

FORUM

A Response to the Forum

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It was with great pleasure that I read Sue Hamilton's Forum letter and even greater pleasure that I respond with my own experience and understanding on the experience of *'Under-Representation in Contemporary Archaeology'*. As a female early-career academic with a somewhat dilettante sideline in the history of women in archaeology, I will focus my response on the experience of Doing Archaeology Whilst Female (and the history thereof), but I hope some observations might be useful in considering the overall experience of under-represented groups.

What does it mean to be under-represented? As Sue succinctly outlined the state of the profession, it is clear that some aspects of the archaeological career are more gender-balanced than others; notably the early stages of education and training. In my own undergraduate courses (Archaeology, UCLA), female students outnumbered male. During my MA course (Archaeology, UCL) women were again a considerable majority. Similarly, a slight majority of my PhD cohort were also female. I do not recall ever looking around at my fellow students and feeling either out of place or part of an underrepresented group throughout my education. However, picking a specialization (bioarchaeology) and pursuing the more independent course of study that is a PhD meant that the identity of my fellow students became less of a constant

feature in my life and the composition of the field I was attempting to enter became a far more dominant factor. While bioarchaeology has a healthy representation of genders in the UK, I happened to have two male supervisors, both of whom fall more on the side of dental anthropology; and dental anthropology as a field is still largely male dominated.

So what did these things mean for my experience of mentorship, of the absolutely vital forming of academic networks and platforms for future collaboration? I certainly finished my degree, went to conferences and on fieldwork, and was invited to and included in events and seminars. While fieldwork in more conservative areas left me with a strong impression of exactly how immutable gender roles can be in other parts of the world, I never personally experienced anything I would qualify as harassment. I was once excluded from a field project, with the somewhat colourful explanation involving references to my gender—however, the series of epithets that came before and after lead me to believe that it was largely my personality and a remarkably bad essay that was to blame and the director in question had run out of non-misogynist insults. Aside from that rather particular experience, I have never had the feeling that I was excluded from any 'boy's club' as a student and would be quite surprised to learn that any such clubs existed. But part of this sense goes hand in hand with being unencumbered with any great sense of introspection and a keenness for socialising; both of which were greatly facilitated by virtue of the fact

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of being young and a student. It was not until I finished my degree (and my 20s) and began to search for academic employment that I began to notice the structures of career progression – short term post-doctoral contracts, fellowships requiring a move abroad – affecting members of my educational cohort who had caring responsibilities or anything resembling a family life.

When I did finally find a post-doctoral research position, the issue of balancing a series of short-term contracts as someone who might, someday, biologically, require some downtime to reproduce, I suddenly became very interested in knowing more about women who did survive in academia. Informal admissions from more senior female colleagues that they had experienced discrimination and career setbacks when they had children were utterly depressing. Peers confessed to feeling terribly pressured to take more stable employment with some guarantees of maternity leave and working hours that do not expand to fill the full face of the clock. People highlighted the role of childcare demands in making a choice to step back from pursuing academic promotion, or in making the decision that partners with better paid roles should continue to work while the less-remunerated archaeologist took on more caring responsibilities. I observed as older male colleagues were able to make time for a quick social pint of beer or dram of whiskey, with all the attendant networking and banter, while women of the same age with caring responsibilities bowed out when invited. The fascination of working in archaeology now rode shotgun to a series of anxieties about what life decisions would adversely affect my ability to get and keep a career doing what I (most days) love.

It was around this point, after reading a series of popular pieces based on the concept on the 'leaky pipeline' of women in academic careers (Blickenstaff, 2005), that I fell into an entirely new network. The outpouring of pathos, photos of cats and personal experience that is Twitter provided

an instant supportive community of early career researchers that shared my concerns. I have been very lucky this far in my career to have had unwavering support from both male and female academic mentors, but I would like to credit the anonymous hordes of the internet for providing the anecdotes, reassurance, published statistics and enthusiasm for supporting women in academic careers that allows me some hope for a better, brighter future. Within the supportive framework of an educational institution, it had not occurred to me that a support network would be a necessary accessory for academic progression; post-degree I found it was absolutely critical.

This emphasis on networks has become something of an obsession. I spend roughly a quarter of my year on the rotating captaincy of a digital initiative to celebrate unsung contributions to archaeology, geology and palaeontology – the TrowelBlazers Project (trowelblazers.com). An entirely grassroots initiative, the TrowelBlazers project began with a Twitter conversation between a group of (female) early career researchers, and has since spiralled into a website, social media presence and growing archive of life histories and biographies of women who contributed to the disciplines we find ourselves now in. Collecting and collating these stories has led to a profound sense of how important the role of mentors and networks have been in allowing women to transcend traditional gender roles in academia and to participate actively in archaeology. Many of the women who were so influential in the history of the Institute of Archaeology, as mentioned in Sue's letter (Margaret Murray, Kathleen Kenyon) were tied together in a web of social and professional connections that were absolutely critical to their future careers. Hilda Petrie, Tessa Verney Wheeler, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Dorothy Garrod, Dorothea Bate and even Gertrude Bell can be linked at one point or another; and through them an entire army of women who washed finds, labelled pots, or illustrated sections.

Some of these women went on to become inspiring early academics with celebrated biographies, some of these women married and left the field and some of them remained in Palestinian refugee camps and never had the chance at an academic career.

What becomes apparent, as our project traces the lives and interactions of these women, is the rather less-than-revolutionary idea that a supportive network has been critical to helping women participate in archaeology in the past. As student intake reaches and then passes gender parity, it may be that the need for such strong networks is not evident until the rather harsh facts of academic career progression set in, post-degree. I see no reason why membership of these networks should be limited to the under-represented groups they wish to support; on the contrary, our experience at TrowelBlazers is that we have a diverse community of contributors and supporters who are alike only in their dedication to improving gender equality in academia.

The first step in allowing for wider participation in academic life is of course to be aware of those factors which inhibit it – the types of social bias that might actively discourage female participation. A recent paper highlights the shocking statistic that 75 per cent of fieldwork participants report experiencing sexual harassment (Clancy, et al., 2014). The authors stress the importance of highlighting sexual harassment policies and raising awareness of

appropriate behaviour and mechanisms for reporting sexual harassment if it does occur. This need for awareness extends to other aspects of academia; such as recognizing the disparity in the representation of women at different career stages. The mismatch in gender balance between students coming into archaeology and professors coming out can no longer be written off as a historical legacy; we have had nearly 60 years since Kathleen Kenyon steered the Institute of Archaeology through the Second World War and more than 90 since Dorothy Garrod began teaching at Cambridge. I would hope that growing awareness of the 'leaky pipeline' through self-monitoring activities such as those promoted by the Athena Swan organization, along with a groundswell of support from a networked generation will slowly erode the barriers to full participation in academic archaeology that women currently face.

References

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