

# Duty, Passion and the (Re)Production of a Gendered Life: One Young Woman's Struggle to Craft a Meaningful Vocational Project

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## Abstract

This longitudinal narrative case study traces one young woman's vocational journey from age 17 to 23.

Drawing on youth transitions literature and feminist scholarship on the gendered division of labour, the paper considers how her journey was shaped by powerful ideologies linked to relational work, home-based production, and postsecondary schooling.

## Résumé

Ce cas d'étude narratif longitudinal trace le parcours professionnel d'une jeune femme de l'âge de 17 ans à 23 ans. En se basant sur la littérature sur les phases de transitions de la jeunesse et sur l'érudition féministe sur la division du travail selon les sexes, cet article considère la façon dont sa trajectoire a été façonnée par des idéologies puissantes reliées au travail relationnel, la production au foyer et à l'éducation postsecondaire.

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## Context and Significance

One of life's major life-course passages for females is the complex journey of moving from girlhood to womanhood. During the mid-to-late teens and early twenties, a major part of this journey revolves around negotiating school-work transitions. For Canadian young women, like their male and female counterparts internationally, the school-work transitions process has increasingly become longer and more complex (Franke 2003).

Many youth transition scholars are calling for more textured understandings of how today's young people grapple with the tensions, changes, choices and unpredictability of school-work transitions (Wyn & Dwyer 1999). Harris, for example, underlines the need for research that explores "young people's own meanings around adulthood, successful pathways, and desired futures" (2004, 189). More specific to gender, Mahaffy (2003) notes that gender is rarely given a central place within research designs and thus, important issues such as gender inequality tend to be overlooked in youth transitions literature.

The present study attempts to take up some of these challenges by tracking the school-work transitions of one middle class young woman living in Ontario Canada, a young woman we call Carol. Through an extended personal narrative spanning her mid-to-late teens to age 23, we offer a firsthand glimpse into her emergent vocational biography. We display how, over time, different spheres of her life intersect and collide, and in turn help shape the context within which she expresses her joys, desires, and troubles; manages personal and vocational-related dilemmas; and at times makes life altering vocational decisions. We then go on to highlight three dominant themes prevailing across her narrative that draw attention to the pervasive gendered quality of her school-work transitions journey.

### Conceptual and Methodological Approach

Our study is situated within current theoretical perspectives that highlight the complexity and diversity of school-work transitions (Shanahan 2000; Wyn & Dwyer 1999); that pay attention to the inherent tensions between structure and agency (Rudd & Evans 1998); and that draw on Bourdieuan perspectives (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997). We found Bourdieu's work particularly helpful in framing Carol's transition story. We see Carol's decisions throughout her school-work transitions journey as arising from the interaction of her "habitus" (a matrix of her predispositions, appreciations, worldviews) and her assessment of her various types of "capital" or resources (cultural, social, economic) that could help her participate favorably within a given "field" (social or vocational context).

In addition to youth transitions literature, our study also draws on feminist perspectives. Feminists have documented how the gendered division of labour shapes women's experiences within education, employment, and family systems. For example, in educational settings, many young women remain clustered in female-dominated programs; in employment settings, many are segregated in jobs where wages, status, security, and access to training are limited; and, within domestic settings, women continue to perform most of the household and caring duties (Hadley 2003; Kodar 2004). At the same time, we lack knowledge about how one's social arrangements and experiences of social inequality during an individual's transition from adolescence to young adulthood are shaped by one's gender (Mahaffy 2003). What's more, analyses of school-work transitions have not given adequate attention to what socialist feminists have long considered important, namely that for women, the public and domestic spheres are inextricably linked (Hamilton 2005). In this study we give gender a central place in the analysis and try to pay attention to the complex and often subtle ways that Carol's school, work and home experiences intersect over time to help create her unique gendered vocational biography.

The narrative we have constructed was derived from eleven interviews with Carol, nine of which were carried out over the academic year leading up to her high school graduation, with the remaining two taking place three and five years later. Although

the narrative was derived from a much lengthier interview process, we try to capture prevailing themes at and across different times in Carol's life and to remain true to her original words.

### Carol's Narrative

Carol's narrative is presented as an unfolding story in three segments, reflecting the three interview periods we spent with her when she was 17/18, 21, and 23. We conclude each segment with a brief recap in order to highlight what we believe were her main preoccupations during that time period.

#### CAROL: THE LATE TEEN YEARS

##### Searching For a Vocational Direction

I have so many wide varieties of interests. It's always been emphasized that it was better to go to university than to go to college. I always thought that I would go to university, and my parents think I'm going. I'm able to achieve it, and it's a higher achievement; college seems like a cop-out to me. The only appealing thing about college is that it's over in two years; and then I'm out of the house; I'm away from that pressure.

I know that my maths and my sciences are my strong areas. My average in math has always been about 82; this is without doing homework. [If] I've got lots on my mind, then I don't do the work and don't hand it in. It's one of my major, major, major problems. I have to learn how to separate my school from my out-of-school dilemmas.

I can't imagine myself working where I didn't have the opportunity to work with people. I'm not interested in business. I don't want to be an engineer. I'm not interested in Accounting [or] Marketing. So that's the problem with going into the math areas. Ever since I can remember I've always worked with younger kids. [Last year] I asked for a kindergarten placement [as my unpaid, cooperative education work option] because [in my dance classes] I enjoyed the younger ones the most. I've got a letter of reference [from the teacher] and she says that I'm very well suited [for teaching]. I know now that I do want to teach young children and go into teaching.

September I'm coming back [after graduation], starting my OACs [university prerequisite courses]. I really want to achieve well on my OACs.

What I'm looking for is what it'll lead to. It looks like I'm going into the education field; I'm very capable of doing it; but if my marks aren't high enough to get into the Education program then I'd like to have something else there. At the end of my education, I want to be qualified to do something.

#### Passionate Dancer and Teacher

I teach dancing at my mother's school; that's my paid job. The dance studio's in [our] house. Unofficially, I started at the age of 12 teaching younger students. My grandmother started the school; she's the director, and my mom's school is the second school. Monday and Tuesday nights I'm doing my teacher's course [to get] my teacher's [certificate] this year. With [teaching], a lot of kids [will] get easily frustrated and aggravated and upset. One this year used to break down in tears because she didn't think she was as good as the other kids. The more I told her, "You're doing well; you're a wonderful dancer," the better it got. And now she's one of the most confident kids in that class, and she just shines. So that itself is a reward. I'm happy that I'm there to be part of that happiness.

The dance troupe [I belong to] travels to different international festivals [with] my mom and my grandmother. I've got a lot of dancing to do [this summer], shows, performances; so that will keep me busy.

[In my kindergarten co-op course] I decided to see what it would be like to be a teacher in a classroom rather than the studio. I [knew] the kids, their personalities, how to handle them. I've learned a lot of things. [Sometimes] they didn't want to do something and you have to coax them. It's something I knew quite a lot about before being there, not only [from] teaching dancing but also at home trying to coax my sister and brothers. I've had a few situations where they've broken down in tears, and then I'll say, "Show me your smile"; and just that moment when they show this little grin, it's just the best feeling.

#### Family Life

I know in every household everybody has their responsibilities, but it's just the way that everything gets thrown at me, and my brothers just sit there and

slum around all the time. There's four kids in that house. My two brothers [are] fourteen and sixteen; they might as well not be there. They just don't do a thing. The 12-year-old, my sister, does lots. I remember in elementary school, I didn't want to be at home because that meant I had to clean the house and take care of my brothers and sister. Even now, I'm the one [who baby-sits]; my mother can't leave my sister with my brothers because instead of taking care of her, they yell and shove her and then one thing leads to another.

My mother works evenings [teaching dance]. I take on the role of dinner and evening stuff. My father works full days and she works evenings; so the only time they're together is when she's done [teaching] at 9:00 at night.

Right now, I'm having a really hard time balancing my home life with my school, because every time I turn around, it's "We're going out for a couple of hours, watch this kid, watch that kid, make supper, do this, do that." I feel as if I'm jeopardizing my education in order to keep house and watch my brothers and sister, and I don't think it's fair.

#### RECAP

Carol seems intent on choosing a vocation for herself that she will enjoy over the long term, but a vocational plan continues to elude her. She senses it is essential to pursue post-secondary schooling and is sensitive to the higher status university option. It is also important that the program qualify her "to do something." She keeps circling back to the idea of a teaching career, but she's not at all sure that her grades will be good enough. Carol's life outside of school appears to be filled with numerous commitments and involvements as a dancer and dance teacher. In the domestic sphere, Carol has for years tolerated but resented her extensive household and babysitting responsibilities.

#### CAROL, THREE YEARS LATER, AGE 21

[After high school] I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with myself and figured I might as well stay in school. I ended up taking eight pre-university courses. I passed all these courses. I wanted to have a post-secondary education. I didn't want to just finish high school and that's it; I just felt I needed an

education. If you want to get somewhere, then I think school's the way to go. I'm not sure my grades are high enough to get into university at all. I decided to go to college after doing all my OACs [pre-university courses]. Now I'm starting my life.

It took me a long time to decide [what to do]. I chose to not pursue my education field. I really love working with kids; that's what I'm doing now; I'm teaching dance still. I decided it would be good if I found something that didn't involve children as my career choice, something that I didn't know that I could do.

I'm [near the end of] my first year in the Interior Design program at [a local college] and I'm enjoying it so much. It brings in all of my math and art skills at the same time. It's a 3-year program [but] most students choose to do it in four years just because it's a really heavy course load. If it comes down to it, I'll have to go the four-year [route] in order to keep up with the dancing and school at the same time. There's lots of things I could do in Interior Design: kitchen, office, restaurant design, anywhere from picking colour schemes to building the whole interior of the building, from drafting to interior drawing. I wouldn't be stuck in one area.

I just get more and more attached to [teaching dance]. I've seen these kids grow up; like some are 14 now [and] I've been teaching them since they were six. It's almost like a personal success to see them succeed and become wonderful performers. [Dancing has always] been such a big part of who I am. It's family, too.

There's a lot of positives [to having the dance school in our home]. You're never late; there is no drive home. You're able to work on something whenever you want. The only con is you never put work down. I'm having a hard time because right now there is too much at-home stuff: there's homework at home, work at home, family at home and free time at home. Now free time gets thrown out the window and family gets neglected, and homework gets pushed aside, because [I'll say to myself] "I'll just work on this step for a little while" and a little while turns into five hours. I'm so used to doing my [dance] work at home that other things have a hard time fitting into my at-home time.

I'm running the [dance] school with my mom right now so it's really demanding. I was

working seven days a week [teaching dance] and going to school fulltime and doing my homework. I wasn't sleeping very well so I toned back to five days a week for work. When I was in high school I was only teaching maybe once, twice a week. Now I'm teaching five times a week and my school is ten times more involved and a hundred times more challenging. I don't know how I do it; my friends don't know how I do it. A lot of all-nighters and pushing myself as far as I can go, to my physical limits as well as my mental limits. But needless to say that's not a healthy way of working. I can't give up one for the other; when it comes down to it, I don't know which way it's going to go.

A lot of household duties have been passed down to my younger sister. When I was [my sister's] age, I was doing everything because [my sister] wasn't old enough to do anything and my brothers were too stubborn to do anything. So I took on a lot of the work.

#### RECAP

Carol tells us about how, over these last three years, she gradually found a way out of her earlier vocational stalemate and is now almost one third of the way to completing her college-level program in Interior Design. It is during these years that Carol finds herself struggling with her emotional commitments to two very different possible futures: her passion for the field of dance and her determination to complete her post-secondary program. She struggles to balance her time and energy demands between her commitment to teaching at the dance school and her commitment to a demanding 3-year college program. We hear her reflect on the particular challenges facing a home-located business, particularly when she is drawn so much to it.

#### CAROL, TWO YEARS LATER, AGE 23

I took Interior Design for a year and a half [and] decided that's not what I want to do. I'm teaching dance; that's what I'm doing now. I enjoy it totally; I can't imagine not doing it. It's a family-run business; I work closely with my mother. Fulltime. Because I'm teaching dance, I'm in a field run by women who are very independent, a group of businesswomen who are very secure and smart and intelligent.

I really wanted to find something that was completely adult that didn't involve children; creative, but at the same time, not going straight back to doing what I was doing, teaching dancing. [I thought] "I should do something on my own, take responsibility and work in the adult world." That's when the Interior Design came in.

But I really was not happy; it was a really stressful time. I was part-time with dancing still and going to school in a program that pretty much drains the life out of you, so sleeping and eating were at the bottom of the list. It's a hard way to live your life, day in, day out, just running. I never stopped; running and running and running. I got home from school and I was an emotional wreck. I found myself completely drained after a year. I was just so unhappy; so halfway through the [next] year, I thought, "I can truck through this just to say I finished this and suffer through this for another year and a half, or I can cut my losses." [Leaving the program] was probably the best thing to do at the time, [but it] was hard because I felt like I had been defeated.

I made the right choice, I think. My stress level has come down exceedingly since then. I know that I enjoy working with children and now I am more comfortable with that choice. I'm sure now that I've made the right choice. I love it and every day is different. It's scary at the same time. I'm very happy doing what I want to do, but to have decided that so early on; I'm still very young. To be in the pattern already is a bit scary. This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life, day in day out. Some days you think, "Did I really do the right thing? Do I really want to be...?" It's that stuck feeling.

[My mom and I] work all evenings from 4:00-9:00, weekends, and then busy times. Then there's the regular chore with running a business; we have to do a lot of the accounting. I'm on contract. There's [also] private lessons arranged by parents. I do workshops, hired on by other teachers. Now that I'm not around the house as much as I used to be, [my sister has] pretty well taken over, helping out a lot of the time. [She] resents it, too. My brothers got away scot-free. They don't contribute to the household at all; they just expect things to be done for them. It made me very angry because when I was the oldest in high school I was taking care of half the household

duties, of my brothers and sister, a lot of cleaning and I would teach. I just couldn't not help.

I'm in the process of moving in with two friends of mine. That's going to do a lot of good as far as the strain on working with the family. Family issues and dancing issues get thrown together in one big heap, so there's a lot of tension sometimes. I moved away from home last summer for about four months; it made things a lot better, not living and working in the same place.

I want to go back [to school] eventually; I just don't know what I'll take. It's a lot of money to be spending on something you're not sure about. There's a (college) program, early childhood education, (that) connects to child studies at university; and after that you can go to teacher's college.

#### RECAP

Midway through her program, Carol had reached a breaking point. The combination of work, exacerbated by the fact that it was located right there in the home, her domestic duties, and schooling demands, were more than she could bear, and so she made the painful decision to abandon her studies. She feels less stressed; is happy doing what she has always felt she was best at, teaching children; and is in a field run by strong capable women. She is working full time and her sister has now taken over most of her domestic duties. She is moving in with friends and is looking forward to "not living and working in the same place." At times, however, she worries about being "stuck" and she does not rule out the possibility of one day returning to school to become a teacher.

#### Discussion

Our discussion focuses on three key themes within Carol's narrative that have profoundly shaped her emergent vocational biography over the years: the pull of gender-typical relational work, the management of the home-work interface within home-based production, and her attempt to pursue a post-secondary project.

GENDER-TYPICAL CHOICES AND THE PULL OF RELATIONAL WORK: "Ever since I Can Remember I've Always Worked with Younger Kids"

Feminist scholars have extensively documented the powerful influences of gender on family, educational and employment experiences of women. Often, these experiences rely heavily on gendered relational work: in the home sphere, women's care work remains both physically and emotionally a key aspect of their overall domestic duties (Marks 2004); in the educational sphere, they are found in much greater numbers in post-secondary programs such as teaching, early childhood education, nursing, and social work; and in the employment sphere, cultivating a service relationship is often central to the work they do (OECD 1998).

Carol's narrative helps us see the plight of one young woman as she spends years living under the shadow of pervasive gendered constraints at home, school, and work, entertaining a range of gender-typical and occasionally less typical vocational futures, and making at times painful but in some ways emancipating choices before eventually settling into what she hopes will be a rewarding vocational future, at least for the foreseeable future.

Carol's home circumstances provide an essential backdrop for understanding the development of her vocational habitus. According to the (limited) research on children's home responsibilities, adolescent girls spend considerable time with family housework and care work, with eldest daughters, and even younger daughters, assuming much more responsibility than sons (Cohen 2001; Lee, Schneider, & Waite 2003). In terms of paid work, beginning at age 12, Carol informally worked as a dance teacher in her mother's school. These responsibilities continued and at times increased throughout her teen years and her early twenties, simultaneously contributing to both the family economy, to Carol's commitment to her mother's business, and to her sense of competence in and enduring pull toward gendered relational work, particularly teaching children. As a teen, Carol directly links her decision to do a high school co-op teaching placement in a kindergarten to these strengths; and her success with this experience reinforces her perception and appreciation of teaching as a desirable career choice. As a young woman in her twenties, she continues to enjoy working with children, again linking her competence and pleasure in this domain to her earlier domestic care work and dance teaching experience.

Carol's strength in relational work is also a source of tension throughout her life and in her vocational decision-making. She persists in resenting her heavy burden of domestic responsibilities and the inequalities she perceived in the gendered division of labour in her family. Her academic strengths in maths and sciences expanded her vocational options, and as a teen she tries to imagine herself in these types of jobs, but they are seen to lack that essential relational quality with which she is so familiar and comfortable. Research suggests that Carol's perspective is not unusual; women in particular are likely to reject math- and science-related careers because these careers are not seen to support their interpersonal work goals (Morgan, Isaac, & Sansone 2001).

Carol's narrative draws attention to both the predictability and unpredictability of her vocational choices around relational work during the time span of her mid-teens through her early twenties. They are predictable in that they appear to be nested within female-typical choices, namely, relational work with children within a teaching environment. They are unpredictable in that she feels caught by the limited program choices; opts into a promising alternative program that, while still quite gender typical, emphasizes her math rather than relational skills; and spends almost two years struggling to keep alive two very different vocational futures.

#### MANAGING THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC INTERFACE WITHIN HOME-BASED EMPLOYMENT:

"It's a Hard Way to Live Your Life, Day In, Day Out, Just Running"

Carol and her mother are among a growing contingent of women working out of the home. Often referred to as home-based labourers, their work circumstances are part of the larger shift toward the proliferation of non-standard work forms (Felstead & Jewson 2000) and the increasing number of self-employed women who create or tap into local market niches (Rooney et al. 2003).

Although we know very little about the lives of women involved in home-based labour, and virtually nothing about how these challenges may be shaping their daughters' vocational lives and futures, feminist scholars are now beginning to pay more attention to this increasingly popular work form. Carol's narrative

spotlights what some scholars see as the largest challenge for women involved with home-based production: managing the interface between the private (home) and public (work) sphere. Far from being a family-friendly strategy that reconciles paid and unpaid work, the very fact that paid work is spatially located right in the home makes it "inherently problematic" (Felstead & Jewson 2000, 118, italics in original). What's more, because domestic work remains highly gendered, managing the home-work interface becomes a gendered project as well. Paying attention to family relationships; ambivalent feelings over competing home-work urgencies; potential collisions between home-work roles; and the ever-present need to monitor time and space boundaries become critical tensions in this struggle (Felstead & Jewson 2000; Mirchandani 2000).

Although not always sympathetic, over the years Carol sees her mother forever struggling with these issues. Notably, Carol struggles in her own way with these very same tensions. As a teen and young woman, she understands, but nonetheless resents, the major role she must play in helping her mother manage the domestic side of the work-home interface; and she remains frustrated by her brothers' non-involvement. In high school, she struggles with her own private (home) and public (school) tensions; she feels her extensive domestic duties may be jeopardizing her commitment to school, a claim not easily dismissed given her repeated reference to her domestic role over the years. When Carol enrolls in a demanding program at a local college, she finds herself juggling not two, but three, unrelenting commitments: domestic responsibilities, paid responsibilities in the home-based business, and school responsibilities. She enjoys her work in the family business; and as some researchers have highlighted (Mirchandani 2000), she sees some advantages to it being located in the home. At the same time, she appears highly rushed, stressed, and sleep deprived.

In terms of previous research, we know virtually nothing about the struggles facing individuals in similar circumstances to Carol, but we do know that large numbers of high school and post-secondary students combine waged work with schooling (CAUT, 2006; Sales, Drolet, & Bonneau 2001). Evidence also suggests that post-secondary studies are stressful for Canadian youth, particularly for young women,

regardless if they are juggling paid work (Franke 2003); that although about 85 percent of female high school graduates are believed at some point to have enrolled in some form of post-secondary studies by age 20 (Tomkowicz & Bushnik 2003), almost one in six leave the post-secondary system before graduating (Statistics Canada 2000); and that female post-secondary students with demanding jobs tend to cut back dramatically on study time and virtually eliminate leisure pursuits (Franke 2003). Carol's narrative helps contextualize these broad patterns and also draws attention to other important home-based work tensions that require more systematic attention by youth transition researchers.

#### CAROL'S POST-SECONDARY PROJECT: "I Made the Right Choice, I Think"

Like many of today's working and middle class adolescent females, Carol sees post-secondary education as the route to success and a middle class lifestyle (Harris 2004). She believes in, participates in, and positions herself to be successful in post-secondary education and yet, she does not complete any post-secondary program. On the surface, Carol could appear as a kind of failure, a college dropout statistic on a downward mobility path (Liljander 1998) because she neither completed her college studies nor pursued her interest in becoming a teacher. However, it is important to see her post-secondary project within the larger context of her life course, a perspective that provides insight into how her home-school-work environments have shaped her vocational habitus over the years, the chronic tensions she endured, and the kinds of vocational capital that she feels she can draw on to feel successful.

By her early 20s, Carol has already spent more than a dozen years acquiring extensive relational capital through her domestic and paid work as well as her co-op placement. She has also acquired extensive cultural and social capital, and even economic capital - the family's dance studio - which, when combined, gives her a remarkable amount of entrepreneurial capital to draw on as she gradually assumes a pivotal role within the family business. Carol has considerable specialized cultural capital linked to home-based labour that she has acquired in watching her mother

that could leverage risk-taking if Carol were ever to attempt another home-based business. She has also learned to combine several related jobs, a valuable survival strategy in today's labour market that relies so heavily on part-time jobs, particularly in female-typical industries and occupations.

At the same time, Carol wonders if she has made the right career "choice," and is still immersed in trying to sort her way through this. She worries about being "stuck" and remains troubled about her vocational future. Despite her relational skills and dance credentials, without post-secondary credentials she lacks transferable institutional cultural capital that could give her more career leverage outside her immediate field of dance. Contemporary society values institutional cultural capital much more so than in the past. Increasingly, in many occupations, individuals who hope to "make it" are now required to complete extensive post-secondary schooling. Carol seems aware of this trend; in fact, despite her interest in the teaching profession, the competitive educational route needed to become a certified school teacher appears to have been a key factor in her never giving it serious thought.

Institutional capital, and its transferability across fields, is important in today's labour market where many individuals can expect to change occupations numerous times over the course of their working lives. If Carol decides to abandon the field of dance as an occupation, she could find herself with relatively few valued personal resources. Janz (2004), for example, found that young women with a high school education or less tend to be low-paid part-time workers, to be in service occupations or in the consumer services industry, and to be employed in small non-unionized workplaces. As for women working in home-located businesses, although their circumstances vary widely, as a group they not only experience similar disadvantages as their sisters in conventional workplace settings, but they also tend to earn considerably less than them (Felstead & Jewson 2000).

Perhaps Carol will eventually attempt post-secondary schooling, although being an older student and attempting a lengthy, competitive vocational path from college to university to teacher's college reduce her chances of success (Andres 2001). What's more, despite the value placed on

post-secondary credentials, Livingstone (2003), among others, reminds us that in a society like Canada's, where education and employment are not tightly coupled, the promise of securing well paid rewarding work through enhanced credentialing could still elude her.

#### Concluding Comments

This paper has presented one young woman's unique vocational journey from age 17 to 23. Told in her own words, Carol's story helps contextualize and expand our current understandings of young women's school-work transitions. We argue that Carol's struggle to craft a rewarding vocational project needs to be understood within the context of her unique social location as a dutiful middle-class young woman and eldest daughter in a two-parent family with a working mother; as a passionate dancer working in a home-based dance business; and as an academically average student who was drawn to relational work and believed in post-secondary schooling as a necessary means to a favourable vocational end.

This study also draws attention to the need to challenge powerful ideologies that mask important "work" that many female adolescents and post-adolescents do as family members, paid workers, and individuals striving to craft a meaningful vocational biography. Carol's story reminds us of the need to pay greater attention to these everyday, everynight experiences of young women which comprise their extended gendered apprenticeship into the world of paid and unpaid work more specifically and help shape their socialized vocational subjectivities more generally.

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