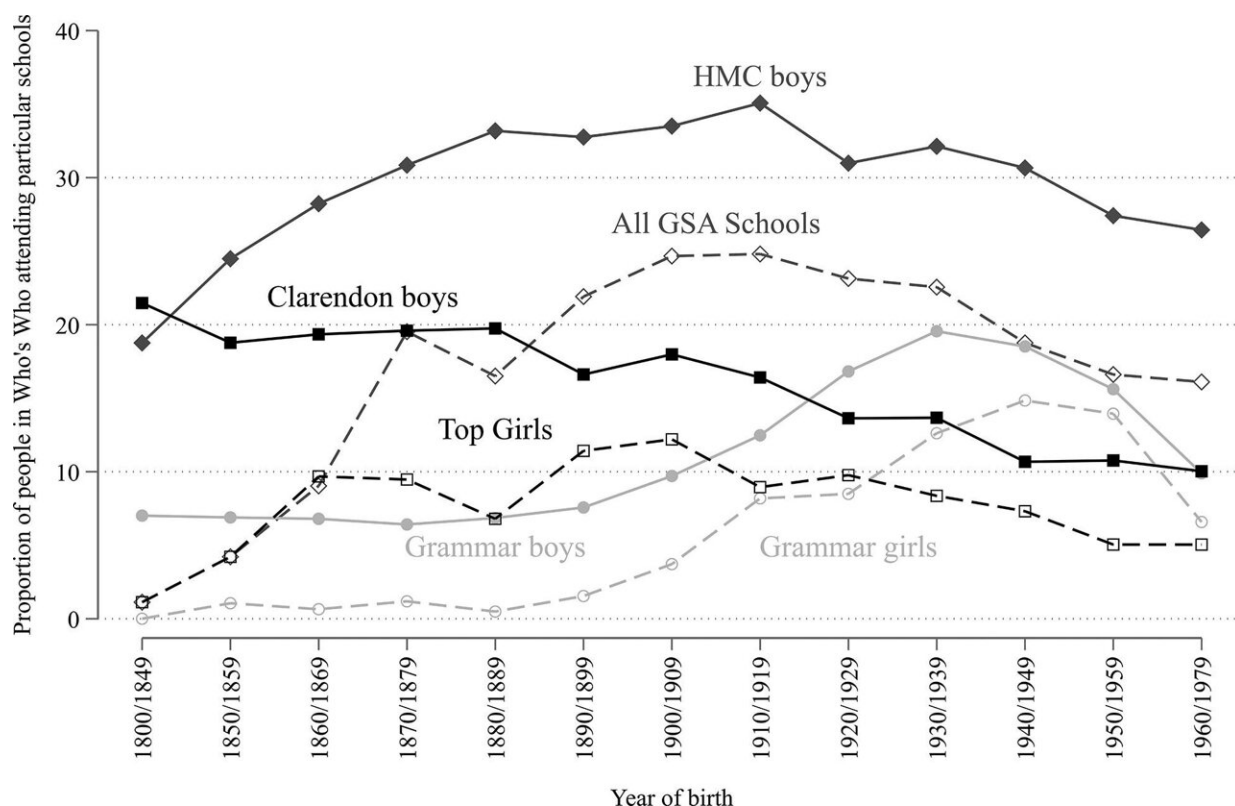


Alumni from Britain's top girls' public schools 20 times more likely to reach elite positions

November 9 2022



Proportion of men and women in Who's Who that attended elite schools. Credit: *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2022). DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2022.2132472

The alumni of 12 leading girls' public schools (Note: "public schools" in

UK means "private schools" in the USA) are 20 times more likely to reach the most powerful elite positions in British society than women who attended any other school, according to a unique historical analysis of Who's Who.

The study—by the University of Exeter, the University of Oxford and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)—examines the past and present influence of 12 of Britain's most [elite](#) girls' schools, including Cheltenham Ladies' College, North London Collegiate School and St Paul's Girls' School in London.

The schools were identified as the most 'elite' by the researchers at the outset of the project as they have historically been among the most successful in delivering their alumni to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The research also examines the power of the wider network of around 200 [private schools](#) represented by the Girls' Schools Association.

The paper, *Is there an old girls network? Girls' schools and recruitment to the British elite*, analyzes 120 years of biographical data contained within Who's Who to explore, for the first time, whether private girls' schools have the same effect on the trajectories of [women](#) to elite positions as leading private boys' schools do so with men.

It finds that although alumni are 20 times more likely to reach the most powerful elite positions, these elite girls' schools have been "consistently less propulsive than their male-only counterparts."

Dr. Eve Worth, Lecturer in Modern British History at Exeter, and lead-author of the paper, said, "It is fascinating to view the shifting dynamics through the decades that impacted so profoundly on elite women, such as those experienced by the cohorts of 1940s and '50s, who represented something of a transition generation. But what is also clear is that, unlike

men, over the last century, women have required more than simply access to the best education to achieve elite occupational success."

Previous research, also based on Who's Who, has indicated that the alumni of nine leading boy's public schools, known as the Clarendon Schools, are 35 times more likely to reach the most powerful elite positions. Even at the peak of their power, elite girls' schools educated just 12% of Who's Who entrants, whereas the Clarendon Schools educated 17% of male entrants. The authors argue that this difference is "rooted in the ambivalent aims of girls' elite education," where there has been a longstanding tension between promoting academic achievement and upholding traditional gender norms.

Who's Who, the leading biographical dictionary of "noteworthy and influential" people in the UK, has been published every year since 1897. Many entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position, such as MPs, Peers, Judges, senior civil servants, heads of public bodies, Dames and Knights, Poet Laureates, and heads of museums and large arts organizations. The rest are selected based on "a noteworthy professional appointment or sustained prestige, influence or fame."

The paper, published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, finds that 50% of women in Who's Who, who have attended these elite girls' schools, also attended Oxford or Cambridge. It also finds that elite women who have attended these schools are more likely to have direct connections to other people in Who's Who, particularly spouses.

It says, "Here, in a context of entrenched masculine domination and powerful institutional and cultural barriers to occupational progress, women often relied on male partners to facilitate access to elite positions."

It argues that, while elite boys' schools have always been network hubs, elite girls' schools "provided the resources and platform for many women to meet elite men who may have directly or indirectly (through their networks) aided their career."

The paper also examines the role of private members clubs, which are well known for "bending the arc" of male elite trajectories. It found that clubs that are especially popular among women in Who's Who are the Albemarle Club, the University Women's Club, the Literary Ladies' Club and, in more recent times, the Reform Club and the Atheneum Club. The paper concludes that such clubs, however, have been a less significant channel of elite recruitment for women than men.

Professor Aaron Reeves of the University of Oxford, co-author of the paper, said, "There have been numerous films, books, and TV shows dedicated to exploring how Britain's fortunes as a country have been tied to the actions, ideologies, and rivalries of the alumni of certain elite boys' schools. And yet, there has been surprisingly little attention given to the alumni of elite girls' schools, especially given the enduring influence that some of these schools have had on propelling their alumni in positions of power and influence."

Professor Sam Friedman of LSE, co-author of the paper, added, "These results illustrate that elite girls' schools are also important engines of inequality. That certain old girls are 20 times more likely to reach an elite position than other women surely makes a mockery of the notion that equality of opportunity exists in contemporary Britain."

More information: Eve Worth et al, Is there an old girls' network? Girls' schools and recruitment to the British elite, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2022.2132472](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2132472)

Provided by University of Exeter

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