

LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Interviewee: VSE039
Interviewer: Beth Jenkins
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The speaker was born in Porth and moved to Pontypridd when she was about eighteenth months old. She went to Hawthorne School and then attended Pontypridd Grammar School. Her father was the local GP and her mother was a maths teacher. Her mother didn't return to teaching until she was in sixth form. Her mother went back to work then because there was a shortage of maths teachers, and also so that she could do her A Level maths.

She didn't have any idea of what career she wanted to pursue. She enjoyed school but didn't really enjoy the sixth form. The only path that was really suggested to her was teaching. She didn't have enough A Levels to go to university, so went to teacher training college instead at Roehampton. She notes how Roehampton wasn't as renowned then as it is now. She recalls how she was a student teacher for two years in London and had a great time in the 'swinging sixties'. She attended teacher training between 1966 and the summer of 1968. She had enjoyed the course, but couldn't see herself teaching. She only had one academic year remaining, but there would have been a probationary year that she would have had to have done. She felt she was too young, especially teaching experience in Tooting, Clapham and Brixton. She had good days where she enjoyed it, but felt that most of it was trying to discipline the children.

In the summer she did her dissertation on movement and the physically handicapped child. She went to various classes as part of her course and did voluntary work in physiotherapy in Porth with a woman who inspired her. She questioned why she was going back to college.

3.44:

She said:

'So I went down to the Employment Exchange and looked into doing nursing instead. But, you know, grammar school girls didn't do nursing - it wasn't really considered the right thing to do. And the lecturer that I told that I was leaving to do nursing said "well

you don't want to be cleaning bed pans all day". That was his kind of idea of what nursing was at the time.'

The speaker had made up her mind to pursue nursing and went to Cardiff Royal Infirmary. She really enjoyed her nursing and then went on to do midwifery. She said it was fantastic, a really great career.

However, she wasn't able to start the nursing until January 1969. During the summer in between (1968) the Employment Exchange suggested that she take a job at Fram Filters in the Treforest Trading Estate. The factory was within walking distance of her house in Hawthorne, only a mile and half away.

She doesn't remember having an interview for the job, she was just sent along to be told what was going on.

It was a full-time job, eight hours a day, Monday to Friday.

She recalls how she undertook two roles. The first was making sintered bolts/washers, putting the plates ready to go into the machine and then filling up the hopper with plastic granules. The second job was inspecting minute white washers for quality assessment, ensuring that they didn't have 'white stalks' on them. It was primarily women who performed those tasks.

Apart from herself and a friend her own age, most of the other women were older. She notes how their glasses often hindered what the older women could see. She recalls that because she was younger, she was able to do the job quite quickly and earn what was called 'a non-productive bonus'.

08.19:

She said:

'One of the things that caused a bit of a problem was that we – the younger ones – were a lot faster doing some of these tasks. Of course, the older women then didn't really take on board why it was that we were – well I didn't know I was getting any more money because I didn't know what anyone else had – but these bonuses I suppose added up. And at one point with the sinter products there was a bit of a dispute because some of the women thought that we were getting the boys to speed up the machine for us. We used to, you know, flirt around with the boys and what have you, and we used to have to climb up to put the plastic in the hob and they'd come along with their mirrors to look under our skirts – you had mini-skirts in those days. [Laughter] You needed the mirror to look at the plate, if there was a blockage, so they needed the mirror for that but when we were putting the plastic in the top they'd come along with their mirrors and laugh with you and joke...which, some of the others then, felt like we were getting too much attention I think. But I don't know whether it was me, or whether it was between us, but we were just quicker as a pair working together.'

The speaker and her friend decided that the first plate could be emptied after the second plate had been put in, which speeded up the process and doubled the output.

Her colleagues watched what they were doing to make more bolts than had previously been made in that time and she noticed a bit of tension.

She thought there was a generational divide; the younger had different skills which the older women perhaps felt threatened of.

She thought the pay was quite good - about £6 per week. She was also living at home at the time.

There were married women working in the factory. One of the women had a son with cerebral palsy. The older women tended to be married, it wasn't unusual. If anything, she felt she was the exception as a single girl.

She wasn't aware of any trade unions affiliated with the factory.

There wasn't a set uniform and the workers wore their own clothes.

There were no health and safety regulations that she can recall. She used to stand up on plastic swivel chairs to put the plastic granules into the hopper.

13.18:

She said:

'The breaks were very strict and I always say that it stood me in good stead working in that job because nurses tend to believe their own mythology and their own hype – you know the 'angel nurse' and these long hours and all the rest of it. But we worked long hours in that factory and we worked consistently. When we were at the work bench, you just did the job and the breaks we had – I think it was quarter of an hour, might have been ten minutes , but say quarter of an hour in the morning – but it was only a quarter of an hour. You didn't have any addition to that. That was what you had and you were expected to be back after quarter of an hour and get on the job again. I think it was half an hour lunch time. I don't think we had a break in the afternoon.'

The speaker doesn't remember going anywhere for lunch, she thinks she took sandwiches.

She doesn't recall any social activities organised by the factory. She used to go out socially to Cardiff or Pontypridd with a colleague from Merthyr.

She knows the BOAC (one of FF's suppliers) had a sports field and there were activities there. Because she was only there for three months she didn't really get involved in this.

The factories used to have the summer fortnight off. She doesn't know what the holiday provision was.

The speaker enjoyed her time there and believed it stood her in good stead for her nursing career. She felt that between working in the factory and waitressing, it kept her grounded in what she was required to do, without expecting any acknowledgement or gratitude for it.

16.35:

She said:

‘From the waitressing and from the factory, they kind of helped me keep realistic about what I was expected to do in nursing, you know. And I think from that point of view it was beneficial to have an outside perspective, because so many seemed to leave school and go straight into nursing...they can’t see outside of that. ‘

17.30:

She said:

‘It was a stop-gap and it was a beneficial stop-gap, but if it had gone on for years I think I might have wanted something a bit more than that.’

She noted that working in a factory wouldn’t have been something that she would have been encouraged to do in school. She talks about her friend who left school after her O Levels to work in a zip factory because her father wanted her to make some money. She was using her chemistry O-Level practically and did end up in quite a good job afterwards.

20.12:

She said:

‘It was a good experience and it stood me in good stead.’