

Sixteen: Sweet or Sorry?

You might think that 1986's teenagers are different, that the old sexual stereotyping in jobs is beginning to break down. It's not. The picture, in fact, is all too familiar. And the reason, **Cynthia Cockburn** suggests, has a lot to do with sex.



T rue love is not something on which marxist theory has ever had much analytical purchase. We have had more to say about the labour market than the marriage market. Yet the two are closely connected even among the up-and-coming generation of today's sixteen-year-olds. Young women have two expectations as they leave school. One is that they will earn their living. The other is that they will meet the right young man, fall in love, marry and have children. Inevitably the two prospects are connected. Young people's 'choices' of occupation are affected, even directed, in part by the social futures they anticipate.

For all this our perception of young people's occupational decisions rarely overlaps with our understanding of adolescent subcultures. We tend to see young people (and ourselves, for that matter) either as workers or as lovers. It is supposed that the workplace is somehow a sphere of pure economics while sexuality walks the streets or snuggles up in bed.

It is not only that we relate to working colleagues as sexual beings but that our working identity itself is gendered. Most jobs, like heterosexual romantic attachments, confer and call for an unequivocal and demonstrable femininity or masculinity. To be a 'good' secretary you have to have a compliant manner, a gentling telephone voice and unclad tights. To be a 'good' maintenance engineer it helps if you see oily clothes and injured extremities as a badge of honour. To be a boss is to be authoritative. Jobs are gendered, like people.

The fact that jobs are gendered helps perpetuate a sexual division of labour – people tend to opt for jobs of their own gender. Conversely, the fact that, say, men are in men's jobs makes the jobs seem masculine. Employers have a clear-cut profit motive in treating women as a cheap source of labour and designing some of their jobs as clearly 'for' women. Since, however, the macho jobs are the better paid and more prestigious, men as men can be assumed to have a vested interest in such a system too.

The result of the self-interested endeavours of both employers and male employees is a very high and persistent degree of occupational sex-segregation in Britain. In 1984 for example, 73% of clerical and related workers, 76% of catering, cleaning, hairdressing and other personal service workers, were women. And this greatly underestimates the true extent of segregation. The more closely one defines occupations the greater the separation between the sexes that comes to view. The few men in 'women's work' are identifiable as filling distinct niches within the broader groups: the senior stylist in the salon, the chef in the kitchen.

This kind of sex-typed pattern of work is usually put down to tradition. The implication is that things are changing and young people will be found to act differently from their elders. It is disturbing therefore that the figures of trainees on the Manpower Services Commission's Youth Training Scheme show young people apparently making exactly the same



Photo: Katalin Arkel/Network

choices as the generation before them.

With the exception of catering, each of the 11 'occupational training families' used by the MSC has a distinct gender. Only 21% of all the young male trainees on the Scheme in 1985 were to be found in the three female-dominated groups, while a mere 5% of all female trainees were to be found in the four most male categories of occupation. A closer look in one London area showed that even this greatly understated the true sex divisions. Of 2000 young women, no less than 82% were in office work or hairdressing. Of building trade trainees around 2% were female.

The MSC's video for school leavers, and its glossy brochures and Saatchi and Saatchi advertising, which had in good faith tried to put across the idea that all kinds of placement were for either sex of young person, had clearly failed to induce many school leavers to be pioneers on the gender frontier.

I recently talked with more than 70 YTS trainees, young women and young



men, in the London area. My aim was to find out what circumstances or pressure in YTS were causing this age-old sex-stereotyping to recur even among today's 'post-equality' adolescents. One cause was equally old-fashioned sex prejudice. For all its high-sounding commitment to equal opportunity on YTS, the Manpower Services Commission was not putting it into practice in monitoring its schemes.

The guidelines from the MSC to its local programme teams during YTS' first three years did not include equal opportunity among the criteria for approval of managing agents or evaluation of schemes. There was no provision for mandatory in-service training in sex and gender issues for MSC staff, for managing agents or for sponsoring employers.

The Commission under Peter Morrison's political leadership had been set against positive action for young women in YTS. The Department of Employment's lawyers had besides

given a conservative and contentious ruling that it was not permissible under sex-equality legislation.

Individually many of the women and men delivering the Youth Training Scheme – MSC officers, YTS managing agents, supervisors and instructors – were concerned to see so much sex-stereotyping in the Scheme. Most felt however that there was nothing, within the remit of the Scheme, that could be done about it.

Their concern was lessened by the fact that young women seemed in other ways to be doing well – more young women than young men were going into the preferred employer-based schemes, and more were getting jobs afterwards. The fact that young women received one kind of training while young men got another could be said to be setting them up for highly unequal futures. Yet it was not interpreted as a question of inequality at all, but as a question of *choice*.

Had more young women wanted to enter male occupations the blame

would have shifted to employer discrimination. As it was everyone was tending to say, 'Young women have made up their minds by 16. They are set in their ways. It's not for us to push them into something they don't want to do.' This in one way was benign. It reflected the permissive client-orientated philosophy of youth and careers work. Yet paradoxically it was not doing young women a service. It would have been better to be asking *why*.

The only way to get an answer is by listening carefully to what young people say and watching how they behave. What becomes immediately apparent is that they do not believe and have no reason to believe that the world is their oyster for the picking. The choices that they appear to have made have, in the first place, been whittled down to least-worst options based on an early experience of class and race inequalities. These inequalities are all too clearly manifest to them in school achievements, or lack of them, in family work history and in the expectations of their friends and acquaintances. Beyond this however the choices take account of the realities of sex. Sex-stereotyped choices are essentially sensible choices from the point of view of gender identity.

Imagine what it is like to be what is laughably called sweet sixteen, just emerging from the concrete clamour of comprehensive school. In school it is friendships, enmities and the dramas surrounding these that have filled the space where teachers idealistically expect study to be. Researchers who have spent time with teenage girls, like Christine Griffin and Sue Lees, have demonstrated that how you are seen and how you see yourself is of overriding importance. They have also shown that the self-image in question is a *gendered* image.

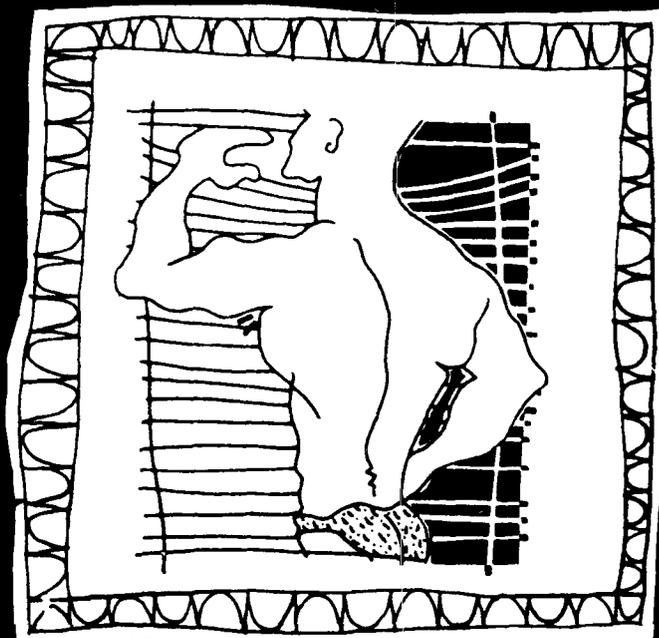
What matters more than anything, more than honesty, sobriety or intellect, is successfully performing the balancing trick between sexual desirability and good moral standing. It is boys that call the tune, of course. But girls, as they dance to it, hold each other into line. Girls as well as boys label girls as available, 'slags', or as uptight, 'drags'. You can avoid one epithet by incurring the other, but to avoid both you have to be some boy's steady, someone's missus already. Boys of course are under the heterosexual compulsion too. The quality they most admire in each other is an ability to pull the birds while remaining a man's man, unattached and unmoved.

The girls and boys produced by such a culture of course have little in common. Girls value one set of things (true love, marriage, caring, partnership) and boys value quite different things (the respect of other males, sexual freedom, female servicing). Anne Stafford worked and trained among 16 and 17-year-

'Since the macho jobs are the better paid and more prestigious, men as men can be assumed to have a vested interest in such a system too'



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"If you were the smallest, weediest thing in your school you didn't keep throwing your head against some thug's boot. You got the hell out of it and threw a rock at them when they weren't looking!"
Ken Livingstone

"I'm never in the majority, that's my problem. I have to wait till Reagan's in power to become a flaming fag!"
Armistead Maupin

"But ultimately there is still a naked working class human desire for ecstasy and glory that is a Blakeian human birthright, constantly denied by any commercial exploitation of flesh and desire!"
Allen Ginsberg

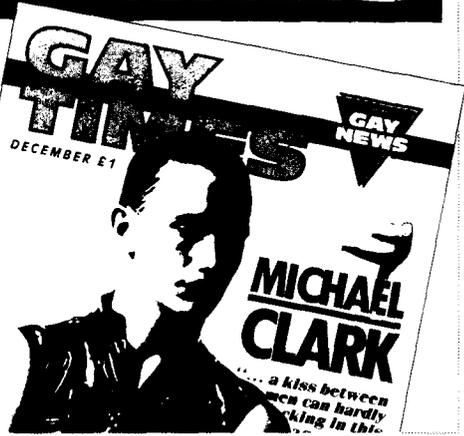
"There's so much scaremongering going on. We're in quite a strong position to express the alternative point of view, and it's our duty to keep that up!"
Jimi Somerville

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'The end looks less dead if you can glimpse the shadowy outline of Prince Charming waiting there'



Photo: Karalin Arkell/Network

olds on a YOP scheme for five months. She never heard a boy in all that time refer to a girl except in terms of sexual objectification. No girl was ever referred to as a person.

Now consider the reality, as a young woman confronting the careers officer and that short list of jobs, slightly longer list of YTS places. Suppose she asks for a non-traditional opening: in electronic engineering perhaps, or printing; as a garage mechanic or plasterer. Disregard the response she is likely to get from the CO (it may be welcoming, more likely discouraging) and think rather of the first days in training or at work. How does the feminine identity, so carefully nurtured and so necessary to viable friendships, survive the masculine clothes, the unfamiliar tools, the male environment and the men themselves – young colleagues, adult supervisors?

All studies of young women in gender-contrary jobs show them caught in a contradiction. On the one hand they may be sexually interested in men, wishing to be considered desirable. In this case they will inevitably be dismissed as incompetent at the job, possibly labelled 'slag'. If they do form a sexual relationship they will find it impossible to combine with the job (which, remember, has its own gender).

On the other hand they may not care or appear to care about men as objects of romance. They may concentrate on the job. In this case they forfeit a feminine gender identity and may be labelled 'tight' – or lesbian. 'Thinks she's one of us', an unpleasant young man said to me of a young woman on his printing course. And he added with a snarl, 'Right little bruiser!' If the young woman is a lesbian (or even if she is not) she will be lonely for lack of female company. That is all in the knitwear section, the hairdressing salon or the typing pool.

In contrast to all this confusion, a proper woman's job, conferring its own femininity on the person who does it, seems a reassuring place to be. Norma Sherratt found the pursuit of glamour to be the best way of explaining girls' apparently self-damaging choice of

dead-end jobs. The end looks less dead if you can glimpse the shadowy outline of Prince Charming waiting there. It helps if your workday image is not out of sync with your evening looks. The boring, exploitative workplace itself is less unendurable if it can be thought of as a possible place for romance. It is in this sense that the marriage market and the labour market interact for the young.

For beyond the hope of romance is the idea of marriage. This too has a bearing on job choice. Since young men of this generation show few signs of changing *their* domestic intentions, since they show no signs of developing the skills of caring for babies, the ill or elderly, young women have to accept that they will be the ones to pick up the burden. They already see their mothers and their older sisters shouldering it. A job that fits in with that prospect, as most kinds of women's work and fewer kinds of men's work can, is doubly sensible.

In the light of all this, to exhort young women to train for engineering, or building, or business management seems somewhat disrespectful. It is suggesting that women are timid, or silly or blind. It is asking women to do all the changing and adapting. Is there not instead a way we can change young women's realistic circumstances?

There are signs that the Manpower Services Commission itself now realises the shortcomings of what has been primarily a marketing approach. It is embarking on a modest scheme of single-sex schemes for young women in male-dominated occupations; reserved places for young women to create a sex-balance in a handful of schemes; chances for young women in some projects to 'sample' non-traditional occupations before making their choice of training scheme.

It is worthwhile, then, thinking through the principles that might guide positive discrimination for young women on YTS, or, in another form of training or in work. We have to develop strategies that move us from equality of opportunity, equal access, to similarity of outcomes and achievement.

Somehow the human relations involved in training have to change. In the first place there is need for more clearly-defined and protected women's space – single-sex schemes are good, but so would be assertiveness sessions and self-defence for girls. There is already a small proportion of young women coming onto YTS who view with real distaste the compulsion to take on the expected roles at home and at work. They deserve far more support than they get: female role models, other young women for company, counselling and encouragement. Men's trades and occupations need detaching as far as possible from their male associations. So long as the craft ethic has a grip on the workshop it is difficult for young women to feel it belongs to them.

The Manpower Services Commission gives a considerable part of its trainees' labour free to employers. Some form of *quid pro quo* is called for, a system of 'contract compliance' that would require employers to alter work relations in their firms as a condition of receiving trainees. While jobs inside the workplace are gendered, and women and men have different and unequal career paths and prospects, trainees' experiences and choices are bound to reflect this. They want to feel they are training for real, existing jobs.

Changing young women's circumstances of course means, ultimately, changing young men. Men are a highly significant factor in young women's environment. Adult men in YTS, who have often arrived there from the business world or from male crafts, need patiently retreading.

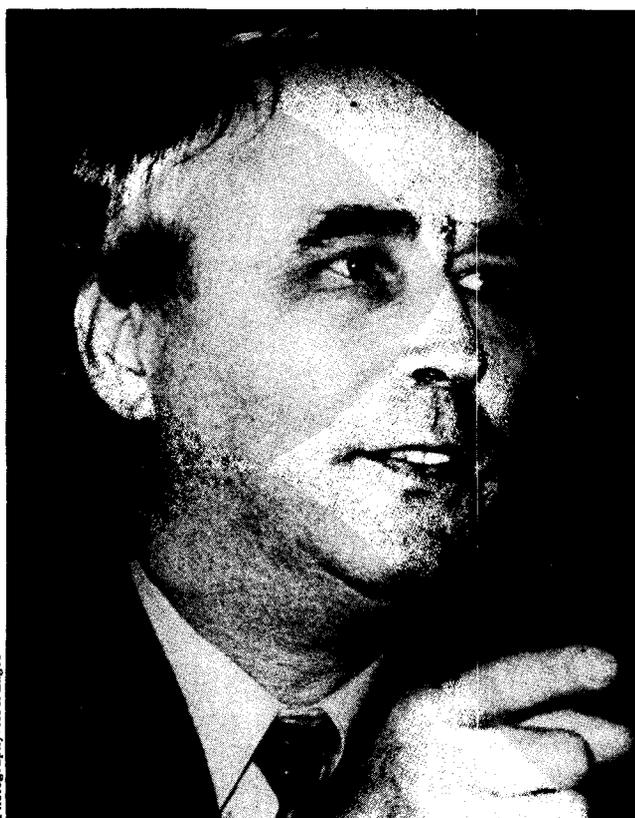
Sixteen-year-old boys are a different problem. There is an ethos of 'fair play' among young people today. Both boys and girls are ready to say 'it's up to him' or 'it's up to her' what a person chooses to do. The philosophy however is completely contradicted by actual behaviour. Young people make conventional choices and make it difficult for each other to do otherwise.

Until young men's actual behaviour changes, the way they relate to their girlfriends, the way they relate to their young women colleagues, the entry fee for young women wanting to take up male work will continue to be too high. There is an argument to be made for positive action in YTS being positive action for young women but positive action on young men. That is the only way, in the long run, young women can hope to get both of the things they want: a choice of interesting, well-paid, skilled jobs and a choice of workable sexual relationships. It is not, after all, so much to ask. ●

The research described here was funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Economic and Social Research Council. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of either body. References mentioned in the article are Christine Griffin *Typical Girls?* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985; Sue Lees *Losing Out* Hutchinson, 1986; Norma Sherratt 'Girls, jobs and glamour' *Feminist Review* No 15, 1983; and Anne Stafford *Trying Work* PhD Thesis University of Edinburgh, 1986.

Life After Reykjavik

The opening session at *Marxism Today's* Left Unlimited in November brought together Denis Healey and Fedor Burlatsky to discuss East-West relations post-Reykjavik. Fedor Burlatsky was a leading aide to Khrushchev and now enjoys a very close relationship with the Gorbachev administration. He was a member of the Soviet team at both the Geneva summit and the Reykjavik mini-summit. Denis Healey is the Shadow Foreign Secretary. We print below their opening statements.



Photography: Abel Lagos

**Burlatsky:
'I believe
in new
thinking, not
only in my
country but
in Western
countries too'**

I was in Reykjavik and first of all let me tell you I was disappointed, very disappointed. Because we had a feeling after the first day that there would be an excellent agreement between Reagan and Gorbachev. But I was not shocked because I have taken part in many such meetings over a long time and I can understand what happened from the historical point of view. But in my opinion the position of both sides came closer than at any time in the last 25 years, certainly since John Kennedy.

Gorbachev's dream and Reagan's dream coincided in one point, the possibility of going back to the past, to the pre-nuclear age, to the feeling of safety and security. Our proposal is the total elimination of nuclear weapons. And we see the first step as a 50% reduction in strategic arms and the total elimination of medium-range missiles in Europe. This was agreed by both the Americans and the Soviets. The sticking-point was the Strategic Defence Initiative, SDI. People have asked us why we are against this programme, that perhaps it is better to settle for those reductions anyway, especially as we don't believe SDI will be so effective.

There are three reasons, in my opinion, why this is unacceptable. The first is that nobody knows whether the SDI programme will prove in the future, in 10 or 20 years time, to be defensive or offensive. The second problem is that SDI is only the tip of the iceberg. Because it means a new stage in the arms race in all fields, since the new technology involved will give fantastic possibilities for this. The third and main point is will we go down the road of SDI, with all that is involved, or can we stop the arms race

and move towards the elimination of all nuclear weapons?

As far as East-West relations are concerned, we must change. As someone educated in law, I very much appreciate the British legal principle that presumes innocence until proved guilty. Both sides must change their view that we are enemies. We must use the presumption of innocence: that the other side doesn't want to blow you up with nuclear weapons, that neither side is crazy, that nobody wants to disappear from this planet. If we believe that, then we can go back to the time when there was real safety and real security in the world.

Now I believe in new thinking: it is a real fact in the Soviet Union, not only in relation to foreign policy but with regard to domestic policy, about structural reform in our country. I have dreamt about this for 30 years. Therefore why can't I believe in new thinking in the United States too? Why not? I believe that both sides, East and West, the United States and the Soviet Union, have, from an objective point of view, the same interest, to stop the arms race. To stop, to say enough is enough. Therefore I believe in new thinking, not only in my country but in Western countries too. And Reykjavik is the platform for a new step in dialogue and negotiations.

Now I must say I was concerned about the reaction of public opinion in the United States and in Western Europe to Reykjavik, even shocked. For when Reagan came back to Washington after the summit, he was attacked not only from conservative people but from liberal figures too. I remember the article by Kissinger, who as you know took part in détente in the 70s, in which he criticised Reagan, especially be-

cause Reagan agreed with the elimination of all nuclear weapons. And the same voice we hear from West European countries. Not from all commentators and not from all political leaders, but unfortunately from many of them. Now I understand that many people are nervous, even afraid, because for 30 years or more, nuclear deterrence has helped us to prevent a nuclear war. And now maybe we'll agree, I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no - it depends not only on us, but also on the American side. Maybe we will agree about the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

Now one fear concerns conventional weapons in Western Europe. Gorbachev emphasised that we are also prepared to discuss the problem of conventional weapons, to make a big reduction in these weapons. But this notwithstanding, the risk of a nuclear war is so great that the dangers involved in peace without nuclear weapons is nothing compared with this risk. The second point of course concerns Soviet and American rockets in Europe. It seems very strange to us that many West European political leaders and commentators were against this proposal, very strange indeed, because it was Reagan's proposal, his zero option proposal. I remember on previous visits to West European countries many people telling me about the threat posed by the SS20s. Now nobody seems afraid of them. What happened? We want to destroy the SS20s if the Americans will destroy Pershing 2 and the cruise missiles. So I am a little bit shocked about this reaction, especially since the West European countries could obviously exercise some positive influence in the arms race control process. ●