

# Anthropology Book Forum

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**JESSICA HALLIDAY HARDIE**, 2022, *Best Laid Plans: Women Coming of Age in Uncertain Times*, California: University of California Press, 274 pp., ISBN 9780520970052

**Keywords:** Planning, Educational Attainment, Women, Student Debt, Higher Education

*'Work hard, and you will get there!'* This is something that we as young students hear so often. The undue stress that is put upon individuals to achieve their goals often tends to lose sight of structural constraints that discourage people from achieving their purpose. When people discuss tales of success or sob stories of failure, the constraining conditions rarely find mention. Jessica Halliday Hardie's *Best Laid Plans* is a significant intervention into these discussions. Through this work, she questions the existing scholarship that considers planning for the future and goal attainment merely as a function of individual aspirations and hard work. She argues that we need to move beyond the 'planning paradigm' to see the multiple economic, social, and political factors that determine the chances of upward mobility and career achievement during the transition from adolescence to adulthood among school-going students, particularly those from underprivileged groups and disadvantaged social classes.

The study is based in the United States and follows the trajectory of several young women who are on their journey to achieve their 'American Dream.' Through seven chapters, Hardie follows the career paths of young women from middle, poor, and working classes to find out how successful they have been in being able to achieve their adolescent dreams and plans. Interestingly, the book sustains a distinction between the three classes. Working class women are employed at low-paying jobs while poor women are coming from familial backgrounds in which everyone is struggling to get even a low-paying job. Middle class women come from familial backgrounds in which one or both the parents are in decent paying jobs and have a pretty reliable social circle.

Despite having realistic and well-thought-out plans, her study reveals that young women - particularly from economically underprivileged backgrounds - find it difficult or sometimes impossible to realize their goals. Middle-class women fare slightly better. For Hardie, the underlying factors that generate this difference are the availability of economic resources, issues of accessibility, and the social connections that working-class and poor women often lack. The planning process and execution are embedded and shaped by the larger web of background socio-economic conditions and the reasons for non-fulfillment of the plans are more structural than are commonly understood.

### **Can Everyone Afford Education? Economy as a Structural Constraint**

In the United States, the diverse higher education 'market' offers various kinds of institutions and courses for students. The students from poor and working-class backgrounds, because of lack of affordability, tend to miss out on the most 'sellable' and 'asked for' courses. For them, even the bare minimum of educational attainment would mean drowning in the sea of student debt. Ranging from financial to intimate relations, there are multiple costs that families across the United States have to pay, just to be able to send their younger members to higher educational institutions (Zaloom 2019). Attaining higher education in the United States is too costly an affair for certain groups of people which ultimately lands them in bad financial situations and many of them end up dropping out (Goldrick-Rab 2016).

This question of affordability is one of the prime factors for the ever-widening gap in educational and career achievement of middle and working-class students, particularly women. Even if one begins with the same level of aspiration and equally 'well-laid plans,' Hardie shows how even then the socio-economic marginality of certain groups tend to deter them from achieving what they aspire. The crisis becomes even graver for women because of the multiple burdens that women carry.

The class bias in the American job-market is also well known. It is mostly the students from the elite sections of society who are able to reach the highest and most well-paying positions (Rivera 2015). No matter how carefully and effectively they plan, the discouraging force of socio-

economic compulsions extinguishes the potentiality of upward mobility towards which such plans aspire.

### **‘Packaged’ and ‘Repackaged’ Futures**

This is significant in Hardie’s study. School-going girls across classes had similar dreams but the plans they could make and their paths towards attainment varied. Hardie attributes this to their embeddedness in the respective socio-economic and familial contexts. White middle-class women dreamt of an already packaged future- examples of which they have seen all their lives and the path to achieve that future is already known to them, almost as if their present is already a part of that future. For others, however, such a future is aspirational and the path to attain that future is unknown to them. They mobilize their resources and contacts to their limited capabilities. They know where to go but the question of ‘how to get there’ always needed more investigation and perhaps greater investment. Such a lack of generational privilege which is available to White middle-class women is absent for middle-class Black women along with poor and working-class women across races. Therefore, they dreamt of an unpackaged future. Added to this is the hostility of American Higher Educational Institutions towards people of color and racial minorities which hurt the women from these communities in the worst ways possible. Adam Harris’ work is a very recent account of how colleges and universities in the United States are deeply discriminatory towards Black students (Harris 2022).

Unlike women who look forward to a packaged future, the struggle for poor and working-class women is more tenuous, tiring, and taxing. These girls have also encountered severe physical and mental health issues more frequently than their counterparts in a higher social class. All of this has a severe impact on their educational and occupational prospects.

### **From Adolescence to Adulthood: Three Paths**

The young school-going women that Hardie interviewed for this work took three different paths toward their career and educational attainments. Among the women who have remained ‘*on track*’

and could achieve what they planned, the majority happened to be from the White middle-class. For the remaining ones, the journey has not been as easy as them.

In the *'holding on'* category, women across classes could not achieve what they had initially planned and therefore readjusted and reoriented themselves to their goals through a longer, sometimes similar looking destination. Yet in this group as well, despite several personal and professional impediments, the middle-class women got what Hardie calls a *'soft landing'* than women of poorer and working classes who had to *'climb a rock wall.'*

Among the group of women who are navigating *'the rough seas,'* majority happened to be from working class or poor backgrounds. Numerous of them were lesbian and bisexual. In a heteronormative order, they had a hard time dealing with their families and incurred high emotional and financial costs which made their journey to achieve their dreams almost impossible. This explains why among those interviewed, women who did not subscribe to dominant sexual orientation across classes and races found themselves navigating *'the rough seas.'*

Hardie's core conundrum was to understand why for certain women, their 'class origins' also tend to be their 'class destinations.' During their transition from adolescence to adulthood, despite having the 'best-laid' plans and hopes for upward mobility, they find it difficult, sometimes impossible to break free of the processes of what she calls 'class replication.' According to the author, mere individual planning does not suffice. At a time when job and economic precarity are rising and people across classes are finding it difficult to retain their current economic status, there is a need to look at the larger structure that tends to deny marginalized women all the possibilities of upward mobility. Keeping this in view, the book argues that instead of placing the responsibilities on individuals to 'work harder' to be high achievers, we need to work on certain background conditions that can be made enabling and encouraging to young people working towards their goals. Accessible and equitable education for 'all' is certainly central to such a re-setting of background enabling conditions.

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