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**Review of 'The XX Factor. How working women are  
creating a new society'  
by Alison Wolf**

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**REVIEW**

Alison Wolf's new book is, for me, the best general book about women and work published in the last few years. It is controversial, and will certainly challenge many fondly held conceptions about the continuing impact of gender inequality on women in the societies in which we live. In 2009 when I was working on a UK statistics guide to gender and SET (Kirkup et al., 2010) I began to worry that the patterns of gender inequality I could see from the most recent statistics were not as simply gender differentiated as most people presumed. In many cases professional women were doing very 'nicely'- even in STEM, participating almost equally with men in a number of STEM academic areas, and earning wages that compared well with male colleagues in the same work. What became clear from the statistics was that the gap between different women's educational qualifications, and incomes, was more like a chasm than a gap. Because the media are excited by issues to do with glass ceilings, quotas in boardrooms and in Nobel prizes, our attention tends to be focused on women at the top. Because research studies on gender and SET still tend to be about the SET classroom or SET professionals, or women like ourselves we too focus on high achieving women and girls. And we have justified our concern with high profile women at the top on the grounds that they are role models and mentors for other women,

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and that opening spaces at the top of career ladders opens opportunities on all the rungs beneath. But that only works if we are on the same ladder. Alison Wolf's thesis in her book is that:

'professionals, business women and holders of advanced degrees, the top 15 or 20 per cent of a developed country's female workforce....are now more like the men of the family than ever before in history. It is from other women that they have drawn away' (p 2)

Graduate professional women it seems are now likely to be sharing the rungs of the ladder with their male colleagues; men with whom they have professional, class and family allegiances. Poorly educated women are not only NOT on the same ladder, they are stuck at the bottom holding it for their professional sisters (and brothers).

Wolf presents an historical overview which provides the context for an extensive analysis of recent statistical data about women's lives across the world. Until very recently, she argues, most women in the world had a huge amount in common. Their focus was child-rearing and domestic work, and their exclusion from most kinds of skilled employment, made them financially and socially dependent on their families and men. The opening of labour markets to women has created huge life changing opportunities, but mainly for middle class graduate women: the 'top-quintile' of women earners. These women have public and private lives comparable to those of their male peers and partners, and lives and lifestyles that rely on the continued existence of another class of women doing low paid, low status work, whose lives and opportunities are not much different from those of their mothers.

In the first half of her book Wolf analyses statistics about women in the workforce. She looks at gender segregation in the workforce; something which is much more prevalent in low paid and low status jobs than in high status jobs (this applies to SET as much as any other sector). She looks at work-patterns over the life-cycle, noting that it is less educated women who take long career breaks and work part-time and in temporary jobs; producing a long-term negative impact on both their income and, because of that, the opportunities that they can provide for their children. Less educated men and women also have more children and at a younger age. Graduate women employ other women to do their childcare and domestic work, poor women do it themselves. Everyone it seems now eats food that has largely been industrially prepared and probably cooked (by low paid men and women) outside the home. Wolf spends time analysing time diaries since the 1960s, and argues that it is mass produced food in particular that has released professional women from domestic work, and allowed them to work the same hours as their male colleagues. These 'top-quintile' professional women are not doing more work than their male partners in the home; the 'double shift' of domestic work does not exist for them. This work is being done by others, inside and outside the home, and for professional mothers the double shift of childcare is shared much more equally with fathers than we commonly believe.

Modern professional global elites, Wolf argues, have been produced not by inherited wealth but by attendance at top universities. Education has been the key, and elite education is the key to elite jobs. People working in elite jobs marry each other. This is assortative mating. When there were few professional women in the workforce, doctors married nurses and business men married their secretaries. Doctors now take doctors as their partners, academics take academics, and engineers take engineers. These professional pairs now have access to two professional salaries, more than doubling the wealth difference between them and non-professionals, who have also

partnered with each other. This has significantly contributed to economic and social inequality in many countries. High earning families have more disposable income to buy educational opportunities for their children, and ensure that they stay in the elite class. It is not the political arguments of feminism that suddenly convert high status men into 'feminists' when they become fathers, it is self-interest: a liberal version of nepotism. They see that the future of their daughters (and their sons) depends not on marrying wealth and power, but on earning it - which will then also produce the opportunity to marry it. They want their female partners to continue to have access to the careers and incomes that they did before they had children. We should not mistake class self-interest for interest in the common good.

In the second part of the book Wolf examines other ways in which this divide between elite women and the rest of the female population is played out in other lifestyle choices, such as sexual activity and childbearing. I found this part more light hearted, although it deals with subjects such as the changing workforce in the sex industry, and the beauty industry, and is less solid on the statistics, relying more on anecdote and case studies. But it supports Wolf's argument. Even in the sex and beauty industry, there are high status women at the top running the business and low status women at the bottom doing the unpleasant work. There is no ladder from the bottom to the top.

Wolf has written this book for the general reader; it is stuffed with charts and statistics. These are embedded in the text, included in an appendix and in copious notes: 100 pages of them, for the scholarly to dig down into. She makes her arguments clearly, grounding them in the statistics and illustrating them with case histories and anecdotes. I would have preferred fewer of the latter, but I am sure that Wolf's publishers know their market. Until this book Wolf's reputation has been as a UK government advisor and academic, focusing mainly on the economic impact of education. Her influential report on UK vocational qualifications made many educators like me stop and rethink about what we were actually doing for young people taking vocational qualifications: that some kinds of education/training are not necessarily a good thing. The XX Factor is targeted at transatlantic readers, carefully including lots of US data, UK and European data and data from the newly developed world, and using a style of journalistic writing common to US popular texts.

For those of us working in SET, Wolf's message is that we too need to distinguish between SET 'elite' women- not just the Heads of State like Angela Merkel (and Margaret Thatcher) who have SET qualifications and are members of the global political elite, but all those top-quintile women working in SET industries and occupations - and the rest of the female workforce who work for these women directly and in the companies and organisations they lead. When we look at studies of gender inequality among elite SET women, we need to remember that we are not looking at the kinds of problems faced by other women working in SET, or the problems faced by women who simply live in a world structured by SET. Should so much of our energy and scholarship be focused on this top- quintile who, although they are not yet living in a gender equal world, are actually doing very well all told? Is that where the critical issues of gender and SET lie?

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