the media portrayed them, the upset they felt in the evaluation of what it is to be a parent by society, the struggles they had, guilt they felt with someone else was minding their child and the financial constraints they had to deal with throughout their educational journey. It became evident there was pressure on these women in trying to find a balance, whether it be as a working mother and lone parent or full time student and lone parent.

6.10 Role-model for the Future

The study identified how a new cycle had begun within some of these women's families that could have potential ramifications for future generations. In Joan's words in relation to her own father putting a premature stop to her continued education.

Joan: I swore there and then that if I ever had kids, especially with them being daughters, I wouldn't allow anybody dictate their life, from the moment they were born, they were going to university.

Some students, such as Joan, Clare and Deirdre were also acutely aware of the positive influence that their studies were having upon their children and the likelihood that their children would consider university as an option. In Clare's words: '*the seed is planted*' when describing that her son is already strategizing points regarding entry into third level and he is only fourteen.

6.11 What Worked for these Women in their Return to Education

These women's stories illustrated how there can be potential for personal transformation through engagement with education whether it is in community, further and higher education. Whether these women attended one or all three of these educational institutions, expanding their knowledge led these women to think very differently about

themselves in a number of significant ways. They were developing a greater sense of personal independence and confidence as they challenged the more restrictive aspects of their gendered role.

Joan: it's amazing how you are conditioned as a woman.... so I was being given empowerment through education.

Throughout this process, education then, became not only about acquiring knowledge but restoring a sense of self or identity. This certainly featured in the narratives of these participants, many of whom had experienced profound change in their time in education that led to them wanting to continue with their educational journey.

6.12 The Importance of Not Limiting These Women's Progression

The majority of women expressed how returning to education had come to represent freedom and personal independence from their roles as wives and mothers.

Deirdre: God I could be doing something for myself as the kids got older...started to get the urge to want to learn more.

It offered the potential for broader personal transformations and self-discoveries. These changes are indicative of profound growth and change both in relation to the women's original perceptions of education and also on a more fundamental level. Having the desire to reach the full potential of their educational journey had come to be regarded by some of the women as an intrinsic need. Education also helped them challenge the more restrictive aspects of their gendered role.

6.13 Women and Political Representation

Women in this study expressed their frustrations regarding their gendered roles and proposed a need for more representation for women by women in Government positions.

Amy: As a parent, how is your voice being heard? Not by the Government is it, there is only a small percentage of women involved in the government, where is the representation?

As a result of the newly adopted quota policies identified, there is a rise of female candidates to address the gender gap. A feminist lens might bring an awareness to the gendered nature of political concepts to politics. The election of more women might not ensure a representation of all women, however women who might have a shared aim such as policies to enhance child care provision, leading to an increase in the public domain of education and the labour market or a mutual understanding of a particular group might be

of preference. Keeping in mind as the study has shown, there is such a diversity of women. It is crucial to promote the election of women sensitive to the needs of women with subjugated voices.

6.14 My Reflection from this Research Study

From the findings in this study, I propose there is a need for social change and debate due to the issues that I have identified; women's subordination, women's economic dependence, the need for a multi-dimensional perspective on women's reality, women's exclusive responsibility for nurturing and the challenges presented to them through the structuring of adult education institutions. In practical terms, based on this study, I suggest we do live in a class based gendered society that contributes to the challenges and barriers for women who wish to return to education. When exploring current governance and funding of adult education in Ireland, I became conscious that the Irish Governments decisions on education policy could be seen now to be dictated by other European countries due to current monetary conditions and financial obligations. This suggests to me that key aspects of the economic and social policy frameworks shape, and sometimes determine the changing patterns of women's lives and this may hinder their opportunities to progress further in education. I propose women who wish to return to education are unfairly constrained by an institutional structure using inconvenient timetables based on the industrial model, leading to a barrier for them in relation to access and participation. I propose from this that there is an unfair gender divide in the approach to the structures of adult education and equality of opportunity. It is important here to merge the public world of education with the private world of domestic arrangements. I suggest it is also important for subjugated voices to be heard if society is to be radically changed. I propose this be addressed by women representatives with a shared aim. This also suggests there is a need for not only policy to change but for the consciousness of society as a whole to change. My conviction now from having completed this study is that the subjugated voices of all women are not being heard. I would also concur with hooks (1984 p.83) statement regarding the transformation of society that "separatist ideology encourages us to believe that women alone can make feminist revolution – we cannot. hooks' approach is more inclusive, particularly in her suggestion to make men allies and that "the eradication of sexist oppression can only be successful if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a

whole” (p. 83). However in an Irish context, I would question whether there is a real appreciation by the Irish Government or the wider Irish society for that matter regarding the barriers and challenges to access, funding and childcare that influence wider participation for women who wish to return to education.

Having explored women’s under representation in the higher echelons such as government positions and challenging the status quo, I do question if an increase in female political representation would lead to issues of inequalities being addressed by women for all women. The implications found in the study suggest to me there is a continued need for both feminist critique and activism. During this study I found myself questioning how this activism could come about. What stood out for me in relation to this was the similarity between the advocacy for change for women historically that achieved the historical milestones to date and the advocating for change that the LGBT community put in place more recently in their attempt to achieve equality. Timetables, Childcare and Funding are inextricably linked to the prevention of women progressing further during their return to education. Without government assistance, this issue then undoubtedly returns itself to the private domain. Recognition of women’s unpaid care work is fundamental for women to achieve economic independence. In order to expand the opportunities for women as parents, there is a need to acknowledge and facilitate mature students who wish to return to adult education who have school going children by having a more flexible commencement time. The issue of childcare needs to be moved from the private sphere into the public sphere. These changes are necessary in contributing to the removal of the ‘glass class’ positioning for women as parents returning to education.

As a result of this study and its limitations, further study suggests itself to me such as more research is needed to bring about social, cultural, political and economic change to establish gender equality.

My ultimate conviction as a result of this study from reading the literature written by Simone De Beauvoir in 1949 through time to reading the most current of literature relative to the positioning of women in society is summed up in the French quote:

plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (Karr, 1849)

(the more things change, the more they stay the same)

(Thesis Word Count: 24,860)

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APPENDIX A: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

Project Title:

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR WOMEN AS PARENTS RETURN TO EDUCATION IN AN IRISH CONTEXT

Under:

The Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House, North Campus, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare

Researcher: Barbara Dillon **email:** BARBARA.DILLON.2014@nuim.ie

Aim of the Research:

The aim of the research is to investigate if equality of access and participation exists for women as parents who wish to return to adult education in an Irish context. From this, the immediate aim will then become that of understanding the challenges and barriers outlined by the participants.

Further aims of the research are:

- (i) To provide an insight into why the participants returned to education
- (ii) To explore the participants educational journey to date
- (iii) To identify challenges experienced by the participants throughout their educational journey
- (iv) To identify barriers experienced by the participants throughout their educational journey
- (v) To provide a theoretical analysis of the emerging themes.
- (vi) To evaluate current practices and policies in education
- (vii) To identify if there is a contradiction between policy and practice.

Involvement in the Research Study:

As a potential participant in this research study you will be asked to partake in what's known as a Feminist Qualitative Research interview with the above named researcher.

This involves the following:

- (i) For you to participate in an informal interview with the researcher. The interview approach is you telling your story about challenges and barriers you experienced during your educational journey as a woman and a mother, sharing your experiences of your educational journey to date.
- (ii) From this, the researcher will gather quantitative data to ascertain challenges and barriers you may have encountered on your educational journey as a woman, mature student and parent. This information will give a true representation of your journey through the educational system.
- (iii) With your permission these interviews will be audio-taped so the researcher can transcribe them at a later date. Your time commitment should be no more than two hours in total, however, your answers may warrant further exploration at another stage.
- (iv) Before the research study is written and submitted, you will receive a transcript of the interview to allow you to request the removal of any information that you wish to withdraw. (A timescale of one month will be provided to give you time to make your final decision on allowing or omitting details from the interview process for the study.

Every effort will be made to efficiently and concisely provide information and support without impacting on your daily life and all information provided will remain confidential and anonymous. This research study should not incur any risk on your behalf either in your professional or home life. All necessary access and permissions will be secured prior to your participation.

It is hoped that this research will:

Highlight contradictions between current policies and practice. The information garnered from interviews with participants may offer new strategies that could assist with addressing current barriers or challenges preventing this cohort from continuing their educational journey if they so wish.

The research will conform to all applicable legislation including the Freedom of Information Act, and the Data Protection Act. All personal information will remain confidential and anonymous and will be preserved solely for production in this researcher's postgraduate research thesis.

All involvement in this research study is voluntary and a participant may withdraw at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: Dr. Brid Connolly, (Lecturer/Supervisor) email: brid.connolly@nuim.ie

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title:

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR WOMEN AS PARENTS RETURNING TO EDUCATION IN AN IRISH CONTEXT

Under: The Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House, North Campus, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare

Researcher: Barbara Dillon **email:** BARBARA.DILLON.2014@nuim.ie

Aim of the Research:

The aim of the research study is to explore what are the challenges and barriers for women as parents returning to education in an Irish context. From this, the immediate aim will then become that of understanding the issues outlined by the participants.

Further aims of the research are:

- (i) To provide an insight into why the participants returned to education
- (ii) To explore the participants educational journey to date
- (iii) To identify challenges experienced by the participants throughout their educational journey
- (iv) To identify barriers experienced by the participants throughout their educational journey
- (v) To provide a theoretical analysis of the emerging themes.
- (vi) To evaluate current practices and policies in education
- (vii) To identify if there is a contradiction between policy and practice.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

- | | |
|--|--------|
| I have read or had read to me the Plain Language Statement | Yes/No |
| I understand the information provided? | Yes/No |
| I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? | Yes/No |
| I have received satisfactory answers to my questions? | Yes/No |
| I am aware that my interview will be audio taped? | Yes/No |

All involvement in this research study is voluntary and a participant may withdraw at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed.

The research will conform to all applicable legislation including the Freedom of Information Act, and the Data Protection Act. All personal information will remain confidential and anonymous and will be preserved solely for production in the researcher's postgraduate thesis.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research study.

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE EXTRACTS FROM REFLECTIVE DIARY & JOURNAL

Diary:

When Participant B – Joan informed me today how her Dad put a stop to her scholarship... I was unsure how to respond to this or to write about this for that matter. It was such a personal thing to happen, how do I theorise about this, It makes me wonder, has this sort of thing happened in other houses. I assumed if someone did not continue with their education it would be because they did not engage. I suppose this shows the difference between Joan's parents and mine...my parents really wanted me to continue yet Joans parents did not see the point. Could this be because of her parents own upbringing and approach to education. Her Dad seemed to have the final decision in the house, I will look up on other research on early school leavers and theory on patriarchy for this.

Journal:

I was surprised at the difference between Amy and Clare's approach to having to return to education. Amy seen things in a more negative light than Clare. Clare had such a different perspective, she referred to returning to education as an 'Opportunity to be a better parent'. She felt returning to the workforce as too much time away from hers son. I thought it was interesting how she accepts?? That she is sacrificing half her wage to spend more time with her son.

Also what was interesting was Clare's view that society does not value education.

She was so upset once she started to describe the stigma of being classified as a lone parent and it also stood out for me the effect this can have on people..also the media portraying these women so negatively. I will look up why this negative attitude exists.

Diary:

If I was doing quantitative research, I think the results would be quite similar, participants and I were similar in age, qualifications, challenges as mothers etc, yet our experiences where so so different...remember not to generalize and discuss diversity of women because of this.

Journal:

The participants seem to think the grass is greener when it comes to marital status:

Those who did not have a partner assumed the other women had support, help with the children etc.

Those who did have a partner/husband assumed that lone parents had more autonomy and did not have to suffer the resentment from husbands or partners – interesting points to write about the different status of women.