



# The Gender Trap

by Imogen Young

**The Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Opportunities Act in 1975, outlawed discrimination against, and improved opportunities for women, on the grounds of sex. Since then there has been more discussion and open mindedness. Women's attitudes and expectations have been raised as to what sorts of jobs they can do and the sort of lives they can lead.**

It had fallen mainly to educationalists to take responsibility to ensure that girls as well as boys are given equal opportunities and not discriminated against on grounds of sex. Schools now have to ensure that all subject options are offered to girls and boys instead of offering, say, woodwork to boys only and cookery to girls only. 'Timetabling' is an excuse some schools use to avoid meeting the needs. But what about youth service? It's clear that such legislation as the SDA and EOA could be more applicable to Antartica than Britain if current general practice and awareness is anything to go by. I wonder why this is so, whilst race relations legislation is seriously enforced.

From the cradle to the grave we are 'encouraged' into strictly defined gender roles. Girls are dressed in pink and boys are dressed in blue; girls made to stay clean and neat while they dress dolls and attempt to sew; boys are encouraged to be adventurous while they play with their meccano and model railways. Little girls don't fight or get wet, while boys don't cry. In primary school the Peter and Jane books tell stories in which women are praised for being attractive or for looking after someone whilst men are praised for their cleverness or achievement.

What is the effect of all these messages? The effect is that girls begin to feel unconfident and undermined.

The little girl becomes an adolescent and by this time she has a considerably different set of skills from her male counterparts. She does different things at school, at home and in the

youth club, where she giggles in corners, is interested in the boys (and even if she isn't she pretends to be). She spends time in the "powder room" applying make-up. She may pick up a table tennis bat and attempt to hit the ball rather self-consciously and probably miss. She may ask to put the records on, but that is dealing with electrical equipment which is a boys' job. She does the food providing and hands out floral tributes to the VIP who opens a new extension.

There is one thread running through her teens and indeed the rest of her life. Boys. The finding and keeping of a boyfriend. Even those girls/women who make a decision not to make it the



be-and-end-all go through great internal conflict and guilt and run the risk of being ostracized. She dresses for the boys, does things that she thinks they would like. She may not turn up for a school/youth club sports event because she has been told by him it's not feminine, or just as bad, he's not interested. Or if she hasn't got a boy-friend, to be known as sporty is the wrong image. Neither does she want to be known as clever or hardworking. She gives up all interests except one and then she concentrates hard; admire his motor-bike, be a pillion passenger, watch him play his match, admire his achievements and keep quiet about her own achievements. She then accepts his sexual demands without questioning. How often does she say it hurts? How

often does she go on the pill because he insists. Her role is to put him first.

When the pattern is set it's not surprising that women become less confident; helpless when it comes to practical things. We are unused to tools, having had a lifetime of them being taken out of our hands by impatient men, or having the job done for us by well meaning men. We don't even know the names of the tools. Do we know how to change a plug? Often those that do, have to think twice. In groups who does most of the talking? Men speak, women listen. Oh yes. We have all the caring, servicing skills. Good at jobs with people. Nurses, teachers, social workers, shop assistants, typists.

Women must try and take back confidence that has been stripped away. It is vital to understand that this lack of confidence is deep rooted. Women have been taught to be inferior so we think we are. When a girl says "I can't", she genuinely believes she can't. Somehow she has to be shown that it is within her ability. She has to see that women can do things traditionally undertaken by men. Girls are put down as apathetic and uninterested. They might well be, because that is how they have been expected to behave. They might not be, yet hide it to conform. To suddenly become motivated and active or to appear so demands a change almost too difficult to make. To develop one's own interests is to have the confidence to do that. To ask about a course or a job is to have the confidence to actually do it. They need to be shown how to use it, to be helped how to make decisions, indeed that it's right to make decisions.

**Those who are concerned about "youth" should be concerned that women develop as people not as adjuncts to men. Youth workers must begin questioning what they are doing with girls and boys. Are they colluding with society in undermining girls or are they helping them to develop to their full potential. If you are colluding maybe you ought to think again.**