



Leading Women. An executive briefing.

the
**RHODES
PROJECT**

Investigating the lives and career trajectories of Rhodes Scholars to understand the factors affecting the achievements of successful women and to engage the public in work toward gender equality.

Leading Women

Leading Women focuses on the first cohort of women Rhodes Scholars (elected 1977-1982) to see how the lives and roles of women have changed.

When the first women Rhodes Scholars arrived at Oxford in 1977, they might reasonably have been expected to be equally successful as their male counterparts. Opening up Rhodes Scholarships to women seemed to promise an escape from the constraints of gender, at least for elite, educated women.

Traditionally, women's place had been assumed to be in the home or office but not both. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, feminism and groundbreaking books such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977) were challenging these assumptions.

In the 1980s, most educated women were rejecting having to make a choice between career and family and buying into the new rhetoric of "having it all". Most assumed that they would pursue professional careers after university on the same basis as men, perhaps even after starting a family. In *Gaudy Night* (1935), Dorothy L. Sayers' alter ego Harriet Vane presciently questioned, however, whether educated women, "cursed with both hearts and brains", could find a compromise between family and career. As Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) and Alison Wolf's *The XX Factor* (2013) suggest, educated women still find that gender matters at home and at work.

Our research for the book has been carried out as part of the Rhodes Project, an on-going study of women Rhodes Scholars. We have had unprecedented access to 30 women from the first five years of women Rhodes Scholars as well as to many of the other 1140 women Rhodes Scholars to date.

Our data includes over 100 transcribed interviews with women who talk about their lives, families and careers and more than 300 survey responses. We support this exciting database with academic research and our own experience as senior women academics.

Rhodes Scholars

Women Rhodes Scholars are a unique and rare sample of highly educated women. Many of them have become prominent in professions such as law, medicine, consulting, and investment banking. But many have also established rich family lives without giving up their careers.

Unprecedented access to 30 women from the first five years of women Rhodes Scholars

Having been selected in part because of their accomplishments and leadership potential, women Rhodes Scholars are not Sheryl Sandberg's women who need to lean in because they are afraid to raise their hands to ask questions in meetings or to take a seat at the table, and relatively few are Alison Wolf's alpha females such as Margaret Thatcher or Angela Merkel.

The first cohort of women Rhodes Scholars are neither the "young, full-time professionals with no children" nor the "middle-aged, part-time, non-professionals with children" described by Sandberg and Wolf. Rather, many have stunning careers and large, happy families. Their experience speaks to all women who face the apparent choice between "hearts" and "brains".

A unique and rare sample of highly educated women

What “Leading Women” will be about?

In the first section of the book, we focus on the first cohort of women Rhodes Scholars as “leading women” in the long history of the Rhodes Scholarships and often pathbreakers in their colleges, degrees, and professions. Our first chapter describes their paths to the Rhodes. Our second chapter explores the selection process and their experiences at Oxford. The third chapter traces what they did after leaving Oxford.

In the second part of our book, we look in more detail at how these women have managed their careers, families, and personal lives. Rhodes Scholars are selected on the basis of both academic attainment and leadership capacity and the Rhodes legacy carries with it a potent passport for career success.

But women Rhodes Scholars face the same decisions about balancing work and family life as any woman. In chapter four we look at work-life balance. In chapter five we consider how they shaped professional careers for themselves. In chapter six we explore changing definitions of success by exploring the career patterns that we see enacted in the stories of women Rhodes Scholars.

In the third part of our book, we focus on women Rhodes Scholars as “leading women” in the sense that they were chosen in part for their leadership potential. In chapter seven, we consider to what extent they have fulfilled the goals originally set out by Cecil Rhodes for “fighting the world’s fight”. In chapter eight, we move on to “making a difference”. In chapter nine, we draw out some lessons from our research for us all.

An introduction to the women Rhodes Scholars and to the major themes of the book precedes Part 1 and an epilogue that reflects on a century’s worth of choice between the “heart” and the “brain” for educated women concludes the book.

Gender matters at home and at work

Themes

A major theme of our book is women Rhodes Scholars as “leading women”.

3 Ways of Leading

Women Rhodes Scholars are “leading women” in that they are:

Pioneers

Women Rhodes Scholars were pioneers, not only in being awarded the Rhodes, but also in their careers and lives afterwards.

Redefining leadership

Women Rhodes Scholars have become leaders in both personal and public spheres.

Making different choices

Women Rhodes Scholars make choices about balancing work and family that differ from the previous generations who were forced to choose between work and family.

Why this book will make a difference

In a call for evidence-based management, Stanford Business School professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton argued that we must distinguish between “hard facts, dangerous half-truths, and total nonsense”.

In 2013, Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg and sociologist Alison Wolf gained significant media attention when they published *Lean In* and *The XX Factor*. These are but the latest additions to a long line of books aimed at explaining how women should act in order to get ahead in the modern world. But the current discussion of women, careers, families, and leadership is sometimes closer to anecdote or memoir than grounded in systematic research.

Our book will contribute to a substantial body of literature that ranges from academic work firmly grounded in theory and empirical research, such as Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s *Men and Women of the Corporation*, to personal treatises with a gilding of relevant academic research (e.g., Sandberg and Wolf), to reports on issues facing women in the workplace (e.g., Catalyst.org reports), to self-help guides and how-to books (e.g., Joanna Barsh’s *How Remarkable Women Lead*).

We expect to appeal not only to women Rhodes Scholars but also to readers of *Harvard Business Review* and similar publications, particularly women (and men) who are on demanding career paths in law firms, politics, investment banks, strategic consulting firms, and the like, and who want to see themselves and their choices reflected in the literature. This book will be useful to high-achievers just starting out in their careers who want to see the paths to take to success (and the paths to avoid).

Conclusions

We have learned from “leading women” that it is possible but not easy to use both “hearts” and “brains,” a lesson that applies to all women.

Rhodes women offer both inspiration and new definitions of success

As Sylvia Ann Hewlett argued in a recent *Harvard Business Review* blog post, what young women need is not stories of struggle and sacrifice but “narratives of success that provide a beacon of hope for professional women toiling in the trenches” and “thrilling tales to tell that could stiffen the backbone of any woman seeking to make a difference in this world.”

Hope for professional women and role models for aspiring women

Distinctive features

- We “peek behind the scenes” at a time of tremendous change in the status of women at Oxford (the opening up of the previously male colleges) and at Rhodes House.
- To give coherence to our story, we focus on the first cohort of women Rhodes Scholars. But we draw on scores of interviews with, and surveys from, women Rhodes Scholars up to the present.

A time of tremendous change in the status of women at Oxford

- Grounded both in academic theory and in substantive empirical data, rather than just anecdote or personal experience.
- Based on the experiences of many women, not just the author(s). Our women tell their stories in their own words and make sense of their lives, rather than our imposing a story or meaning on them.

Women tell their stories in their own words

- We are writing about a particular set of women at a particular time. But we believe that what we have to say will generalize:
 - To a much wider set of women who are too accomplished to need to “lean in”, yet not the alpha females at the top of the corporate heap.
 - To the next generation of women, who will benefit by learning about the choices and journeys of women who are presently in their 50s, and about how those choices can inform their own.

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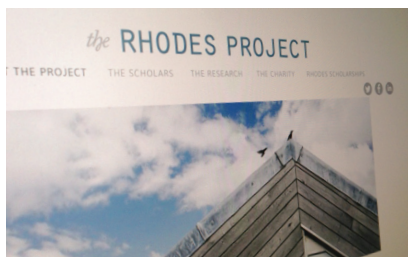
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Email us.

Email us at info@rhodesproject.com to be featured in the Profile series, considered for a research interview or receive regular updates on current projects and upcoming publications.

Mission

A Registered Charity in England and Wales, the Rhodes Project investigates the lives and career trajectories of Rhodes Scholars to understand the factors affecting female achievement, and to engage the public in work toward gender equality.

The Rhodes Scholarship, arguably the most prestigious post graduate scholarship in the world, was not available to women until 1977. Since then, more than 1,140 women have taken up the scholarship to study at the University of Oxford. What they have to say about their lives and career trajectories is the subject of our research.

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