DILEMMAS WOMEN FACE IN THE 1990s: CAREER VERSUS FAMILY.
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY IN TWO CANADIAN CITIES

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Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1
Research Methodology ................................................................................................. 2
  The Schools ............................................................................................................. 2
  Communities .......................................................................................................... 3
  Data Collected ....................................................................................................... 3
  Number and Ages of Respondents ......................................................................... 4
Research Findings: Dreams and Realities ................................................................. 5
  Key Issues .............................................................................................................. 5
    Family Background, Schools, Cities and Women’s Opportunities ..................... 5
Educational Opportunities ......................................................................................... 5
  Aspirations ........................................................................................................... 5
  Attainments ......................................................................................................... 6
Occupational Opportunities ...................................................................................... 7
  Aspirations .......................................................................................................... 7
  Attainments ......................................................................................................... 8
Separation of Work and Family in the “Diaries of the Future” ......................... 9
  Aspirations ......................................................................................................... 9
  Realities ............................................................................................................... 12
Motherhood ............................................................................................................... 13
Social Policy Implications ....................................................................................... 16
  Feminist Social Policy .......................................................................................... 16
Women’s Caring Role in Society ........................................................................... 17
The Changing Context and Social Responsibility to Young Women .................. 19
  Effects on Women ............................................................................................... 19
  Effects on Youth .................................................................................................. 20
References ............................................................................................................... 22
Introduction

The past fifty years have seen great changes in the lives of women in many countries of the world. In industrial societies such as Canada, the post war era brought a considerable amount of economic prosperity. From our current perspective, it can be seen that the immediate period following World War Two, in which many women were pushed back into the domestic sphere after having been engaged in the labour force and in the war effort, was an attempt to return to an earlier, perhaps simpler time. But that was not to be, as the economy changed and women’s participation in the labour force was required. From the 1960s through the late 1990s, women’s involvement in postsecondary education increased greatly as did women’s participation in the labour force. In the late 1990s, over fifty percent of undergraduate students in university are women, while fifty-two percent of Canadian women were in the labour force (Statistics Canada 1995).

Indeed, it has now become important to argue that women who are mothers should have the right to remain at home to raise children and that women who do such work are making an important contribution to the society. The fact that it is necessary to make such an argument indicates how far we have come from the early part of this century when a “family wage” was supported by a number of sectors of society as a means of encouraging women to remain at home to care for children, while men were considered to be the primary breadwinners (Evans 1996, 151-171).

As the century comes to a close, the pace and nature of change has continued at an even greater rate. There is a great deal of insecurity and uncertainty about the future of work as the economic system becomes globalized and the nation state loses its significance. Whatever the future may bring, there is a great deal of concern that large numbers of people will be excluded from the labour force once again.

Which sectors of the community constitute a potential reserve army of labour has changed from the time when women played this role in the economy within industrial societies. In an international economy, the old ways of operating are changing considerably. Wherever these changes may take us, there is not any emphasis, in Canadian society at any rate, for women as a group to return to the home. There are, however, in the new economy, other types of stressors which have a considerable affect upon women who continue to have most of the responsibility for childcare and housework (McDaniel 1993, 163-180).

The changes wrought by the restructuring of the labour force during this era have profoundly affected the lives of women, men and children within the context of the family. The post-war emphasis and focus on nesting, which led to the baby boom, the rise of the suburbs and a considerable increase in domestic consumption, appears, at the end of this century, to be quaint at best.
We live in a very different time indeed. Our notion of what constitutes a family has changed greatly, has become highly politicized and has become an area of considerable controversy (The Vanier Institute of the Family 1994). Family size has decreased over the past half-century. Many couples are living common-law rather than marrying. Divorce rates have increased. The issue of violence in the family has been identified as a serious problem. The traditional nuclear family of father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker with two or more children living in a home of their own is very much in the minority. Single parents (especially mothers) and children; two working parents and children; two working people without children; blended families; and same-sex partners, often with children, are the families of the late 1990s (Statistics Canada 1995). People living at this time can attest to the fact that “the times, they have changed!”

Given the issues discussed above, we might well ask, How have these changes affected the lives of those who have grown up during this era of phenomenal change? How do young people negotiate the terrain that has been carved out for them by their elders? What are their concerns? What are their hopes and their dreams?

Further we might ask, What obstacles do young people experience in the transition from high school to young adulthood? What educational opportunities have been available? What have their experiences been as they seek to enter the labour force? What options do they consider as they develop intimate relationships? What issues do they confront as they consider whether they will have children? What experiences do young people have in common as a generation living in the latter part of the 20th century? What differences do they experience because of gender, class, race and ethnicity or region of the country they grew up in?

Many of these questions are considered in this paper, based upon longitudinal research conducted with 95 female high school students who wrote “diaries of the future,” outlining their hopes and dreams. The project began in 1983 and was conducted in six schools in different regions of the country, three in Toronto, Ontario and three in Regina, Saskatchewan. This research project has given me the opportunity to enter the lives of a group of women at two different periods of their lives in order to discover how they envisioned their own futures while in high school, and again ten years later, to find out whether they followed their dreams. I have learned a great deal about them and their lives, far more than can be presented in this paper.

In this paper I briefly present research findings based upon the original study (in 1983) and follow-up interviews (in 1993), identify key issues that emerge from the study and consider the social policy implications of these findings from a feminist perspective.

**Research Methodology**

**The Schools**

In 1983 “diaries of the future” and demographic questionnaires were collected from 430 high school-aged women students in Toronto and Regina from schools with relatively
distinct populations. The results of the demographic questionnaires indicated there were significant social class differences among the students in the Toronto schools. Toronto Private School is a school for girls and young women within the city of Toronto which has a predominantly upper-middle class student body (Maxwell and Maxwell 1984). Toronto City School is a commercial high school with a predominantly working class student body. Located on the outskirts of the city of Toronto, Toronto Suburban School is a composite high school with both academic and commercial streams. The social class background of the students is predominantly middle class (Geller 1973; 1984a; 1996).

Regina Private School was selected along with two public high schools in Regina, one located in the north end of the city, which draws from a working class community (Regina North), and one in the south end of the city, which draws from a more middle class community (Regina South). Regina schools do not fall as strongly into different social class groupings as those in Toronto, although there are significant contrasts between Regina North and Regina South schools. Regina Private School is not an elite school comparable to Toronto Private, but appears to be predominantly middle class (Geller 1984b).

Communities

There are numerous contrasts between the two cities included in this study. The young women growing up in Toronto lived in or near a large metropolitan industrial centre in central Canada. Although the province was in the midst of a recession in 1983, Ontario is one of Canada’s wealthiest provinces. The lifestyles, experiences and expectations of young women growing up in urban Canada contrast strongly with those of young women growing up in a small, agricultural and considerably poorer province in the broad expanse of prairie in the middle of the country.

Regina is a city of about 190,000 people and rests on the TransCanada highway. While it is the capital city of Saskatchewan, Regina remains largely dependent upon the resources of Saskatchewan: extraction from the land through agriculture and mineral resources, as well as natural gas and oil.

While Saskatchewan, in 1983, was not in the depth of the recession that existed in Ontario at that time, the agricultural sector underwent a period of drought in the mid-to-late 1980s, which kept the province in economic doldrums for a longer period of time than Ontario, which experienced an economic boom in the late 1980s.

In analyzing this research we will bear in mind the different contexts experienced by young women growing up in different parts of the country.

Data Collected

Students at the beginning of their high school careers in grade nine and those at the end of high school, in grade 12 or grade 13, were the population sampled. The young women
wrote “diaries of the future” about their hopes and dreams for their futures through to old age. Demographic data obtained from each of the high school students included information about the country of birth of the student and her parents, ethnic background, education and occupation of parents. Most respondents focused on the future with respect to such issues as education, occupation, intimate relationships, marriage and children. Many of the women wrote about their desire to travel or to participate in activities such as certain sports. Often, respondents would indicate a desire or wish for their own good health and/or happiness and that of family members.

In 1993 follow-up interviews were conducted with 95 women. Respondents were asked about their educational and occupational pursuits and how these related to what they had written in their “diaries.” A major component of the interview was concerned with intimate relationships, marriage and children and how the realities compared with the “dreams.” An aspect of home life that was explored with the respondents, especially those living with a partner, concerned issues related to housework. For those who were mothers at the time of the interviews, we asked about the experience of being a mother, wife and housewife compared to the “dreams” of high school.

We asked the women to reflect upon their life course up to the point of the interview by inquiring about any obstacles they had encountered in trying to achieve their goals, what advice they would give to their high-school aged selves, and what they would do differently if they could change things. Finally, interview respondents were asked if they were feminists.

The table below shows the ages of our respondents as students in 1983, according to the school they attended.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>14-16</th>
<th>17-19</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto City</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Private</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Suburban</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina Private</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina South</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina North</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Number and Ages of Respondents**

There were 95 women who were interviewed or who completed the interview questionnaire in 1993: 38 were from Toronto and area schools and 57 were from Regina schools.
Thirty-two women from Regina South School were interviewed as compared to only seven from Regina Private School. Equal numbers were interviewed from Regina North and Toronto Private Schools and equal numbers from Toronto City and Toronto Suburban Schools were located.

The age-range of the respondents when they wrote their “diaries of the future” was between 14 and 19. Ten years later, the women therefore ranged in age from 24 to 29.

Key issues that emerged from this longitudinal study are discussed below. The voices of some of the young women at different stages of this research are presented.

**Research Findings: Dreams and Realities**

**Key Issues**

In this section I consider three key issues that emerged from this study and include some of the women’s voices at appropriate points. The key issues discussed below are:

1. Family background, schools, cities and women’s opportunities.
2. Separation of work and family in the “diaries of the future.”
3. Motherhood.

**Family Background, Schools, Cities and Women’s Opportunities**

In selecting schools from different parts of Canada, there were expectations that there would be economic as well as social differences between the regions.

The educational, occupational and employment status of mothers was considered particularly significant, since how mothers handled their roles and responsibilities with respect to family and employment would serve as models for their daughters while in high school. Based upon parents’ educational and occupational backgrounds, ethnicity and country of birth, the six schools have been shown to have a predominance of students from different social class backgrounds and, to some extent, ethnicity and immigrant status. Below we consider the educational and occupational aspirations and attainments of the women in our study, compared by school.

**Educational Opportunities**

**Aspirations**

There are contrasts among the schools as to the women’s aspirations to continue their education. Although only about ten percent of the entire sample of women aspired to end their education at grade 12, one-third of the women from Regina North School aspired to go only as far as grade 12. A few women from Regina South and Toronto City School aspired to end their education with grade 12. None of the women from the private schools aspired only to high school completion.
A majority of the women in the two private schools and the two middle-class schools aspired to postsecondary education, mostly university. A number of the women from the working class school also aspired to attend postsecondary education.

The young woman quoted below attended Toronto Private School.

I’ve thought of what I’d like to do after high school for quite a few years now. I’ve always loved exploring new things, especially those to do with the outdoors and being with people. Because of that my ideas of a pleasurable career are slightly different to those of most of my classmates. In grade seven I said to myself that I wanted to take a year off before going to university. . . . I realized that I’d have to get a job to support myself in the future, because there were so many things I wanted to do, but didn’t have the funds. . . . I realized that since I was always so adventurous and loved just getting out and being active, that I wouldn’t want a job that would tie me down in a big city at a desk. . . . Since I’ve always loved sports, I thought of something along the lines of sports medicine or kinesiology or physiotherapy, all being things that really interest me so my mind wouldn’t get bored as easily. Yet those would still be 9-5 city jobs most of the time, so I also thought of something like Marine Biology which could eventually take me out to the wildlife.

As a student in grade 13 she sought an education that would prepare her to work in the outdoors. Her remarks show that she had given a considerable amount of thought to her future. She recognized that she would have to pursue an education that would enable her to live the kind of life she aspired to. Not many of the “diaries” presented such a clearly considered reflection as this one.

**Attainments**

More than one-third of the women left school after high school, although a number of them subsequently returned to school after working for a period of time. Two-thirds of the women from Regina North School, one-third from Regina South School and half from Toronto City School left after high school.

Only one-quarter of the women went all the way through to university completion without any time out to work. About 80 percent of Toronto Private School women, 70 percent of Toronto Suburban School women and 45 percent of Regina South School respondents completed at least one university degree without taking any time out to work or to pursue other activities. The woman from Toronto Private School quoted above responded to our question concerning her educational decisions as follows:

My marks weren’t good enough for Physio. Occupational therapy is more holistic than Physio, including more aspects of psychology. I wanted a marketable profession, a trade.

The questionnaire completed by the woman quoted above disclosed that her occupation is coordinator in a refugee camp in Africa. Even though she was unable to enter a program in physiotherapy, she found an area that gave her the “marketable profession” she desired. Her sense of adventure took her to Africa. At the time of the interview she seemed to be living the life she had aspired to in her “diary of the future.”
While a considerable number of women did not go on to further education or training immediately after high school, a substantial number of them took some time out to work or to travel and then returned to school at a later date. At the time of the 1993 interviews, about one-fifth of our respondents were enrolled in a university program. Over 70 percent of Regina Private School women were in part-time or full-time university studies. On the other hand, none of the women from Regina North School and only one woman from Toronto City School completed a university degree. However, a number of them returned to school in order to upgrade their skills and knowledge.

It is clear that the class background of the women was a significant influence on both their aspirations while in high school and their subsequent attainments.

**Occupational Opportunities**

**Aspirations**

A large proportion of the women who mentioned an occupation aspired to professional careers. Over 70 percent of Toronto Private School women, about 60 percent of Regina South women and around 40 percent from Toronto Suburban and Regina Private Schools aspired to professional jobs. Very few women aspired to jobs in the clerical or services field, and none aspired to work in sales.

There are contrasts between the women who were groomed in high school for further education and those who saw high school as the end of their education. These latter were often quite eager to get out of school as quickly as possible in order to get a job and get on with their lives. This was particularly evident in the “diaries” of the women from Regina North School.

The grade 12 student from Regina South School quoted below aspired to leave school at the end of high school.

Right now I would like to finish my high school education and go on to the Regina city police force or the RCMP. I would like to stay in that occupation just to see what it is like and maybe leave and try and get a job as a secretary. While being a secretary I wouldn’t mind being able to sell my art work. I love to paint and sketch, and I have already sold quite a few pictures. If I’m not good enough, then I’ll just paint for fun. I’m not planning on getting married or having any kids. I would just like to work and be able to support myself sufficiently. I don’t want to become old and useless, so I hope I don’t live past 65.

She mentions several potential occupations: police work, working as a secretary, and being an artist. Since she did not intend to marry and have children, she recognized she would be responsible for supporting herself.

Often, the women who did not plan to continue their education past high school indicated an interest in getting an unspecified “job,” working for a while, marrying and, some time later, starting a family.
Attainments

One-quarter of the women worked in clerical occupations at the time they were interviewed in 1993: half of these women were from Toronto City School; one-third, from Regina North School; 30 percent, from Toronto Suburban School; and one-quarter, from Regina South School. Women from Toronto Private (about 28 percent) and Regina Private (43 percent) schools were more likely to be in the financial and customer services sectors than in secretarial or other clerical occupations.

Fewer than one-fifth of the women were in professional (and technical) occupations. About one-quarter of Toronto Private and Regina South School women were in such occupations. A number of these latter women were teachers; a few were lawyers or doctors. Other occupations these women were in included nursing and social work. Some women were in managerial and administrative occupations (about 14 percent) and a small number worked in artistic, literary or recreational areas. About 10 percent of the women were full-time students, and another five percent were full-time mothers and homemakers.

The women were in predominantly female-dominated occupations. Just over half were in full-time permanent positions, a few were in temporary full-time jobs, while others worked on contract from year to year. A substantial number of the women worked part-time, only had summer jobs, were students or were full-time mothers and homemakers.

The woman quoted above had not worked as a police officer but had developed skills as an artist and a computer operator. Her updated story follows:

Well, I was encouraged a great deal with my artistic abilities in my art classes, and actually pursued computers rather than the police force. I learned all about computers in high school, and got some very good positions without having to take further schooling. I moved from Regina to Florida where I had very good jobs. I worked away, bought a nice house, new cars and nice dogs. I should have been content but I travelled to Europe where I met my current fiancée. So I sold up and moved to Britain to breed Arabian horses and train sheep dogs and be with my fiancée. . . . I still love to do artwork and I am selling some commissioned pictures. I should be content with my life but I always feel that I could learn more about other cultures, countries, people, things in general.

The questionnaire completed by the woman quoted above showed she was living on a farm in Scotland and identified her occupation as artist and dog trainer. This is a woman who also appears to have a sense of adventure and desire for independence, having travelled some distance from the province she lived in while in high school. She developed valuable skills while in high school, both as an artist and as a computer operator, which have been very advantageous to her. Although she had not intended to marry, her current relationship, which took her to a farm in Scotland, enabled her to develop other valuable skills as a horse breeder and sheep dog trainer. Her experiences have been quite different from many of the other women we followed in this study.

Since so many of the women worked in female-dominated jobs, a number of them worked part-time and some were students or homemakers, on the whole, their salary lev-
els were not very high. Over 70 percent of the women from Regina North and Regina Private schools earned under $25,000 per year. Many Regina North women were mothers who were also employed out of the home. Regina Private School women were in university programs when we interviewed them and would be expected to have better job opportunities and higher salaries once they had completed their program of studies.

Sixty percent of Regina South School women earned over $25,000 per year. Several of them earned over $40,000. Half the women from Toronto City and Toronto Suburban schools earned over $25,000, while only about 40 percent of Toronto Private School earned in this range. Several women from this school did not report any income either because they were full-time students who lived at home with their parents or were homemakers.

Career and job opportunities were important to the majority of the women we interviewed. A substantial number of them had pursued postsecondary education, while others returned to school to upgrade their skills or took specialized programs and courses.

The women were in different stages in their careers. A number of them were recent graduates. Others had returned to school to obtain a first or subsequent degree. Yet others had left school after high school and had been working for some time when interviewed. While many of the women stated they were satisfied with their current jobs or occupations, many of them also said they would like to change their jobs or their occupations at some time. Some of the women said they would like to start their own businesses.

School and family background influences on occupational opportunities were somewhat less clear-cut than those related to education. In part, this is related to the fact that the women’s life course experiences varied in relation to whether they went on to further education, married or had children.

Separation of Work and Family in the “Diaries of the Future”

Aspirations

In previous generations, the majority of women were likely to marry within a few years of completing their education—often in their late teens and early twenties. Women who went on to further education might wait to marry until they had completed their teaching or nursing programs or university education. Once women had children, they tended to drop out of the labour force to raise their families.

While many women found ways to contribute to family income through part-time work—keeping boarders, selling eggs, etc.—it was assumed, throughout this century, that women’s place was in the home with the children. Since the Second World War, with the availability of more jobs, more women returned to the labour force once they raised their children.
More recently, large proportions of women with very young children have remained in the labour force, rather than leave to raise their children (Statistics Canada 1995). However, there remains a very strong message that the best person to raise young children is their mother. In the early 1980s this message continued to influence the young women who participated in this study, as we see from the following quote from the “diary” of a young women in Grade 13 from Toronto Suburban School.

I don’t really want to work while children are under 10 years old because if I am to be a good mother, I want to devote a great deal of my time to my children. I want to be there when they need me. I guess I want a career and all the things that go along with it and then a family. I want two different lives.

This woman’s desire to have “two lives” poses the dilemma of many of the women in this study, although few of them articulated it so clearly. In their “diaries of the future,” the young women generally said they would marry once they were established in their jobs or careers. Children would come some time after. Most of the young women in our study aspired to marry and to have children as well as to prepare themselves for the labour force, as did the woman quoted above. Many of them expected they would stay at home with their children as she did.

A large proportion (78 percent) of Regina North School women did not write about whether they would return to work once they had children. They were closely followed, however, by Regina Private School (71 percent), Toronto Private School (61 percent) and Toronto Suburban School women (60 percent). Women from Toronto City School (40 percent) and Regina South School (25 percent) were somewhat more likely to write about planning to return to work after they had children. Often this was once their children had entered school or when they did not need their mothers at home any longer, which some women suggested was when the children were quite a lot older. A small proportion of women (five percent) said they would work continuously, not taking any time out to raise their children. While some of the young women (about five percent) said they would quit work once they had children, this number was quite small and no particular school stands out.

In writing their “diaries,” the students were likely to segment their “two lives” between their educational/occupational aspirations and their aspirations for marriage and children. Often they did not say what they would do. A couple of examples of how the young women presented their aspirations to have both a career and a family are presented below.

I hope to get married around age 22 or 23. I already know whom I am going to marry: my boyfriend of 2-1/2 years. We were made for each other. . . . He is very possessive and jealous, although he has no reason to be, except his own immaturity and insecurities. . . . He gets drunk and spends money like crazy. He is getting better all the time. I guess all he needed was a little understanding and TLC from someone and I’m glad to help him. . . . I don’t know what I’m going to do after I’m married. I don’t want to be a regular housewife, cooped up in a house or apartment. . . . I don’t know what I want, a career or a family, I don’t want both, at least not at the same time. I will devote myself totally to one thing, but I can’t handle two. I would like to have some daughters and sons, to watch them grow up and help them through adolescence, one of the toughest times in life.
This woman, a grade 12 student at Toronto City School, presents a frightening picture of a young woman in an abusive relationship, who believed she could rescue her boyfriend through “Tender Loving Care.” Her comments about not being able to handle two things at once, both a career and a family, are similar to those made by the woman quoted above from Toronto Suburban School, who wrote that she wanted “two lives.” On the other hand, the Toronto City School student shows her considerable ambivalence about the traditional role of the “housewife.” Her desire to help her children through adolescence suggests the difficulties she was experiencing with her own adolescence. The next quote is from a woman from Regina North School who planned to quit her job when she had children and return to work or school once the children were older.

Once I get out of school, I plan to continue to work at the Hospital as a dietary aide. Three years down the road, I plan to marry my boyfriend. He is going to continue to work and once we have enough money, we are going to buy a house. Once we have been married for six years, we will have some ‘juniors’ . . . Just a few because I can only handle so much pain. When I have my first child, I plan to quit so I can spend all my time with my children. Once the kids are old enough to take care of themselves, I will hopefully go back to work, maybe even back to school, taking something like accounting, typing or anything that is required to become a secretary.

Both of these women did not plan to go on to further education. Both were in relationships in high school with men they planned to marry. The woman from Regina North School also wanted “two lives.” She handled this in her “diary” by segmenting these “two lives” into parts: she would work full-time in the hospital where she had worked while at school; save money to get married to her current boyfriend; quit her job once she had children and stay home with them until they could take care of themselves; and then return to work or perhaps to school in order to become a secretary. It would seem that her plans to marry her current boyfriend influenced her decision to work after she finished grade 12, rather than get qualifications to become a secretary immediately after high school graduation.

What are the implications of “wanting two different lives” for young women? How do they understand these two lives while in high school and later in their lives? Where do they look to get some answers for how to deal with what appears to be disparate lives?

During their school years their mothers would be their primary role models. Many mothers worked outside the home at the time their daughters were in high school. The two major exceptions were mothers from Toronto Private School and Regina North School, more of whom were full-time mothers and homemakers at the time their daughters were in high school. The traditional views of Regina North School students mirror the traditional lives of their mothers. Toronto Private School students, on the other hand, expected to “have it all,” professional careers and families. The mothers who were not employed when their daughters were in high school were either engaged in volunteer work or had returned to school in order to facilitate their return to the labour force.
Given that one of the major changes to occur in the lives of large proportions of women over the couple of decades is the expectation that they will have careers and raise a family, it is important to recognize the nature of the dilemma this poses for young women. Their dilemma did not appear to alter significantly once they reach adulthood, as we see in the next section.

**Realities**

At the time of the interviews, ten years later when the women were in their mid-to-late 20s, 75 percent did not yet have children. Except for the women from Regina North School, 50 percent of whom had children, only one or two women from most of the other schools had children. None of the women from Toronto Private School had children. About 50 percent of all of the women were single. While a few single women had children, the women tended to want to be in established relationships before having children. Almost all of the women who did not have children aspired to have children in the future.

A majority of the women had put off having children until they established themselves in their careers, which is what many of them suggested they would do in their “diaries of the future.” The economic situation they found themselves in had made it difficult for some of them to find or keep jobs. This may have been a significant factor, particularly for those women who did not go on to further education, such as those from Toronto City School, most of whom were married or in common-law relationships. Even though they were in long-term relationships, their partners’ incomes may not have been adequate to raise a family. The women from this school would be expected to continue to contribute to the family income as well as care for a child.

Our data show this to be the case for a number of women from Regina North School who had not expected they would continue to hold down full-time jobs while raising children. It is not clear why there is a difference between the women from these two schools. The fact that the cost of housing in Toronto was considerably higher than that in Regina at the time of the interviews may have been a factor in this difference. Regina North women had also been most keenly desirous to have children while in high school.

There is a difference with respect to the transition to adult life among the women from different schools and social class backgrounds. In this study, school and class factors are significant with respect to the age at which the women were likely to marry and start families, which related to the age at which the women completed their education and entered the labour force.

A substantial proportion of women from Regina North School, followed by several women from Regina South School, took on the responsibility of raising children at an earlier age than most of the other women in this study. Women from the private high schools in both cities, on the other hand, took a lot more time to “grow up.” They continued on with their education, travelled, moved to other cities and did a variety of other things. Quite a few of these women lived at home with their parents at the time of the in-
terviews. They seemed to be much more “carefree” than many women from working class backgrounds. The women who were mothers carried the heaviest loads, and their lives were far from “carefree.” In the next section, I discuss the issue of motherhood.

Motherhood

Twenty-five per cent of the women in this study had their own children. Most of the women who were mothers had children under five years of age. One-third of the women with children were full-time mothers and homemakers. Most of the other women made use of daycare services, their mothers or a hired caregiver to care for their children when they went out to work.

Equal numbers of the women said their roles as mothers, wives and housewives were similar to what they had expected they would be while they were in high school, and said their views in high school about these roles had been unrealistic. Forty percent of the women from Regina North School, who were mothers, said their views had been unrealistic. The women whose views were unrealistic generally said they had not realized the amount of responsibility and work that was involved in caring for children. Most of the women from Regina North School, who were mothers, were employed full-time outside of the home, including the women who were single mothers. Six of the women from this school had two or three children.

The three women whose “diaries” we quoted above have had somewhat different experiences from one another and from what they thought while in high school. The woman quoted above from Toronto Suburban School, who wanted “two different lives,” seemed to be doing what she said she would do as a full-time mother and homemaker.

I have learned that it is too difficult to give quality time to children, a job, housework and husband all at the same time, something suffers. I have learned to live with less money and [fewer] expectations.

However, although she seemed to be following her aspirations to be a full-time mother, her remarks, when asked to reflect on her experiences by indicating what advice she would give to herself as a high school student, shows that her views may have changed somewhat.

Get lots of education, study in other countries if possible. Always be financially independent, keep your job, reduce hours to part-time if kids are involved but don’t give up your job completely. Marry in your late 20s, early 30s, take your time, learn, travel, know yourself, have fun.

This woman had a six-month-old baby. She stayed at home during the week with her child and worked part-time on weekends doing data entry. She had quit a very good job because of problems with co-workers. She looked for a job for a year without any luck, and then she had a baby. She thought she would stay out of the labour force for two years. It would appear that financial dependency on her partner may be a problem for her. We
also know that as a young woman finishing high school, she believed she would be a
stay-at-home mom for a few years.

To what extent her current situation is a reflection of her earlier beliefs, we do not know,
other than the fact that the “advice” she offered suggests that she realized that being fi-
nancially independent was important to her. It seems likely that she will return to the la-
bour force well before she thought she would while in high school and that she will likely
learn to juggle the “two lives” as so many other women do.

The woman from Toronto City School who in grade 12 thought she would marry her
jealous and possessive boyfriend, fortunately, did not marry him and was single at the
time of the interview. She said that her views had changed since high school. Although
she did not have children, her experiences are worth considering here.

My views on people have changed since seeing how different men and women really are. When
you’re young you think you’ll live happily ever after. Now I think if I want someone I want them
to be a good friend first without having any further involvement in a relationship. In terms of life
with men, I have a really hard time trusting because in the past I’ve always been very trusting and
in two relationships that trust was taken advantage of. I have a very tainted view of men at the
moment, they’re such weaklings.

The woman quoted above broke up with the boyfriend mentioned in the “diary” because he
“became involved in drugs and broke my heart.” We do not know what her life was
like while she was growing up. It would appear that she had problems based upon her
comments about the difficulties of adolescence. Her high school boyfriend, who was pos-
sessive and jealous towards her and who had problems with compulsive spending, alco-
hol and drugs and was someone she wanted to rescue, would undoubtedly have caused
her a great deal of grief had she married him. Her view of men when we interviewed her
was distrustful because she had been hurt in her relationships. She appears to be a woman
who could have a lot of trouble in a marriage if she does not receive help to deal with her
difficulties at some time.

Finally, we consider the situation of the woman from Regina North School who planned
to marry her high school boyfriend. While she had not married him, she did have two
children with him and she was employed full-time. Her remarks concerning her experi-
ences of being a mother, wife and housewife follow:

I didn’t think I’d be working full-time so I thought it would be less hectic. I didn’t think it would
be so draining. It’s a lot of responsibility, but I really enjoy their company and being a mother.

The woman quoted above did not marry the man with whom she had her children because of his abusive father. She expected to receive respect from her husband and felt that his father, with whom she would be expected to live, was abusive. She continued to have a relationship with her partner, but refused to marry him or live with him.
This woman’s situation is quite unusual in that while she did not marry her boyfriend, she
had children with him and maintained her relationship with him though it meant that she
had to work full-time while carrying the responsibility of the children. She explained that
her parents’ marriage had been a very good one, and her expectations that she would be
treated with respect had influenced her decision not to marry him.

Her reality is quite different from her high school aspirations and expectations that she
would be a full-time mother and homemaker. Given her experiences, it is interesting to
consider the advice she would give to herself as a high school student: “Get a degree in
social work or a profession. Hold off with your family until established in a career.” Also
of interest are the changes she would make if she could: “I would have worked casual at
the hospital after grade 12 and continued my schooling, postsecondary education.”

She emphasized the importance of further education, as did many of the women we inter-
viewed who had not pursued education after high school. And like many others in this
study, her advice was to wait to have a family until a career was established.

As young women in high school, many of our students were unsure about how they
would handle full-time jobs and raise a family. By the time they were interviewed ten
years later, the women had all, in their own ways, dealt with the issue of having “two
lives.” Half of the women were single and did not have children, although most of them
aspired to marriage and family within the next several years. The married women and the
women living common-law were in different stages with respect to having a family.
Some of the women we interviewed were pregnant. Others planned to have children in
the future. About one-quarter of the women were mothers. Some of these women dealt
with the dilemma by dropping out of the labour force for a period of time in order to be
full-time mothers and housewives. Those who were single mothers carried the full burden
of responsibility for children while they continued to work. Some women stated they had
children too early and had put their lives and career opportunities on hold as a result.

School and family background influenced the time when the women in our study had
children. Many of the women from upper-middle and middle-class backgrounds had not
had children. They were still getting their careers on track. Most would likely not have
children until their late twenties or their thirties, at which time they likely would be es-
tablished in careers and in a position to pay for childcare. Some may work part-time for a
period of time.

Some of the women who had children at an earlier age made the decision to remain at
home with their children rather than trying to juggle both aspects of their lives. A number
of the women, whose high school aspirations had been most traditional, were not only
mothers as they had hoped to be, but were working in low-paying jobs.
Social Policy Implications

This research raises a number of questions concerning the situation of young women, which needs to be addressed by families, educators, policy makers and all those concerned about the status of women in our society.

In the final section of this paper, I consider a feminist approach to the social policy implications of the research findings. I begin by addressing the need for feminist social policy and then consider the significance of women’s caring on women’s lives. Finally, I consider the changing context of our times and the responsibility of social institutions to young women struggling through their own transitions in a time of complex social, political and economic transformation.

Feminist Social Policy

Gender and race have generally been neglected and marginalized in social policy analysis and in the development of social policy (Williams 1989). The results of such neglect and marginalization can be seen in the results of the research presented here. Young women are having to struggle, as individuals, with much the same issues as did women from earlier generations. Women remain most vulnerable to poverty, especially single women who have children. Women’s work in the home and in the labour force is undervalued. A substantial majority of women remain ghettoized in job categories which offer low wages and little room for advancement. Women who are mothers tend to carry the heavy burden of paid employment, along with the responsibility for much of the work in the home and childcare.

Many women continue to be economically dependent, either on a male partner or on the state, due to the failure of the state to recognize the fact that women’s caregiving roles are a primary cause for their vulnerability to poverty.

The state plays a major role in assuming a sexual division of labour (Williams: 183). A labour market structured on class, race and gender lines persists and influences the destinies of young women, as can be seen from the results of this study. Williams notes that working class girls’ destinies are most limited. She further states:

It is clear that the welfare state operates in ways as to maintain the financial dependence of women in the home, their subordination to male authority in the home and at work, and to define, limit and constrain women’s sexuality, their mothering, their reproductive powers and their access to independent income… this process operates differently according to class and ‘race’ and… this process is neither monotonous nor monolithic but both contradictory and contested.

The contradictory aspect of the situation in which many women find themselves rests with the fact that it is their caring work in the home with the elderly, frail, sick or young, which frequently renders them financially dependent (195).
Williams argues that it is important to centre women’s interests, along with a recognition of class differences, in political and economic decisions and that women must be centrally involved in the decision-making that has such profound affect upon their lives.

It is important to recognize that there has been a long history in Canada, dating from the last century, of women seeking to influence public policy through the women’s movements of first and second wave feminism. And, indeed, state policies have been affected by such movements, both Canadian and international. The Report on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada was published in 1972. In 1979, Canada became a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and in 1982, through the efforts of women from across Canada, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guaranteed equality to women.

The reality that Canadian society has a long way to go towards developing a society which offers women the equality they desire, is evident from a Status of Women document entitled Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality (1995). This document, written some 25 years after the formation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, presents information on how gender analysis may be undertaken. The document recognizes the difficulties women experience balancing the demands in their lives, difficulties many of the women in this study have faced:

... the conflicting demands of unpaid- and paid-work responsibilities create a considerable drain on many women... It can lead to women delaying their entry into paid-work; turning down opportunities for advancement, promotion or work altogether; taking part-time rather than full-time work; avoiding non-traditional occupations if perceived to be sources of additional stress; not taking advantage of educational and training opportunities or foregoing the paid-work experience altogether as is especially true in the case of sole-support mothers.... These limitations contribute to women’s over-representation among Canadians in poverty... (19)

The document goes on to note that women’s progress toward economic equality depends on how legislation, policies and programs deal with women’s social and economic realities and to present the federal government’s commitment to women’s equality through a variety of measures (27-33). While many of these commitments may offer some assistance to individual women, it is difficult to take them seriously, given the fact that during this same period the federal government abolished the Canada Assistance Plan, made drastic cuts in transfer payments to the provinces in the areas of Health, Education and Social Services and eliminated 45,000 jobs from the Public Service, many of which were held by women. One of the key outcomes of these cuts is to slow down, if not stop, the evolution of women’s equality.

**Women’s Caring Role in Society**

The significance of caring in women’s lives has been identified as a key factor in limiting women’s opportunities. Caring involves the mental, emotional and physical work involved in looking after others. Most of this work is done by women throughout their lives, as mothers, daughters, wives and volunteers. It is done by women in the professions
of nursing, social work and teaching as well as workers in hospitals, child-care centres and homemaking services (Baines et al. 1991). Caring work tends to be invisible. Its costs and benefits have not been incorporated into the design of social policies and formal services.

Women’s poverty is a function of their caring role in society (Evans 1991). The economic position of women will not be altered fundamentally without the recognition of both the value of women’s caregiving role in the home, and of labour market inequities which women face. The exclusive assignment of caring responsibilities to women is the issue. Avoiding public responsibility for the caring work done by women in families gives families these responsibilities without providing the necessary resources to carry them out. Efforts to achieve equity in the workplace must be accompanied by efforts to make women’s work in the labour market and at home, more compatible (194). There is a need for a generous and flexible parental leave policy and universal and subsidized childcare system and the state must pursue a policy of collective responsibility for children and dependent adults.

It is important to recognize that policies which are directed at diminishing the inequalities women face in the labour market will have little effect unless there are changes in their domestic and childcare responsibilities. Caring must be moved to centre stage in future policy discussions.

In these research findings, it is apparent that in high school most of the young women aspired to the contradictory and conflicting roles of caregiver and worker. The state has failed to develop social policy that recognizes these conflicts faced by young women as they attempt to manage their adult lives. Its economic policies have maintained high levels of unemployment and focused on deficit reduction, all of which have had an effect on the lives of these young women. It is apparent that a gender analysis was not undertaken on the effects of deficit reduction. The government has failed to provide affordable universal childcare, which is a further factor in women’s inequality.

The young women in this study who have pursued their caregiving roles were the women carrying the heaviest burdens and the ones most vulnerable to poverty. They tended to have the lowest level of education and the lowest-paying jobs. While, as mothers they are clearly making a significant contribution to the society, their caregiver roles receive little recognition from policy makers, as the society offers little in the way of material supports to these young women. The women who were able to do so made the decision to remain out of the labour force for a period of time to raise their children, while others worked part-time, and still others appeared to have put off establishing families.

Keeping in mind the need to centre women’s realities in making social policy, we turn to the final section of this paper.
The Changing Context and Social Responsibility to Young Women

In the final section of this paper I consider the effects of the changing social, political and economic context on women and youth and briefly discuss the responsibility of social institutions and the state to young women. Suggestions for what needs to be done are made here as well.

Effects on Women

The impact of globalization of industry, corporate restructuring and rapid technological change have brought high levels of unemployment, the slowing of economic growth, increases in part-time employment and growing inequities among people (Bakker and Brodie 1995). The family wage has disappeared. It now takes between 65 and 80 hours of work per week for each family to earn its keep. Median family income has been declining. As of 1995, 18 percent of Canadian children live in low income families; a large proportion live in lone parent (usually mother-led) families.

The effects of restructuring have quite different effects across racial and class groupings. The gendered impacts of restructuring are distributed differently among women, causing the greatest hardship among young women, immigrant women, women of colour and working-class women (Brodie 1996). The erosion of the welfare state and cuts in public sector employment affects women disproportionately, increasing their economic insecurity. In the research discussed in this report, the greatest hardship is clearly borne by the women from working and lower middle-class backgrounds.

Women’s labour force participation continues to be characterized by female job ghettos. Trends toward smaller firms and declining unionization erode working conditions, job security and wages of women. The situation of nursing during a time of severe cuts in the health sector and an emphasis on community-based (home) care are examples of the de-professionalization that has a serious impact on “women’s” professions. The goals of pay and employment equity have been ineffective and are in serious danger of being destroyed as part of the mania toward deficit reduction. In this research I have been able to show that many of the women work in traditional, low-paying positions and have been negatively affected by cut-backs.

Caregiving functions are being downloaded to the home. The notion that poverty is not necessarily the fault of the individual and that all citizens have the right to a basic standard of living has been destroyed with the killing of the Canadian Assistance Plan. Single mothers have been identified as employable across the country. This ignores that their caring work poses very real constraints to workforce participation. The new ideal of the common good rests on market-oriented values of self-reliance, efficiency and competition, demanding that the “good citizen recognizes the limits and liabilities of state provision and embraces the obligation to work longer and harder to become more self-reliant” (Brodie: 19). Brodie also states that the “new moral order accords more value to the private than the public, to the individual than the collective, to reassert that the family is the site for self-sufficiency and responsibility”(21). The effect of social policy decisions be-
ing made in Canada is summed up by Wiseman (1996, 115) who states: “Women are being forced into the bottom end of the labour market at the same time as declining expenditure on health and community services increases demands on women to carry out unpaid caring and domestic work in the home.” The young women in this study bear the brunt of these changes since they are in the stage of their lives in which they are establishing careers and families and potentially have to care for other family members.

**Effects on Youth**

It is well-known that young people are particularly vulnerable to the changes that are discussed above. Youth unemployment is viewed as being a serious problem. Real hourly wages of young workers have been falling through the 1980s and 1990s at the same time that skill requirements have been rising (Venne 1996, 50). Fewer and fewer jobs require only high school. Post-secondary enrolment has been increasing during the 1990s. The transition from school to work has become more prolonged and complex.

In the research discussed in this paper, the transitions from school to work and to the undertaking of family responsibilities of a sample of young Canadian women has been explored in all of its complexity. The struggles that many of the young women have undergone, as they confront life in a time of transformation, is quite evident from the data gathered in this study. While the respondents consider their lives as individuals, it is important that we recognize the ways in which social, political and economic conditions influence the life chances of youth.

Heinz (1996, 2-13) indicates that transition research should cover issues of social policy through demonstrating the long-term consequences of different transition regimes from school to work on the person’s life chances and living arrangements. He further suggests that transition systems should be able to integrate disadvantaged social groups as well as attract privileged ones. They should open the gate to various occupational careers and not block access or returns to school and higher education. Transition systems in Canadian society tend to be individualistic in nature. While such systems may be advantageous for those from advantaged social groups, it is quite evident from this study that such systems do not work satisfactorily for many of the young women from less advantaged backgrounds.

Many of the young women lacked a sense of the future beyond high school, other than some vague notion of a “job” and, of course, marriage and having children and then being a full-time mother. In today’s world and that of the future, such a vague notion of the future may well condemn the young woman to a marginal life and to poverty. Sharpe (1996, 180) remarks that “[d]eveloping aspirations and plans are an integral part of the transition process for youth and one of the most significant determinants of success or eventual attainment. They help provide direction and focus efforts for educational and job searches and establishment in programs, jobs and eventually careers.” In this study, those women who had fairly clearly defined aspirations in the last grade of high school were
more likely to achieve their dreams than those whose ideas were vague. For the younger women in grade nine in this study, there was still time to develop their aspirations.

The society has a responsibility to the young to ensure that they take their places as adults in the society. The complexity of the transition from youth to adulthood is compounded by the caregiving roles that women are expected and required to fulfill and by the fact that the Canadian state has begun to abdicate its responsibility to its citizens, leaving the way open to “market forces.”

The Canadian state is moving in the opposite direction from where it should be going in order to meet its professed goal of gender equality. If such a goal is to be met, the state must provide public childcare, extended leave for family responsibilities, and equity for women in hiring, pay and promotion. Among the solutions to child and family poverty would be child-centred programs; labour market strategies, including job sharing, job creation, education and training; taxation changes; and changes in our national priorities (Baker 1995, 14-18).

Caregiving of those in need must be redistributed and shared across the society and recognized and compensated for the significant and demanding labour it truly is. The state cannot continue to abdicate social responsibility for the young, the old, the frail and the needy, while leaving the primary burden and responsibility on the shoulders of women. The young women of our nation deserve better.
References


