

My personal story

R: Well, one of the examples I thought of was when I was at school and we had - as we were getting towards 14 or 15 - we had career advisors in school, or we had a teacher who was a career's advisor. And we used to have to go along and it was all part of planning what you wanted to be as part of your career. And the teacher we had, who did that job, it was a man, he was quite old – or, at the time, he seemed quite old - and there was a joke amongst us - particularly the girls - that if you went to see him, the only jobs he ever suggested for the girls, was to be a nurse or a secretary.

I: Wow!

R: And even then, to us that seemed wrong and outdate. He was a very old-fashioned kind of teacher and the fact that he was there to do that job. That was one of his responsibilities, was to career advice, and yet nearly all the girls, he would say to: 'Well, the best job for you is to be nurse or to be...!' And that has always stuck with me because even as children - or young adults - we all saw it as quite a joke and none of us really believed it and I don't think it had any great influence on us. But it was just something that just stuck with me. It was a joke, that even then, even - and this must have been, what would it have been? - kind of mid-'80, that we all felt: well, what a load of rubbish! That is not what we are going to do!

I: So, it was not the advice that you were looking for?

R: No, and everybody just discounted it as being rubbish and a waste of time. So, from that point of view, even at that kind of age, I didn't feel that being a girl would stop me in any way at all from doing whatever I wanted to do.

I: Okay, and who gave you that message?

R: I think, I think it was partly my parents. Because I grew up just with a sister, so we were a female dominated household and my mother and my grandmother, her mother, were quite strong people, although they'd lived quite traditional lives, they were very strong characters and I think that just gave us, or helped give us quite a sense of: we can do what we want to do! And my father was always very, he never, I never felt that he treated us like girls. We weren't ever his little princesses, we didn't have that sort of upbringing, where - I mean we had dolls, we had dressing up clothes, we had quite female toys - but when I see some parents now, I see everything that child has now is pink and fluffy and I don't relate to that. When I grew up I didn't feel I was treated like a little princess or anything. And I think we always had the message that if we worked hard at school, we could go on and do whatever we wanted to do. And also at the time, throughout the time that I was at school, but particularly secondary school, there was a group of us, it was a mixed secondary school - so boys and girls - but we didn't really mix very much at all. The girls were very kind of strong units. All our friendships were with each other and it was almost like, we don't need the boys they're a waste of time.

I: And that was throughout most of secondary school or just a certain age?

R: I think nearly all of it, maybe slightly more during the last couple of years, 17 or 18, there was a bit more mixing, but certainly up until then. I mean, I had no boys who were my friends and none of my girlfriends did either. It was like we were completely segregated from them. And we were very strong as a unit and all quite intelligent and we got very good results and everyone went to university and was quite ambitious. You know, people wanted to be doctors and doing a career.

I: So, you never doubted it?

R: No, I don't think so, at that age, it was, if we worked hard, we could do whatever we chose to do, whatever we were good at. And we weren't really thinking in terms of, well, at that age, babies and career, how that would affect your career. It was more: I want to go out and succeed. And yet, my parents, at that time, only my father worked. He worked very hard, he worked full time. My mum stayed at home to look after us. And actually quite a few of my friends were quite the same model. Their mother was at home in the household bringing up the children and not working. And yet, I didn't come out of school thinking that that was what was going to happen to me. Which is quite strange really. I'd never imagined that I would just get married and have children.

I: Yes, that was not an option?

R: No! And it wasn't for any of my friends. And yet, to grow up in that kind of household, which was a very traditional household...

I: It was probably traditional in their ways, but they did give you a different message. That you had other options.

R: My mother worked until she got married and then until - she was still working - until she had her first child, which was my sister and then that was it. Because at that time when you had children, you stayed at home and looked after them. There was no part time working, you know, it was just accepted that that was the way it was. And I almost think that was the last, or we are children of the last generation where that happened, really. Because my friends, some of them stay at home at the moment, to look after the children, but that is the minority. By far, the majority now work.

I: So, that's what I was going to ask. If you think back at that high school group of girls, that you were part of and who were very ambitious, did they succeed in their studies and are they working now?

R: Yes, on the whole, the people have gone on to be quite successful I think. My best friend from those years, whom I'm still in touch with, she knew from the age of - probably 7 or 8, very young - that she wanted to be a doctor and she did all the exams, did the right exams, she went to university and she's now a doctor and she was always very determined that that was what she was going to do. And interestingly she had a sister like I did, and also had a very similar family background where her father worked and made a professional career and her mother stayed at home. But like me, she was always set on doing a job and it didn't affect her that she was going to be staying at home and looking after the children.

I: And so she's still working now?

R: She is, and she has children now, as do most of my friends, we're at that kind of age. But she's still working. It is just that having children affects the hours and the working pattern I think.

I: What did you go on to study?

R: I went to university at 18 and I did social anthropology for 4 years, which was great, but I came out of it really still not knowing really what I wanted to do. And I then had a year of working in various jobs, saving some money, I did a bit of travelling and then I decided to do a law degree, a condensed law degree that takes a year. So, I then went on to qualify as a lawyer. So I did two more years of study to become a lawyer so that's what I've done ever since.

I: And you're also combining your children with working?

R: Yes, although I quite deliberately chose to go into an area that is more flexible and that is much easier to balance with having children. So I only work now part time three days a week.

I: And what area of law would that be?

R: It's employment law, but the job that I do: I don't deal very much face to face with clients, I provide more of a kind of supporting function to the team, so research and I write quite a lot of articles for publications, so it's marketing the firm that I work for and we do training for clients and seminars and that's my job. So, it is not really a very client facing role.

I: It is more of a back office job?

R: It is! It is, so I'm a qualified lawyer, and I give legal advice, but, just generally speaking, I perform the back office, which is much easier to do working part time, because clients want advice instantly.

I: And are you happy with it or do you think it is a compromise that you rather not would have made?

R: I definitely think it is a compromise, and when I went into it, I didn't really think, when I first went into law and went into training to be a lawyer, I wasn't really thinking about 10 years' time and how I would have children and how I would balance it out. But I do think that one of the reasons why I went into the route that I followed is because it is easier to do it part time. And I see people who trained about the same time as me, who qualified about the same time as me, who had their careers, have in the legal world, have been much more successful. They have achieved a lot more, they are a lot more senior, they're earning a lot more. And I really felt that that was something that I never particularly wanted, partly because I knew it would have such an impact on my ability to have a family or, at least, play a part in looking after my children. And I think even now, I have days when I think, in a way I've let myself down because I've not achieved what I could have achieved. But then on other days I think: well, I think I have a balance that a lot of people could not find. So, it is difficult. I think there is always a slight sense of failure if you're not, if you haven't gone as far as you think you might have been able to.

I: But you did gain in the family life?

R: Yes, exactly, and likewise I know people who have been more successful but it comes at a price. They maybe have no children, or they have no partner or no husband and for them their job is everything. It was never going to be that for me. So, I think I've chosen what was probably the right thing to do for me. But it's that kind of balancing that women always have to do!

I: And your husband is also working?

R: Yes, but he also works part time. Although he does more hours than me, but it means that we share some of the childcare between us. So, he has, I work three days a week and I have 2 days at home, and he works 4 days a week and has 1 day at home, so that's just 2 days that the children have to go to childcare. Which again, for me, I didn't want a child having to go to nursery as a one year old, 5 days a week. That is not what I wanted. That works for us and actually quite a few of our friends have husbands' partners who also do some childcare or work at reduced or flexible hours.

I: So it is becoming much more acceptable for men now?

R: Yes, I think it is, it is much more common than how it was.

(...)

I: Good, thanks, that's very interesting. Anything else you thought about when this research was announced?

R: I mean, I think the main thing that occurred to me is the extent to which having children really shapes your decisions and your ability to work or to move around or the choices that you make and how as a teenager, as a young adult, that didn't really occur to me. That was the main thing really. I mean, I never grew up thinking that all I wanted from life was a family and children and I would marry someone who would pay all the bills and I would not have to work. You know, that just never fated into it, but I think I always had an expectation that I would have children, but somehow I would be able to work and look after them and, you know, that it would all be quite a lot easier.

I: So, now you realise that the impact of having children is a lot bigger than what you anticipated?

R: It's massive! I think it is massive! It changes everything. And until you have children, I don't think you can ever understand that. And I think especially having more than one child. But, you know, I wouldn't have it any other way! But, certainly growing up...

I: Do you have a bit of a social network that you can rely upon for childcare? Like other mothers at school?

R: Yeah, I do, we have some good friends in this town - we've lived here for 12 or even 13 years - and we have some friends that we've known all the time. I think you interviewed person A? Yes, we are good friends with them. So, we have a couple of good friends, and, you know, they will babysit for us some evenings. And we will babysit for them, we kind of share it. Last year for example, my daughter, we had to take her into hospital for a couple of days. So, our friends looked after my son for a couple of days, so we do have some help, but we don't have family close by whom we can call on. My mum lives about an hour and half away. So, she will come up every so often, but she can't really come up at short notice because it is too far away. And my husband's family are much further away and his mum is quite old and has quite poor health, so we don't really have family help and that is again something that we didn't appreciate before we had children, how useful it would be to have family support nearby. But in a way, I think the families that we are friends with, I would regard them almost as family. Because it gives you that support network that normally your family would provide if you lived closer.

I: Ok, thank you very much!

R: Is that enough?

I: Yes, absolutely, that is very rich material!

R: I mean, it is not something that I go around thinking about really at all.

I: But obviously you found many good examples!

R: But I don't, I can't really think of any example - apart from that example about the teacher - any example wherein I feel that someone has treated me in a way or said something in a way that I really thought: 'That is a very sexist thing to say' or in any way has been particularly dictated by the fact that I am a women.

I: For the better! It is good that you didn't encounter blatant sexism in life. And it is not only that we are looking for blatant sexism in the interviews, it is more like - as you say - the mechanisms of life itself that you encountered, and as you say having children has a massive impact and was a bit underestimated and you see all these expectations that arise from it. It is more of these things which are also quite important and will influence people's lives. So, ok, thank you very much!

Metadata

OTHER TOPIC CATEGORIES: EDUCATION, IDENTITY, PROFESSIONAL CAREER, SOCIETAL CONTEXT

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: breadwinner, caring/carer/care giver, family life, fatherhood, housewife/houseman, support, upbringing, choice, degree/diploma, mixed or single sex education, orientation, prejudice, (not) questioning/(no) doubts, peer group,

ambition, career path, reconciliation private/professional, sexism

Female, 38 Non EU countries

Gender did matter