

The story of women at Cambridge is one which most students know something about, albeit in little detail. Most of us have heard of Emily Davies and the founding of Girton, the Queen Mother receiving the first Cambridge degree awarded to a woman, and the lively tales of Magdalene's attitude to women from a punt guide. But what is the real background behind women graduates, and indeed undergraduates, at Cambridge? How have things changed in the 145 years since Girton College began life at Benson House, Hitchin, on 16 October 1869? What is the present state of women in academia at Cambridge? *Megan Meredith-Lobay* reviews the historical aspect of the education of women at Cambridge.

THE PAST

Instead of a historical account of women's education at Cambridge, it is more interesting to examine how the perception of women in academia have changed over the years, both from the point of view of society and women themselves. Gillian Sutherland, in her articles about the different approaches to learning between Girton and Newnham Colleges in the late 19th century, defines gender as '...never a single or dichotomous variable: it interacts in complex fashion with the social, economic, and political structures of the society both locally and nationally'.

The attitude of the cantabrigian society towards their first women undergraduates, from Girton and Newnham in the late nineteenth century, can be summed up by the title of Rita McWilliams-Tullberg's book: *Women at Cambridge - A Men's University - though of mixed type*. This title suggests an atmosphere of the strictest

segregation of men and the women, as indeed was the case. Women were not allowed into the market on their own, and indeed, they were not initially allowed to attend lectures with men. Tutoring was done at the women's colleges under the watchful eye of a chaperone.

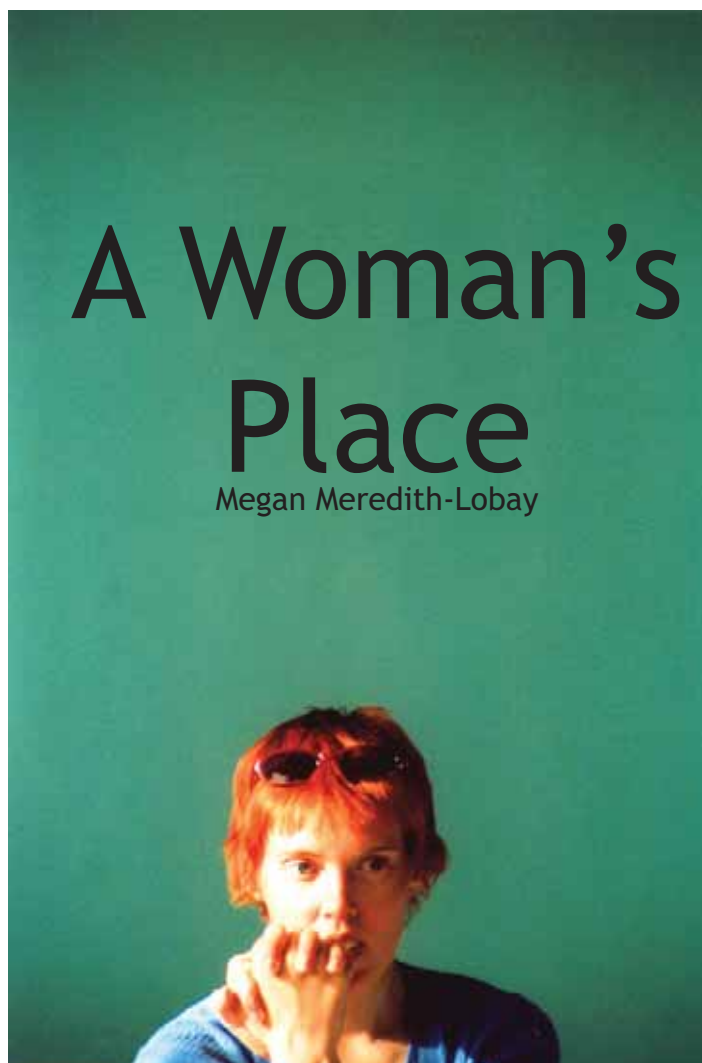
And a fascinating article by Paula Gould describes how predominant male attitudes led to the belief that studying too hard would have detrimental effect on both the mental and physical well-being of women students. Essentially, they believed that women would become too masculine and no longer able to wed.

Much of the worry stemmed from the idea that mental ability came enhanced physical prowess. Nineteenth century men at

Cambridge were expected to perform as well, if not decidedly better, on the sports grounds as in the laboratory. Therefore, the argument ran, that ladies could not live up to such physical and mental demands. However, many did succeed in adopting an outward identity that included both a healthy sporting life as well as stellar academics, thus really suppressing their gender differences through adopting the masculine work ethic.

THE PRESENT

The number of women entering Cambridge for post-graduate degrees has increased exponentially since the earliest days of active participation in the university. The University Reporter issue on student numbers for 2002-2003 reported that of 5,285 post-graduates, 44.1%



were women across all disciplines. In 1968 when the Reporter statistics were first published, the percentage of women was only 14.4%. The chart opposite illustrates the great strides women have been making in the last 35 years.

Many colleges now strive for an equal numbers of men and women post-graduates, though the numbers are still quite uneven in many respects. Newnham and New Hall aside, several colleges have more than twice the numbers of men as women; Girton itself has nearly three times the numbers of male post-graduates as females.

Although universities and colleges all over the world happily admit women to programmes for undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, the gender gap still exists even a century and a half after Emily Davies and Anne Jemima Clough fought for women's right to an education. The present problem for women academics is that for women in all professional fields: being offered opportunities. The numbers of women teaching at a university level is still very low and recent articles in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* and *The Guardian* report that there still exists a pay difference between men and women of between £5000-8000 per annum. According to the

Association of University Teachers (AUT), women in academic professions earn only 85% of what their male colleagues earn.

THE FUTURE

Whatever the problems in gaining access to equal pay, recognition, and opportunities are, the future for women in academia looks bright as initiatives to tempt girls into higher education are encouraged. Initiatives like the nationwide *Athena Project* to create more opportunities for women in science, and the Cambridge-based *WiSETI* (Women in Science, Engineering, and Technology) do promote the work of women in fields which have traditionally been dominated by men. Few if any of these types of initiatives exist for women in the Arts and Social Sciences where the numbers of entering female postgrads continues to rise.

As the numbers of women entering postgraduate studies soars, one can hope that the numbers will dictate that more women will be heading academic departments in the future, thereby shattering the glass ceiling. A recent large scale survey of Girton college graduates from the past 85 years noted that the graduates from the 1960s, who truly believed that society had reached a point where they could succeed to the highest levels while still having a family

life, were the most disappointed of all age categories. The problems of juggling family life and academic research are the same for women now earning higher degrees, only they seem to be less idealistic about what their chances really are of obtaining the ideal career cycle. It is therefore up to the post-graduate women studying today to continue lobbying for those rights that they should hold along with their male colleagues, namely the right to choose their own career path.

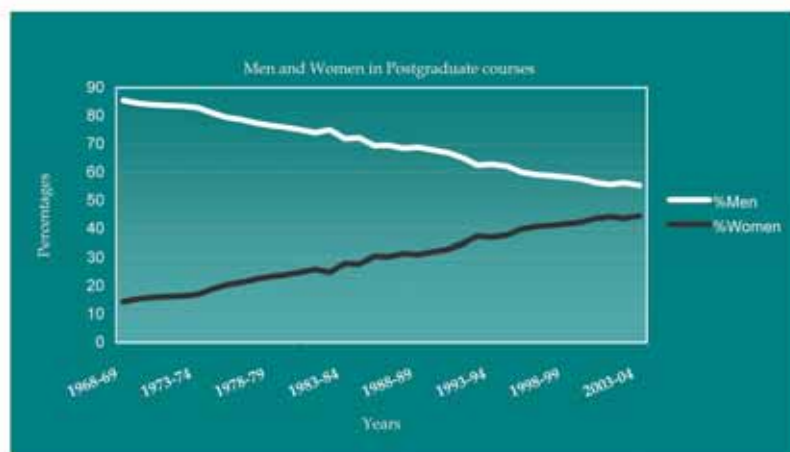
The issue of gender is not just of the history of women graduates at the university, but also their present. It is story of struggle for change and understanding, for recognition and advancement, and for a society-wide redefinition of a woman's place.

PROFILES

LIVING WITH A PHD IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Joanna Turner

My partner is researching a PhD in the Sciences. This is a little different to having a partner who 'works in an office' as the very words 'PhD, Cambridge and Chemistry' elicit beard-stroking admiration from those in the working world (or my mother) who have no idea of what a PhD chemist does. They probably assume that he spends his time in dusty libraries fiddling with test tubes, but I know that in fact he spends quite a bit of time lying in, e-mailing me at work and drinking coffee in Savino's with other equally intellectual colleagues while I slave away on excel spreadsheets and discuss last night's episode of *Accounts* and all the other joys of an office job.



Researching a PhD is a curious activity because it means you are not really a grown up; you are still a *student*. You can still lounge around the house watching Countdown while eating digestive biscuits at 3pm if you really want to as you do not have an office manager to make snide or patronising comments about your punctuality.

However by this stage you are actually paid for being potentially clever and brilliant so it is a good idea to show up occasionally, and if you have a partner who is in the working world, it is recommended that you do not decide to sit down for some serious particle physics study when she has just come back from a long, hard day at work, braved the horrors of queuing at the Co-op, cooked dinner and is looking forward to some quality time.

Some tips for PhD people with partners who are in the working world include:

1. Not inviting your partner to the pub to meet some fellow PhD scientists when you have all just spent the day at an international conference on maths and you wish to just quickly recap the events of the day. It is the equivalent of said girlfriend being invited to have dinner with a group of people who only know how to communicate in Klingon.

2. Not drinking until 2 am because you know you don't have to get up at 7am and cycle three miles to work in the rain, getting home and waking partner up with a loving attempt at physical affection. (And do not then complain bitterly when said partner does get up at 7am in a bad mood, not improved when hung over PhD student moans about the use of a hairdryer because he 'has a headache'.)

3. Not whingeing about how difficult life is when you are doing a PhD candidate. It is not difficult. You are doing a subject you are actually interested in. You get paid to do it. The fact that you do not get paid much is mitigated by the fact that it is a) not taxed and b) you have a student bar to drink in. You can get drunk every Friday on Port at dinner in your College. You can go shopping when everyone else is at work. You can take a holiday whenever you feel like it. You get a title at the end.

But, there are definitely upsides. Like persuading your partner PhD student to pick up your dry cleaning, go to the bank, do the washing up etc. Your friends assume that you must be as clever as your partner who is doing a PhD You get to hang out in College and pretend that you have a right to be there. You get discounts with Scudamore's. But most importantly, you live with someone who is doing something they really want to with their life, rather than whingeing about having become an accountant.

Maybe I should think about doing one myself - having been a sociologist at University perhaps I could get the funding for a study into how being the partner of a PhD student affects my life chances....

STUDENT-PARENTS

Megan Meredith-Lobay

The issues of childcare at the University are serious, though ones which are getting increasing attention from the administration. Single parents, and parents where one partner is pursuing a degree, can be overwhelmed by the cost of childcare in and around Cambridge. However, many colleges and the university itself are making great strides to improve access to

childcare for students and staff. Many colleges now offer childcare bursaries which students can use to offset the cost. Some colleges now run nurseries for their students and staff. According to the online guide for Student parents available through the main university web-site, a new nursery serving six colleges will open in 2005 providing further support for parents in the University. The new facilities opening in west Cambridge also have limited places for children. However these places still cost around and over £50 a day; a high cost for student parents, and especially single parents. Ruth Shaw, a single mother, student and President of the Graduate Dining Society, mentioned that the places in these college nurseries were so small that she had to walk 45 minutes every morning just to find a nursery that had room for her daughter. The university also runs the Holiday Play Scheme in conjunction with Anglia Polytechnic where childcare is available during holiday breaks for a daily fee of around £10-15.

Useful information abounds, though some students still feel that the university could do more to help families through more facilities and better rates of childcare. One student indicated that his college had no accommodation for families with children, and that his children were not even allowed in the Hall. Some tension exists between the University and parents with childcare needs as to where funds should be allocated. When questioned about the issues of childcare, Dr. Alan Findlay, head of the Graduate Tutors Committee had this to say:

'The real question is, 'What is the fundamental function of a University and where should its money be spent?...Should an academic institution invest in childcare when it could invest the same amount of money on educational



resources, such as getting a new lecturer for the benefit of the wider student community? I'll ask you the question: who should cover childcare costs? The University? the parents? We all agree that childcare is very expensive, but students with families who want to pursue postgraduate degrees should be aware of the difficulties they will face and be prepared for them. It is reasonable to expect students with families to know that kids will get in the way of University work.'

Some parents would agree that the university needs to review its requirements for the financial guarantee that students must fulfill before being admitted to the university as a graduate student. For a student with children, the university requires a guarantee of an additional £2,640 for your first child, and subsequent children will need £900 each per year. This is in addition to proof that a student can pay University and College fees. The additions for children are however skewed in that they assume a partner at home caring for the children. This is not possible in today's society for the most part as if one parent is studying then the other must be working, or you have a single parent situation. Dr. Findlay agrees that this policy must be reviewed by the tutors committee.

PART-TIME GRADUATE LIFE

Kerstyn Comley

At the end of last year I had a decision to make. I could either dedicate myself to being a 'stay at home mum', look for a job as a project engineer, or I could return to academia. I chose the third option, partly because I thought studying might provide me with the flexibility to enhance my career while still giving me time to bring up my son. Another important factor which helped me make up my mind was the previous five years in industry, which had fuelled my desire to learn more about engineering. I never thought about researching a Ph.D and I had assumed that I probably never would.

In April my application to study a part-time PhD in Bio-Engineering was accepted. Part-time PhDs are relatively new to Cambridge, although most departments and many colleges support them. I still feel that some of the academic and administrative staff are still anxious about the level of commitment and enthusiasm a part-time student can dedicate to their project. This is borne out by the fact that unlike full time students I have to issue

a short progress report each term and keep a record of meetings my supervisor. Despite all this, the staff in my department couldn't have been more supportive. I have been loaned a laptop so that I can work from home if necessary and I have been allocated my own desk even though I am only in the department part-time.

Three days a week my working day starts at 6 am, with the usual: shower, breakfast, nappy change (my son's; not mine!). I'm on the M11 by 7.30am, then a pit-stop at Sawston nursery, before picking up my bike at Trumpington Park and Ride and I'm into the department at about 9 am. My mobile phone is never far from me just in case the nursery should ring. It is a far cry from the lack of responsibility I had when I was last at university. Twice a week my day is more sedate. Baby groups and trips to the park are mixed with housework and playing. Occasionally I manage to squeeze in an hour or so of study.

And finally....

DIVERSITY encompasses a plethora of meanings while it is at the same time is indefinable. We have highlighted a few of the ways in which the lives of graduates at Cambridge, be they women, parents, students from Malaysia or Peru, archaeologists or engineers differ from one another. In highlighting the differences, it is also important to recognize the host of shared experiences of being a Cambridge student. No matter who we are, what we do, or how we live, we are all part of a community of excellence. Some of the issues detailed above, in terms of women's place in academics and opening up the university to better childcare facilities are ones which the graduate community now has the power to change.