

Chapter 10

The Careers of Female Graduates of Cambridge University, 1920s-1970s

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Introduction

This chapter is based on a sample survey of the life histories of female graduates of Girton College, University of Cambridge, from the earliest date at which we could find living graduates – the earliest respondent entered Girton in 1918- up to the 1980s. Girton was exclusively a women's college from its foundation in 1873 until it became co-educational in 1979. I and my co-researchers, Dr Amy-Louise Erickson and Ms Kate Perry, sent a very detailed, 29 page questionnaire to a ten percent sample of post 1930 graduates (700 women) and interviewed 10 percent of these. We contacted all 130 survivors who had graduated before 1930 and received 76 completed questionnaires. The study examines the experiences of female graduates through a period in which women's career opportunities widened considerably, but not sufficiently to match those of men. It focuses upon what shaped their patterns of paid and unpaid employment, whether or not we describe these as 'careers'.

Girton was the first college for women to be established in either of the elite English universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Elsewhere in England, two women's university colleges were founded in London in the eighteen forties. Universities throughout Britain gradually became co-educational from the later eighteen seventies onwards, though women remained a minority of students and there were, and still remain, strong gender differences in the subjects studied, with men dominating the sciences and women more strongly represented in the arts, humanities and modern languages (Dyhouse, 1995). By 1900 women were 16 percent of all British university students. The percentage rose to 27 by 1930, and then fell to 23 by 1938 where it remained until the early 1970s. However the proportion of women in higher education, more broadly defined, was not static through this period, for the percentage of women receiving education in teacher training colleges rose rapidly. From the 1970s the proportion of women attending universities rose steadily until male and female student numbers reached parity in the mid-1980s, which has been maintained to the present. However part of this gender shift can be explained by the absorption of teacher training into universities from the later 1970s. (Anderson, 1992, p. 23; Halsey and Webb, pp. 225-9, 242-3).

Girton was founded specifically to challenge gender differences in higher education and the restricted career opportunities they imposed upon both men and women. The founder of Girton, Emily Davies, was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, who did not marry. She was educated largely at home and came to resent the more extensive education received by her brothers at school and university and the wider opportunities it opened to them. In the 1850s she was drawn into the growing feminist and social reform movements of mid-Victorian England and became increasingly committed to improving the education of middle class women (Davies, Howarth, 1988). She assumed that they had equal capacities to those of men and should have equal career opportunities. In 1866 she described, caustically, the irrational gender division in middle and upper class education that characterized mid-Victorian England:

The present distribution is, indeed, somewhat whimsical. Inasmuch as young men go into offices where they have to conduct foreign correspondence, and as they travel about all over the world, they are taught the dead languages. As woman's place is at the domestic hearth, and as middle class women rarely see a foreigner, they are taught modern languages with a special view to facility in speaking... As women are not expected to take part in political affairs they are taught history. As men do, boys are taught mathematics instead. In physical science, astronomy and botany are considered the ladies' department. Chemistry and mechanics being the branches most directly applicable to domestic uses, are reserved for boys. (Davies, Howarth, 1988, pp. 126-7).

She added: 'These distinctions ought rather, however, to be spoken of as a thing of the past. The educators of boys and girls respectively are learning and borrowing from each other.' (Davies, Howarth, 1988, p. 127). This research aimed to investigate whether Davies' optimism was justified.

More broadly, studying the life histories of a sample of Girton graduates over much of the twentieth century can provide insight into the employment experiences of an important sub-group of the female population over a period of profound change in society, the economy and gender relations. In no sense are Girtonians a representative sample of the female population, being highly selected students at an elite institution. But, for this very reason, they are representative of those women graduates who should have been best equipped to compete with men in the employment market, since they were clever women and highly educated graduates of Cambridge University, whose male graduates were highly successful in reaching the top in the professions and in business. It can be argued, indeed, that female graduates of Cambridge, for most of the period of this study, were more able than the men because they were more highly selected. Before World War One, one in four of the whole undergraduate population of Great Britain attended Oxford or Cambridge, but only one in ten female undergraduates. Female student numbers at Cambridge were formally fixed at one in ten of the total student population until 1987, although in practice the proportion grew from the mid 1970s as previously all-male colleges began, slowly, to admit women. There is no evidence that British men are inherently more able than British women. Hence this study offers a particular opportunity to explore the circumstances in which women have, or have

not, achieved equal employment opportunities with men and to explore the gendered processes of recruitment to high status careers.

This study is unusual in examining a specified sub-group of British women through a long period of the recent past. In general terms, we know a great deal about the paid and unpaid work activities of British women through the twentieth century, about the occupations they entered and their pay relative to that of men (e.g., Roberts, 1988; Lewis, 1984; Beechey and Perkins, 1987); and there are short-term studies of women in specific occupations (e.g. Glucksmann, 1990). We know that still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, clear gender divisions remain in employment in respect both of the occupations which employ men and women, in levels of pay and in their relative chances of reaching the highest levels in most careers (Dench, 2002). The gender gap has narrowed and the employment prospects of married women in particular have broadened, especially since the 1970s, but a substantial gap remains. But what has and has not changed over time, and why, has not previously been studied systematically for a clearly defined sub-group of the female population. By examining the extreme case of a group of women who could be expected, in principle, to have had a greater opportunity than most British women of closing the gender gap, we might hope to cast light on wider issues relating to gender differences in careers.

The absence of comparable studies is partly due to lack of suitable sources. Another reason for using an Oxford or Cambridge College as a source for a long-run study is that they keep systematic records of their students and maintain contact with a high proportion of them, as most other British 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. We aimed to construct a picture of the lives of all Girtonians over the period in order to assess, among other things, what shaped their patterns of employment, rather than selecting for study only women who had conventionally successful careers.

The questionnaires and interviews asked questions about many aspects of the women's lives including why they went to Girton, what or who influenced their next move after graduation; about paid and unpaid work over their lifetimes; about family life; if they did not marry, why not; the division of tasks within the household; when they first had sex; methods 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, almost 70 percent, despite the length of the questionnaire. We hoped that this might be so given that this is a highly literate population with 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, especially from older respondents. All of the data will be available for consultation in the Girton College archive when our analysis is complete.

Patterns of Employment

This paper focuses on the preliminary findings of the research as it concerns women's changing and intersecting roles in their 'careers', broadly defined, after graduation. The definition of a 'career' used here is not restricted to paid employment let alone highly paid employment but also includes family life, voluntary work and low-paid work as well as high-flying work. The study is seeking to gain a sense of the pattern of women's lives as a whole. One of our aims is to explore what the term 'career' means to these women. The work-lives of many of them do not fit the conventional definition of a career as a series of progressive moves up the ladder of a specific occupation: rather some of the women can be said to have a different conception of a 'career' as a series of adjustments in the relationship between their private and their public lives which enabled them to remain employed, not necessarily in paid work, in ways that they found personally satisfying. Others refused to comment in terms of careers, regarding their work histories as a series of 'jobs' with no particular pattern or meaning.

Indeed an immediately striking feature of the findings is the very complex work patterns of most Girtonians over the whole period since the 1920s. And, hardly surprisingly, the careers of women graduates are more strongly influenced by family relationships and responsibilities than those of men. Individual careers are so complex and individually varied that we have not, so far, found a means to represent these systematically in a way that does not mislead by over-simplifying.

Broadly, it can be said that, throughout the period, most female graduates who did not marry (for statistics of how many did and did not marry see below) were in paid employment, normally in a progressive professional career, from graduation until retirement at age 60-65, and most who married took paid work at least between graduation and marriage. Before World War Two, paid work was effectively forbidden to married women, though many of them engaged in voluntary work, especially when their children were grown. Thereafter it was socially acceptable for them to remain in, or to return to, paid employment, though opportunities remained severely limited at least until the 1970s. Most Girtonians who married, especially from the 1950s, stayed in the labour market until the birth of a first child, then spent some years in the home before returning to paid work in later life, which they did in increasing numbers over time. From the 1970s growing, though still small, numbers combined childrearing with paid work through all or most of their lives between marriage and retirement. In all of these changes, Girtonians closely followed the employment patterns of the British female population as a whole. However their patterns differed in an important regard from what is conventionally assumed about the activities of non-graduate middle class women at this time (though it must be said that these have not been adequately researched). Very small numbers of Girtonians, including those who graduated before World War Two, led exclusively domestic lives, even after marriage and childbirth. Dyhouse (2000) similarly found that only 12 percent of a sample of 500 female graduates of English universities, other than Oxford and Cambridge, between the wars had no paid employment after becoming parents.

Among the Girton graduates, also, very few had a 'job for life' with one employer. Even those who did not marry had relatively complex work histories. Even most schoolteachers- as we will see, the occupation entered by the largest number of Girtonians up to the 1970s, changed their place of employment at regular intervals- on average every three to five years for the first twenty years of employment- sometimes in search of promotion, sometimes to follow husbands as they moved for purposes of work, or to live close to other relatives. A significant number, even of unmarried women, gave up paid work for a period, normally to care for an aging relative or a sick or disabled sibling.

These generalizations mask substantial variations that can best be conveyed by descriptions of individual experiences. One woman who graduated in 1935 is a relatively successful representative of mothers who strove to construct satisfying, progressive careers in a period when it was both socially and institutionally difficult for mothers to obtain paid work. It was socially disapproved of and there were few opportunities. Firstly after graduation, she trained as a housing manager. She was one of an increasing though still small number of Girtonians who entered the growing public sector social services in the 1930s. These were new professional occupations that replaced tasks previously performed by unpaid women in the voluntary sector and hence were relatively easily accessible to women since they were seen to be within their accustomed sphere of work. She joined the civil service during World War Two, responsible mainly for housing policy. In principle the higher levels of the civil service (other than the diplomatic service) had been open to (unmarried) women since 1921 (Martindale, 1938), but few Girtonians or other women entered this career-which was a popular destination for male Cambridge graduates at this time- until the absence of men in wartime increased the demand for highly qualified women. This woman had three children, in 1942, 1944 and 1947. Like others she found the post-war civil service again inhospitable to married women, especially if they had children, despite formal abolition of the 'marriage bar'. Between 1945 and 1952 she worked as a journalist on the *Economist*, writing mainly on social issues. She chose this occupation because this was one of the few that could be combined flexibly with child-rearing and enabled her to draw on her professional knowledge and experience. Three other married women graduates with children worked alongside her, attracted by the fact that they could work partly at home. Her mother helped with the children. This was important to her continuing in paid work when, for the first time in history, the British middle classes had difficulty in finding servants, in a buoyant labour market, and there were few other sources of childcare. She soon felt, however, that she 'wanted to do real things, not writing about what other people did' so in 1952 she became an administrator at the government planned New Town at Harlow which was then under construction, on the recommendation of her former, female, manager in the civil service. In 1962 she moved to become Director of Education at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) where she remained until retirement in 1980. She commented that she had had a 'good career... but I still feel that I would have liked to have done more...I've been a conscientious mother but a reluctant one...all my life has been a pull between career and family...up to becoming a mother I felt being a woman was an

advantage. I could hold my own'. This was a refrain of married women throughout the survey. Thereafter, 'if you play fair by your husband and children it is a handicap'. Her being successful and better paid than her husband caused problems and they divorced. Such tensions were commonest in the lives of married women who gave high priority to a paid career. She summed up: 'I've had an extremely interesting life and I think a fairly useful life. I just think that being a woman you are handicapped and it's a sort of grievance... to me its hugely frustrating not to be able to use your full abilities... if something had been available that had more responsibility [than RIBA] I would have taken it'. This was an especially articulate expression of a view that was very common among her own and later generations. She had determinedly built something that can be recognized as a 'career', much of it in newly emerging occupations, building on experience and contacts made in her successive occupations, but she had done so with great difficulty and felt that she had not fulfilled her potential.

At the other end of the spectrum, in that her activities were more various and less structured, was a woman who was a student just after World War Two. She described herself as a 'magpie'. After graduation she started a PhD on eighteenth century maritime law, but married and had four children rather than complete it. She travelled extensively in East Asia with her academic husband before his untimely death. She took an MA in sociology in the 1960s, but decided not to pursue it but to train in documentary and anthropological photography. She then worked for twelve years as an oral history interviewer, then as an estate agent and finally as a freelance garden consultant. She was extreme in the number of different activities she undertook, but not in the fact that they were too various to be described as a structured career, or in the enthusiasm and flexibility with which she pursued them and combined them with family life.

Social and Demographic Context

To understand the experiences of these women graduates requires knowledge about their social backgrounds. It is a common assumption that most of these students at an elite college came from 'upper class' or wealthy backgrounds. In fact this was rare. Young women from the most upper class backgrounds, at least until the 1960s, often faced stronger opposition than women in other classes to going to university and becoming, as their families feared, unmarriageable 'bluestockings'. Such assumptions shaped the career opportunities of such women. Throughout the period, only about 5 percent came from 'upper class' backgrounds, by any definition. This is roughly the same percentage who came from working class backgrounds, even in the pre- World War Two period. This working class presence before the war was unexpected and interesting. Most Girtonians were fairly evenly spread over the many gradations of the British middle classes. They varied from the daughters of relatively poorly paid clergy and school teachers in the state sector to those of prosperous professionals, business executives, successful civil servants and colonial officials. The middle classes had stronger incentives than the very rich to educate their daughters since most were not rich enough to support them if they

could not marry, and family support, both financial and emotional, was crucial in the decision of women to go to university. That many families were far from wealthy is suggested by the fact that a significant number of respondents lived at college on very limited incomes. This is indicated by the precision with which they could recall, many decades later, their income and outgoings, their difficulties in paying for books and clothing, still less for pleasures such as cinema –going.

Consequently, 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 World War Two than before; and even then they normally worked until the first child was born. Even the earliest cohorts of graduates in the sample 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. 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 becoming married. But parents of women graduates of the 1920s, 30s and 40s were preparing 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.

Of all British women born 1900-7, 15 percent never married. A minimum of 22 percent of Girtonians of that generation who graduated in the 1920s (calculated from the 70 who responded to the questionnaire) never married. Analysis of the register of all Girton students yields 47 percent of this age group who never married. This may exaggerate the true numbers due to the failure of some graduates to inform the college of their marriages.

Table 10.1 Percentage of women ever marrying

Born	1900-07	1918-27	1928-37	1938-47
UK	85	92	96	96
All Girtonians*	53	57	82	83
Sample	78	77	84	91

Note: *Drawn from the *Girton College Register, 1869-1946* (Girton College, 1948) which recorded known personal information about all Girton staff and students.

Almost without exception, these unmarried women did not have inherited incomes sufficient to support them, needed to earn their livings throughout their lives and often had to support others, such as widowed mothers or disabled siblings, or both. There was a significantly higher marriage rate among those born from the later 1920s onwards and graduating after World War Two. This follows the national trend to an evening of the sex ratio in the population and almost universal marriage after World War Two.

The median age of marriage of Girtonians was consistently higher than that of the female population as a whole until the 1950s, when it shared the general fall in the marriage age. Overall it followed the same declining trend as the general population as did the marriage ages of graduates of other British universities (Dyhouse, 2002). Marriage ages of British women between the late 1940s and early 1970s were at a historically remarkably low level, for reasons that have not been explained. For at least a century before World War Two they averaged 25 or above. From the 1970s they returned to the previous high levels.

Table 10.2 Median age of women at first marriage

At Girton in	England and Wales	Girton sample
1900-19	26	28
1920-29	25	27
1930-34	25	26
1944-49	24	24
1950-59	23	24
1960-69	22	23

Source: Jane Lewis *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations*. (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2001), p. 30.

The lower ages of marriage and first childbirth in the decades after the war shortened the period in which women could establish themselves in a paid career between graduation and childbirth. This occurred just at the time, in a period of severe labour shortage and economic change, when career opportunities for women had the possibility of widening. From the later 1960s the ages of marriage and first childbirth first stabilized then rose, while the birthrate started a long-term decline. Girtonians experienced the same increased divorce rate from the 1960s, and the decline of formal marriage along with the increased numbers of stable unmarried partnerships as the population as a whole from the 1980s also.

As already suggested, up to World War Two, women were formally excluded on marriage from most professional or business occupations, including teaching. This ‘marriage bar’, as it was known, spread especially fast during the inter-war years, at the very time when increasing numbers of women were beginning to come forward for such occupations. For example it was introduced into the civil service in 1921, in the same statutory Order that extended the admission of women to the service. Even childless married women could not work, though widows were permitted to return to employment. Women’s organizations and trade unions (e.g. of women schoolteachers) campaigned vigorously but ineffectually against the ‘marriage bar’ and some women evaded it. (Copelman, 1996). One Girtonian schoolteacher described how she was able to hide the fact that she was married because she lived in a different part of London from the school where she worked. Another commented on the surprising number of her colleagues who appeared to have married over-night when the bar was abolished in London. In smaller towns it was harder to hide. The bar more or less disappeared, and then was formally abolished in most occupations in World War Two due to the shortage of labour.

Consequently, women born in the 1940s and after and graduating in the 1960s or later were the first to grow up able realistically to imagine that a career after marriage was possible and to plan for it. We need to be aware of the novelty of this expectation when assessing the behaviour both of women and of employers in the labour market in recent decades.

Within marriage, Girtonians and most other British women practised birth control throughout the period from the 1920s. Nationally, the birth rate declined from the later nineteenth century to an historically low point in the early 1930s. Though it recovered somewhat from the early 1940s until the later 1960s, it has remained at low levels ever since. Throughout the period Girtonians in the sample who had children (almost all of those who married and very few who did not) had more than the national average number. This is not the normal expectation of highly educated women, especially in view of their higher marriage age, and it differs from US findings (Hulbert and Schuster, 1993, p. 43).

Table 10.3 Average completed family size

Married in	1924-34	1935-39	1940-44	1945-49	1950-54	1955-59
England and Wales	2.15	2.07	2.09	2.22	2.30	2.38
Girton sample	2.59	2.81	2.55	2.34	2.96	2.46

The birth control pill, which became widely available in Britain in the mid 1960s, but was not easily available to unmarried women until the mid 1970s (Cook, 2003), can be assumed to have influenced women's career choices and prospects, but the precise nature of this influence is unclear. It has been argued for the US that the availability of reliable and comfortable contraception in the form of the pill encouraged young women to invest in lengthy career training and to defer marriage until they were established in a career (Goldin and Katz, 2002). In Britain, late ages at marriage before World War Two had not been associated with high levels of higher education largely because the career opportunities open to women were very limited. Nor could the availability of the pill have led to this outcome had formal institutional barriers to the admission of women to elite universities, medical schools and the legal profession not been removed from the later 1970s. At present we cannot separate out the effects of these two distinct changes, though closer analysis of our data may enable it. The pill allows women more comfortably to delay births, without delaying sexual partnerships, until they are established in their careers and gives them a stronger belief in their capacity to control their fertility. The age of first birth has risen generally among British women, including highly educated women, since the 1970s. However this shifts along the life-course rather than removes the problems of combining career and motherhood (Cook, 2003). Though the pill has changed women's career prospects it has not removed major obstacles to career advancement.

Graduates of the inter-war years, especially of the 1930s, were the first generation of women to enter marriage knowing with some certainty that they could control the size and timing of their families. They normally had families of

around the low average size of the period - 2 to 3 - and had them early in marriage, compared with earlier generations of women (including their own mothers, as our data shows) who had more children spread over a longer period of life, often into their forties (Anderson, 1990). This generation of women 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 done something useful for the community if the opportunity had been available, the more so since this was a time at which expectation of the length of healthy life was also rising (Thane, 2001). That the opportunities to take up paid work in middle life were rarely available was a cause of varying degrees of regret, in some cases of open resentment, among them.

However, it is also important to note how many Girtonians found ways of making use of their skills and talents outside the paid labour market, above all by making careers in unpaid voluntary work. These could be real careers in the sense of being long-term and often progressive in terms of training and promotion, though unpaid, and they were certainly of value to society. For example, women appear to have reformed and professionalized the ancient lay magistracy (a key component of the British judicial system) after they were first admitted to it in 1919. They insisted on the introduction of training and professional standards into a voluntary occupation that was falling into disrepute in male hands (Logan, 2002). Without these women such work as that of the magistracy, and of such important voluntary organizations as the Citizens' Advice Bureaux and Marriage Guidance – the voluntary occupations in which Girtonians were most commonly involved and which emerged and thrived during our period- could not have functioned so effectively. They were, however, active in so many forms of voluntary activity – political and religious, as well as caring and social- that systematic analysis is difficult, especially because respondents are sometimes vague about when and for how long they were active in such work.

Again, individual examples are highly suggestive of the wider pattern. One woman who entered Girton in 1931 came from a wealthy family, married twice, had no children, and worked for an employer only during World War Two. However, she ran a farm throughout her marriages, was a magistrate for 25 years, chair of her local magistrates' bench for five years and served, unpaid, as a member of a New Town Corporation in the 1950s, as an elected member of a Rural District Council and an appointed member of a Regional Hospital Board.

Many Girtonians took this route of voluntary work, but some of them comment on feeling under-valued for all the hard and valuable work they did, because it was unpaid and not taken as seriously by others as paid work. This prevailing attitude may have encouraged many of them to abandon voluntary work in favour of paid work when this became more readily available for women. This suggests that there were social losses as well as gains when female graduates took up paid rather than unpaid work. It is notable however, how many respondents took up, or increased their commitment to, voluntary work after retirement from paid work. Over time, there are signs of a shift in the age structure of volunteering rather than of a dramatic decline.

Marriage itself was a more secure career option for women between the 1930s and 1960s than before or after. Before, there were higher rates of widowhood

relatively early in life (Mitchell and Deane, 1962, p. 16). A number of Girtonians experienced relative poverty in early life 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 World War Two. Graduates from the later 1960s on, like the rest of the population, had a significantly higher propensity to divorce than earlier cohorts. The cohorts in between 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. In particular, graduates of the 1980s, born in the sixties, who grew up in the divorce culture, and might be 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 partnership.

Paid Work

Against this background of complex social changes which closely influenced women's adult lives, what paid occupations did Girtonians take up?

Before, during and after World War Two, they overwhelmingly became schoolteachers, at some point in their lives. This was generally true of female British graduates and more so in lower status universities than in Oxford and Cambridge. 78.7 percent of female graduates of Manchester University in the 1930s became teachers (Dyhouse, 1997, p. 219). Cambridge and Oxford graduates were more likely than other graduates to obtain posts in higher status independent and grammar schools. Of the Girton graduates of the early 1920s for whom we have employment information 62 percent went straight into school-teaching, slightly fewer among 1930s graduates; about one-third of those who graduated in 1944-53 did so. A higher proportion taught at some time in their lives. Still, one-third of early 1960s graduates entered school teaching; 20 percent of those of the early seventies when school teaching was still the largest single occupation of Girton graduates. We find in the mid 1930s the first hints that teaching was coming to be rather despised as a career for a Cambridge graduate, a view that has become much stronger in recent years. In 2000 only two percent of Oxford and Cambridge graduates went directly into school teaching or teacher training (IPPR, 2002). But many women who did not teach immediately after graduation, or even refused to do so because it did not attract them, 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 whatever their previous occupation or career aspirations, despite the putative opening of wider career opportunities for women after World War Two.

About 50 percent of the teachers went enthusiastically into teaching at graduation or later. Many others went reluctantly, feeling that they had no option when so few occupations were welcoming to women graduates, but they had to earn a living. Often they complain of receiving poor vocational guidance from the college and from the Cambridge University Appointments Board who, up to the 1960s, were said to offer teaching and secretarial work as the chief options for

women graduates. Similar complaints were made by reluctant teachers who graduated from other British universities (Dyhouse, 2000). But, however disappointing at the time, this may have been a realistic appraisal by career advice centres of the female graduate labour market. Secretarial work was the second most frequent first occupation of Girton graduates up to the 1960s. Some of these posts carried considerable responsibility, for example in international organizations. In other cases women were advised to take secretarial posts as a first step into another professional career. One Girtonian in the 1930s took a secretarial post in an insurance office following advice that she might graduate to the career as an actuary to which she aspired. She was disappointed.

A secretarial career was more common among graduates who married than among those who did not, as the analysis below of the careers of unmarried women will show. It is difficult to judge whether women took secretarial posts because they aspired to marry or whether such posts provided more opportunities to meet prospective husbands than teaching in an all-female school, as most female graduate teachers did until the 1970s. Certainly many teachers complained of their restricted opportunities to meet men.

For some, a period of teaching was a condition of the local authority grant that enabled them to attend university. Others accepted it as a flexible career which would enable them to move around the country, or the world, as their husbands moved employment, or which would fit around the needs of children. Notably few women from wealthy backgrounds, who could afford the luxury of choice, went into teaching. 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. A significant number taught because they moved abroad, following their husband's work, and found that it was the only employment acceptable to the local culture or to the husband's employer. In the 1950s there was an acute shortage of teachers in Britain and the profession became heavily dependent upon the 'married woman returnee'. Several women report being persuaded to teach at that time by their children's head teacher, desperate due to lack of staff. One of many reasons for the current teacher shortage in Britain must be that the profession was once so dependent upon women graduates, but now they have wider options at all stages.

Husbands and children had major influences on whether and at what married Girtonians worked for pay. Very few, even among pre World War Two graduates say that their husbands were hostile to their working if they wished to do so. This is contrary to what even post-war surveys say about male attitudes to married women's work (Bruley, 1999, pp. 119-128). It may be that men who married one of the small number of female graduates of elite universities at this time had different expectations from other men. A few women in all cohorts worked because their husband's incomes were low or unstable due to illness or disability or due to the nature of their occupations, e.g., free lance artists or writers. A high earning husband obviously allowed a wife flexibility about when or whether she worked. A high proportion in all periods shifted their jobs when their husband's moved theirs. The reverse process was very rare, especially before the 1970s. A number of

women were affected by the conventions operating in many occupations, including university departments, until at least the later 1960s, that married couples might not work in the same department. It was always the woman who was required to move. One ambitious scientific researcher was required in 1950 to quit her post in the science laboratory of a petroleum company when her husband was appointed deputy head of the laboratory. Then, her research career unwillingly ended, she took part-time jobs as a technical writer and then in teaching. Many women were fully employed as unpaid assistants to their husbands who were general practitioners working from home, clergy or academics (as typists, researchers, car-drivers, hostesses).

It is clear from the questionnaires and interviews that, unlike women graduates before World War One, who expected to have to choose *either* marriage *or* a career (Vicinus, 1985), very many women from the 1920s, and especially from the 1930s, already aspired to combine them in some way. Only a minority state that they expected to give up permanently all work outside the home on marriage or the birth of children, which would in practice rarely have been possible for pre-war graduates. Most, at all times, expected to return to some form of paid or unpaid work later in life, often commenting that they felt that this was an obligation following on from their education. They rarely express a wish to combine 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, enabling them to construct a coherent, progressive, if slow-moving, career. This is the view most consistently expressed over the whole period of the survey. It is clear from our survey that 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 over-simplify 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. Again these are most easily demonstrated by examples.

A woman who entered Girton in 1932 was one of the very few Girtonians to become a barrister before World War Two, although women had been admitted to the bar in 1919. She was obviously talented, gaining a first class in bar finals. She experienced 'a hostile attitude to women at the bar'. She claimed that the most negative experience of her life was 'being sneered at and condescended to at the Bar before the war'. She married a fellow barrister, had two children, carried on working, and then divorced. During World War Two she fled the bar to take a senior management post at British Overseas Airways Corporation that would not have been open to a woman in peacetime, at which she was successful. In 1946 she remarried a general practitioner and gave up paid work, which she confessed was a very difficult decision. Thereafter she had another child, and worked unpaid for her husband and in voluntary work.

Only one woman in the sample who graduated before 1930 combined motherhood and almost full-time paid work, first as a hospital doctor than as a highly successful medical researcher. This was Alice Stewart who discovered that low-level radiation caused childhood leukaemia and other cancers. She is one of

the few Girtonians of her generation who made 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 90 and still an active researcher, and had long moved her lab from Oxford to Birmingham (Greene, 1999).

Medical women throughout our period were in fact the most likely to combine a professional career with domestic responsibilities, though far more often by working part-time in general practice or in public health than in high status hospital posts. This was also true of female medical graduates of other British universities (Dyhouse, 1998). They were most likely to form their career ambitions very early in life, often when very young, and to hold tenaciously to them. Some respondents described, however, how their medical ambitions were frustrated due to poor advice, which prevented their studying appropriate subjects for admission to medical school, or by family refusal to pay the high costs of a medical training due to low incomes or preference for educating boys in the family. For most of the period, it was not easy for women to gain a medical education. Female medical students were more highly selected than males. Although women were admitted, reluctantly, to the medical profession before World War One, they were excluded from most medical schools again after the war. There were strict quotas on the numbers of women admitted to medical schools from the 1920s until the 1960s. Once the doors were opened the numbers rapidly rose to parity with men by the 1980s.

Some women gave up seeking careers in the face of hostility at work, especially if they had children, or were deterred from entering careers in which they were likely to encounter difficulties, as other studies have also shown (Seear, 1964; Thane, 1991). A science graduate worked for the government Directorate of Atomic Energy during World War Two. At the end of the war, like other married women, she had to leave. She sought other jobs, without success, despite her qualifications and experience. She once, experimentally, submitted an application which did not reveal her gender and, at last, of course, I got an enthusiastic reply ...and...went for an interview and they were extremely cross'. It did not occur to the firm to employ her. She eventually got a post in an aeronautical laboratory in Australia, where she moved with her second husband, but she was appointed on a much lower level than men with comparable qualifications and experience. She commented 'I was so desperate, I would try anything...(then)...suddenly I spoke up and said...why am I on this level and all my colleagues doing the same thing are on this level? This caused an enormous outcry and I was put up several grades. She had similar battles when she returned to work in Britain in the 1970s. Nevertheless- or perhaps because she challenged discrimination- she was highly successful, achieving a senior management position in an international chemicals company. She chose to have no children.

Other than non-marriage and childlessness it is difficult to discern any clear reasons why some women in the sample competed successfully in male-dominated occupations while others did not. Career success is not clearly correlated with any

aspect of family background, though for married women the husband's support was essential.

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 do not regret having married and had children. According to their own accounts they are mostly successful mothers and the responses suggest that they see their adult children regularly and that most of the children have been successful in education and career terms. The mother's education may have contributed to this, but it is hard to test. Many of them do express to varying degrees a sense of loss, that they could have done more with their talents and skills for the community and had more fulfilled lives for themselves if the opportunities had been available either for part-time working when children were small or for re-training after a career-break.

Throughout the period it is striking how readily Girtonians took up new career opportunities when they were offered, as in medicine. There has been a comparable expansion in female admission to the law. Women were 4 percent of all lawyers in Britain in 1971 (at that point the highest proportion in history) and 27 percent in 1990, by which time they were 50 percent of entrants to the profession. Access of women to Cambridge University itself also increased, reaching almost 50 percent of students by 2000. World War Two was a period in which new occupations opened to women, sometimes temporarily due to the absence of men, and women flocked to fill them. This suggests 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, in obstacles in the labour market. When opportunities emerged there were women to take them. All too often they did not emerge.

The use of terms such as 'choice' and 'decision' to characterize the ways in which women make their pathways through family responsibilities and paid work misses many complexities and ambiguities (Hakim, 2002) Such terms risk loading the responsibility for the outcome wholly upon the women, without sufficient sensitivity to the external institutional and cultural constraints on their possibilities for action.

The greater share of domestic responsibility typically assumed by women has not been the only source of difference between male and female careers. This is evident if we examine the careers of women in the sample who did not marry in the three time periods in which, as we have seen, career opportunities for women differed. This analysis is based on data on the total population of Girton students drawn from the college registers.

Of students entering Girton in 1920-29, we can identify 240 who never married and for whom we have full occupation histories. Of these, 66 percent became schoolteachers, four percent university lecturers. Careers as secretaries, in medicine or university administration each attracted two percent of graduates. A handful of graduates entered each of the careers of factory inspection, social work, librarianship, and retail management.

Of students 1944-53, we can identify 172 who never married, for whom we have occupational histories. In this cohort, 33 percent became schoolteachers, 11 percent university lecturers (most of them outside Britain, mostly in the United

States), nine percent entered medicine, nine percent scientific research. Again, only small numbers entered any other occupation.

Of the 1966-74 cohort we have occupational histories for 179 who were unmarried at least until their mid-forties. Of these 15 percent became schoolteachers, 11 percent university teachers (again mostly in other countries), eight percent worked in medicine, and six percent in the civil service. The range of careers was wider than before and now included a scattering of barristers, career advisers, town planners, financial advisers and business executives.

These profiles are clearly different from those of male graduates of elite British universities in the twentieth century who consistently entered a much wider range of high status occupations (Harrison, 1994). Female graduates of the 1970s and eighties entered a wider range of occupations and more of them reached higher levels than their predecessors, but analysis of these cohorts is not yet complete and nor are the careers of many of them.

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 not unrealistic about the implications of so doing. The problem they face is inflexibility at work, rendering part-time work or returning after child rearing difficult or impossible- a problem that has been identified and thoroughly analysed in an extensive literature over the past 40 years (Fogarty, Rapoport and Rapoport, 1968, 1971; Hansard Society, 1990, 1996, 2000).

Indeed the difficulties for women of combining paid work and family life have increased over the past 20 years due to the unforeseen increase in time pressure on senior workers in business and the professions in Britain. In the 1960s, industrial sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and others who advocated greater flexibility in the workplace in order to mobilize the talents and skills of women for the good of the economy, in view of skill shortages, and for the good of women, anticipated a coming reduction in working hours which would facilitate the flexible combination of parenting and paid work (Fogarty, Rapoport and Rapoport, 1968, 1971) They did not foresee the lengthening of working time that has occurred in Britain, especially since the 1980s. 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. There is evidence of a recent steep decline in satisfaction with hours worked among women at all educational and occupational levels. Among women graduates the percentage 'completely or very satisfied' with hours worked was 36 in 1992 and 23 in 2000 (Taylor, 2002, p. 16).

Another obstacle that was unforeseen in the 1960s, though the precise effects are hard to calculate, was the increasing instability of partnerships from the 1970s onwards. This left women more often than men as sole carers of children and caused more women to be dependent on the labour market for more years than might otherwise have been the case.

Conclusion

The main influences shaping the careers of these female graduates from the 1920s to the 1980s were, before World War Two, the high proportion never marrying; the marriage bar, for those who did marry; traditional assumptions about appropriate occupations for men and women; husband's occupation; antagonism/discrimination in the workplace. Between the end of the war and the 1960s the last three in the above list remained influential. To these we can add: inadequate childcare, inadequate facilities for re-training in mid-life, and inflexible employment practices. All of the influences shaping women's careers in the 1960s survived into the 70s and 80s though, some, such as overt discrimination, were declining somewhat, but the increased instability of personal relationships and lengthening working hours provided new obstacles.

Throughout, the period, demand for paid work on the part of the graduates was greater than the supply. There may often have been rational explanations for this on the side of the employer. Nevertheless it is a situation that has created a certain frustration among generations of female graduates and has deprived the economy and society of inputs many of them were willing to provide.

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