



Murray Edwards  
College  
University of Cambridge



# Women **Today,** Women **Tomorrow**

Survey Report | March 2014

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*Cover photo: Zoah Hedges Stocks. Graduated from Murray Edwards with a first-class degree in 2013, the first person in her fairground family to go to university.*

## MURRAY EDWARDS COLLEGE

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Murray Edwards College at the University of Cambridge was founded (as New Hall) in 1954. Its purpose is to offer outstanding young women from all backgrounds the opportunity to study at Cambridge. It provides the world-class education expected at Cambridge but also supports young women in developing the confidence and skills to achieve their aspirations.

As part of the events for our 60th anniversary, we have gone back to the many women who have come through the College and asked them to complete a survey telling us about their life experiences, both in the personal sphere and in the world of work. We use this information to celebrate their many achievements; to try to understand the challenges that a group of highly-motivated and well-educated women face as they navigate their life courses; to consider how this may have changed over the decades; and to think about what Murray Edwards can do to help future generations.

Our almost 1,000 respondents, whilst not necessarily representative of all those who have attended the College in its 60 years of existence, are educationally a broadly homogeneous group. This gives us a window into the lives of women in the second half of the 20th century – a period of significant change for women in the workplace, as well as for attitudes about women's role in society more generally.

We would like to thank those women who responded to our survey, particularly for their willingness to share so much about their life experiences with us. This report presents the key findings from our analysis of this data.

## THE DIVERSITY OF WOMEN'S LIVES

The latter half of the 20th century marked a period of significant change for women in all aspects of their lives. In our survey, we asked our alumnae to tell us about the range of activities that their lives encompass, and this illustrated the great diversity of their values and interests.

Specifically, we asked our respondents what factors were most important to them at this point in their lives. They had to allocate 100 points across the factors shown in the table to indicate their current relative importance.

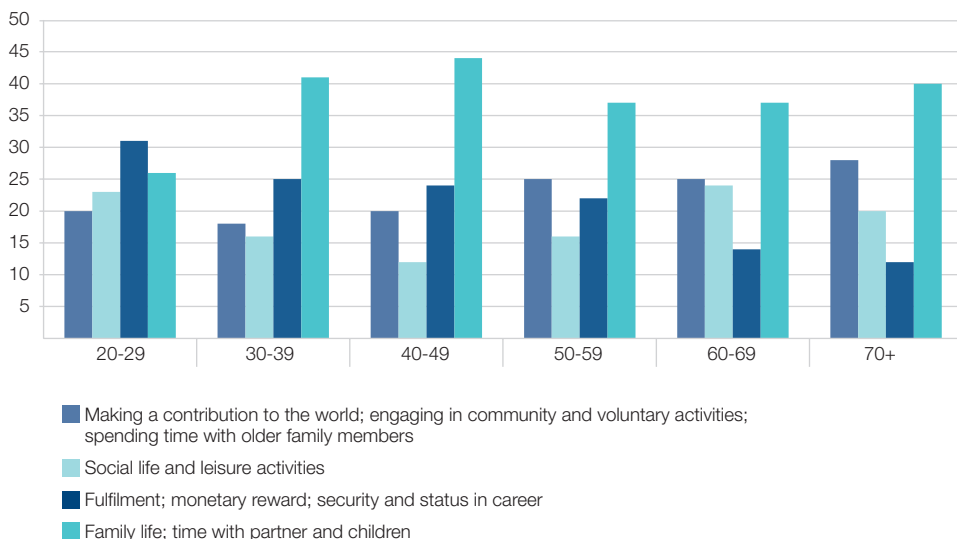
The results revealed that, unsurprisingly, women's priorities do indeed change according to their current situation. But given the very different life-cycle stages of these women, their priorities were also remarkably similar in some respects.

Career success was the most important to the youngest respondents; but as one might expect, this category took on a declining importance for the older women – especially those in or nearing retirement.

Tellingly, family life was the single most important factor and was equally important to all age groups over 30.

Apart from those at each end of the age spectrum, leisure activities and making a contribution to the world were as important as career success across the age groups.

The majority of women, in all age groups, agreed with the statement: *'My sense of what is important to me in life has changed quite significantly as time has passed.'*



## SUCCESSSES AFTER GRADUATION: CAREER, FAMILY AND BEYOND

We started by asking all our survey respondents to tell us about the successes they had had within the first ten years following graduation. We wanted to know about anything they felt proud of and valued highly. We encouraged respondents to give us as much detail as they wanted – and we were delighted with how much they told us.

Age	Career	Personal	Academic	Multiple <sup>1</sup>	Other
20-29	50	16	17	11	6
30-39	48	17	17	8	10
40-49	59	12	17	6	6
50-59	57	14	10	5	14
60-69	51	21	12	6	10
70+	25	27	15	4	29
<b>Overall</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes: Impact on community; Voluntary; Sports or physical achievement; Obtaining public office.

For those who graduated more than ten years ago, we also asked them to think of a later success. What emerged from the data was that, career and family success aside, women's lives are so varied that no particular specific success outranked another. The successes simply varied between different women and according to where they were in their life cycle.

We then asked how the women felt about their success in life generally, reflecting on the areas that they themselves said they valued highly:

- 88% considered themselves successful in family life
- 83% considered they had achieved fulfilment in their career
- 83% felt they were successful in making a difference in the world

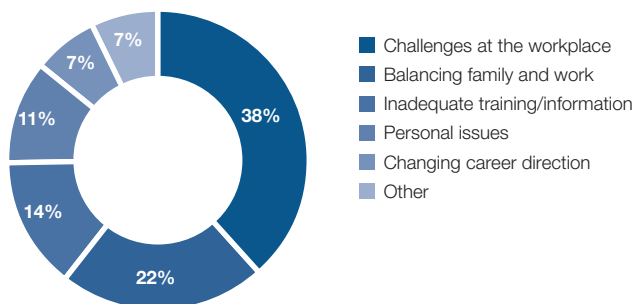
- 83% also felt satisfied and fulfilled by current roles and responsibilities in both career and personal life
- 89% felt confident in the role they play in their personal life and career

58% strongly agreed with the statement: *'I easily manage to combine my career and personal life'*. Those finding it the hardest are often those aged 30-49, many of whom may be trying to combine caring for young families with work.

There are clearly not enough hours in the day for some women. When asked whether they would want to change anything in terms of time allocation if they could, 53% said yes. 42% of this group said they would simply like to get more sleep, and 72% would like more time to take some exercise.

## THE WORK CHALLENGE: FACING INEQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND BALANCING FAMILY LIFE

We asked our women to reflect on their career to date and tell us about the challenges they had encountered. Over three-quarters had faced some sort of challenge – sometimes more than one. We categorised their responses into the groups shown.



The most cited career challenges were coping with a non-supportive workplace culture; balancing family and work; and inadequate training and information.

With 824 separate challenges mentioned, there are myriad hurdles which women have to overcome during their careers. The survey revealed that the most common of these fell within the workplace, with 38% falling into this category. By contrast, the difficult area of balancing work, family life and childcare pressures represented a lesser 22%.

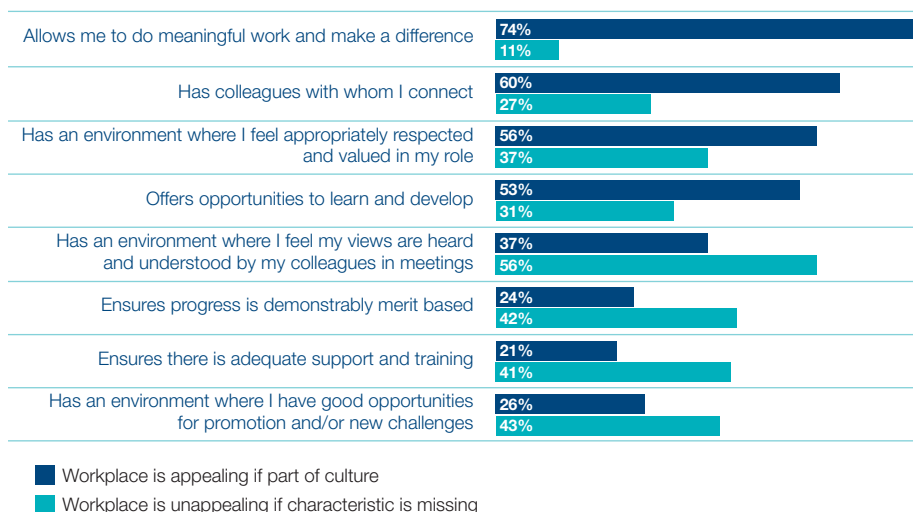
Falling within the workplace arena, the issues most mentioned related to gender inequality and discrimination, non-supportive and difficult colleagues and managers, bullying, undervalued work, and women feeling that they had to over-perform simply because they are female.

All age groups cited workplace issues as a challenge, even 31% of the 20-29 age group.

It would seem that the single largest challenge women have to face in their careers concerns the issue of gender. While legislation may have removed most discrimination, subtle forms of gender bias still persist.

So how did the women affected tackle these workplace challenges? Dedication, hard work and personal drive were the most cited. The main source of support was partners, followed by family, friends and mentors. Rarely did women mention finding support from their employer.

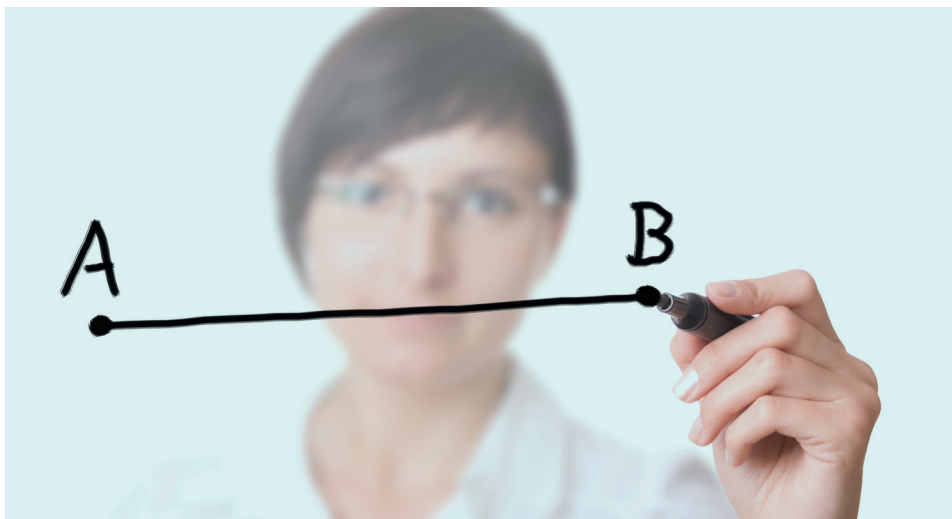
We also asked what made a workplace unappealing or attractive. Overall, women want to make a difference. They want to have their voices heard; feel respected and valued in their role; and work with colleagues with whom they connect. They also find a workplace where progress is not demonstrably merit based unappealing.



In another question, we asked our respondents to tell us what surprised them when they started their careers. These answers reinforce much of what was said about a non-supportive work environment and stressed surprise about the extent to which success was determined by factors other than merit.

## WHAT WOULD HELP WOMEN ACHIEVE?

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One of the aims of our survey was to think of programmes that the College might put in place to address these issues for our current and future students. Although many were related to career development (either for the respondents' own business or otherwise), some of the key areas that emerged had universal importance, such as life skills including confidence building and conflict management. The four most popular suggestions were:

- Leadership coaching (62%)
- Confidence building skills (60%)
- Mentoring network (45%)
- Life coaching (36%)

We also asked our respondents to reflect on their careers and life experiences and to share some of the insights they had gained from these. Were there things about their careers that our respondents would change with the benefit of hindsight? 43% said yes. Many would have followed a different career path early on, perhaps taking a degree that better matched their interests. Some wished they had changed jobs more frequently, promoted their own contributions, and/or would have liked to develop useful workplace skills, such as networking.

Linking this back to our responsibilities at the College, many felt that they would have benefited from more guidance to better inform their career decisions.



## FINAL THOUGHTS FROM OUR ALUMNAE

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Finally, we wanted to draw on the extensive experience of our alumnae and asked: *'What one thing do you know now that you wish you had known when you graduated?'* The answers were detailed, varied and illuminating, and we share a few examples here:

*'That I could truly do what I dreamed about, rather than what I thought was possible.'*  
(aged 40-49)

*'That you never, ever need to stop learning new things.'* (aged 60+)



*'How meritocracy only works so far and doing a good job is not always enough. We need to publicise the good job as well.'*  
(aged 30-39)

*'I would advise young women to follow their instincts and be prepared to be surprised.'*  
(aged 70+)

*'That careers aren't necessarily linear. That you don't necessarily have to have your whole career planned out by the end of your second year.'* (aged 30-39)

## SO WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM THIS SURVEY?



The answers from the women who responded to our survey show how varied our women's lives are and how what they value most changes over time. Our respondents say that the most difficult challenge they have faced in their careers is the non-supportive culture of their workplace. Shockingly, this is just as true for women aged 20-29 as for our older age group. This confirms the findings of other surveys, particularly those carried out in the private sector.

Of course, women (and men) need the provision of good childcare, and the possibilities of part-time and flexible working are now expected from good employers. Women also face conflicting pressures from family and work (as do men). But above all, they want to have their voices heard, to be respected and to progress based on merit.

To achieve this requires huge changes in the workplace. It is not just that progress may be based on many subtle factors other than merit; it is also that the skills that these highly capable and well-educated women bring are often not recognised.

Unless these deep-seated cultures are changed, no matter how hard a college like Murray Edwards tries, it will still be difficult for our women to have the impact they aspire to have in the world. Meantime, though, we have learnt from the survey that even this group of women of drive and determination still need confidence building, leadership and management training, and networks of influence and support.

We will continue to improve what we do to give them that confidence to achieve their aspirations.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Barbara Stocking'.

Dame Barbara Stocking  
President

## THE SURVEY SAMPLE

We sent the survey to 3,670 alumnae through an email link, and sent the link to a further 1,100 by letter. We received 954 responses (20% of those contacted). The respondents represented all age groups:

Aged 20-29	14%
Aged 30-39	18%
Aged 40-49	17%
Aged 50-59	24%
Aged 60-69	21%
Aged 70+	6%

There was an overrepresentation of the older cohorts, but this gave us the benefit of their longer lifetime experiences.

92% of the sample had initially entered the College to study for their first degree (BA, MSc or equivalent); 59% had taken Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences subjects; the remainder had taken Science and related courses.



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