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Aifric Campbell reviews *The XX Factor: How the Rise of Working Women has Created a Far Less Equal World* by Alison Wolf

What happens to a book when it crosses the Atlantic? “The XX Factor” was published in England six months ago with the subtitle “How Working Women Are Creating a New Society.” The U.S. publisher has switched this to “How the Rise of Working Women Has Created a Far Less Equal World,” adorned the dust jacket with neon pink scribble and added an invective about women who derive “self-worth and pleasure from wielding professional power.” Thus this important book about how social change affects everyone, everywhere, arrives in the U.S. as a story about how working women are screwing things up for their sisters.

The repackaging insults the author, misrepresents her thesis and risks alienating the broad readership that the book deserves. Meticulously researched, global in reach and grounded in data, “The XX Factor” elevates and informs a jaded and adversarial debate that often turns on sound bites and anecdote. Instead of urging women to lean in, or trumpeting the end of men, or whining about not having it all, Ms. Wolf invites us all to consider a future already unfolding.

Readers of this paper need no introduction to the elite woman who is the focus of this work. She is the face that greets you in the mirror or in the elevator each morning—one of the estimated 70 million women around the world holding “top-quintile jobs as professionals, senior managers or directors of substantial companies” whose earnings place them “in their countries’ elite.” Ms. Wolf, a British economist and government policy adviser, synthesizes a vast array of data to reveal how educational attainment and income have created a divergence among women that extends far beyond the workplace—to sleep, sexual behavior, fertility, marriage, divorce and parenting styles.

In 1970, less than 5% of the practicing lawyers in the U.S. were women. By 2002, this number had risen to 40%. Since women now make up half of the student population at the world’s top universities, we can expect the female elite to continue its rapid rise. But the suggestion that working women are creating “a far less equal world” confuses cause and effect. “The XX Factor” confirms what we have always known: education and money transform lives. The key issue is that the female universal no longer exists. We might therefore hope that media commentators and politicians will cease to talk about women “en masse” and address a new reality that has profound implications for social and economic policy from cradle to grave.

Ms. Wolf’s story of divergence runs parallel with an intriguing convergence. Since elite women “date, cohabit with and marry men like themselves,” “The XX Factor” promises an entertaining night in for elite couples who might cuddle up in bed and consider their similarities. They might begin on page 69 with the revelation that “men and women now put in the same average number of working hours.” This holds true right across the developed world—the differences lie in work done inside and outside the home.

Both of you are very likely working full time and enjoy more leisure hours than ever before—but you’re also getting less sleep and watching less TV than your less-educated contemporaries because your free time is sucked by “active parenting” or extra hours on the job. The good news is you both want more sex. It turns out that pretty much everyone is averaging once a week, but 52% of women with degrees want much more, way ahead of their non-graduate sisters. And, increasingly, they want satisfaction. The data reveals a sharp but unexplained rise in-graduate women who think orgasm really does matter.

The “XX Factor” examines how general trends vary across the globe. In the U.S. and U.K., for example, 30% of male and female college graduates will fail to reproduce. (The big breeders among this group are the “super rich” women—less than 1%—who give up work to look after their three-plus children and manage their husbands’ estates.) We learn that Dutch women work part-time in record numbers because they “put family and personal life first”, that 80% of senior managers at large private businesses in China are women and that the rise of elite women in Japan is constrained by tax and immigration policy.

Ms. Wolf starts slowly but soon hits her stride. The extensive notes entertain and frustrate: there is some creative guesswork behind the estimated 70 million elite and the website pointer did not deliver the promised detail on statistical method. But this book of evidence illuminates our vision of the future. What women have achieved is “hardly what feminism’s prophets foretold,” Ms. Wolf concludes. “Marriage and the ‘intact’ nuclear family are now strongest among the educated.” Women will continue their rise in most professions, but a 50/50 gender split at the very top will be rare since it is graduate mothers, not fathers, who cap their hours.

A joyless parenting narrative haunts this book, though the author remains untroubled. The story of the 5-year-old who failed 17 entrance exams for a New York City school is depressingly familiar and underpins conversations I have these days with elite undergraduates, who balance the weight of parental and societal expectations and ever-increasing competition in a world

obsessed with formal education. Research tells us that there is no upside to emotional well-being beyond \$75,000 a year but, as Alain de Botton has remarked, “anxiety is the handmaiden of contemporary ambition.”

In the happiness stakes of career progression, the law of diminishing returns prevails. We may get where we want, but we never arrive.

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