

## Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s

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**Reviewer:**

Ruth Watts

The 1950s is a comparatively under-researched area for gender studies. Anyone wanting to understand the constructed gender roles which underpinned not only girls' and women's lives but also those of boys and men, would do no better than to start with this excellent book. Stephanie Spencer, in exploring the choices made by school-leavers aged 15 to 18 regarding employment, further education and future career, has found a clever approach to significant issues of women's history in a decade not usually perceived as pregnant with gender issues in the way the war years and their immediate aftermath or the 'swinging sixties' are. Spencer's analysis, however, reveals not only continuity of, even reversal to conventional notions of male/female roles, but also changes sometimes so subtle that those experiencing them were hardly fully aware of them. At the same time economic and technological factors helped a steady rise in married women returning to paid employment once children were in school and thus altered career expectations. By the late 1950s, indeed, women's dual role of home and work was much debated, following a decade when themes of autonomy, independence and citizenship were raised constantly, and when the role of women and the education and employment of girls was under scrutiny.

These themes are frequently reiterated here as Spencer explores an abundant range of material including welfare legislation, the records of teaching associations, career advice manuals and official career advice, career novels, popular women's and girls' magazines, together with some oral interviews. These somewhat serendipitous, but quite inspired choices, allow the author to investigate very diverse source material in each chapter and, in so-doing, she deals with very different approaches and methodologies, each building on the work of other carefully cited authors. The result is a focused and rich mosaic of evidence which gives the reader a deep understanding of the multiplicity of influences which stimulated girls to do what was expected of them, to accept 'that's how it was' as many of the interviewees said. On the other hand people did make

choices and Spencer's use of the feminist philosopher Morwenna Griffiths's 'web of identity' allows her to integrate the contradictions and individual identities into the general framework as the point of this metaphor is that a web is constructed by its maker but constrained by outside influences in its overall shape' (p.15). Throughout the book she returns to this metaphor, explaining how women constantly reweave their lives as their circumstances changed, especially when they left school or got married. They found themselves in different places on their web as issues of class and gender forced them to formulate an identity of their own between overlapping, or sometimes alienated, communities whether home and school or a domestic role in a home of their own and a low-paid, low-status, unskilled job. Thus they forged some autonomy while fulfilling the 'norms' they anxiously watched. Following Griffiths's metaphor and arguments ensures that Spencer explores many facets of a woman's life, including its material circumstances, even if, as she acknowledges, Griffiths's approach cannot always look beneath the surface and explain why some strands become dominant (p.197). Spencer's use of it does result, however, in a very broad-ranging analysis.

In her introductory chapter, Spencer shows how despite the increased educational opportunities from 1944 and full employment in the 1950s, female career choices were constricted by the seemingly universal opinion that woman's place would be in the home, an expectation much confirmed by a younger age of marriage and motherhood. The vast majority of girls left school at 15 and, after, at most, a brief training period, entered employment only to leave once married. Class mostly determined the choice of career and which type of school was attended, and, even if there were greater choices open to a few girls, all were affected by notions of a 'universal woman', who in essence was white and middle class. Such an image pervaded throughout both official documents and women's magazines, although largely speaking most sociological (and, for that matter, psychological and educational) debates at the time concerning class and youth ignored gender questions, an omission compounded by later historians. Spencer sets out to redress that by exploring some of the constructions of adult identity open to girls as they left school, and by probing the relationship of external forces and individual agency. The role played by women themselves in constructing these identities and the insights gained into the ambivalence of the female role in the 1950s, lead her to urge a re-evaluation of 'consensus' politics and a re-definition of what we mean by 'work'. Such questioning is a vital part of the whole book.

The second chapter gives a very valuable analysis of William Beveridge's Report on social insurance, the recommendations of which became the basis of the welfare state and embodied gender divisions, presenting 'women' as a universal grouping all of whom were destined to become dependent housewives. Those who did not were seen as a problem. Acknowledging that, it is ahistorical for feminists not to recognise that the material benefits accruing from the welfare state and the high status accorded to motherhood were welcomed by most women. Spencer explains that notions of companionate marriages were not unproblematic. They centred on the needs of men, the breadwinners, and left married women with a 'somewhat detached relationship to the welfare state' (p.32), their benefits provided only through their husbands. Men, not women, were to be protected from the dehumanising effect of unemployment. Yet motherhood (within wedlock) was also perceived as 'work', the stress on its nurturing role both fitting the child care concerns of the 1950s and giving women a gendered definition of citizenship. Although women's organisations gave virtually unanimous support, Spencer shows that they expressed many reservations, not least annoyance at the disregard shown to spinsters. However, their desire for equal status in benefits and contributions for women and men was dismissed by civil servants. Exploring this and material in the Mass Observation archive, Spencer proves that women both largely accepted the assumptions of the Beveridge Report while, in practice, many of them increasingly chose to be both workers and mothers.

The new welfare state gave rise to ideas of 'social citizenship' which with regard to females included earning a living when necessary, responsible housewifery and motherhood and social obligations. Official language referred to 'woman' without the divisions of class, but the latter were very real and crucial when it came to occupational choice. By examining in turn contemporary sociological and educational writing on school leavers' occupational choices (now rightly perceived as historical documents), the archives of the headmistresses' and the Assistant Mistresses' association and submissions made to the Central Advisory Council for Education for the Crowther Report 15-18 of 1959, Spencer is able to uncover tensions and

dichotomies between general assumptions of the universal woman, and the notable distinctions between the few who went to grammar school (chiefly middle class), and the vast majority who attended secondary moderns. Historians have taken little notice of the latter and among those who have Gary McCulloch is one of the few to have recognised how secondary schools tried to socialise the working-class girl. Educational texts of the 1950s indicate the gendered vocational courses at secondary moderns, but generally contemporary educational and sociological material ignored or marginalised girls, a factor attributed by Spencer partly to the male dominance of sociology at the time. Reports from the women's teaching associations, on the other hand, crossed class lines and while accepting the need to prepare girls for likely domestic responsibilities, were acutely conscious of having also to educate girls for work at a time when there was increasing demand for female employment and for their rights and duties as citizens, which the teachers envisaged on far more equal terms than Beveridge had. They were somewhat uneasily aware too of girls' fear of being 'unfeminine' - a prime reason why so few entered occupations such as engineering - and the complexities of a situation where girls were marrying and bearing children earlier. Such considerations underpinned the Crowther Report, where the preoccupation with girls' domestic role led to recommendations for a gendered curriculum where girls would be educated for their 'natural' work. Spencer shows that such marginalisation might not fit changing employment needs of either employers or individual women.

Spencer thus demonstrates clearly how investigating old questions through a gendered lens uncovers new layers of meaning and leads to fresh interpretations. From chapter four she goes even further in using sources from this period previously little examined, if examined at all. In a fascinating examination of advice manuals and women's employment, she shows that, although the domestic role of women was always recognised, increasingly careers advice advocated choosing appropriate paid work which might be interrupted by a period at home rather than stopped altogether. Thus a woman's 'career' incorporated different periods of the time she could be in employment. Whether perusing advice from the youth Employment Bureau, manuals or the fortnightly *Women's Employment*, a female would learn that satisfying employment, as well as preparing her for being an ideal housewife and a lifelong display of feminine graces, was also part of her duties as a citizen. Well-chosen statistical tables (pp. 200-4) illustrate the gendered nature of occupational choice, showing that while an increasing number of women returned to the workforce once their children were older, many others continued at home. Much of the supposedly classless career advice was middle class in tone, for example paid work was assumed to be more fulfilling than domestic, but then, of course, middle-class women were more likely to have entry to skilled employment. The sociological literature acknowledged that women had a dual or combined role as worker, wife and mother - complementary strands of the web, says Spencer, which 'could be easily woven together into the web of adult identity' (p.86) as the individual's status changed. Work, indeed, should prepare girls for their responsibilities as home makers and citizens, even as a girl's status at work was affected by where she stood in the marriage market. Boys' choices were gendered too, however, their choices were interrupted by National Service and defined by the expectation of them being breadwinners.

Whereas advice from the Youth Employment Service is shown to have been largely directed towards local unskilled and semi-skilled work for secondary modern school leavers, the proliferation of careers advice books, both official and otherwise, seem more middle class in tone, anxious to promote a wider range of skilled work for women but with very gendered overtones. In the ones examined here, girls are directed towards jobs which they will be able to combine successfully in future years with their prime domestic responsibilities, and satisfying jobs. Teaching and nursing of all kinds (and dentistry) are preferred. It was no wonder that so few women were to be found in engineering and science since the advice they were likely to receive on the difficulties on entry and acceptance compounded their own distrust of 'dirty' jobs. Other advice books stressed good grooming and over-scrupulous housework to such an extent that it seems amazing that any housewife ever had time to contemplate even part-time work, whereas *Women's Employment*, while accepting that appearance and domestic responsibilities were very important, focused on paid, or at least worthy voluntary work, as intrinsic to women's duty to the community. Consideration of a wider range of jobs here interestingly included engineering as particularly attractive to women because it dealt with technical problems in homes, schools and other public buildings and could be returned to after marriage.

By the late 1950s *manpower* shortages helped attitudes which were already changing towards women's work and a realignment of gender roles in the workplace was being encouraged. To achieve this, however, girls needed to be encouraged to stay on at school and to take extra qualifications. Spencer's analysis of the brief heyday of a source little known to most historians - the career novel for girls aged 14 to 16 (older if they were at grammar school) - gives a revealing insight into contemporary views on women and work. These fictional tales could be dismissed as merely the wishful thinking of their middle-class editors, writers and publishers, but their extraordinary popularity in the years before greater educational and employment opportunities for girls and women increased, is testimony to their appeal, even if this was partly owing to the romantic twist whereby the loyal, plucky girl who chose her job wisely always got her man. The deliberate policy in these books of stimulating girls to train for those skilled jobs 'suitable' for women and future homemakers who might well return to work was illustrated by both the detailed correspondence which went into their making and the collaboration on themes between the main publishers, Bodley Head and Chatto and Windus. Spencer offers a fascinating glimpse into these popular books (usefully listed at the end of the chapter), middle-class in tone yet read eagerly by many working-class girls. Like the contemporary radio soap *The Archers*, they conveyed didactic messages in an engaging form, their lessons also teaching how girls and women should behave at work. Through work indeed, heroines 'grow up' (pp. 115-16), a point made by woman reformers in the 19th century, although, of course, still girls first experience of it might be quite short. Ironically, however, although many of the heroines intend to carry on working after their great triumph of marriage or return to it after childbearing, none of their mothers work. Role models have to be established professional women, often sympathetic aunts. How these idealised stories were partly based on, yet also conflicted with, reality is shown by Spencer's reflections of the career of one of the authors, Evelyn Forbes.

A major preoccupation of the career novels was having the 'correct' appearance. This was also a major focus of recreational literature aimed at girls and women. Using the magazines *Housewife* and *Woman* and the comic *Girl* aimed at 12 to 16 year olds (although I certainly read it when younger and gave it up before I was a teenager), Spencer shows how females were educated into how to be 'feminine', how to be a 'woman' in the post-war, consumer society, a model which was constructed as white, middle-class, heterosexual and married or most likely to be. The unstated focus was really on the needs of the male breadwinner. Physical appearance and crafted images were a priority and to be maintained both at home and in the growing variety of jobs, some increasingly adventurous, promoted in these publications. The latter all actively sought to unite readers around the job of being a woman, participation by readers being encouraged in readers' clubs and correspondence, although the latter, particularly in advice given on the problems pages, actually revealed how hard it was for many to conform to prevailing values. Weavers of webs, after all, are not passive creatures. Spencer herself stresses that those who edited and wrote such publications were largely women who did not conform to the roles endorsed. On the other hand, she presents a world in which women were

creating the very role model which constrained the autonomy of career choice.

Aware of a need to hear the voices of the girls themselves, Spencer interviewed 23 women who had left school between 1956 and 1960. She did this through advertising in south London for volunteers and in no way claims that this small, self-chosen group are necessarily representative especially as the majority of them had been to grammar school. Nevertheless, even taking into account Spencer's own careful caveats concerning such interviews, the latter are instructive. The women said nothing about notions of citizenship, but otherwise their recollections demonstrate how they internalised the rhetoric on the female adult role, using it to rationalise their abandonment of enjoyable paid work for domesticity. Their accounts reveal the significance of 11+ results, fitting in at school, parental control and expectations, the need to find a way between teachers' and family values, and often, of the knowledge that a wage packet was needed at home particularly if younger siblings, especially brothers, had to be supported. It was easy to find a job but not to get appropriate advice on which job was best. All of these women married but Spencer found they marginalised their lives as wives and housewives in contrast to the way they fitted their lives around being mothers, a role which gave them greater confidence in life. Most took up employment later, usually part-time at first, and eventually created new careers. Obviously their stories were told with the benefit of hindsight, but Spencer reveals that the only time their narratives faltered was when they perceived inconsistencies between what they wanted and the actual choices they made, particularly with regard to the option they took when leaving school. The way many interviewees anxiously stressed how they had to fit life as it was, is telling evidence of the pervasiveness of gendered social norms in the 1950s, while at the same time their vivid stories indicate nuances and personal struggles often overlooked.

Spencer, through the wide variety of sources she has interrogated and the analytic tools she has used, explores and analyses the wider implications of the interrelationship between education, both formal and informal, employment and the individual's sense of self in a very thoughtful and readable way. Throughout she draws on a wide range of relevant literature, both critiquing it and using it to support her analysis. She is aware that further exploration of this much neglected period is necessary, but she has made an excellent job of plugging some of the gaps and proved, once again, how useful gender is as a category of analysis.

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