

# **‘There was still a bit of that paternalistic crap going on’: Revealing the ‘Forgotten’ Labour of Working-Class Women in an Australian Industrial Coal Region**

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For much of the twentieth century, workers in the industrial coal region of the Latrobe Valley in south-eastern Australia were part of a substantial enterprise that at its peak provided Victoria with 90 per cent of its electricity needs. The prevailing narrative of the Valley’s coal and power industry is one that prioritises masculine prowess in which men are master engineers and labourers. The often overlooked reality is that the region’s economy depended on working-class women’s labour, which came at the cost of narrowing their opportunities. Drawing on oral histories of working-class women born between the late 1930s and late 1960s, this article illuminates the profound and pervasive impact of gendered expectations and power dynamics. Following Valley women’s lives through periods of tremendous change, local and global, including the post–World War Two boom times, second wave feminism, devastating repercussions of privatisation in the 1990s, and into a phase of deindustrialisation and climate change threats in the 2000s, their recollections demonstrate their adaptability, resourcefulness and endurance. Valley women’s accounts challenge conventional notions of

'dependence' and expand ideas of who relies on who in the labour market  
and family economy.

*Note: Interviewee accounts are represented here in italics, a style I have adopted from other oral historians. Using italics emphasises the narrator's voice, offers a clear distinction between their accounts and my interpretation, and visually delineates the contents of an interview and how they have been used to construct a narrative. When women are introduced, I note their birth year in brackets to offer time context.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

In September 1955, the Melbourne *Argus* newspaper warned of an impending catastrophe in rural Victoria. The Latrobe Valley, at the centre of the Gippsland region in the state's east, was rich in brown-coal deposits, so vast that the resource was second only to that of Russia and expected to last for 500 years.<sup>2</sup> The State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SEC) had secured an independent electricity supply for the state based almost entirely on mining and burning coal.<sup>3</sup> The threat to this enterprise was not industrial espionage or a natural disaster but that the area had become the 'Valley of forgotten women'.<sup>4</sup> The paper reported a looming 'mass walk-out' of 'job-starved women' because the SEC employed so few of them.<sup>5</sup> Victorian premiers of varied political persuasions, including Labor's John Cain (Snr) and then the Liberal's Henry Bolte, promised to help attract 'light' industries to employ local Valley girls and women.<sup>6</sup> 'Light' was code for low-paid factory work, which was deemed feminine and appropriate for working-class girls, who were presumed

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1 For examples on the use of italics in writing oral history: Linda Shopes, 'After the Interview Ends: Moving Oral History Out of the Archives and into Publication', *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (2015): 308; Alistair Thomson, *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women Across Two Countries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

2 Philip Chubb, *Power Failure: The Inside Story of Climate Politics under Rudd and Gillard* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2014), 44.

3 The State Electricity Commission of Victoria would ordinarily have the acronym 'SECV'. However, common usage in the Latrobe Valley is 'SEC'.

4 Michael Courtney, 'Worry in the Valley of Forgotten Women', *Argus*, 28 September 1955, 4.

5 Courtney, 'Worry in the Valley', 4.

6 'Many Girls in Morwell Want Jobs', *Argus*, 10 December 1954, 7. Note that Latrobe Valley is shortened to the 'Valley' throughout, which also reflects local usage.

to have short-term careers before they realised their ultimate potential as wives and mothers.<sup>7</sup> As it turned out, no mass walk-out eventuated and the impending ‘catastrophe’ of 1955 fizzled out. But another kind of ‘forgetting’ occurred. Valley women’s essential contribution to the area’s productivity was eclipsed by the region’s popular historical story through the valorisation of men’s industrial achievements.<sup>8</sup> Cain and Bolte’s promises were part of public discourse in the Valley in the post–World War Two decades that fretted about jobs for girls and women but did little to shift actual circumstances.

This article shows how distinctive characteristics of a regional and industrial coal-mining community impacted working-class women’s labour experiences across the twentieth century. The Valley’s industrial set-up has depended on women’s work though is rarely acknowledged in favour of themes of masculine prowess in which men are master engineers and labourers. Scholarly literature about the Valley tends to focus on industrial transformation, and in terms of heritage outcomes, as labour historian Erik Eklund notes, half of the Valley’s listed sites on the Victorian State Heritage Register are industrial.<sup>9</sup> A perusal of the register shows there are more trees listed than any places that might suggest women’s presence and contribution.<sup>10</sup> Heritage-making processes in the Valley can be fraught with political antagonism

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7 Kate Murphy, ‘Rural Womanhood and the “Embellishment” of Rural Life in Urban Australia’, in Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia* (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2005), 02.1–02.15.

8 Examples include: Bob Birrell, ‘The Latrobe Valley – Victim of Industrial Restructuring’ (Melbourne: Monash University, 2001); Peter Fairbrother et al., ‘Jobs and Skills Transition in the Latrobe Valley’ (Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2012); Sally Weller, Peter Sheehan and John Tomaney, ‘The Regional Effects of Pricing Carbon Emissions: Adjustment Strategy for the Latrobe Valley’ (Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University, 2011); Larissa Bamberry, ‘Restructuring Women’s Work: Labour Market and Household Gender Regimes in the Greater Latrobe Valley, Australia’, *Gender, Place and Culture* 23, no. 8 (2016): 1135–1149; Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson, ‘Alternative Pathways to Community and Economic Development: The Latrobe Valley Community Partnering Project’, *Geographical Research* 43, no. 3 (2005): 274–285; John Tomaney and Margaret Somerville, ‘Climate Change and Regional Identity in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria’, *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 49 (2010): 29–47.

9 Erik Eklund, ‘Negotiating Industrial Heritage and Regional Identity in Three Australian Regions’, *The Public Historian* 39, no. 4 (2017): 60.

10 Heritage Council Victoria, ‘Victorian Heritage Database’, available at <https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/search?sub=&mun=37&pos=&do=s&collapse=true&type=place&spage=1&tab=places&rp=300&view=detailed>. Accessed 22 June 2021.

and ambivalent community attitudes.<sup>11</sup> What is considered worthy of preservation is limited in scope and weighted towards industrial heritage, such that women's work is seemingly invisible. However, Valley women's 'hidden' labour has, in fact, enabled and sustained the economic functioning of the area. Oral histories of Valley women's working lives expand what is considered productive and valuable in heavy industrial communities in rural and regional Australia.

This article is based on oral history interviews that I undertook with 17 Valley women between 2015 and 2016 for a PhD that was awarded in 2022. I took a whole-of-life approach to the interviews, tracing women's lives from their earliest memories to their most recent. The 11 recollections included in this article focus on aspects of their work experiences from when they first started paid employment until they retired. In doing so I exclude the full picture of women's work such as farm labour and caring for siblings in girlhood, and activism and volunteering post-retirement. The Valley women I interviewed were born between the late 1930s through to the late 1960s, and were either born in the region, were migrant children who arrived with their European-born parents or were newly married in their early twenties; they considered themselves locals. Though I did not set out to specifically interview women with a connection to the Valley's industrial complex, most women I interviewed (82 per cent) had either a husband or father who had been or were still employed in mines and power stations. These Valley women were industrial bystanders, tethered to the industry and living with its effects yet rarely employed by the sector the region is so known for.

Oral history is a useful methodology for unearthing unknown histories or challenging existing mainstream accounts. Evidence of working-class Valley women's lives is not readily available in many archives, simply because they were often prevented from holding formal roles in government or industry for much of the twentieth century. Purposefully shifting attention from men's lives as central and normal is part of the 'feminist embrace' of oral history which recognises, as Joan Sangster wrote, that

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11 Erik Eklund, Antoinette Holm and Keir Reeves, 'Industrial Heritage Agents, Actors and Outcomes: Regional Case Studies from Broken Hill and the Latrobe Valley', *Journal of Australian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2021): 533.

‘traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women’ and therefore focusing on their experiences is a ‘means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women’s lives’.<sup>12</sup>

A small number of sources can produce valuable and insightful history. Oral history enables analytical generalisation (as distinct from statistical generalisation), which moves beyond representation and tells stories of ‘the particular’, which generate theories about relationships, emotions, meanings of decisions and events, and the processes and social contexts in which people’s lives unfold.<sup>13</sup> Oral histories produce valuable ‘thick descriptions’ that come from the careful and intimate analysis of a small number of case studies (compared with ‘thin description’ from a large set of cases).<sup>14</sup> Historians who specialise in family history attest to oral history’s ‘impressive pedigree’ as a research method, particularly for motherhood and childhood.<sup>15</sup> The backwards-looking nature of the interview encounter can bridge a mnemonic gap between past and present, awakening forgotten or repressed aspects of life, and re-evaluating past actions. Oral history interviews are an invaluable and ontological dialogue that tell us something about the past and of the moment in which it was conducted.<sup>16</sup>

The oral histories of Valley women I collected form part of a broader project, but for this article, I have drawn out the distinctive aspects of their working lives that show another side of the heavily caricatured industrial vision of the Valley. These Valley women’s stories are arranged thematically and chronologically to follow key periods of the Valley’s economic and social history.

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12 Joan Sangster, ‘Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History’, *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5.

13 Julia Brannen, Peter Moss and Ann Mooney, *Working and Caring over the Twentieth Century: Change and Continuity in Four-Generation Families* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

14 Brannen, Moss and Mooney, *Working and Caring*, drawing on anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

15 Alistair Thomson, ‘“When’s Dad Home?”: An Oral History of Inter-War Australian Fatherhood’, *Oral History* 47, no. 1 (2019): 35.

16 Carla Pascoe Leahy, *Becoming a Mother* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 20.

## THE BIRTH OF 'KING COAL'

The development of the Valley's brown-coal resulted in enormous social, environmental and economic change that has drastically shaped the region's fortunes for a hundred years. The SEC was a Victorian government authority, first led by war hero and engineer Sir John Monash in 1920, with a mandate to build power stations, mine brown-coal, and burn it for electricity.<sup>17</sup> After World War Two, plans for Valley mines and power stations expanded and the region's population skyrocketed, underpinned by post-war migrants, mostly from Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy.<sup>18</sup> Governments could not keep pace with local infrastructure needs as once sleepy towns like Moe tripled in size in less than a decade.<sup>19</sup> Mining and power generation also meant forced land acquisition, which caused friction with existing farming and forestry industries, which had themselves dispossessed First Nations peoples, the GunaiKurnai, from about the late 1830s.<sup>20</sup>

The Valley's industrial history, like other mining regions in Australia, underwent periods of boom and bust. The SEC built a company town for workers from the 1920s, Yallourn, which was based on imported 'garden city' ideals from Europe.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Meredith Fletcher, *Digging People Up for Coal: A History of Yallourn* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 14–16; Ian Puffin, 'Life in the Latrobe Valley: Companion to the Central Gippsland Survey' (Town and Country Planning Board, Department of State Development and Decentralization, State Electricity Commission of Victoria, 1975), 3; David Langmore, *Planning Power: The Uses and Abuses of Power in the Planning of the Latrobe Valley* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), 4; Lorraine Proctor, 'New Pioneers in the Valley of the Future: Post-War British Migrants and the Latrobe Valley', *Australian Studies* 20, no. 1 & 2 (2005): 11.

18 Stephen M. Legg, *Heart of the Valley: A History of the Morwell Municipality* (Melbourne: The Book Printer, 1992), 217, 252–253; Fletcher, *Digging People Up for Coal*, 153; Proctor, 'New Pioneers in the Valley', 11; Alexandra Dellios, 'Migration Parks and Monuments to Multiculturalism: Finding the Challenge to Australian Heritage Discourses through Community Public History Practice', *The Public Historian* 42, no. 2 (2020): 7–32.

19 In 1947, the population of Moe was 2,260 which increased to 8,770 in 1954. See Langmore, *Planning Power*, 106.

20 P.D. Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father: Angus McMillan and the Kurnai Tribe of Gippsland 1839–1865* (Melbourne: Ensay, 1987); Steaphan Paton and Cameron Cope, 'Wallung Githa Unsettled', *Gippslandia*, Summer 2021; Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, 'Gunaikurnai Whole-of-Country Plan' (Bairnsdale, Victoria, 2015), 4; Tom Doig, *Hazelwood* (Australia: Penguin Random House, 2019), 54; Kellie Lazzaro, 'Scores of Aboriginal Stone Tools Discovered in Gippsland during Sewer Dig', *ABC News*, 4 May 2018. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-04/aboriginal-stone-tools-found-in-gippsland-during-sewer-dig/9722718>. Accessed 18 December 2020.

21 Fletcher, *Digging People Up for Coal*, 54–51.

Coal, however, trumped all. In the early 1980s, the 20-square-kilometre town was wilfully destroyed and over 5,000 people removed, to get to the coal beneath.<sup>22</sup> In the same decade, four power stations, two open-cut coal mines, briquette factories and a coal-to-gas plant were completed. The Valley produced almost 90 per cent of Victoria's electricity and a fifth of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>23</sup> Electricity was now indispensable and considered essential for the social order of the state. However, in the late 1980s, when Victoria was purportedly on the verge of economic collapse, the SEC was sold. Approximately 9,000 people in the Valley lost their jobs, which caused massive and widespread social deterioration from which some researchers say the Valley has never recovered.<sup>24</sup>

The Latrobe Valley is currently in a phase of deindustrialisation as the region's outdated power stations close. Hazelwood Power Station, often referred to in mainstream media as the 'dirtiest' in the nation, shut in 2017. Hazelwood's neighbours, Yallourn and Loy Yang A stations, are expected to close in the next two decades.<sup>25</sup> How to fill the mines left behind that pockmark the landscape is ongoing, with lofty visions of Lake Como-like vistas alongside warranted community fears that the

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22 Langmore, *Planning Power*, 168.

23 Langmore, *Planning Power*, 19, 25, 101–103, 150, 154, 186, 195;. Tomaney and Somerville, 'Climate Change and Regional Identity', 37; Chubb, *Power Failure*, 24.

24 Fairbrother et al., 'Jobs and Skills Transition', 28; Tomaney and Somerville, 'Climate Change and Regional Identity', 36; Weller, Sheehan and Tomaney, 'The Regional Effects of Pricing Carbon Emissions'; J. Wright, R. Valenzuela and D. Chotikapanich, 'Measuring Poverty and Inequality from Highly Aggregated Small Area Data: The Changing Fortunes of Latrobe Valley Households. Working Paper.' (Melbourne: Department of Econometrics and Business Statistics, Monash University, 2012); Al Rainnie and Renée Paulet, 'Images of Community, Industrial Relations and Regional Development', *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies* 9, no. 2 (2003): 151–168; Deirdre O'Neill, 'Victoria: Rolling Back or Reinventing the Kennett Revolution?', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 59, no. 4 (2000): 109–115.

25 Mary Griffiths, 'Moccasins and "Respect": Writing Practices During Media Coverage of the Moe Story', *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy* 88 (1998): 99–120; Jarrod Whittaker, 'Energy Australia to Close Yallourn Power Station Early and Build 350 Megawatt Battery', *ABC Gippsland*, 10 March 2021. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-10/yallourn-power-station-early-closure/13233274>. Accessed 4 April 2021; Madeleine Spencer and Natasha Schapova, 'Latrobe Valley Locals Face an Uncertain Future as AGL Prepares to Shut down Power Station', *ABC News*, 2 October 2022. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-03/latrobe-valley-loy-yang-coal-power-closure-uncertain-future/101491282>. Accessed 26 November 2023; Jarrod Whittaker, 'Latrobe Valley Optimistic Two Years after Hazelwood Power Station Closure, but Coal Attachment Remains', *ABC News*, 17 March 2019, Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-18/hazelwood-power-station-closure-two-years-on/10908866>. Accessed 26 November 2023.

nearby town of Morwell will collapse into the brown-coal abyss that is four times the size of Sydney Harbour.<sup>26</sup>

Despite sweeping transformation in the twentieth century, the Valley is remarkably resistant to change in other aspects. The Valley's labour market has a particularly stubborn and persistent problem, that of 'stagnant and stale' gendered employment patterns.<sup>27</sup> Gendered social and cultural expectations in mining regions like the Valley position girls and women as useful in narrow and specific terms, usually unpaid and typically in caring roles. The industrial set-up of the Valley favoured male employment. In the late 1950s, of the roughly 5,000 employees at the SEC, about 120 were women.<sup>28</sup> By 1974, the Commission's workforce had increased by about 2,000, but there were just 50 extra women employed.<sup>29</sup> The SEC no longer exists, yet into the twenty-first century the Valley continues to have a highly gender-differentiated employment market.<sup>30</sup>

The Valley schooling system also promoted divisions. Valley boys had clear career pathways including a purpose-built technical college that guided boys from high school to trades or engineering in the power industry.<sup>31</sup> Girls' experiences were vastly different. There was no clear career path; early school leaving was encouraged perhaps for local retail work, others for nursing and teaching. The schooling system

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26 Doig, *Hazelwood*, 61–62; Meredith Fletcher, *Jean Galbraith. Writer in a Valley* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2014), 181; Jarrod Whittaker, 'Latrobe River Earmarked as Water Source in Plan to Turn Coal Mines into Lakes', *ABC Gippsland*, 8 February 2020. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-08/plan-to-turn-victorias-coal-mines-into-lakes/11942972>. Accessed 21 December 2020; Whittaker, 'Latrobe Valley Optimistic'; Spencer and Schapova, 'Latrobe Valley Locals Face an Uncertain Future'.

27 Bamberry, 'Restructuring Women's Work', 1135.

28 Jerzy Zubrzycki, *Settlers of the Latrobe Valley* (Sydney: Healstead Press, 1964).

29 Langmore, *Planning Power*, 154. An SECV memo from 1974 noted 2.5 per cent of 6,978 SEC workers were women.

30 Employment statistics are binary, which demonstrates another kind of 'hidden' labour. Philip Taylor, Corey Carter and Andrew O'Loughlin, 'Gippsland Regional Labour Force Participation Report' (Morwell, Victoria: Federation University and Latrobe Valley Authority, 2022), 48.

31 Note that these options for boys are also a type of limitation. Lorraine Proctor, 'Smart Lads and Capable Girls: School Leavers and Work in Moe 1945–1975' (PhD thesis, Monash University, 2001); Meredith Fletcher, 'Alumni 2002: Yallourn Technical School, Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, Monash University' (Monash University, 2002).



and local economy reinforced ideas that men should be sole breadwinners in families and women should be unpaid housewives after marriage.<sup>32</sup>

The Valley was typically a working-class region with yearly incomes less than state averages.<sup>33</sup> Generally, however, fewer Valley families lived in poverty compared to their country counterparts, like South and East Gippsland where farming was the priority.<sup>34</sup> The Valley included a subset of working-class individuals and families that earned above average incomes, attributed to high wages in the power industry. In some cases, Valley men's earnings rivalled Victorian averages.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Valley women's wages across the century remained low, an ongoing legacy of the 1907 *Harvester Judgement*. Married Valley women were barred from working at the local council, publicly criticised for taking jobs off single women, and there was limited childcare or flexible workplaces that welcomed mothers.<sup>36</sup>

### FIRST FORAYS INTO THE SEC

In the 1960s, SEC employment was acceptable for young working-class women, especially for families who already worked at the organisation. The SEC's reputation at the time was as a long-term employer with conditions colloquially called 'slow easy comfortable'. Those who worked there tended to view the Commission and its contribution to the community favourably.<sup>37</sup> Lena Bianchi (1955) was a baby

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32 Proctor, 'Smart Lads and Capable Girls', 272.

33 In 1976, Valley household incomes were 40 per cent higher than other rural areas, but lower than Melbourne and the state average. Anona F. Armstrong and Alexander J. Wearing, 'Indicators for Victoria Stage Three: A Profile of the Latrobe Valley' (Melbourne: Department of Community Welfare Services, University of Melbourne, 1982), 58.

34 Armstrong and Wearing, 'Indicators for Victoria', 58.

35 Armstrong and Wearing, 'Indicators for Victoria', 58. In 1991 the median individual income for Valley men was \$21,900 compared with the Victorian men's average wage of \$19,600. Hayden Brown, 'Incomes in the Latrobe Valley and Victoria' (Morwell: The Family Research Action Centre, 1996).

36 After World War Two, the 1949–50 Basic Wage Inquiry increased women's wages to 75 per cent of the male rate. J. Rob Bray, 'Reflections on the Evolution of the Minimum Wage in Australia: Options for the Future', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2013. Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/abstract=2342026>. Accessed 19 June 2021; Desley Deacon, 'Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth-Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman', *Signs* 11, no. 1 (1985): 27–47; Proctor, 'Smart Lads and Capable Girls', 273–274, 275, 279, 281–283.

37 Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, Town and Country Planning Board, and State Electricity Commission of Victoria, *Central Gippsland Social Survey: A Socio-Economic Study of the Latrobe Valley* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1975), 75.

in 1956 when her family moved from Italy to Moe, where her father worked at the SEC. Lena followed him to the same workplace almost 20 years later. The SEC took a yearly intake of female school leavers and Lena opted for the typing pool. *I was quite interested actually in becoming a secretary or doing reception work, and that was perhaps what most girls would have gotten in to in those days.*<sup>38</sup>

Family connections to the SEC helped young women. Marta Borgogni (1961), who like Lena migrated from Italy, arrived in Morwell in 1966 as a young child. Her father worked at the SEC and her mother at a local textile factory. In the early 1980s, Marta finished a business degree at nearby Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (GIAE) and applied for an SEC role. *It wasn't considered nepotism then,* said Marta, recalling a question on the application form that asked: *'Do you have any relatives who work here?'*, and *I put my father, you know, so that actually counted in my favour because Dad was an employee.*<sup>39</sup>

While family connections to the SEC may have smoothed the way for Valley girls, their roles were not the same as their male family members. Women's employment at the SEC was almost entirely confined to the office. Shirlee Jones (1950) grew up in Yallourn and Newborough. Her father worked on the railways and her mother as a dressmaker. In 1966, Shirlee finished year 11 at her Moe high school to start in the calculator pool at the SEC. *We did all the processing of account documents and payrolls on old clunking machines called Burroughs calculators.* Her brother, who was four years older, went to *Yallourn Tech* and then did an *apprenticeship at the SEC.*<sup>40</sup> In the 1980s when Marta started at the Commission, she worked in administration at the SEC's Briquette Factory in Morwell where her father was a machinery operator. Marta

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38 Lena Bianchi, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Jeeralang Junction, 24 November 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

39 Marta Borgogni, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Morwell, 7 January 2016, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden. There are numerous examples of family connections influencing employment in industrial workplaces. In the mid-1950s, for example, some employers, like General Motors-Holden, encouraged family members to apply for jobs to ensure positive retention rates. See Carolyn Collins and Paul Sendziuk, "'It's like having your home knocked down": Place, Identity and Community at General Motors-Holden's Woodville Factory', *Studies in Oral History* 43 (2021): 75.

40 Shirlee Jones, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Traralgon, 30 May 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

transferred to a role in accounting within a few months and later to the industrial relations team.

Male-dominated workplaces are often characterised by gender-based role stereotyping. When Shirlee went for an interview at the SEC aged sixteen in the mid-1960s, she was faced with an all-men panel. *I found it quite nerve-racking. When she started work they were all females in there [...] they had to call their supervisor, 'Miss' ... cause not many married women worked there. In the mid-1960s, all the bosses were male [...] there wasn't any women in senior positions then, except for Shirlee's immediate supervisor. We knew our place.*

Sex discrimination and sexual harassment were significant barriers to women's employment but was not illegal until the introduction of the *Sex Discrimination Act* in 1984. For some young Valley women entering the paid workforce for the first time in the 1960s, sexist ridicule was a readily recalled experience. When Shirlee began at the SEC, she said that whenever a *new girl* started, male colleagues would ask, *'What do virgins eat for breakfast?'*, and *she'd usually stand there quivering and say, 'Well I don't know,' which brought lots of laughter from the guys.* The men's joke was a lose-lose scenario for female employees, intended to shame unmarried young women who were especially vulnerable at the time to being condemned for premarital sex.<sup>41</sup> Habitual humiliation of new female employees was an example of the way men subtly demeaned women in the workplace, seeking to remind women that they were in a man's world, and if they wanted to remain, women were expected to be subordinate.<sup>42</sup>

## REMOVING BARRIERS OR EXPANDING PERMISSION?

Though women were increasingly doing more paid work, by the late 1970s, they continued to encounter critical attitudes about whether they should be working.

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41 Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia* (Sydney: New-South Publishing, 2016), 373.

42 Skye Saunders and Patricia Weiser Eastal, 'The Nature, Pervasiveness and Manifestations of Sexual Harassment in Rural Australia: Does "Masculinity" of Workplace Make a Difference?', *Women's Studies International Forum* 40 (2013): 130.

Lyn Richards argues neither marriage nor motherhood were keeping women home as they had in the mid-1950s.<sup>43</sup> Part of the reason for women's increasing work-force participation was because it was becoming harder, especially for working-class families, to afford to buy a home unless both parents were working.<sup>44</sup> A male-breadwinner wage was not enough to 'support' a family. Mothers often returned to work because they wanted and needed to, in spite of family criticism. In the late 1970s, Gayle Lewis (1945) went back to work when her baby was about ten months old. Gayle was a teenager when her family moved from rural NSW to Morwell where her father secured a job at the Lurgi Gas Plant. With *only Dad's wage*, Gayle *knew that going to university would probably have been unaffordable*.<sup>45</sup> Gayle repeated her senior high school year to get better grades and received a scholarship to train as a medical record librarian in Melbourne. After Gayle married and had a baby, her new family boarded so they could save for a house deposit. The family *certainly needed the money* and Gayle had *done all this training so why shouldn't I?* Gayle's mother-in-law was unsupportive; she was *very much against me going back to work* because she felt that married mothers *shouldn't work*. Gayle's financial concerns grated against the maternal expectations of another generation. Work for Gayle was a necessity as it was also proof that her study efforts could pay off in a material way.

Returning to work after having children was often about survival. In 1972, Cath MacConnell's (1945) husband left. She had two children, one aged three and the other six months. Cath had *four dollars in the bank*. *That was a bit hard for a while [laughs]*.<sup>46</sup> The Supporting Mother's Benefit was not introduced until 1973, after

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43 Richards notes that official statistics underestimate the numbers of married women that return to work after having children, partly because figures collected at the time only accounted for women who worked over 15 hours per week. In 1954, 26 per cent of women were working, including 13 per cent of married women. Roughly a third of the female workforce in 1954 were married. Lyn Richards, *Having Families: Marriage, Parenthood and Social Pressures in Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1978), 17; Tom Sheridan and Pat Stretton, 'Mandarins, Ministers and the Bar on Married Women', *Journal of Industrial Relations* 46, no. 1 (2004): 86.

44 Carla Pascoe Leahy, 'From the Little Wife to the Supermom? Maternographies of Feminism and Mothering in Australia since 1945', *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 115.

45 Gayle Lewis, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Morwell, 8 September 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

46 Cath MacConnell, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Westbury, 15 October 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

Cath's divorce, nor was her husband paying child maintenance.<sup>47</sup> Cath needed full-time work.

Finding childcare was the next barrier. It was hard to find and expensive. In 1970 there were just 560 childcare centres in Australia caring for about 13,750 children. Most working mothers relied on relatives, friends or unregistered childminders.<sup>48</sup> There was no daycare *like you've got now*, said Cath. Instead, Cath came to a private arrangement with a woman she played squash with. *She was a bit older than me, a real salt-of-the-earth lady, from Moe.* Barbara was a *real honest engine* and worked as a nanny for Cath for over 10 years. *It cost me a lot, I mean I think I paid a third of my salary to her, but it was worth it, because I had to get back to school [to teach] for my own economic survival.*

Cath's hurdles did not end there. The next obstacle was the state government. Cath grew up in Yallourn in the 1960s and was one of only seven girls who did 'matric' at the local high school.<sup>49</sup> Cath's academic ability secured her two bursaries to attend teachers' college in Melbourne, which she completed, and then returned to the Valley to marry and work. Yet according to the authorities, having a baby made Cath less capable to do a job she was well qualified for. She needed permission to work. Cath's youngest child *was only six months old, and I couldn't go back teaching because you weren't allowed to go back until your baby was nine months old.* Cath had to get a *letter from her gynaecologist* before the Victorian Education Department approved her teaching post. Cath's account shows how institutional gendered restrictions

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47 Mothers needed to wait for six months before receiving the benefit. The payment was extended to single fathers in 1977 and in 1980 the waiting period was abolished. Katie Holmes and Sarah Pinto, 'Gender and Sexuality', in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 2 (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 308, 324.

48 Probert citing Brennan and O'Donnell (1986) in Belinda Probert, 'Women's Working Lives', in Kate Prichard Hughes (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Feminism*, 2nd Edition (Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 321.

49 The Valley women I interviewed who finished secondary school in the 1960s often referred to the senior years as 'matric'. Matriculation was discontinued in 1969 and the Victorian High School Certificate introduced in 1970. See University of Melbourne, 'Chronologies of Secondary School Curriculum Policy Victoria' (The University of Melbourne, 17 February 2021). Available through [http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculum/policies/project/chrono\\_vic.html](http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculum/policies/project/chrono_vic.html). Accessed 17 February 2021.

made getting work difficult, causing undue additional pressures during times of economic precarity.

### ADVANCING WOMEN OR 'PRETTY SOLID WALLS'?

Changing employment legislation in the mid-1980s helped alleviate some obstacles and offered better job security.<sup>50</sup> Flexibility at work was particularly crucial for single mothers. When Shirlee (1950) divorced in the mid-1980s she returned to work at the SEC while having sole care of two primary-school-aged children. She initially worked casually in administration, trying to work as much as possible. But *the kids were quite young and I was conscious of them being home, I didn't like working outside school hours*. Fortunately, Shirlee became *the first part-time employee in the whole SEC, I was the first one to come through as that [...] nobody had ever had a permanent part-time job before [...] they were terrific employers and they bent over backwards to give me this part-time role which I really appreciated*. A permanent part-time role offered Shirlee guaranteed work hours that were compatible with her children's routine. The success of her position precipitated opportunities for others and part-time roles at the SEC became *more prolific*.<sup>51</sup>

It was not easy being a woman in government organisations like the SEC regardless of changing workplace policies. Marta (1961), who had started at the Commission in the early 1980s, recalled she was the first female industrial relations officer (IRO) at a time when there were *about 10,000 employees and only 126 of which were women. I was doing a job where I was with men all the time, trying to negotiate*.<sup>52</sup> She was often the only woman in the room. Marta was at the forefront of testing and defying rigid ideas about what work roles were suitable for women. *I can remember going to*

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50 Laws included: the federal *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women Act) 1986*, and, in Victoria, the *Equal Opportunity Act 1977* (revised in 1984).

51 In 1984 the SEC appointed an equal employment opportunity manager and officer in response to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation. In 1985, of a total workforce of 22,518 at the SEC (across Victoria, not just the Latrobe Valley), 7 per cent were women and just 16 were in supervisory positions. SEC, 'State Electricity Commission of Victoria Annual Report 1984-85' (Victorian Government, 1985), 45; Shirlee Jones interview, 30 May 2015.

52 SEC employment records show that in 1989-1990 there were 8,481 employees. Cameron and Gibson, 'Alternative Pathways to Community and Economic Development', 274; Marta Borgogni interview, 7 January 2016.

*one of the meetings, you know and I'm sitting there and I'm taking notes and one of the guys sitting next to me goes, 'Are you the secretary?'*, I said, *'No I'm actually an IRO in training'*. Marta derived workplace pride and amusement in challenging colleagues' preconceptions of what SEC women would ordinarily be doing.

Marta responded to a hypermasculine workplace by opting for a particular style of workwear. She dressed in *high heels and silk suits, really dressy eighties style, you know, big ra ra ra, fluffy hair and all this sort of stuff you know, with my makeup*. Teased hair and suits with broad shoulder pads were part of a 1980s aesthetic that represented a specific trend in workplace dress styles of that decade. Women's workplace fashion metaphorically and materially took up space, albeit in a way that mimicked the corporate male uniform. The power suit was a tremendous symbol of feminist gains in Australian workplaces, so much so Anne Summers donated her rust-coloured power suit to a dedicated museum collection of second-wave feminist material culture.<sup>53</sup> Marta too was asserting and performing femininity in a very particular way in a rural coal-mining setting. Though Marta did not indicate that her work outfits expressed feminist power (in the way Summers used a suit), Marta's animated and delighted tone suggests it was clear she thought how she dressed made a difference. In a sea of SEC men in suits and coats, overalls and high vis, Marta's vivid and flamboyant outfits highlighted that she could not hide her gender in the workplace, so she decided to be loud and proud about it.<sup>54</sup> What women wore to work is an important part of working-class women's labour histories, and for Marta, clothes were one way that demonstrated her infiltration into new or uncommon work roles.

Women were not always accepted in some Valley workplaces and mothering compounded their efforts. Mandated school hours and holidays never aligned (and

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53 Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson, 'The Australian Women's Movement Goes to the Museum: The "Cultures of Australian Feminist Activism, 1970–1990" Project', *Women's Studies International Forum* 37 (2013): 85–94; Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 25–27.

54 Until the mid-1980s, the SEC divided employees using the terms 'staff' and 'wages'. 'Wages' employees were heavily unionised and provided a uniform of overalls and boots. 'Staff' were SEC managers and technical experts like engineers who typically wore suits and grey coats. See Fletcher, *Digging People Up for Coal*, 27–28; Meredith Fletcher, 'Telling the Yallourn Stories', *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 118 (2002): 246; Proctor, 'Smart Lads and Capable Girls', 47.

still do not) with mainstream work-week hours and annual leave. Finding affordable childcare, plus work that accommodated school schedules, was an enormous challenge.<sup>55</sup> In response, some Valley mothers set up small businesses. In 1989, Evelyn Green (1955) bought a computer with a friend and started a secretarial business in Traralgon, at a time when few people had computers at work or home. Evelyn grew up in Morwell where her father worked at the SEC. She finished school early to work at an insurance agency before marrying and having four children. *I'm just amazed that we had the audacity to start up a business, we'd never even used a computer.*<sup>56</sup> The pair learned quickly and the arrangement worked well. *She had three children and I had four. We worked two days and three days, you know, two days one week and three the next and the other minded the children while the other one worked.* Together they provided a range of services including typing letters, compiling resumés, and audio dictation. *Our office was on the same block as my home. So six doors around the corner was my office.* When Evelyn's kids were a bit older they would just ring or run round the corner to see me if they wanted something. The proximity between her home and office, and collaboration with a business partner who was in a similar life stage, enabled Evelyn to manage mothering and employment.

Working in the public service in the 1980s, where new workplace gender equality legislation applied, did not end workplace sexism. In the late 1980s, Cath MacConnell (1945) had left teaching for a new career path. She applied for a state government role in the Valley and the male interviewer asked her, *'Well what are you going to do about the children?'* She countered with, *'Well what do you do about yours?'* And he said, *'Oh, oh, fair enough.'* And I said, *'I wouldn't be here asking, being interviewed for this job if I didn't know how to look after my children. I'd imagine you have yours looked after as well and you manage it [...] it's got nothing to do with my ability to do the job.'* Even with anti-discrimination legislation in place, employers continued to query

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55 Many mothers in the 1990s were dissatisfied with the terms of paid employment and a lack of affordable childcare, partly because most Australian employees at the time did not have access to flexible roles or parental leave. Grazyna Zajdow, 'Families and Economies: What Counts and What Doesn't', in Marilyn Poole (ed.), *Family: Changing Families, Changing Times* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 104–105.

56 Evelyn Green, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Traralgon, 13 May 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.



whether mothers were capable of working. Cath could at least deploy the language of anti-discrimination to dispute potential roadblocks when she encountered them. *I just thought it was an unfair question, and I wasn't going to wear it.*<sup>57</sup>

Inspired by the image of the Australian femocrat and affirmative action plans, Valley women like Cath asserted a feminist agenda in the workplace. 'Femocrats' were a distinctive and 'defining feature of Australian feminism' in which women bureaucrats pursued feminist policies.<sup>58</sup> In Cath's state government role she was one of several *strong women* who worked in government who *were respected for our say* and there were *a lot of us in management positions*. At the time it was the *days of Joan Kirner* (first woman premier of Victoria, 1990–1992) when there were *a few women coming into power politically* and the *Women's Electoral Lobby and [Victorian] Women's Trust* supported women's employment participation and representation in political life. In this political environment Cath felt she had a greater capacity to speak her mind at work. She would *always insist there was a woman on a panel* and when new jobs were advertised, she always asked if women were being encouraged to apply or were being interviewed.<sup>59</sup>

Policies supporting women's increasing entrance into male-dominated workplaces were not a boon for gender equality. In the early 1990s, Marta (1961) had a business degree and over 10 years' experience at the SEC in various roles. She believed that SEC culture remained underpinned by an idea that men required a 'family wage'. To her mind the organisation's commitment to equal opportunity did not extend to a managerial promotion for an experienced woman worker. Marta was overlooked for multiple promotions, including in favour of a male colleague to a position he was *totally unqualified for*. She believed the SEC was *looking after him because he was married and he had kids* while Marta was *female and unmarried and no kids, you know [...] there was still a bit of that paternalistic crap going on*. In comparison she was

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57 Cath got the job. Cath MacConnell interview, 15 October 2015.

58 Holmes and Pinto, 'Gender and Sexuality', 327. See also: Deborah Brennan, 'Babies, Budgets, and Birthrates: Work/Family Policy in Australia 1996–2006', *Social Politics* 14, no. 1 (2007): 32; Bartlett and Henderson, 'The Australian Women's Movement', 92.

59 Cath took a similar approach in her voluntary work, refusing to join the Moe Rotary club because they had no women members. She joined the Morwell organisation instead.

perceived to be less in need of greater responsibility and the increased wage that went along with it. It was not so much a glass ceiling as *some pretty solid walls*.<sup>60</sup>

Expectations about Valley women working continued to be plagued by gendered ideas, including some employers who considered women's marriage status risky. Debbie Young (1958) learned that being divorced was an employment hazard. Debbie grew up in Newborough, worked briefly as a secretary before marrying, and moved to Melbourne where her husband's defence force job was based. In the early 1980s, Debbie moved back to Newborough when her marriage broke down. During a job interview for a shop assistant role, the woman interviewer asked, '*Why are you looking for a job?*' Debbie said, '*Well I'm divorced and I've come back to this area to live and I want to make my home here and try and start over again,*' [...] '*What if he comes back into your life, you'll just leave [...]* I don't know whether I want to entertain a divorced woman here'.<sup>61</sup> Debbie was *horrified*. A man wouldn't get asked the same question. Eventually she found an administrative job in a local car dealership and was *thrilled*. *I would have worked day and night there for them. That really set me on the road to having a life basically*. Legislation that prevented workplace discrimination based on a person's marital status was introduced nationally in 1984, a year or two after Debbie divorced. Given that some Valley employers considered divorced women unreliable and therefore unemployable, legislation was needed to challenge such attitudes that stigmatised divorce.

## GENDERED ECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT CRISIS

In the 1990s, the state of Victoria was in recession and encumbered with debt. The government's solution included privatising the SEC, which significantly transformed the Valley's economy and employment opportunities.<sup>62</sup> Thousands of workers were

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60 Marta Borgogni interview, 7 January 2016.

61 Debbie Young, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Newborough, 16 April 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

62 Restructuring and privatisation of the SEC began in the late 1980s and was finalised by 1997. See Rainnie and Paulet, 'Images of Community', 157. Privatisation of state-owned enterprises include selling infrastructure and services to privately owned organisations and/or outsourcing or contracting-out government services. See Graeme A. Hodge and Ken Coghill, 'Accountability in the Privatized State', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 20, no. 4 (2007): 675.

laid off. The impact of restructuring and deindustrialisation was, however, a gendered experience and research that focuses on male job loss, though significant, is not the complete picture. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows the largest employer in the Valley before privatisation was the electricity, gas and water sector that mostly employed men.<sup>63</sup> Towards the end of privatisation, the number of people employed in the Latrobe Shire dropped overall by 18 per cent. The number of men working plummeted while the number of women working was comparatively stable and increased slightly. By the end of the 1990s, after the sale of the SEC, the power industry no longer dominated employment. Valley people were employed mostly in the retail sector.<sup>64</sup>

Male SEC workers have been, in many ways, a privileged workforce, and the decline of the industry had a major impact on Valley men and on workplace and household gender dynamics. Larissa Bamberry's study of the impact of privatisation in the Valley showed that because the Valley's labour market relied on the 'male-breadwinner' model, the ability of Valley households to adjust in times of significant economic change was compromised.<sup>65</sup> In 1991 in the Valley, women earned significantly less than men. The median individual income for Valley women was \$8,300 per year compared with \$21,900 for men. Compared with the rest of Victoria, Valley women's wages were below the state average of \$12,300, while Valley men's wages were above the state average of \$19,600.<sup>66</sup> These differences are partly attributed to mining sector incomes that are typically higher than sectors that employ mostly

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63 In 1986, of the 8,024 people employed in the electricity, gas and water sector, 521 were women and 7,503 were men. See Cameron and Gibson, 'Alternative Pathways', 45.

64 In 1986, 19,620 men were employed in the Latrobe Shire, which fell to 13,855 in 1996. In 1996, the number of women working had increased by 4 per cent to 10,464. In 1986, the electricity, gas and water sector in the Latrobe Shire employed 8,024 people, which in 1996 had dropped to 1,985. The sector that employed the most people in 1996 was retail with 3,954 people (a slight increase from 3,813 in 1986). See Cameron and Gibson, 'Alternative Pathways', 45; Katherine Gibson, Jenny Cameron and Arthur Veno, 'Negotiating Restructuring: A Study of Regional Communities Experiencing Rapid and Social Economic Change' (Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 1999), 71, 45.

65 Bamberry, 'Restructuring Women's Work', 1135.

66 Brown's study analysed data from the 1991 ABS Census as well as the Victorian Department of Social Security and the Department of Planning and Development. Brown, 'Incomes in the Latrobe Valley', iv-5. In 1991 there were about 2,500 sole parent families in the Valley with about 90 per cent of single mothers not in paid employment. Gibson, Cameron and Veno, 'Negotiating Restructuring', citing 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15.

women, and that many women combined mothering with part-time work. In the Valley there was little to no financial incentive for families to challenge male-breadwinner/female-caregiver roles because wage disparity was so great.

Valley residents often provide well-worn stories of the economic and social decline that followed privatisation. Many people share similar emotional responses such as 'loss, lack, depletion, demoralisation, grieving and shock'.<sup>67</sup> Accounts of the Valley women I interviewed suggest that impacts of privatisation were not uniformly experienced or perceived. For some Valley women SEC privatisation represented a period of increased stress, whilst for others, it presented opportunities.

The sale of the SEC and subsequent job losses disrupted gender arrangements in some Valley families.<sup>68</sup> Adele White's (1958) husband had worked at a Valley power station for decades. When the SEC started restructuring around 1989 ahead of the sell-off, he *was one of those people who had no options* because *without any education* there were limited local opportunities for him.<sup>69</sup> Adele grew up in the Valley, married at 18, and completed a community services diploma at GIAE while her children were babies. At the time of privatisation, Adele was living in Moe and working full-time. When her husband was made redundant, she became her family's *breadwinner*. Adele's tertiary education and career acted like a partial financial buffer. I use 'partial' because women's education and workforce experience did not guarantee economic security because even a professional public service role could not offset the loss of a male SEC income. *Finances were a bit tight*, said Adele. Yet she considered her situation *fortunate* because she had a job. *It was a pretty grim situation [...] other families had no power on, they had people coming with food to feed their children*. Being 'fortunate' in a working-class region that was heading into a post-industrial era meant just affording the basics – groceries and utility bills.

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67 Gibson, Cameron and Veno, 'Negotiating Restructuring', 28.

68 Bamberg, 'Restructuring Women's Work'.

69 Adele White, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Drouin, 14 April 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden. For impacts of education and deindustrialisation, see: Julian Teicher, Bernadine Van Gramberg and Peter Holland, 'Trade Union Response to Outsourcing in a Neo-Liberal Environment: A Case Study Analysis of the Australian Public Sector', *Asia Pacific Business Review* 12, no. 2 (2006): 251.

Marta Borgogni (1961) saw opportunity when SEC privatisation began. In the early 1990s she *could see the writing on the wall*.<sup>70</sup> As we learned earlier, in Marta's view the SEC's organisational culture had curtailed her promotion. She was ready for a change. At age 29, Marta opted for a voluntary departure package that she used to pay off her mortgage and retrain at university.<sup>71</sup> Marta completed a diploma in secondary teaching and started working at a high school in Traralgon for the next almost 20 years. When privatisation occurred, Marta did not have children or significant caring responsibilities of other family members, and apart from her mortgage, she had no major debts. She was flexible financially and emotionally, capable of taking advantage of her severance pay and proximity to a local tertiary institute to orchestrate an alternative career path. She thus avoided serious long-term unemployment and the financial shocks that many others experienced in the Valley at the time – notwithstanding that her career change was prompted by discrimination and potential job loss.<sup>72</sup>

The SEC was not the only organisation undergoing major staff cuts that impacted Valley women's work lives in the 1990s. Jobs in the public service were also reduced after the newly elected Liberal government, led by Premier Jeff Kennett (1992–1999), introduced public sector 'reforms'.<sup>73</sup> By 1999, the Victorian public service

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70 Marta Borgogni interview, 7 January 2016.

71 Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (GIAE) was formed in 1968, taking over from Yallourn Technical College that offered diplomas in engineering, science and business. At the end of 1975, GIAE had schools that catered for more than engineering and science, including visual arts, education, business and social studies. GIAE amalgamated with Monash University in 1990. See Fletcher, 'Alumni 2002', 7–9, 15.

72 The role of education and access to a range of formal and informal educational opportunities is crucial in deindustrialising communities. For examples, see: Jo Forster, Margaret Petrie and Jim Crowther, 'Deindustrialisation, Community, and Adult Education: The North East England Experience', *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018): 210.

73 The Liberal Party's public service reform policies were likely developed before the 1992 Victorian state election. Some passages of Victorian legislation were copied from 'new public management' public sector reforms in New Zealand. For an outline of Victorian legislation, see Shaun Goldfinch and Vanessa Roberts, 'New Public Management and Public Sector Reform in Victoria and New Zealand: Policy Transfer, Elite Networks and Legislative Copying', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 59, no. 1 (2013): 80–96. Restructuring and downsizing of the Victorian public service included 22 government departments reduced to 13. O'Neill, 'Victoria: Rolling Back or Reinventing the Kennett Revolution?', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 59, no. 4 (2020): 111–112. For examples of media discourse of the public sector reforms in Victoria, see Jill Blackmore and Stephen Thorpe, 'Media/ting Change:

had decreased by 25 per cent or 70,000 staff since 1992, which also included 8,000 teachers.<sup>74</sup> The government's scheme severely impacted Valley women's capacity to adapt to an already narrow job market. In the mid-1990s Cath (1945) was working with a regional government authority in the Valley when the organisation was disbanded. She recalled a ruling that stopped former public service staff from being re-employed. Cath could not fall back on her previous career as a schoolteacher. She applied for a role at the local TAFE but was initially told she was an unlikely candidate because of the bar on former government employees.<sup>75</sup> Cath had been '*Jeffed*', a colloquial euphemism to describe Kennett's austerity measures.<sup>76</sup> In some cases though, Valley people found ways around the unreasonable rules. Cath ended up with the job at TAFE, but *on paper* she was employed by one of the power stations that auspiced the funds so she could coordinate the project.

In other areas of the Valley economy in the 1990s, small businesses were trapped with no way to get around the negative effects of government privatisation and downsizing. Unemployment across the Valley increased, disposable incomes disappeared, and local retail suffered. In the late 1980s, Olivia Anders (1941) had bought a sewing shop in Morwell that thrived for a time. Olivia grew up in Norway and was a nurse when she met an Australian man. The couple married, moved to Yallourn in 1971, had three children and moved to Newborough when Yallourn was demolished. Olivia's business, a niche retail store reliant on local spending, was destroyed by the drastic impacts that followed privatisation.

The economic shock of the SEC sale was explosive. *Somebody tried to blow up the pizza place* on Church Street, said Olivia. *That set the street back a lot.* She recalled

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The Print Media's Role in Mediating Education Policy in a Period of Radical Reform in Victoria, Australia', *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 6 (2003): 583.

74 O'Neill, 'Victoria: Rolling Back or Reinventing', 109. The number of Victorian schools were reduced from 2,000 to 1,664. Susan Pascoe and Robert Pascoe, 'Education Reform in Australia: 1992–97' (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1998), 10.

75 Technical and Further Education (TAFE) are government-funded educational institutes that provide vocational education and post-secondary education in Australia. Vocational training includes, for example, certificates and diplomas in hospitality, trade apprenticeship schemes in plumbing or hairdressing, and advanced diplomas in health and community services.

76 Cath MacConnell interview, 15 October 2015.

*vacuuming up broken glass* that had shattered her shop windows.<sup>77</sup> Olivia, with her business in a prime retail location in Morwell, was both a victim of and witness to the damaging public and private outfall of the Victorian government's economic challenges and subsequent 'solutions' across the 1990s. In retrospect Olivia felt her decision to buy and manage a small business was a *bit of a mistake [...] although I enjoyed it*. It took her some time to accept her business was no longer viable, and unable to sell, she closed seven years after purchasing it, conceding she had *lost a lot of money*. Olivia's husband, who had been a technical specialist at the SEC for decades, accepted a redundancy package. *We thought it was going to be alright. It wasn't [...] not as much as we expected or maybe we didn't handle it quite well*. In her interview, Olivia was generally disinclined to represent herself as a victim, prioritising instead reflections about decisions she had made and what she could have done differently. Her consideration that she and her husband had not adequately 'handled' the impacts of privatisation suggests an element of personal failing. These kinds of subtle self-recriminations demonstrate how personally accountable women felt in extreme economic crises like deindustrialisation of which they had little control.

### BEYOND THE GRIP OF 'KING COAL'?

Despite the Valley's coal and electricity sector no longer dominating employment after privatisation, the culture of 'king coal' prevailed, which made working in some sectors difficult. Workers were not immune from dominant ideas that coal-based employment in the Valley was essential and therefore should not be challenged. In the early 2000s, Katie Roberts (1956), who had moved to the Valley in the 1970s as a young mother and university student, was working in local government coordinating community-based carbon reduction programs:

*Basically we could do a whole lot of environmental projects that involve ratepayers, but the power stations are not classified as rate payers [...] so you'd be encouraging*

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77 Olivia Anders, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Newborough, 23 November 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden. The Church Street Pizza Parlour was blown up by arsonists in March 1991 destroying five adjacent shops and damaging 41 others. A CFA volunteer firefighter was awarded a Bronze Medal for Bravery in relation to the incident and Premier Joan Kirner visited. Leo Billington, 'Church Street's Blast from the Past', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 11 April 2016. Available at <https://latrobevalleyexpress.com.au/news/2016/04/10/church-streets-blast-from-the-past/>. Accessed 26 May 2021.

*people to do all these 'green' household things, but at the same time you couldn't come out and publicly oppose [...] the pollution caused by the burning of coal, I mean yeah, it's a big conflict, and the feeling is you're putting the onus back on the little people and you're not able to participate in the big picture.*<sup>78</sup>

Katie's experience was part of increasing tensions in the Valley between the pollution-producing power sector and governments attempting to address climate change. In her job, Katie felt unable to criticise the biggest carbon emitters in her area. Her use of the term 'little people' is a visual reminder of the physical and metaphorical scale of the problem. The coal mines, industrial buildings, and stacks of the power stations loom over residents, as much as organisational culture, attitudes and pressure in Katie's workplace constrained her from feeling effective. Katie felt expected to have an *allegiance* and respect for coal. It was too difficult for Katie to do her public service role and not *say anything about power stations*. She left her job to work for a not-for-profit organisation.

Throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s, state and federal government policy shifted to a degree, which saw the introduction of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Government policies that responded to climate change posed a threat to Valley employment and the regional economy, but also created new work opportunities for some women.<sup>79</sup> Government funding increased for environmental sustainability efforts, including for local Valley projects run by paid project officers.<sup>80</sup> At the time, Katie worked part-time managing a community garden and arts project,

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78 Katie Roberts, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Latrobe City, 10 September 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

79 Chubb, *Power Failure*; Tomaney and Somerville, 'Climate Change and Regional Identity'.

80 For an outline of sustainability policy in Victoria, see Brian Coffey, 'Another Opportunity Lost? Victorian Labor's Enactment of Sustainability, 1999–2010', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 71, no. 3 (2012): 303–313. For examples of bushfire and environmental sustainability projects in GunaiKurnai Country/Gippsland and the Latrobe Valley, see Monica Green and Sherie McClam, 'Collective Hope and Action in a Time of Transition: Kitchen Table Conversations with Gippsland Sustainability Change Agents', in Angela Campbell, Michelle Duffy and Beth Edmondson (eds), *Located Research* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 223–251; Ian Thomas and Samuel Millar, 'Sustainability, Education and Local Government: Insights from the Australian State of Victoria', *Local Environment* 21, no. 12 (2016): 1482–1499; Kate Jones and Ruth Webber, 'Looking for Sustainability in Not-for-Profit Program Delivery: An Experiment in Providing Post-Bushfire Recovery Programs', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 71, no. 4 (2012): 412–422.



coordinating a team of volunteers and facilitating workshops like edible gardens, composting, and water tank installation.

However, unlike men's high wages in the Valley's electricity industry, working in the community and environment sector did not guarantee women's careers or financial security.<sup>81</sup> Contracts in community and social services are particularly disadvantageous to women who are largely employed in the sector. Jobs are usually short-term and precarious. When funding ceases, paid workers are often replaced by unpaid volunteers, which contributes to expectations that community work should be done, mostly by women, for free.<sup>82</sup> When Katie's funded role ended, she continued to work on the project unpaid along with other volunteers. She spent a lot of her time doing project administration and funding acquittal that required technical knowledge because most grant processes are online. Such activities were not easy in a small rural town with poor reception and for people reliant on welfare payments who could not afford home internet.

Job security was non-existent in the Valley for women like Katie, even with multiple degrees and expertise. Initial seed funding can help set up sustainability initiatives, but they are not always financially viable long-term because they rely heavily on the unpaid labour of local people. *I've done so much unpaid work in my life, community work [...] you're representing a lot of, you know, either nature or people who don't usually have a voice [...] I can't afford it anymore, basically [laughs] I'm poorer than I ever was. Yeah.* Katie's working life in the Valley was impacted by local workplace culture that resisted criticism of 'king coal', as well as employment conditions that did not offer sufficient pay or ongoing work.

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81 In the 2010s, workers at Hazelwood Power Station were in the top 5 per cent of wage earners in Australia – 'hi-vis gentry'. According to Doig, a starting salary in 2010 at Hazelwood was about \$120,000 per annum and the average salary, \$172,000. Doig, *Hazelwood*, 72.

82 Cora Baldock argues that privatisation of social welfare government services is disadvantageous for women because they dominate the sector and privatisation often results in programs shifting to not-for-profit organisations and voluntary agencies. The outcome includes a deterioration of work conditions and that paid female workers are replaced by unpaid female volunteers. Cora Baldock, 'Feminist Discourses of Unwaged Work: The Case of Volunteerism', *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 27 (1998): 20, 27.

## VOLUNTEERING AND CARING ACROSS DECADES

The most persistent gendered circumstance that impacted Valley women's working lives was the expectation that women provide care labour to others from birth to death. Working for free is more common in Australia than being paid to work and is a gendered experience. Though women may volunteer for altruistic reasons, gender culture influences ideas about women's unpaid labour which can be viewed as an extension of their mothering duties; they do it for 'love not money'.<sup>83</sup> Some researchers argue that women's volunteer work in institutional settings, like schools, is a state-sanctioned and exploitative practice. Women's volunteer work typically occurs in the community and education sectors, undertaken during work hours that replace paid work or done alongside part-time work.<sup>84</sup> Volunteering for this group of Valley women who I interviewed was associated with their children's educational progression from kindergarten to high school. Women volunteered on kinder committees, did in-class readings, and organised school functions, all of which supported and enriched children's educational and social experiences.

Volunteering can also be personally fulfilling and empowering for some women and offer a feeling they are helping and contributing to their community or a cause. Some women were also able to use their volunteer experiences to their advantage. Debbie Young's (1958) position on her daughter's kinder committee was her first foray into *doing advocacy*.<sup>85</sup> She regularly liaised with the local council and participated in rallies to protest state government funding cuts. Debbie informally upskilled and networked, which helped her secure a paid part-time job with the local council coordinating kindergarten enrolments. Similarly, Lena Bianchi (1955) volunteered at her children's primary school in the mid to late 1980s as an Italian teacher. In her own time, and to improve her teaching effectiveness, Lena visited other local schools, effectively auditing existing language programs. Lena gained confidence and

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83 Baldock, 'Feminist Discourses of Unwaged Work', 19–20, 29.

84 For feminist perspectives of women's voluntary and unpaid work, see Baldock, 'Feminist Discourses of Unwaged Work'; Lois Bryson, 'Revaluing the Household Economy', *Women's Studies International Forum* 19, no. 3 (1996): 207–219.

85 Debbie Young interview, 16 April 2015.

eventually negotiated a paid part-time teaching assistant role that she did for about five years.<sup>86</sup>

Gendered expectations about volunteering also include work associated with protecting, caring for and cleaning up the environment. Researchers argue there is an ‘eco gender gap’ in which women are more likely than men to participate in activities associated with conservation and environmental sustainability.<sup>87</sup> The idea that women should be carers translates to expectations that women do the same for the planet. In the Valley, women’s efforts include ‘guerrilla’ conservation, a type of clandestine land management of neglected public land and reserves, and environmental campaigns like the ‘Knitting Nannas of Gippsland’ who protest coal-seam gas exploration.<sup>88</sup>

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Katie Roberts (1956) was part of a group of locals who cared for an area of forest around the upper Morwell River near an abandoned prison farm, about 20 kilometres south of Boolarra. There were *lots of different birds and crayfish and platypus and ferns. It really sticks out, you think, ‘Wow this is really*

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86 Lena Bianchi interview, 24 November 2015.

87 For examples, see: Elle Hunt, ‘The Eco Gender Gap: Why Is Saving the Planet Seen as Women’s Work?’, *Guardian*, 6 February 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/06/eco-gender-gap-why-saving-planet-seen-womens-work>. Accessed 10 February 2022; Louise Williams and Clara Williams Roldan, ‘Cleaning up the Planet Shouldn’t Be “Women’s Work”’, *ABC News*, 5 July 2019. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-06/how-women-dominate-the-charge-to-help-the-environment/11278386>. Accessed 10 February 2022; Ines Weller, ‘Gender Dimensions of Sustainable Consumption’, in Sherilyn MacGregor (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 331–344; Vanessa Organo, Lesley Head and Gordon Waitt, ‘Who Does the Work in Sustainable Households? A Time and Gender Analysis in New South Wales, Australia’, *Gender, Place and Culture* 20, no. 5 (2013): 559–577.

88 The term ‘guerrilla gardening’ refers to people who, without permission from authorities, turn small areas of public land, like verges and roundabouts, into productive gardens with flowers, herbs and vegetables. Some older women who joined environmental protest organisations were frustrated by sexist and ageist attitudes of male activists. Knitting nanna groups evolved in response to such attitudes. Lorraine Larri and Hilary Whitehouse, ‘Nannagogy: Social Movement Learning for Older Women’s Activism in the Gas Fields of Australia’, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 59, no. 1 (2019): 27–52. According to Foskey it was not until 1983 that forest conservation in Victoria was recognised as a function of the state government. Deb Foskey, ‘“We have to live here”: Early Days of Forest Activism in East Gippsland’, in Erik Eklund and Julie Fenley (eds), *Earth and Industry. Stories from Gippsland* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 205. For examples of the various ways volunteers have tried to preserve native forests in the region, see: Fletcher, *Jean Galbraith*; Foskey, ‘“We have to live here”’; Julie Constable, ‘Reams and Reams of Paper: The Strzelecki Forest Campaigns’, in Erik Eklund and Julie Fenley (eds), *Earth and Industry. Stories from Gippsland* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 219–243.

*special*'. The group worked *under the radar* for about a decade to *maintain the tracks, [remove] the weeds, keep the paths clear, just keep an eye on it [...] without our efforts at maintaining it, it would have been just gobbled up by weeds and eventually by plantation*.<sup>89</sup> In the 2010s, the area formally became the Morwell River Falls Reserve and is promoted as a 'place of peace' in tourism marketing for the Valley.<sup>90</sup> Katie's account shows the significance of the human/nature relationship that compels people into sustained conservation action.<sup>91</sup> Women, like Katie, are 'agents of environmental change' and their collective and voluntary action are an indispensable part of environmental politics and conservation worthy of greater recognition of women's labour in the Valley.<sup>92</sup>

The Valley women I interviewed emphasised caring for children and parents. Care expectations are also shaped by cultural attitudes. As the eldest daughter of three siblings in her Greek family, it was understood that Helena Christos (1968) would care for her mother who suffered with terminal cancer for about five years in the 1990s. *We didn't really know much about services at the time* and so Helena nursed her mother on her own for years in Moe.<sup>93</sup> When her mother was in hospital for longer stays, Helena would dress or assist her to the toilet because some staff *didn't want to nurse her because she wasn't Aussie [...] 'She's a wog, she's dirty'*. Racism intensified an already difficult situation and contributed to Helena's social isolation. At some point she learned she could access a nurse who then came intermittently to their home to assist. During this time Helena did no paid work or study. When her mother died her father presumed Helena would become a 'housewife', cleaning and caring for a

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89 Katie Roberts interview, 10 September 2015.

90 Visit Gippsland, 'Morwell River Falls Reserve', Gipps Wonder Land, 2 December 2021. Available at <https://www.visitgippsland.com.au/do-and-see/nature-and-wildlife/rivers-and-waterfalls/morwell-river-falls-reserve>. Accessed 2 December 2021.

91 For more on the human/nature relationship in Australian environmental history, see Katie Holmes, Andrea Gaynor and Ruth Morgan, 'Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times', *History Australia* 17, no. 2 (2020): 230–251.

92 Ruth Morgan and Margaret Cook, 'Gender, Environment and History: New Methods and Approaches in Environmental History', *International Review of Environmental History* 7, no. 1 (2021): 5.

93 Helena Christos, interviewed by Nicolette Snowden, Moe, 8 December 2015, tape and transcript held by Nicolette Snowden.

younger brother 10 years her junior. Helena was unhappy. *I kept rejecting it. I kept saying to Dad, 'I'm not a mother, I'm a sister, I'm a daughter, I'm not a wife'.*

Extended periods of caring severely impacted Helena emotionally, socially and financially. She lived for much of this time in poverty and when her welfare assistance stopped after her mother's death, Helena found it difficult to leave the house or interact socially. *There was no connection to the outside world...we didn't have a telephone, cause couldn't afford it. And then that starts impacting on your speech, on your communication [...] so I struggled.* Helena's younger sister, who had left home and married, helped Helena secure unemployment benefits. Helena went on to complete a social work diploma in her forties and later secured a full-time job in migrant support services. The care work Helena did ensured her family members were supported to do paid work and other activities, yet it delayed her ability and capacity to imagine and pursue her own work aspirations.

Distinct Valley circumstances exacerbated care labour in many families. In the Latrobe Valley, asbestos-related disease (ARD) is an especially large burden. The prevalence of ARD is mostly due to historical exposures to asbestos in Valley power stations where it was commonly used because of its heat and corrosive-resistant properties.<sup>94</sup> In the Valley, mesothelioma incidence<sup>94</sup> is seven times the national average and former SEC workers experience greater occurrences of asbestos-associated lung cancer.<sup>95</sup> The disease can take many decades to emerge and is almost always fatal.<sup>96</sup> The effects of ARD in the Valley are also gendered, as it is in the rest of the country. Mostly older men develop the disease, and their carers are mostly their wives and daughters.<sup>97</sup>

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94 Australian power station workers have one of the highest mortality rates from ARD in the country, second only to mine workers in the asbestos mining town of Wittenoom in Western Australia. Anthony D. LaMontagne and Hannah H. Walker, 'Community Views on Responding to a Local Asbestos Disease Epidemic: Implications for Policy and Practice', *Policy and Practice in Health and Safety* 3, no. 1 (2005): 71.

95 LaMontagne and Walker, 'Community Views', 71.

96 S. Lee, et al., 'A Very Public Death: Dying of Mesothelioma and Asbestos-Related Lung Cancer (M/ARLC) in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia', *Rural and Remote Health* 9, no. 3 (2009), 1.

97 Lee, et al., 'A Very Public Death', 2. Asbestos was banned in Australia in 2003. Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, 'About Asbestos', 30 September 2019. Available at <https://www.asbestossafety.gov.au/about-asbestos/about-asbestos>. Accessed 30 September 2019.

Asbestos was a toxic industrial workplace product that became a private problem. In the 1990s Evelyn (1955) was running her administrative and human resources business in Traralgon when her father was diagnosed with mesothelioma after asbestos exposure at Gas & Fuel in Morwell in the 1950s. Evelyn's mother *looked after him*.<sup>98</sup> Evelyn's mother did not drive and as the eldest of five siblings, it was up to Evelyn to take her father and mother to his medical and legal appointments. About a decade later in the 2000s, Debbie Young's (1958) father died of asbestos-related lung cancer having worked for the SEC for almost 40 years. Debbie's mother *basically* became a *full-time nurse*.<sup>99</sup> Like Evelyn's mother, Debbie's mother did not drive and so she took her father and mother to his medical appointments and treatments.<sup>100</sup> Debbie's father needed radiation therapy but there were no facilities in the Valley. They were sent to Moorabbin, on the outskirts of Melbourne. Debbie would take days off work and drive her parents to the city. *They couldn't go on public transport because he was too sick. He'd be passing out in the back of the car on the way home after treatment. It became a really intense time. A 'culture of denial' in the Valley about ARD contributed to a lack of appropriate local healthcare facilities for victims.*<sup>101</sup> Women's unpaid care labour necessarily filled the gap where governments failed to address a large-scale industrial and public health catastrophe.

Valley women often felt torn in multiple directions trying to meet the many demands associated with cancer care, work and childcare. When Debbie's father got sick, she was working at a primary school in Newborough with students who required specific teaching support. She felt *torn between looking after Dad and looking after the kids who needed to have somebody in the classroom with them*. Either way she felt she was letting someone down because she was not doing her *duty*. When the palliative care nurse told Debbie her father was *in the throes of dying* she took a break from work, grateful that her school administrators were *really good* for letting her re-arrange

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98 Evelyn Green interview, 13 May 2015.

99 Debbie Young interview, 16 April 2015.

100 In the post-war decades it was unusual for working-class families to own more than one car. In 1955 in Victoria, 43 per cent of adults had a licence of which women accounted for fewer than one in ten. By 1968, 40 per cent of adults who had a licence were women. See Graeme Davison, *Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004), 29–30.

101 LaMontagne and Walker, 'Community Views', 76.

her work schedule. That Debbie feels indebted to an employer and guilty for prioritising her father, demonstrates how competing gendered expectations operate in some Valley women's lives. There were no wins here. Because women are socialised to be the primary caregivers in their families, many adopt a worldview that centres on relationships.<sup>102</sup> Yet when family members fall ill and require their caring work to increase, they can feel guilty for having to relinquish or reduce other commitments. The gendered nature of caring infrastructure can exploit women's sense of responsibility and emotional dedication to the important people in their lives.<sup>103</sup>

The labour associated with ARD care was distributed into the lives and homes of Valley women, rather than to the institutions that had caused harm. Valley women moonlighted as unpaid nurses, chauffeurs, legal aid and counsellors. Evelyn and Debbie's accounts are examples of the Victorian government privatising a public problem, similar to women's experiences in other industrial locations like lead-smelter town Port Pirie in South Australia.<sup>104</sup> Working-class Valley women in this study did the bulk of care work when family members became ill, which often required shifting and shuffling their other roles in the family economy, including paid work and caring for children.

## CONCLUSION

Latrobe Valley women's accounts demonstrate the inescapable force of gender power dynamics that substantially impacted and shaped their working lives from the 1960s and into the 2010s. Gendered forces were asserted ubiquitously, within homes, doctor's offices, workplaces, community groups, and all levels of government, which resulted in Valley women encountering varied barriers in their working lives. Valley women's work life recollections challenge ideas of 'dependence' and who relies on who in the labour market and family economy. When domestic and care work is viewed as the exclusive domain of women, such ideas conveniently overlook

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102 Lois Bryson, Kathleen McPhillips and Kathryn Robinson, 'Turning Public Issues into Private Troubles: Lead Contamination, Domestic Labor, and the Exploitation of Women's Unpaid Labor in Australia', *Gender & Society* 15, no. 5 (2001): 757.

103 Bryson, McPhillips and Robinson, 'Turning Public Issues into Private Troubles', 769.

104 Bryson, McPhillips and Robinson, 'Turning Public Issues into Private Troubles', 768.

men's dependence on women's unwaged labour necessary for men to undertake paid work.<sup>105</sup> The Valley's industrial economy depended on Valley women's labour. What is 'hidden', is not that Valley women were 'starved' of jobs, but that their work undergirded and sustained the economic development and functioning of the Valley.

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105 Deacon, 'Political Arithmetic', 45.