

THE XX FACTOR

HOW WORKING WOMEN
ARE CREATING A NEW SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

One morning in 1802, Jane Austen did something extraordinarily, breathtakingly brave. She broke off her engagement.

The previous evening she had accepted an offer of marriage from a wealthy young man, Harris Bigg-Wither. She was twenty-seven and so unlikely to receive another offer; she had no independent income. That December day, she was quite consciously depriving herself of everything that offered women status and security, namely marriage and children.

Being single and female meant a life spent in other people's homes, dependent on their charity.¹ If Austen reached old age, she would have no children to look after her. She would be single in a society with no state pensions or health insurance, without social security payments. She was choosing what was then the most dreaded of fates: to be a childless old maid.

Moreover, there was nothing unusual in her situation. She knew perfectly well what awaited her. For countless centuries before her, from the dawn of humankind, women's fates and fortunes had been defined in this way.

Today, just eight generations on, elite working women can barely imagine such terrors and such choices. *The XX Factor* is about these modern women, 70 million strong worldwide, and with the number rising daily. It is about their lives and about the choices that face them throughout adulthood; different from those of Austen's time, far more extensive, but hard choices nonetheless. And it is about the growing impact of millions of highly educated, professional females on every aspect of human society.

This is also a book about women who stand in a direct line from Jane Austen and from her novels' heroines. The women of *The XX Factor* are, like Austen's characters, intelligent and educated. They are affluent and successful but they are not the super-rich. Like the family

of Elizabeth Bennet, heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, they move in circles that include City bankers, merchants and clergymen; and like Jane Austen's own family, theirs is a world of busy professionals, such as lawyers and navy officers, as well as owners of businesses and land.

The most obvious difference between Austen's world and ours is also a momentous one. Women now hold the jobs that were the preserve of husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. Women are lawyers and members of the clergy, women are bankers and business owners. In the developed world, they enter professional and business occupations just as often as men; and, among younger cohorts, they do so on equal terms.

A slow transformation of the labour market accelerated suddenly in the 1960s and 1970s. Women's expectations and behaviour were transformed as elite education opened up, job opportunities changed, family structures shifted and the Pill arrived. Only now, looking back, can we see the profound differences between the lives of college-educated women today and those of college-educated women as recent as their grandmothers' generation.

We are also only gradually realising how much the impact of occupational change ripples way beyond the workplace itself. Incrementally but irreversibly, women's penetration of the world's elites is changing both men and women's daily activities and their personal lives. In some cases, we recognise what has changed, but in many others, as this book will show, what people believe is happening is at odds with the documented facts. And one thing which we have failed to understand is that whereas through most of human history it made sense to talk about 'women' en masse, today it very rarely does.

Until now, all women's lives, whether rich or poor, have been dominated by the same experiences and pressures. Today, elite and highly educated women have become a class apart. However, these professionals, businesswomen and holders of advanced degrees, the top 15 or 20 per cent of a developed country's female workforce, have not moved further apart from men than in the past. On the contrary, they are now more like the men of the family than ever before in history. It is from other women that they have drawn away.

Fortunate generations

This 'new class' of women has only bedded down and become numerous in the last thirty to forty years. Before that, across the millennia,

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hardly any women had the chance of a full, lifetime career. In my own family, mine was the very first generation to do so. Yet it was only while writing this book that I realised just how distinct a historic group we are, and how much I have lived a common story.

I grew up in prosperous, peaceful southern England. I went to a highly academic girls' high school, where it was simply taken for granted that we would all go on to college. A tiny number of my classmates went into nursing. An equally small number went straight into teacher training. The rest of us did what we called 'proper', that is academic, degrees.

At one level I understood that this was new. My grandparents all left school for work in their very early teens; my parents completed secondary school but had no opportunity to go to university; my sister and I are graduates. So like millions of other post-war twentieth-century women, we were our family's first graduate generation. But because it was normal for my school and for my friends, only years later did I realise how few women, even in our baby-boomer generations did academic, let alone postgraduate degrees, or how few had done so previously.

My sister and I were first-generation graduates, but as parents we simply took it for granted that our children would – must – get degrees. Today, unlike in my childhood, it is axiomatic that a child from a fairly affluent family, male or female, goes to college. The explosion in student numbers has been great for women in many ways; but what is equally important is their access to the best institutions. In fact, as this book discusses, it is the single most important factor in creating the genuinely co-ed elites which have emerged, especially among younger cohorts.

I went to Oxford University and to one of its then all-women colleges, Somerville. I knew, obviously enough, that Oxford in my time offered far fewer places to women than it did to men. I was totally unaware, even if I had thought about it, that this was just as true for the great American Ivy League universities – Harvard, Yale, Princeton. (Those three were the only ones I knew.) But I wouldn't have been surprised. That was just how things were.

However, the tectonic plates were shifting. Already, no important occupations were barred to me or to my college contemporaries, as they had been to graduate women quite a short time before. And in

key ways Oxford was a microcosm of change. One by one the men's colleges started admitting women, and admission numbers gradually equalised. As they did, the women's colleges were forced to follow suit.

Somerville, my own college, admitted its first men in 1994. It did so for two reasons: the all-female colleges were losing the best women students to the co-ed ones; and they were unable to host university posts, all of which now demanded gender neutrality. Change, in other words, was a response to new social values enshrined in law, as well as to the rational behaviour of ambitious young women. Both were important, and both, as we will see in this book, are critical in explaining our contemporary world.

Although my twenty-year-old self was unaware that higher education would soon be transformed, workplace change was a different matter. I grew up in a world where mothers stayed at home. In my early teens, I remember being pretty certain that I would stop working when my children, if I had any, were small. It was what people – women – did. Indeed, it was the right thing to do. A decade on, I did the opposite.

In going straight back to work after a baby, I was doing something that was new but would soon, for graduates, become totally conventional. In another way I was, personally, a throwback. In common with just one of my college contemporaries, I got married at the end of my senior year, straight after graduation, something that was becoming highly unusual (and which has turned out extremely well). And I had children quickly too, so that our children are significantly older than most of our contemporaries' families. I wasn't a young mother by biological or historical standards, but I had children at the same age as my mother, atypically for my graduate urban milieu and typically for her small-town professional one. It's one of the very few respects in which, quite unwittingly, I bucked the evolving trends.

One reason that today's graduates marry so much later, if they marry at all, and bear children late if ever, is the great revolution of the 1960s. Not the student revolts but the Pill. Those of us who came to adulthood post-Pill stand on another shore, an ocean apart from all generations before us. Sex can be safe. You can relax about it. Women can avoid an undesired pregnancy, completely, securely and on their own. Not surprisingly, sexual behaviour has been transformed; and one result is that marriage is increasingly postponed.

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Here, my generation did know that things were different. Some people were taking off for communes or endorsing 'free love' and multiple partners. Lots of people were sleeping with successive fairly serious boyfriends in a way our mothers would and could never have done. I knew a few of the former, many of the latter; wrote about sex and abortion in our student newspaper; and was well aware that the world was fascinated. (Sex, students plus Oxford is a certain hit.)

We were much less perceptive about the changing state of marriage and the family. We mostly expected to marry. In fact, we saw far less conflict between having a career and having a family than had been the case for the older and often single women who had taught us in high school, and the older and often single female academics who taught us at university.

However, we were graduating into a world where, quite unexpectedly, child-bearing and marriage patterns would be transformed for everyone – albeit in quite different ways at the top from the bottom of the income tree. Time and again contemporary women, and men, don't marry, don't have children, or do neither where once they would have done both.

It is not as simple, as we will see, as men having it all when women don't.² But for highly educated women, the benefits of employment have increased while the risks of giving it up have grown alongside. Both men and women today make perfectly understandable choices which are different from their parents' or grandparents' because their options – educational, occupational and social – have also changed. And as a result, many of them, by their early forties, have lives which are quite different from their teenage expectation of marriage-and-two-children.

My generation didn't see this coming. But then, as students or young professionals, we didn't and couldn't survey what society as a whole was doing. What was normal was what we, as a privileged sub-group, did. This might or might not be the same as everyone else. As it turns out, it wasn't.

The end of sisterhood

In the half-century since 1970, human societies have studied and measured themselves as never before in history. Statistical data, high-speed computing and academic publishing together ensure a flood of

empirical studies, with women a favourite subject. In writing this book I could draw on a very wide range of already published material and on widely used data sets in the public domain. (The one exception is the chapter on sex, where much of the analysis appears for the first time.)

I have used this material to examine whether contemporary women all behave similarly or whether there are systematic differences among them. And the data show, again and again, that they are very different from each other, not just in their careers, family patterns and daily tasks, but even in the bedroom. Moreover, those differences are clearly related to whether or not they are members of today's educated, professional female elites.

I was surprised that these comparisons had not been made more often. But referring to women as a single homogeneous group is the common discourse. To an extraordinary degree, people today, including feminists and professionally 'female' media commentators, talk about women as though they all have common interests. We get discussions of women's pay rates ('unequal'), women's voting intentions ('liberal') and women's opinions of this or that. Far more rarely are particular groups of women compared with others.

For much of history this was reasonable enough. It was almost a century after Jane Austen that Rudyard Kipling wrote, in *Barrack-room Ballads*, that

The Colonel's Lady an' Judy O'Grady
Are sisters under their skin!

And it was true, when he wrote it, in a way that was not true for their men. Elite or poor, Irish or Indian, marriage and child-bearing were women's necessary aspirations. You married well, or badly. You bore living children to support you, or did not. On those realities, as a female, your whole life hinged.

Modern industrial societies have changed everybody's lives, but especially those of women, because the vast majority of women in a developed country can now support themselves, alone. Most women can earn salaries and live independently, whether they are single or divorced, something that was completely inconceivable in Jane Austen's day. And most developed societies now support impoverished single mothers too, replacing husbands with the state.

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Nonetheless, for the vast majority of women, it is family and children, not job and career, that are the major focus of their lives, just as they have always been. Most people, including most women, work to live rather than live to work. And the outcome is two quite different groups of women. The larger group remain essentially traditional in their concerns and also in the jobs they do: namely, long-standing 'female' jobs done largely by females. The other, the elite, are now very like their male counterparts. They share the latter's work habits and job choices. They share their offices, with, as we will see, some predictable and some unpredictable results. They partner and marry men like themselves.

Today's highly educated and professional women, the top 15 or 20 per cent, not only have different jobs from other women; they also have quite different patterns of lifetime employment from other women. They are different in when and how much they work. They have quite different marriage and child-bearing patterns, and very different divorce rates. They bring up their children differently and they differ in how they run their homes.

I will argue in this book that all these changes are interconnected. From the opening up of the labour market, and the egalitarian values that underpin its transformation, there is a direct road to a world in which ever more graduates are childless; and where nannies are a high-growth occupation. There is a direct road to a world where the 'leisure society' seems like a joke, but only for those at the top; and where old-style female altruism is a fading memory. And a direct route, also, to a new century in which change is coming much faster in developing countries than it ever did in my own, and where half of the world's self-made female billionaires live in China.

I realise, now, that mine was a hinge generation. I have always had a job; my hugely capable mother quit paid employment when she married, returning only when her children had left school. My sister and I both employed a nanny; my parents never conceived of the idea. I always worked in institutions – universities, the civil service, think tanks – where it was normal to have women as bosses, men as subordinates. I simply take for granted the presence of women as well as men in the meetings I attend.

And there are a lot of people like me; and like my agent, my mostly female editors and publishers, and like the successful women