

The XX Factor

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The XX Factor is the story of 80 million women, in the developed and developing worlds. It is also my story, the story of my own generation and of those younger than us. And it is about profound social change.

Year by year, decade by decade, more and more women have become highly educated professionals and managers. There are now more than 20 million such women in Europe alone, 80 million worldwide, and this is critical mass. Family life, childbearing, work and sex have all been transformed. Women have far more opportunities than ever before in history; but as old inequalities have faded, new ones are emerging.

Like anyone over 30, I have lived through much of this. I benefitted from it, and also pretty much took it for granted. But every now and again, a fact would break cover and take me aback; and they were the germ of this book.

For example, in Ireland, I discovered, the marriage bar for civil servants – meaning that married women had to resign – had lasted until 1973. Until the late 1960s, there were no female undergraduates at Harvard, Princeton or Yale. Equally remarkable – to me – was that my 27 year old research assistant had never heard the phrase ‘left on the shelf’, with all that it conveys about a world in which women were desperate to marry. And in the UK, the percentage of earnings going to the top female one per cent has doubled since the 1980s.

The more I looked at the numbers, the wider the gulf appeared between the world of professional women today, and the world in which women – all women – once lived, one where the only respected alternative to marriage was the convent. But *The XX Factor* isn't just the gap between the old and the new. It is also about the growing gulf between elite women and the rest.

In today's West, 50% of ‘Class 1’ jobs – professional, upper managerial, graduate jobs – are now held by women. Professional men work with and for them, just as professional women work with and for men. It may not be 50/50 at the very top, but in these integrated workplaces, an all-male meeting has become a curious sight. And while the top 0.01% is very male, a lot of women now make big money. In America, almost 200,000 women are earning a quarter-million dollars a year, or more: and the *average* income, within that group, is a breath-taking \$475,000.

Among younger men and women with equal education levels, who have also put in equal time in the same occupation, there are no gender pay gaps left. Inequality in average earnings isn't caused by glass ceilings. It reflects, instead, two things. First, the lives of non-professional women, the vast majority, the ‘other’ 80%, whose lives are very different. And secondly, it reflects the dilemmas faced by women when they have children, and the choices they make.

Most women today don't do elite jobs alongside men. In their much larger job market, gender still rules. Most jobs are dominated either by women – hotel maids, care assistants, receptionists – or by men: just how many female lorry-drivers or plasterers has anyone ever actually met?

For most people, and for most women, work is about making money. Of course, it is good to have colleagues, get out of the house. But it is very good, indeed essential, to pay the bills. Elite women, like elite men, tend to love their jobs: they are part of their identities. Non-elite women, however, build their work around their family, not vice versa. Most non-graduate mothers drop out of work for years when they have babies:

graduates don't. Non-graduates also work part-time for much of their lives. Both these patterns wreak havoc with their pay rates; they also reflect a strong and enduring preference.

Most women, in other words, have lives that are still distinctively female at home and at work. Elite women, in contrast, lead lives that are increasingly like those of the men beside them.

How has all this happened? Overwhelmingly, through formal education and the explosion in university places. Women do well at school. Then, as graduates they emerge into a world where degrees open doors. Educational discrimination is not just legal and legitimate, but encouraged. Women benefit immensely from a world which values credentials and insists on rule-bound hiring practices. The 1970s were the hinge decade here. At their start, some European countries still had marriage bars, and the 'top' university faculties everywhere were dominated by men. By the end of the decade, we were set on a path to the university world of the 21st century: majority female overall, majority in medicine, majority in law.

For today's highly educated women, the dilemmas are different from those of the past, or from those of less educated women today. They revolve around marriage and, above all, around family: especially the demands of children, but also the care of elderly parents. Both of these are still far more the concern of women than of men, of daughters and mothers than of fathers and sons. Time and again women – not all women, but a significant number of professional women and a huge proportion of non-professional women – change their working patterns in order to care for family.

The conflict and the difficulty of choice between a fulfilling career and a family has wider ramifications too, and both women and men are affected. Highly educated professional people, of both sexes, are much less likely to have children than their less educated contemporaries. And as *The XX Factor* stresses, the factors at work affect women *and* men.

Like most women, I had always suspected that men prefer to marry women much less intelligent, or educated, than themselves. If that were true, they could certainly do so. They haven't. Across the developed world, successful graduate men marry successful graduate women. 'Assortative mating' has actually increased.

Equally, across the developed world, graduate men and graduate women frequently reach their 40s childless, as prolonged education, career opportunities, and the Pill offer opportunities which previous generations could not imagine. Moreover, in very many affluent households, there is just one child. As a result elites are failing to reproduce themselves by a large margin.

These new patterns generate other, class-linked differences. Sex for example, and notably age at first intercourse. The academically successful, boys as well as girls, now postpone sex until much later than their non-academic peers: grades are more important short-term.

Our elites also postpone their babies. As recently as the late 1970s, a first child after the age of 30, let alone 35, was highly unusual for women of any class. Live among today's upper middle classes, and you might get the impression that no-one even contemplates pregnancy until 30 looms.

And yet for most people, a first child after 30 is still an aberration. The least-educated women are, everywhere, the youngest mothers: but other, more educated but non-graduate women also have their children at what used to be the 'normal' age - peak child-bearing is between 25 and 29. Late child-bearing is an international pattern, but only for mothers with full bachelors degrees.

But it is not all that marks off elite families. The 'top sixth' may be less fertile overall. But they are much more likely to be married when they have children and more likely, once married, to stay that way. Here again the gap is widening.

It's easy to miss this. We notice the upheavals and divorces: Charles and Diana, Paul McCartney, Donald Trump. And we also, most of us, know couples where one would love to marry and the other won't: and the latter is usually male. Nonetheless, the statistics are clear.

Graduate professionals have divorce rates that are much lower than other groups'. And their family patterns stand out in societies marked by soaring rates of illegitimacy. In the US, the overall figure is about 40%; but less than 5% of births to white American graduate mothers are extra-marital. Almost half of British births in total are extra-marital; among graduate parents it is less than one in six.

Ours is truly a new world. The *XX Factor* offers a guide to this new terrain.

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