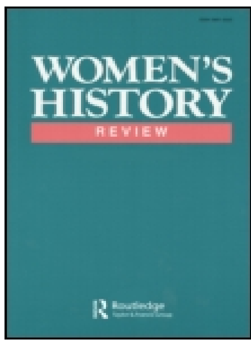

Women's History Review

ISSN: 0961-2025 (Print) 1747-583X (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwhr20

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To cite this article: Pat Thane (2004) Girton graduates: earning and learning, 1920s-1980s, Women's History Review, 13:3, 347-361, DOI: 10.1080/09612020400200398

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020400200398

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Women's History Review, Volume 13, Number 3, 2004

Girton Graduates: earning and learning, 1920s-1980s

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ABSTRACT This article is based on a sample survey of the life histories of female graduates of Girton College, Cambridge between the 1920s and 1980s. It uses part of the survey data to ask why a group of talented and highly skilled women had less conventionally successful careers than men of equivalent ability and training. Few of them came from highly privileged backgrounds, but rather from among the many strata of the British middle classes. Most them expected to earn their livings for some part of their adult lives; for their whole lives between graduation and retirement if they were among the 35% of Girton graduates of the 1920s and 1930s who did not marry. After World War Two the majority married. At the same time it became possible, as it had not been before, for middle-class married women to work for pay outside the home. But their career opportunities continued, at least to the 1970s, to be limited, above all to school-teaching, as had been the case before the War, a limitation which many women resented. When new career opportunities opened, as they did for some during the War and to a limited extent after the War, they were taken up enthusiastically. Many used their skills, rather, in voluntary activities, such as the magistracy. Those who competed in male-dominated paid occupations, such as medicine, business or the law often experienced male hostility or discrimination. Few at any time claimed to want a conventional male pattern of life, dominated by career, but many, throughout the period, regretted that it was so difficult to combine marriage and child-rearing with a career which made use of their talents and skills flexibly over the life cycle. Very few indeed regretted their experience of motherhood.

This article is based on a sample survey of the life histories of graduates of Girton College, Cambridge, from the earliest date at which we could find living graduates, the 1920s, until the 1980s. A very detailed twenty-nine

page questionnaire was sent to a 10% sample of graduates (about 700 women) and 10% of these were interviewed.[1]

The main focus of the project is not on the history of Girton itself or that of Cambridge University, though it is designed to produce information about both, but on a systematic study of the life histories of a group of highly educated women through the twentieth century. The reason for using an Oxford or Cambridge college as a source for such a study is that these institutions have kept systematic records of their students and keep in contact with a high proportion of them, as most other universities have not until the recent past, hence it is possible to contact a reasonably representative sample in order to try to assess what has and has not changed over time in the lives of this female social group. Amy Erickson, Kate Perry and I deliberately did not select for study Girtonians who had conventionally successful careers, but aimed to construct a reasonably representative picture of the lives of Girtonians over the period, partly with the aim of assessing why some have and some have not had 'successful' careers in a conventional sense, and what success has meant to them. We wanted to know what had happened to these women and what they thought about their experiences.

The questionnaires and interviews investigated many aspects of the women's lives, including why they went to Girton; the influence of mothers, fathers, teachers and others on their careers; what or who influenced their next move after graduation; paid and unpaid work over their lifetimes; family life – if they did not marry, why not?; if they did, why?; the division of tasks within the household; when they first had sex; methods of birth control; their mother's method of birth control; what they thought/think (as undergraduates and at the time of responding) about feminism, politics, religion and much else. The response rate was high, 70%, despite the length of the questionnaire. We hoped that this might be so given that Girtonians are a highly literate group likely to have a high level of interest in the content of the research. Testing this belief was one of the methodological aims of the project. Responses were often very full.

For the purposes of this article I am focusing on what the research reveals about women's changing and intersecting roles, their 'careers', broadly defined, after graduation. By this I do not only mean paid employment, still less do I mean highly paid employment. In our definition 'careers' include family life, voluntary work and low-paid work as well as high-flying work. We are trying to gain a sense of the pattern of women's lives as a whole.

Among other things, in this article I am asking the question: why have a group of intelligent and highly educated women, throughout the past century up to the present, had such markedly less successful public careers than men with equivalent abilities and training? This is not the only

interesting question to ask about these women, but it is an important one. After all, if any group of women could have been expected to 'make it' in conventional career terms – highly and expensively educated graduates of the privileged institutions of Oxford and Cambridge, whose male graduates did and do get the top jobs – they should have been in the best position to do so, but overwhelmingly they did not. So what *has* influenced the careers of these women? What has changed over time and what has not? Was the most important factor personal choice – conscious decisions to opt for family and domestic life rather than career? Or cultural and institutional barriers to their employment preferences? Or a more subtle and complex mix of influences? Clearly, there is, and long has been, a 'glass ceiling' preventing most women, including Girtonians, from rising above a certain career level? Why?

Immediately striking are the very complex work patterns of most Girtonians over the whole period since the 1920s. Very few indeed, even of those who graduated before the Second World War (when middle-class married women were effectively prohibited from paid work) either led exclusively domestic lives even after marriage and childbirth, or had a 'job for life' with one employer. Many, in all age groups, sustained paid careers through much of their adult lives without necessarily reaching the 'top'. *Most*, whether married or not, mothers or not, were active in the public sphere in either paid or unpaid capacities.

So what stopped these able and energetic women from competing more successfully with men for more than a century after Emily Davies founded Girton specifically to enable women to achieve equal higher education and equal employment opportunities with men?[2]

In trying to answer this question we need to be clear about the social backgrounds of Girtonians. It is a common assumption that most of them came from 'elite', 'upper-class', certainly from wealthy backgrounds. In fact this was rare. Young women from the most upper-class backgrounds, until the recent past, often faced stronger opposition then women in other classes to going to university and becoming, their families feared, unmarriageable 'bluestockings'. Throughout the period, only about 5% of the sample came from 'upper-class' backgrounds, by any definition, which is roughly the same percentage who came from working-class backgrounds, even in the pre-Second World War Period. This working-class presence before the War was unexpected.

Most Girtonians were fairly evenly spread over the many gradations of the British middle classes. They varied from the daughters of relatively poorly paid clerks, clergymen and schoolmasters in the state sector to those of prosperous professionals, businessmen, successful civil servants and colonial officials. The middle classes had stronger incentives than the very rich to educate their daughters since they were less able to support them if

they did not marry, as many, as we will see, did not. Family support was crucial in the decision of women to go to university. That many Girtonians were not well off is clear from responses to questions about how they financed their studies. Until local authority grants became mandatory in 1962 many did so with difficulty, piecing together small grants and scholarships from the college, the local authority and sometimes from charities, with contributions from family members. A minority got state scholarships which paid fees and an adequate (means-tested) grant. The college had a student loan system to help students out.

Some women got by on very low incomes. One could remember fifty years later walking all the way into Cambridge to go to the cinema, to save the bus fare. Another woman from a lower middle-class background in South London remembered how in the 1930s the headmistress at Mary Datchelor School directed her girls to apply for grants from City of London Livery Companies. She described how:

> She sent me to the Drapers' Company and mother went with me and we went, sort of clean, poor and well darned and were interviewed. And the chairman of the company said: 'Now I see you were offered £80 a year at Westfield [College, in London] and only £50 at Girton. Why did you choose Girton?' So my mother put her foot in it in a big way because she said: 'Oh well, of course Cambridge for maths is considered the best'. We discovered afterwards that the chairman was a governor of Westfield – and I didn't get anything.

She got a state scholarship and remembered her income and expenditure at Girton with a clarity which makes it clear how difficult it was for her to manage.[3] These stories make it clear that student poverty is not a recent phenomenon. What is new in recent years is the willingness and capacity of students to take on debt.

Very few Girtonians at any time could afford to be ladies of leisure after graduation. They needed to earn a living, unless they married immediately after graduation, which was more common after the Second World War than before. Even then they normally worked until children were born. Even the earliest cohorts mostly say that they expected, or that their families expected them, to have professional careers, at least for a period after graduation. At no stage do they represent Girton/Cambridge as a finishing school or as a marriage market, as some elite American universities and women's colleges are said to have been at this time. Rather, most of them perceived Girton as a serious route for young women to acquire professional skills and, very often, to achieve social mobility, or, at least, personal security. For cohorts up to the 1940s these professional skills were expected to become subordinate to domestic pursuits on marriage, though they were not to be wholly abandoned. But parents of women graduates of

the 1920s, 30s and 40s prepared their daughters for the real possibility that they might not marry and would have to be self-supporting throughout their lives. This was the experience of a high proportion of middle-class women of these and preceding decades. The 'surplus' of women who did not marry was not just an outcome of male deaths in the First World War but long predated it.

Of women born between 1900 and 1907 and reaching maturity between the wars, 15% of the whole female population of the United Kingdom never married.[4] About 35% of Girtonians of that generation did not marry. Almost without exception, these unmarried women did not have unearned incomes and needed to earn their livings throughout their lives. Often, also, they had to support others, such as widowed mothers or disabled siblings, or both. There was a significantly higher marriage rate among those born after about 1910 and graduating in the 1930s and after. This followed the national trend to an evening of the sex ratio in the population and almost universal marriage from the later 1930s onwards. The median age of marriage of Girtonians was consistently higher than the population average. It is rare for any woman to state that she did not marry because she preferred to follow a career, though some do so, more frequently among 1920s than 1930s graduates. Most commonly women who did not marry say that they expected and hoped to marry but that the right man did not come along. We should be cautious, however, in interpreting such statements. Rather than implying that these unmarried women were desolate failures, their life stories often suggest that they were having good enough lives on their own to be selective about men and marriage. However, the life stories also convey how difficult it could be to meet men socially in the inter-war years, especially for a woman working in an all-female environment such as a girls' school, as many Girtonians did. One woman who graduated in 1930 moved from her teaching job in London back to her home town of Wolverhampton because, she said, she could never meet men in London. She said, 'I had good friends and so on, but ... there were never any men and I wanted a social life that included men'. Back in Wolverhampton she had ready made social contacts through her family and 'had a great social life in a short time ... a period of about five years flirting, petting and experimenting'. She actually met her husband on a trip to the USSR (they were both on the political left) but delayed marriage for a couple of years because she did not want to give up teaching, which at this time was obligatory on marriage.[5]

Between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1960s the median marriage age of Girtonians fell, much in line with the median age for all women in England and Wales, which fell from 26.7 in 1951 to 24.6 in 1971.[6] Thereafter it stabilised. The decline of formal marriage and the

increased numbers of stable unmarried partnerships in the population as a whole from the 1980s was experienced also by Girtonians.[7]

Until the Second World War married women were forbidden to work, certainly in most professional or business occupations, including teaching – the 'marriage bar' as it was known. Even childless married women were excluded from paid employment, though it was acceptable for widows. Some Girtonians delayed marriage in order to continue their careers. Others were able to hide the fact that they were married, especially if they lived some distance from their workplace. One woman commented that on the day after the marriage bar was lifted for teachers in London, during the War, a surprising number of her colleagues appeared to have married overnight. The formal 'marriage bar' in most occupations disappeared during the Second World War. Hence, only graduates from the later 1950s onwards were aware as they were growing up and imagining their futures that a career after marriage was possible. We need to be aware of the novelty of this expectation when assessing the behaviour both of women and of employers in the later twentieth century. It is clear from our evidence that certainly from the 1950s, and in many cases earlier, Girtonians, even as they gave up careers to rear families, aspired to a later return to paid work, but all too often they found that the opportunities to do so were minimal to non-existent.

Within marriage, Girtonians and most other women practised birth control throughout the period from the 1920s. Nationally, the birth rate declined from the later nineteenth century to a historically low point in the early 1930s, and, though it recovered somewhat from the early 1940s until the late 1960s, it has remained at low levels ever since.[8] Throughout the period Girtonians who had children had around the national average number (slightly more in the immediate post-Second World War period). It cannot be the case, as some sociologists have argued, that more effective contraception in the form of the pill has played a major role in transforming women's career opportunities since the 1960s by making birth control easily accessible.[9] Birth control was being successfully, if often uncomfortably, practised long before the 1960s. The social effects of the pill have been extensive in other respects, but it was not lack of access to effective control over family size that was holding back women in the labour market before the 1960s. An important effect of the pill is probably on the timing of births. Most of the 'pre-pill' graduates had their children early in marriage, unless fertility problems caused delays. Then they stopped. The pill enables women more comfortably to delay births, without delaying sexual partnerships, until they are established in their careers.[10] This shifts rather than removes the problems of combining career and motherhood. It may mean that some women delay conception until it is too late [11], though there are very few known examples of this in our sample.

Graduates of the inter-war years, especially of the 1930s, were the first generation of women to enter marriage knowing with reasonable certainty that they could control the size and timing of their family. They normally had families of around the low average size of the period – two to three – and gave birth early in marriage, compared with earlier generations of women who had more children spread over a longer period of life. This generation of women had, and knew that they had, a long period of adult life after their children ceased to be dependent, during which they felt that they could have contributed something useful to the community if the opportunity had been available. This was the more so because this was a time at which expectation of the length of healthy life was also rising.[12] That the opportunities to do so were at best severely limited was a cause of varying degrees of regret, in some cases of open resentment, among Girtonians.

However, it is also important to note how many Girtonians found alternative ways of making use of their skills and talents, above all by making careers in voluntary work. Without such women, the magistracy, the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Marriage Guidance (later RELATE) and many other organisations, could not have functioned so effectively. Many Girtonians took this route, though a number of them comment on feeling undervalued for all the hard and valuable work they did because this work was unpaid.

Marriage was a more secure option for women between the 1920s and 1950s than before or after. Before, there were higher rates of widowhood relatively early in life. A number of Girtonians experienced relative poverty while young due to the death of a father. They themselves were rarely widowed until late in life, apart from a very few who were bereaved in the Second World War, most of whom remarried. Graduates from the 1960s on, like the rest of the population [13], had a high propensity to divorce. There is a sharp increase in divorce among the 1960s cohort compared with their predecessors. Earlier graduates commonly experienced marriages of forty to fifty years. The increasing instability of relationships since the 1960s has influenced women's career decisions in a variety of ways. Graduates of the 1980s, who had grown up in the divorce culture, often the children of divorced parents, were aware of the need to be self-supporting, not, like their grandmothers, because of the possibility that they might not find a partner, but because they could not expect with certainty a stable, long-term partnership.

Against this background, what did Girtonians do with their lives after graduation? Girton itself, for a high proportion of graduates from the 1920s to the 1950s, was a transforming, liberating experience. They recall it as a time when they were free and independent for the first time – in some cases for the only time – in their lives, which says a lot about the restrictions on

the lives of many women at this time. These expressions of feelings of liberation are strongest among graduates of the 1920s, then they gradually diminish, most rapidly from the 1960s. The early graduates express their pleasure at being free of the constraints of home, being able to make friends and to come and go as they chose. Revealingly, they treasured such things as 'the fact that no one knew and nobody cared what time I went to bed and things like that. I wasn't responsible to anybody, for anybody'; 'Four years of freedom from the usual feminine chores – a wonderful breathing space at the start of adult life'. To have 'a room of one's own' really mattered to them.[14]

Before, during and after the Second World War, Girtonians overwhelmingly became schoolteachers, at some point in their lives. Of the graduates of the early 1920s for whom we have employment information 62% became schoolteachers at some time, slightly fewer among 1930s graduates and about one-third of those who graduated in 1944-53. Still, one-third of early 1960s graduates entered school teaching, and 20% of those of the early 1970s. In 2000, for comparison, only 2% of Oxford and Cambridge graduates went directly into Postgraduate Certificate of Education/school teaching.[15] Many women who did not teach immediately after graduation, or even refused to do so, did so later in life. When they wanted to return to the workforce in the 1950s or later, after their children grew up, they discovered that teaching was the only option open to them.

Some went enthusiastically into teaching at graduation or later. Many went reluctantly, feeling that they had no option when so few occupations were welcoming to women graduates, but they had to earn a living. Notably few women from really wealthy backgrounds entered school teaching. But teaching was the career *expected* of the standard middle-class Girton graduate at least up to the 1960s; it was what many parents and teachers thought that a university education for a woman was for. Some, having entered teaching reluctantly, found that it became a fulfilling lifetime career. Others did not. Some women rejected pressure to enter teaching on graduation only to be drawn into it later in life, when it was the only option if they wanted paid work after an interval for marriage and child-rearing. Others taught because they moved abroad, following their husband's work, often to the British colonies until the rapid decolonisation from the 1950s. These women found that teaching was the only employment acceptable to the local culture or to the husband's employer. An advantage of being an Oxbridge graduate over graduates of other universities was that it was easier to get a high-status job in a top independent or grammar school and formal teacher training was rarely asked of them before the 1960s.

In Britain in the 1950s there was an acute shortage of teachers and the profession became heavily dependent upon the 'married woman returner'. Several women report being persuaded to teach by their children's

head teacher, desperate due to lack of staff. One of many reasons for the current teacher shortage must be that the profession was once so dependent upon women graduates, but now they have wider options at all stages.

Unlike women graduates before the First World War, who expected to have to choose *either* marriage *or* a career, women from the 1920s, and especially from the 1930s, already aspired to combine them in some way. They rarely express a wish to have combined permanent full-time paid work with motherhood, which in practice would very rarely have been possible, but rather wish it had been possible to combine home and paid work flexibly over the life-course. This is a view consistently expressed over the whole period of the survey. It is important not to see graduate women's desires for fulfilling careers as a modern phenomenon, contrasted with a past in which such women 'chose' not to compete in a male world. This is to oversimplify very complex processes. The wish was always there. The obstacles lay not simply in the women's choices but in external constraints both structural and cultural.

Only one woman in the sample who graduated before 1930 combined motherhood and almost full-time paid work, first as a doctor than as a highly successful medical researcher. This was Alice Stewart who discovered that low-level radiation – such as X-rays – caused childhood leukaemia and other cancers. She is one of the few Girtonians of her generation who did make it to the top in her field, but she described very vividly the obstacles she faced, from the crude antagonism of male fellow students in Cambridge to that of male colleagues in Oxford later in life. She did not actually receive the title of Professor until she was aged ninety and still an active researcher, and had long moved her laboratory from Oxford to Birmingham because she had had enough of opposition and obstruction in Oxford. She died, aged 95, in June 2002.[16] She was an impressive woman who was aware that she had had a good and worthwhile life, but she did not receive the degree of public recognition she deserved.[17]

Medics throughout our period were the occupational group the most likely to combine a professional career with domestic responsibilities, though more often by working part-time in general practice or in public health than in high-status hospital posts. This continues to be the case due to long and inflexible hospital working hours, and is a growing cause of concern in the medical profession in view of the current shortage of doctors.[18]

Most Girtonians, in any generation, do not complain bitterly about the lack of career opportunities. For most it was a situation they had grown up to expect, and certainly they very rarely indeed express regret at having married and had children (or if they regret the marriage, they do not regret the children). They express to varying degrees a sense of loss, that they could have done more for the community and for themselves with their

talents and skills if the opportunities had been available either for part-time working when children were small or for retraining after a career break. They do not interpret what happened to them as arising from their free choice. If they had had such choice many of them in every generation would have done differently.

Throughout the period it is striking how readily Girtonians took up new career opportunities when they were offered. This suggests how much talent was, and is, underemployed among those for whom opportunities did not appear; and that the reasons for the restricted career paths of very many Girtonians lay at least as much on the employment supply side as on the demand side. When opportunities emerged there were women to take them. All too often they did not emerge.

The Second World War enabled some women who had entered the workforce before the War, including some reluctant teachers, to change direction by taking over jobs vacated by men. One woman, for example, moved from teaching into management with John Lewis department store, then into a high-ranking civil service job where she remained until retirement. She did not marry. Strikingly few Girtonians entered the civil service before the War, though most ranks and departments were formally open to them. More did so during the War, sometimes reluctantly because it was one of the few occupations open to women graduates after the introduction of conscription for women in December 1941. Thereafter, on graduation, they could choose to enter only the armed services, the civil service, medicine, school teaching or nursing. A number of wartime graduates expressed disappointment that their desires to become architects, actors, academics were destroyed by the War because they were directed into war-related occupations. By the time the War was over they had married, life had moved on and the opportunity was lost. If the War opened new opportunities for some it limited those of others. One woman moved from a reasonably successful career in journalism into the Ministry of Labour because she was persuaded that this was her patriotic duty. As a result, her salary fell, she felt treated with condescension in the civil service and she had very little to do. She felt that her job was a waste of time and she never regained her foothold in journalism after the War.[19] This matches Penny Summerfield's analysis, based on women of different social origins from most of the Girtonians, of the very mixed female experience of the War.[20] It was not all positive and liberating.

Fewer still, before or after the War, made successful careers in the private business sector, which was, and remains, less hospitable to women than the public sector, with the exception of department stores which lay traditionally within women's domain. Feelings of inadequate opportunities (fully *equal* opportunities with men, Girtonians rarely asked for until the 1960s – previously they did not aspire to equality, just to *more*

opportunities) and even accounts of real discrimination are relatively rarely expressed in the language of feminism. In fact, some of the women who faced the toughest battles against overt gender discrimination during their careers were most resistant to identification with feminism, perhaps not surprisingly after their long experience of isolation in male-dominated careers. Even those who express support for what could be described as feminist goals – equal pay, equal work opportunities, equal respect – often reject the word feminism, which they identify with 'stridency', aggression, hostility to men. Least likely to identify with feminism or to acknowledge being influenced by feminism are successful career women in the corporate sector without children, whether married or not.[21] This also changed in the 1960s. In the 1960s cohort alone a significant majority identified as feminists. They form an interesting intermediate generation, who had aspirations to equal opportunities higher than their predecessors but lower than those of later generations and were often, when young, optimistically less aware of the potential obstacles. One 1960s graduate summed this up particularly clearly. She described herself as 'obsessed' with finding a satisfying career after rearing her children, but failing to do so. She wrote:

> I certainly hope my daughter will solve the career [dilemma] before marriage and children ... my daughter takes it for granted she can try any career, whereas I was thinking of 'women's careers'. She is also more sensitized to any hint of discrimination and is ambitious about status and earnings.

This sums up very well the difference in perceptions and aspirations between the generations.

The experience of all too many of the women who did venture into male-dominated careers suggests further reasons why so many of them stayed for so many decades within the confines of occupations in which women were welcome. All too often, like Alice Stewart, they had a hard time, especially up to the 1960s, when overt discrimination was rarely challenged except by isolated individual women. Almost all Girtonians who entered mixed-sex occupations before the 1960s, and some later, describe tensions and feelings of discrimination and/or hostility. Several, including college lecturers, report concealing the fact that they were Cambridge graduates because it made male colleagues and acquaintances uncomfortable or hostile.

The only Girtonian in our sample to go to the Bar before the mid-1930s (though women were admitted to the Bar in 1919) achieved a First in bar finals and became a barrister. She came from a fairly wealthy family. She commented that the most negative experience of her whole life was 'being sneered at and condescended to at the Bar before the War. Very few men would take a woman into chambers as a member'. She married a fellow

barrister who turned out to be unsatisfactory, had two children and, unusually in her generation, carried on working. She gave up the Bar and took a senior post at the British Overseas Airways Corporation during the War and was one of the few women of her generation to divorce. Alice Stewart was another. After the War she married a GP, had another child, and spent the rest of her life caring for her family, assisting her husband, unpaid, and doing voluntary work, clearly seriously resentful about her early experiences at the Bar.[22] She was one of many clever women whose careers became acting as unpaid secretary/assistant to a husband who was a GP, clergyman, diplomat or academic (Oxbridge ones were especially demanding).

The life experiences of many of the Girtonians were influenced by the clear knowledge that they had restricted career options, unless they wanted a tough battle in an unreceptive male world, which most did not, even when they resented the constraints. They often felt very strongly about the need for women like themselves to have successful careers, but most could not face the kind of exhausting fight against the obstacles that very few men would experience. The eagerness with which women, married or unmarried, over the generations have entered new occupations whenever they opened up suggests that their careers were and are not shaped by personal ‘choice’ [23] in any simple sense, but by what was available to them.

Characterising the processes shaping women’s careers as ‘choices’ misses many complexities and ambiguities and risks loading the responsibility for the outcomes wholly upon the women, without sufficient sensitivity to the external institutional and cultural constraints on their possibilities for action and draws attention away from the need to focus upon diminishing those constraints, for example by providing retraining for married women returning to the workforce and more flexible working for parents.

Women have often been deterred from occupations for which they were qualified by realistically anticipating hostility and opposition or, if they were not deterred, they have progressed less successfully than similarly qualified men. This is especially evident if we look at the careers of women in the sample who did not marry or did not have children and who aspired to compete equally with men, but who still faced (and face) severely restricted opportunities, blocked promotion, lower pay and other obstacles.

Graduates of the 1970s and 1980s entered a wider range of occupations with greater success than their predecessors, but they still went less far in their careers than comparable men even if they did not marry or have children. Women of this later generation who have married and had children, whilst recognising that they have traded family life for a degree of career success, share with earlier generations a belief that, even allowing for this trade-off, more use could have been made of their skills and talents. The

Girtonian experience matches the well-documented experience of other women graduates in Britain and many other countries.[24] Women have been held back in the recent past above all by the extreme difficulty they experience in trying to combine parenthood with a long-term career. However, this study, like others, provides evidence that unmarried and childless women also fare less well than men with comparable qualifications and experience in terms of pay and promotion. This again suggests that discrimination or, often, lack of imagination on the part of management, plays a part in holding back the careers of many women. The reality is that most female Girton graduates of recent decades have partners and children and, like their predecessors, are prepared to make compromises by taking a career break to rear children or by working part-time for some years. They are realistic about the implications of so doing, that it means that they will not have equivalent careers to people who work full-time throughout adult life. They rarely have unrealistic expectations to 'have it all', a family and high-flying career success. But all too often the problem they face is of inflexibility at work, rendering part-time work or returning after child-rearing difficult or impossible. Hence they feel that they can contribute less than they have the capacity and the desire to do.

Indeed these difficulties for women have increased since the 1960s due to two changes in particular. The first is the unforeseen increase in time pressure on senior workers in business and the professions. In the 1960s industrial sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and feminists, who advocated greater flexibility in the workplace in order to mobilise the talents and skills of women, anticipated a coming *reduction* in working hours which would make possible the flexible combination of parenting and paid work. They believed that the social problem for the future would be how to cope with too much leisure, not, as it has turned out, with too much work.[25] No one foresaw the lengthening of working time that has occurred. Just at the point at which women were at last gaining wider work opportunities the 'long hours culture' came along to provide a new obstacle. This unforeseen development has done a great deal to hold women back since the 1980s. The notion of a 24/7 commitment to the job makes it harder than ever to combine parenting with many careers. The second unforeseen change is the increased instability of partnerships since the 1960s which has left more women with the responsibilities of lone parenthood, which increases the difficulties of combining motherhood and paid work.

The failure to make greater use of the expensively trained skills of so many women is, and continues to be, a loss to the economy as well as a disappointment to many women, especially in view of the repeated assessments since the Second World War of shortages of highly skilled people especially in science and technology.[26] The Girton evidence suggests that this cannot be explained simply in terms of women's 'choices'

to put family before career, or just as a natural concomitant of woman's reproductive role, in view of the experience of unmarried and infertile women. The explanation lies rather in deeply rooted and fundamentally discriminatory cultural and institutional practices and in failures at top management level to think imaginatively how best to mobilise talent and skill. These are slowly diminishing; experience in many countries since the 1960s suggests that they will not disappear unless impelled by government legislation or by acute shortages of skilled workers.

Notes

[1] I am grateful for funding for this research project, University and Life Experience, from the Spencer Foundation, Chicago, the Leverhulme Trust and the British Academy. It was carried out, jointly, by Dr Amy-Louise Erickson (research officer), Kate Perry (archivist, Girton College) and me. The questionnaires and interview transcripts will be preserved in the Girton archive and will be available to researchers when analysis is complete.

[2] Emily Davies (1866) *The Higher Education of Women* (reprinted 1988, London: The Hambledon Press).

[3] Interview and questionnaire 35051, University and Life Experience Project (ULE), Girton College archive.

[4] B.R. Mitchell & Phyllis Deane (1962) *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, p. 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[5] Interview and questionnaire 27043, ULE.

[6] Jane Lewis (2001) *The End of Marriage?* p. 30 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

[7] Ibid.

[8] A.H. Halsey & Josephine Webb (2000) *Twentieth Century British Social Trends,* p. 34 (London: Macmillan).

[9] Catherine Hakim (2000) *Work–Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century,* pp. 44-50 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[10] Hera Cook (2003) *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex and contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[11] As argued, rather polemically, in Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2002) *Baby Hunger: the new battle for motherhood* (London: Atlantic Books).

[12] Pat Thane (2000) *Old Age in English History: past experiences, present issues,* pp. 333-354 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[13] Lewis *Marriage*, p. 31.

[14] 21061, 26019, 27015, 38059, 38070, ULE.

[15] Institute of Public Policy Research Report (London, January 2002).

[16] Obituary, *Guardian*, 26 June 2002.

[17] 25046, ULE.

[18] *Women in Hospital Medicine* (June 2001); *Women in Consultant Careers* (April 2002) (London: Royal College of Physicians)

[19] 26019, ULE.

[20] Penny Summerfield (1998) *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

[21] E.g. 39004, ULE

[22] 29038, ULE.

[23] As suggested by Hakim, *Work–Lifestyle Choices*.

[24] For Britain, see, among others, M. Fogarty, R. Rapoport & R.N. Rapoport (1967) *Women and Top Jobs* (London: Political and Economic Planning); *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top* (London: Hansard Society, 1990); Susan McRae (1996) *Women at the Top: progress after five years* (London: Hansard Society); K. Ross (2000) *Women at the Top 2000: cracking the public sector glass ceiling* (London: Hansard Society).

[25] E.g. Fogarty et al, *Top Jobs*; Leon Bagrit (1965) *The Age of Automation* (London: BBC, The Reith Lectures).

[26] E.g. *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* (1965-68) pp. 90-93. (London: HMSO).

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