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**ASPECTS OF SCHOOL CULTURE AND  
THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF GIRLS**

by

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## PREFACE

In November 1985, as a result of generous sponsorship by the Italian government (Ministero degli Interni) and the European Policy Unit of the EUI, a conference was held in Florence on "The prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency among girls in the EEC: towards an evaluation". Seventy-two scholars and practitioners attended, from eleven different European countries. The purpose of the conference was to celebrate the United Nations Year of Youth by constructive discussion about how and why girls and young women come to the attention of the criminal justice and welfare systems, how they are treated, and how practices for the care and control of girls and young women might be improved.

The value of comparative work of this kind was amply demonstrated both theoretically and in terms of policy and practice. The big lack was clearly of studies designed and intended for comparative purposes. The 27 conference papers collected together in ten EUI Working Papers (of which this volume is one) reveal both these strengths and this need.

Theoretically what was surprising and of importance were the similarities between countries with very different cultures and political economies in the way girls and young women are treated. Their employment prospects are everywhere worse; their sexuality is heavily policed by their male and female peers, with the ultimate sanction of non-marriageability to a 'good' man having the potential of causing both economic and social and psychic pain. The efforts of a minority of girls and young women to break out of this cycle appear to be policed by state agencies - the welfare and justice systems - although the part played in some countries by private (often religious) agencies remains to be explored. For other girls non-conformity could not properly be understood as rebellion: but whatever its cause the directions and occasions of control were similar.

This cross-nation similarity suggests that a theoretical reduction of these constraints in the direction of familial coupling to an effect of capitalism or of class structure is not adequate, given the wide variations in political economies already alluded to.

The second important similarity which seemed to emerge - although requiring much more detailed work before adequate theorising is achieved - is that policy in relation to delinquent girls is for some matters based on boys' behaviour patterns and career paths. This emerged most clearly in relation to British and Dutch ways of dealing with drug offenders, in the contributions by Thom and Blom (WP 87/298). Such policies, being inappropriate, were also ineffective. But for the most part both court decision making and the practice of subsequent sentences were gendered. This, however, seemed to the contributors to be inappropriate too. The demand, therefore, is not for formal sameness but for appropriate differences in welfare practices in relation to girls, based on careful feminist and sociological analysis of their life spaces and possibilities rather than on male mythologies about the needs and natures of young females. It is to this end that more detailed comparative work must be directed - a project which the conference participants already have in hand.

Maureen Cain



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AND THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF GIRLS

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SEXUAL REPUTATION, MORALITY AND THE SOCIAL  
CONTROL OF GIRLS: A BRITISH STUDY

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Introduction

This paper is based on a three year research project in three London comprehensive schools carried out in the early 1980's. A research fellow was funded by the Inner London Education Authority and the Nuffield Foundation contributed £2,500 towards the project. A hundred 15 to 16 year old girls from varied social class and ethnic groups were interviewed singly, in pairs, or in group discussions. The first two schools were mixed: both had women head teachers and were attempting to put into force an equal opportunities programme. The schools differed in their intake. One was predominantly white working class, the other had a high proportion of different ethnic groups. Most of the children had been brought up in the area. The third school was a single sex school with a mainly middle class intake.

All the discussions and interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. The interviews and group discussions deployed a non-directive approach which allowed the girls to express their experience in their own terms. The design involved analysing the transcriptions according to a schedule developed for the purpose. It is more than a purely descriptive study. By focussing on the terms girls used to describe five aspects of their lives - schools, friendship, boys, sexuality, and their expectations for the future - light was thrown on what their experiences meant to them and how those individual experiences are socially structured. The research will be published as a book, Learning to Love: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls by Hutchinson in the Spring of 1986.

This paper suggests that a woman's sexuality is central to the way she is judged and seen in everyday life as well as by the courts and welfare and law enforcement agencies. The denial of what I shall call non-gendered subjectivity of treating women as human beings rather than as sex objects is the major barrier to women's equality. To speak of a woman's reputation is to invoke her sexual behaviour, but to speak of a man's reputation is to refer to his personality, exploits and his standing in the community. For men sexual reputation is, in the main, separated off from the evaluation of moral behaviour and regarded as private and incidental.

The policing of women through sexual reputation starts in adolescence, where, as my research shows, a girl's sexual reputation is a constant source of debate and gossip between boys and girls and even teachers and social workers. A girl's standing can be destroyed by insinuations about her sexual morality, a boy's reputation in contrast is usually enhanced by his sexual exploits.

When we<sup>1</sup> set out in the early 1980's to talk to about 100 15 and 16 year old girls from different social classes and ethnic groups about their views of school, friendship, marriage and the future we did not intend to focus particularly on sexuality and gender relations. However, the double standard of sexual morality and the concern that girls expressed about their sexual reputations which were frequently the target of abuse from boys and other girls led to a focus on the neglected area of how sexual relations were socially structured. The emphasis in youth culture studies on class has deflected attention away from the power imbalance between boys and girls so that few studies have questioned the taken-for-granted subordination of girls by the structuring of gender relations.

#### The structure of sexual relations and the concept of reputation

Boys and girls talk about sexuality in quite different ways. It is possible to delineate three main differences. Firstly, while a boy's sexual reputation is enhanced by varied experience, a girl's is negated. Boys will brag to others about how many girls they have 'made', but a girl's reputation is under threat not merely if she is known to have had sex with anyone other than her steady boyfriend but for a whole range of other behaviour that has little to do with actual sex. Secondly, a boy's reputation and standing in the world is not predominantly determined by his sexual status or conquests. More important is his sporting prowess, or ability to 'take the mickey' or make people laugh. For a girl, the defence of her sexual reputation is crucial to her standing both with boys and girls - certainly around the age of 15 or so. The emphasis on the importance of sex to a girl's reputation is shown up by a whole battery of insults which are in everyday use among young people. Finally, for boys sexism appears to be very important in male bonding in as much as denigration of girls and women is a crucial ingredient of camaraderie in male circles. The masculine tradition of drinking and making coarse jokes usually focusses on the 'dumb sex object', the 'nagging wife' or the 'filthy whore'. This is not the case for girls. As one girl told me:

"One thing I noticed is that there are not many names you can call a boy. But if you call a girl a name, there's a load of them. You might make a dictionary out of the names you can call a girl."

1. The research was carried out with Celia Cowie with a grant from the Nuffield Foundation and the ILEA.



### The vocabulary of abuse

This lack of symmetry between the variety of names to call a girl and the lack of names to call boys is the starting point for an understanding of the role of verbal abuse focussing on sexuality in reproducing, among girls, an orientation towards the existing structures of patriarchal sex-gender relationships. The word which illustrates this asymmetry more clearly than any other term is 'slag'. There is no equivalent to 'slag' in the vocabulary of terms available to be directed at boys. Derogatory words for boys such as 'prick' or 'wally' are much milder than 'slag' in that they do not refer to the boy's social identity. To call a boy a 'pooff' is derogatory but this term is not used as a term of abuse by girls of boys. As a term used between boys, it implies a lack of guts or femininity: which of itself connotes, in our culture, weakness, softness and inferiority. There is no derogatory word for active male sexuality. The promiscuous Don Juan or the rake may be rebuffed as in Mozart's opera but his reputation is enhanced.

The potency of 'slag' lies in the wide range of circumstances in which it can be used. It is this characteristic that illustrates its functioning as a form of generalised social control, along the lines of gender rather than class, steering girls, in terms of both their actions and their aspirations, into the existing structures of gender relations.

The first thing that is striking about the use of the term 'slag' is the difficulty of getting any clear definition of what it implies from those who use it. This is true both for girls and boys. Take this girl's description of what she calls a 'proper slag':

"I do know one or two slags. I must admit they're not proper slags."

Q. Can you describe what a proper slag is?

"Available aren't they? Just like Jenny, always on the look out for boys, non-stop. You may not know her but you always see her and every time you see her she's got a different fella with her, you get to think she's a slag, don't you. She's got a different fella every minute of the day."

Q. So it is just talking to different boys?

"You see them, some of them, they look as innocent as anything, but I know what they're like."

The implication here is that the girl who is called a 'slag' sleeps around but this is by no means clear, and the insult

often bears no relation at all to a girl's sexual behaviour. Boys are no clearer when it comes to defining what the characteristics used to define a girl as a 'slag' are, which is why they disagree as to who is or is not a slag. In their book about boys Knuckle Sandwich Dave Robbins and Phil Cohen wrote:

The boys classified all the girls into two categories: the slags who'd go with anyone and everyone (they were alright for a quick screw, but you'd never get serious about it) and the drags who didn't but whom you might one day think about going steady with. Different cliques of boys put different girls in each of the two categories. (Robbins & Cohen, 1978)

So whilst everyone apparently knows a slag and stereotypes her as someone who sleeps around, this stereotype bears no relation to the girls to whom the term is applied.

An alternative to asking those who use a term to define it, is to carefully observe the rules whereby the term is used. A look at the actual usage of slag reveals a wide variety of situations or aspects of behaviour to which the term can be applied, many of which are not related to a girl's actual sexual behaviour, or to any clearly defined notion of 'sleeping around'. A constant sliding occurs between slag as a term of joking, as bitchy abuse, as a threat, or as a label. At one moment a girl can be fanciable and the next 'a bit of a slag' or even - the other side of the coin - written off as 'too tight'. The girls tread a very narrow line. They mustn't end up being called a slag. But equally they don't want to be thought unapproachable, sexually cold - a tight bitch.

#### Ways 'slag' can be used

This constant sliding means that any girl is always available to the designation slag in any number of ways. Appearance is crucial: by wearing too much make-up, by having your slit skirt too slit, by not combing your hair, wearing jeans to dances or high heels to school, having your trousers too tight or your tops too low. As one girl said, 'sexual clothes'. Is it any wonder when girls have to learn to make fine discriminations about appearances that they spend so much time deciding what to wear? Whom you mix with also counts:

"I prefer to hang around with someone who's a bit decent. 'cos I mean if you walk down the street with someone who dresses weird you get a bad reputation yourself. Also if you looked a right state, you'd get a bad reputation. Look at her y'know."

Looking weird often means dressing differently from your own group.

Behaviour towards boys is, of course, the riskiest terrain. You mustn't hang around too much waiting for boys to come out (but all girls must hang around sufficiently), talk or be friendly with too many boys, or too many boys too quickly, or even more than one boy in a group, or just find yourself ditched.

Almost everything plays a part in the constant assessment of reputation - including the way you speak:

"If we got a loud mouth, when we do the same they (the boys) do, they call us a slag, or 'got a mouth like the Blackwall tunnel'. But the boys don't get called that, when they go and talk. They think they're cool and hard and all the rest of it 'cos they can slag a teacher off."

Q. Who would be calling you a slag then?

"The boys. They think, oh you got a mouth like an oar, you're all right down the fish market ... They think you've come from a slum sort of area."

Thus 'slag' can just as easily be applied to a girl who dresses or talks in a certain way, or is seen talking to two boys or with someone else's boyfriend. The point is that irrespective of whether, in a particular case, the use of the term 'slag' is applied explicitly to sexual behaviour, since a girl's reputation is defined in terms of her sexuality, all kinds of social behaviour by girls have a potent sexual significance.

### Exercising control

Perhaps the key to an understanding of 'slag' is its functioning as a mechanism which controls the activity and social reputations of girls to the advantage of boys. Girls were preoccupied with what might happen after being dropped by a boy.

"Then the next thing he'll be going around saying 'I've had her, you want to try her, go and ask her out, she's bound to say Yeah'."

or another girl said:

"Some boys are like that they go round saying 'I've had her'. And then they pack you in and their mate will go out with you. And you're thinking that they're going out with you 'cos they like you. But

they're not. They're going out to use you. The next you know you're being called names - like writing on the wall 'I've had it with so and so. I did her in 3 days. And I've done her 12 times in a week'."

It may not be a question of the girl actually having slept with a boy, she may land herself with a reputation as a result of going out with one boy, then being dropped and going out with one of his friends. The consequences for a girl are quite different from those for a boy:

"When there're boys talking and you've been out with more than two you're known as the crisp that they're passing around .... The boy's alright but the girl's a bit of scum."

If a boy takes you out or boasts that he has slept with more than one girl he is more than alright, his reputation is enhanced:

"If a boy tells his mates that he's been with three different girls, his mates would all say: 'Oh lucky you' or 'Well done my son, you're a man'."

The pressure is on boys to boast about their sexual conquests. They have to act big in front of their friends. As one girl explained:

"They might say 'Oh I've had her'. Then it starts spreading round. She might be really quiet or something and they'll say 'Oh she's not quiet when you get outside the school'. Someone else will take it in the wrong way and it'll carry on from there."

No wonder that girls have always got fears about boys going behind their backs and saying 'Oh you know, had it with her'. It is the girl's morality that is always under the microscope whereas anything the boy does is alright. A number of girls described girls who had not slept around but had been out with a number of different boys in a short period of time 'because they were unlucky enough to be dropped by a number of boys'. This led people to start saying 'Oh God who is she with tonight?'

The crucial point, then, about the label 'slag' is that it is used by both girls and boys as a threat. No girl wants to be labelled bad and 'slag' is something to frighten any girl with. The effect of the term is to force girls to submit voluntarily to a very unfair set of gender relations. A few girls did reject the implications of the label and the double standard implicit within it, but even they said they used the term to abuse other girls. What becomes important is not the identification of certain girls but how the term is used. A useful way to understand how terms like slag are used is provided by Colin Sumner in a study of the functioning of categories of deviance.

Their general function is to denounce and control not to explain .... They mark off the deviant, the pathological, the dangerous and the criminal from the normal and the good ... (they) are not just labels ... (but) ... They are loaded with implied interpretations of real phenomena, models of human nature and the weight of political self interest. (Sumner 1983)

To call a girl a slag is to use a term that as we have seen appears at first sight to be a label describing an actual form of behaviour but which no girl incontrovertibly fits into. It is even difficult to identify what actual behaviour is specified. Take Helen's description of how appearance can define girls, not in terms of their attributes as human beings, but in terms of sexual reputation:

"I mean they might not mean any harm. I mean they might not be as bad as they look. But their appearance makes them stand out and that's what makes them look weird and you think 'God I can imagine her y'know?' ... She straight way gets a bad reputation even though the girl might be decent inside. She might be good. She might still be living at home. She might just want to look different but might still act normal."

You cannot imagine a boy's appearance being described in this way. How she dresses determines how a girl is viewed and how she is viewed is in terms of her assumed sexual behaviour. Whether she is 'good' or not is determined by how she is assumed to conduct her sexual life; that sexuality is relative to male sexual needs.

Rather than attempt to specify what particular behaviour differentiates a slag it is more useful to see slag as what Sumner terms a category of 'moral censure': as part of a discourse about behaviour as a departure, or potential departure from - in this case - male conceptions of female sexuality which run deep in the culture, so deep that the majority of men and women cannot formulate them except by reference to these terms of censure that signal a threatened violation. This violation can occur for no reason other than a rebuff from a girl:

"What I hate is when a boy tries, you go somewhere and a boy tries to sort of get in with you and if you dislike him as a person, then (he says) 'Slag'. That's what really annoys me."

A girl should be flattered by a boy's interest, should be a passive and compliant recipient rather than an active agent in her own right. She can be deemed a slag both when she approaches him or rebuffs him. He must always be master.

The term connotes being promiscuous and 'sleeping around' but its actual usage is such that any unattached girl is vulnerable to being categorised as a slag. This is the way in which the term functions as a form of control by boys over girls, a form of control which steers girls into 'acceptable' forms of sexuality and social behaviour. This is reflected in the fact that there is no way the legitimacy of slag can be contested. If someone starts to get a reputation the only thing they can do to redeem themselves is to 'get a steady boyfriend':

"Then that way you seem to be more respectable like you're married or something."

Going steady establishes the location of a sexuality appropriate for 'nice girls', and that sexuality is distinguished from the essentially dirty/promiscuous sexuality of the slag by the presence of LOVE:

The fundamental rule governing sexual behaviour was the existence of affection in the form of romantic love before any sexual commitment. For most of the girls, love existed before sex and it was never a consequence of sexual involvement. (Wilson, 1978)

Deirdre Wilson who studied a group of 13 - 16 year old girls commented:

given this threat of rejection (for sex without love) it was difficult to discover just how many girls actually believed in the primacy of love, and how many simply paid lip service to the ideal. Nevertheless the fact that the girls found it necessary to support this convention, whether they believed in it or not, was an important fact in itself. (Wilson, 1978)

Nice girls cannot have sexual desire outside of love, for them sexuality is something that just happens if you are in love, or if you are unlucky, when you are drunk:

"You might be at a party and someone just dragged you upstairs or something and then the next thing you know you don't know what's happening to you."

If this happens the general consensus of opinion is that it is the girl's fault:

"It happens a lot. But then it's the girl's fault for getting silly drunk in the first place that she can't she doesn't know what's going on or anything."

Few girls were clear about what being in love meant, though invariably love was given as the only legitimate reason for sleeping with a boy. The importance of love seemed to be therefore in permitting sexual excitement while offering some protection from sluttishness. This failure to recognize sexual desire meant that girls often changed their minds

about whom they loved:

"You think you're in love and then when it finishes you find someone else you like more and then you think the last time it couldn't have been love so it must be this time. But you're never sure, are you, 'cos each time it either gets better or it gets worse so you never know."

"You think you're in love loads of times and you go through life thinking 'God I'm in love' and you don't do anything. You want to be with this person all the time. Then you realise you weren't in love, you just thought you were ... I thought I was in love and then I went away and when I came back I realised I wasn't. It wasn't love at all. So I finished it and I was much happier."

The girls here could just as easily be describing the way they felt attracted to a boy and then lost interest. Some girls said they had 'been in love loads of times' whereas others said they 'had never really experienced it':

"It takes a while to happen. I mean it sort of dawns on you that you finally love this person. Don't think it happens straight away. I mean you might say 'Oh look at him I love him', 'I think he's really nice' but you can't really say that until you know him really well."

Given the ambiguity about what love involved it could well be that love is used as a rationalization for sleeping with someone after the event, rather than as Deirdre Wilson suggests as always existing before sex could occur. The confusion that girls experience over whether or not they are in love arises from the confusion of using the word love to express what is really sexual desire. Love is supposed to last for ever or at least for a long time, and is the main reason that girls give for getting married. The distortion of what is really sexual desire into 'love' means that girls must find it difficult to separate their sexual feelings from decisions about marriage and long-term commitment. As Jacky said:

"Girls have got to keep quiet about sex and think it's something to be ashamed of."

However it is quite legitimate to talk of love. The 'legitimacy' of love is precisely its role in steering female sexuality into the only 'safe' place for its expression: marriage. The result is that a girl either suppresses her sexual desire or channels it into a steady relationship that is based on an unwritten contract of inequality - that she will be the one to make compromises over where she works, lives, and spends her leisure. She will bear the main burden of domesticity and child care without pay and adjust herself and indeed contribute to her husband's work, lifestyle and demands.

The importance of the threat of being regarded as a slag in pushing girls to channel their sexuality into the 'legitimate' channels of love which results in marriage is illustrated by the realistic, as opposed to romantic view of marriage which most of the girls had. Almost all the girls took it for granted that they would get married yet they are remarkably clear about the grimmer aspects of woman's lot in marriage. As one girl put it:

"The wife has to stay at home and do the shopping and things. She has got more responsibility in life and they haven't got much to look forward to .... We've got to work at home and look after the children till they grow up, you've got to go out shopping, do the housework and try to have a career. The man comes in and says 'Where's my dinner?' when we've been to work. They say 'You don't work'. It's because boys are brought up expecting girls to do all the work. They expect their mums to do it and when they get married they expect their wives to do it. They're just lazy."

The realism about marriage was based on the observation of their parents:

"My dad won't do anything, he won't make a cup of tea, he says he does the work for the money and the rest is up to my mum - she does part time work too."

The most important reason that girls put forward for getting married was that they saw no alternative. Life as an independent unattached woman is always open to risks:

"If you don't want to get married and want to live a free life and you go out with one bloke one week and another the next, everyone will call you a tart, like you've got to go out with a bloke for a really long time and then marry him."

Besides the constant fear of being regarded as a tart or slag, living alone is seen as too frightening. The need for protection emerged in a number of the interviews. Charlotte describes how her brother is treated differently from her:

"Boys are a totally different physique. I could go out and be raped whereas he couldn't. He'd have more chance of protecting himself. I think that comes up the whole time. It's not that a boy is more trusted. It's that he's freer."

The harsh reality existing in a male dominated world was that you needed protection from sexual harassment. Girls could never go out on their own - or even with girl friends - without fear:



"Say you have a boy protecting you. It's as if no one can hurt you or nothing. You're protected and everything. If someone does something to you, then there's him there too and it just makes you feel secure."

The threat of male physical violence takes its place alongside the verbal violence associated with labelling a girl as a slag to steer girls into the acceptability of marriage. But it is not just the constraints on an independent sex life that lead girls to marriage but that the family is seen as the only hope we appear to have for the fulfilment of needs for warmth and intimacy and love. Lesbian relationships can of course offer these but only if the girl manages to resist the pressure towards conformity and, of course, if she is attracted to other girls.

In the face of these strong pressures the girls inevitably subscribed to the idea that they wanted to marry. Nevertheless their realism about marriage, based on the observation of their parents that we have already noted, led them to devise ways of rationalising or cushioning its inevitable impact. Almost all the girls wanted to put marriage off for some time. By delaying marriage many girls thought that they would be able to have some fun, often fantasised as travel and seeing the world. Marriage was something you ended up with after you had lived:

"I don't really want to get married 'cos ' I want to go round the world first like me dad did ... they got married when they were thirty years old, they just sort of had their life first and then they got married and had us but when you're an air hostess you don't start the job until you're twenty so I want to work until I'm thirty-five."

Girls who did want a career often realised that relationships with boys might upset their intentions and therefore steered clear of them:

"If a boy does ask us out we say 'no' don't want to know, because we want a career and go round the world and all that lot. So we just leave them alone ...."

or Janey put it more strongly:

"I don't really bother about boys now - just get on with my homework. I was brought up not to like boys really 'cos I've heard so much about what they do, robberies, rapes and all that so I keep away from them!

When asked what she meant by being brought up not to like them she replied:

"Well my mum told me never to go with them because they're bad and they damage your health and things like that, don't know."

Boyfriends and marriage could easily interfere with career intentions - the girls could see what had happened to their mums and how little autonomy they had.

Another way of attempting to avoid the predicament of marriage was to attribute the unhappiness they saw in marriages around them to the wrong choice of partner. The subordinate position that many women found themselves in was often attributed to the lack of good sense in choosing the right husband rather than to the general structural constraints on women at home with young children. Alice, looking at the 'mistakes' her mother made - in choosing the wrong man - believed:

"But not all marriages are like that though are they? like if your mum's goes bad, yours might go good, it's what husband you pick."

Alice is right in one respect. Some men allow women more autonomy than others. She does not however criticise the unfairness of the marriage deal itself, particularly if children were involved. Although having children was something that most girls wanted, again, the way in which this inevitably constrained freedom was recognised:

"I think that once you decide to have kids then you've got to accept the fact that you are gonna be tied down for a while. That's why it's important not to get married too early - until you're twenty-eight or so."

In short, the girls were not aware of positive attractions attaching to the married life yet, as far as they saw it, there was just no alternative. Romanticism about choosing the 'right man' can be seen as a way of attributing personal responsibility for structural oppression but the fact of structural oppression is realistically understood. Nevertheless, despite the unattractiveness of marriage the question is, as a girl from Diana Leonard's study (1970) in Swansea put it, not of choosing to get married or not but whether you fail to get married. My argument has been that what forces this closure on all alternatives to married life is above all the power of the slag categorisation for the unattached woman who is sexually active. Once we understand the way in which female sexuality is constructed and constrained by the categorisation of slag, how a woman's femininity and sexuality is only rendered 'safe' when confined to the bonds of marriage, we understand why there is just no alternative, as the girls see it, to married life.

### Sex, class and subculture

As I have noted, most studies of male youth culture have been conducted from a subcultural standpoint in which youth culture is seen as resistance to and temporary escape from, the pressures and demands of society. Yet the experiences of the girls that I have portrayed here can hardly be seen as resistance or escape. On the contrary the processes which I have illustrated are very far from resistance; they are the processes of constraint and the channelling of aspirations and behaviour along the well established paths of sex and gender relations exemplified by the institution of marriage and the role of women in the domestic sphere. To see the rehearsal for entry into a major social institution such as marriage and the domestic sphere as a form of 'subculture' or resistance is, in effect, to deny the reality of the domestic sphere as a social institution akin, say, to economic life and social class relations and to see it purely as a cultural phenomenon. In this way the questions of subculture and the debate over sex and class relations are crucially linked. If the main structural forces or forms of stratification in our society are seen as economic class structures then of course rehearsal for domestic life, when seen from the standpoint of those structures, will be seen as a form of cultural behaviour unrelated to class, or possibly as a form of resistance to the consequences of class-determined life chances - in the way in which, for example, Paul Willis describes the process whereby working class boys reconcile themselves to working class jobs. But if gender divisions are seen as of equal significance to economic class in the constitution of social structure and social institutions then it is less easy to view girls' behaviour as 'subcultural'.

Rather what is important is to analyse the constraints that the structuring of gender relations and the double standard of sexual morality places on girls. In this final section I shall draw out some of the implications of this.

### Morality and sexual behaviour: slags

My research into the language of sexual reputation amongst adolescent girls revealed three things. Firstly, that names like 'slag' function, as terms of abuse, to control single girls and steer them towards marriage as the only legitimate expression of sexuality. Secondly, what became clear was the interdependence of male 'non-gendered subjectivity' and female sexuality. This manifested itself in the way girls continually take on responsibility for male actions - especially violence or other behaviour that is irrational or sexually motivated. Girls also bear the moral responsibility for the consequences of sexual relations - as with taking steps to ensure contraception. Thirdly, the repression of sexuality to the conventional pattern of marriage means that female sexuality has little autonomous expression but is constrained

by social station and its duties. The woman becomes the housewife and her virtue comes to consist in the correct performance of the "duties" of the marital relationship, being a "good wife", in which sexual expression is allowed only to the extent of meeting her husband's "legitimate" sexual needs. When women are charged with petty criminal offences social workers and law enforcement agencies have been shown to give weight to sexual reputation and the performance of domestic duties in sentencing. There is also some evidence that girls are sent to institutions on grounds of sexual conduct rather than the nature of the offence.

If in the private sphere it is woman's duty to keep quiet and be a good wife, in the public sphere her inability to achieve non-gendered subjectivity closely follows from her having to take on the responsibility for male sexuality. Because the male 'rational man' is only possible where his sexual and irrational behaviour can be attributed to 'woman trouble' or other feminine influence it is obviously impossible, under present circumstances for men and women to co-exist as non-gendered subjects. Women's escape from sexual stereotyping in the public sphere would require men taking on responsibility for, and integrating, their sexuality into their public behaviour.

For women, this situation limits the possible forms of behaviour in the public world. One can of course 'latch on to' a man and go places, but, conversely, a woman who does achieve in terms of skills and capacities other than 'sex' stands in danger of either having her achievements attributed to her sex (that she 'slept her way to the top') or to being regarded as sexless - one of the boys and therefore undesirable. To be an honorary man is to be so masculine and 'unattractive' that men and other women will come to dissociate her completely from any concept of sexuality. Thus a type of false non-gendered subjectivity is achieved but only as a residue: a woman is evaluated in terms of her achievements only because no men find her sexually interesting.

For men, on the other hand, virtue is achieved irrespective of sexuality: in public life sexual reputation is largely excluded from the moral evaluation of conduct. In private life too men's sexual conduct does not define moral standing. A man can still be a 'good father' or a 'good husband' and have illicit sexual relationships outside marriage.

### Consequences for the education of girls

Finally, what implications does this analysis have for the way that social relations and sex education are handled in school? Teachers in Britain are by no means united in accepting the need for compensatory programmes for girls or that equal opportunity programmes are necessary. There are four main areas where discrimination needs to be challenged.

Firstly, the whole issue of social relations - and gender relations in particular - should be given far more attention in schools than at present. There is evidence that boys monopolize two thirds of class teachers' time and that teachers pay less attention to girls and even find it more difficult to remember their names.<sup>2</sup> The way that boys and girls integrate in school should be a focus for debate and more attempts should be made by teachers to counteract any indication that boys are either receiving more attention or depriving girls of the use of any school facilities.

Secondly, sex education not only needs to be given far greater attention but needs to be approached with reference to the powerful and taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality which, rather than being natural and biologically given, are social and reflect and reinforce the subordinate position of girls and women in our society. It is only by approaching the question of sex education in this context with a knowledge of how sexual relations are structured by the norms and constraints outlined in this paper that progress can be made. There are two areas that I would like to discuss from this standpoint.

Sex education in the traditional sense usually focusses on different methods of contraception and descriptions of the biological make up and mechanics of the sex act. Even at this level, according to Brenda Spencer, little has changed since 1965 when research indicated that adolescents received little guidance about sex education, virtually none about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases and that unwanted pregnancy was a major problem (Spencer, 1984). Although in England birth control is now free and is available to all teenagers without their parents' consent, in practice only a third of all sexually active teenagers regularly use contraception. This has been explained by girls' hesitancy about approaching doctors and

2. Margaret Spear's study was based on samples of secondary school teachers in mixed comprehensives in southern England (Institute of Educational Technology, Open University).

birth control clinics but what may be more significant is the operation of the double standard that condemns her if she does not use contraception as irresponsible but condemns her if she does use it as unrespectable. It appears that using birth control and contraceptives runs particular risks in relation to a girl's reputation. If she uses contraception on a casual date this involves laying herself open to the charge that sex is premeditated and that she is therefore consciously choosing to anticipate that sex might occur with someone she is not 'in love' with or in a steady relationship with - she is therefore a slag. On the other hand if she has sex without contraception this can be explained by something which 'happens' without previous intent. In fact it is interesting how often girls describe their sexual encounters not as something that they consciously choose to embark on but as something that 'happens' to them. As Hannah said in an earlier quote:

"You might be at a party and someone just dragged you upstairs ... and the next thing you know you don't know what's happening to you."

Of course what's happening is rape. But it is too simple to regard the boys as totally blameworthy and 'potential rapists'. They too are locked in to regarding girls in a contradictory way - on the one hand there are pressures on them to regard girls as conquests and to 'make' as many girls as they can. There are also pressures on them as individuals to treat girls well and as friends and to care for them. It is almost as though there are two kinds of sexuality, one that is without emotional feeling and treats women as dirty and provocative and the other that involves strong feelings of desire and compassion, and that those two concepts of sexuality are inextricably linked to the concepts of the virgin and the whore. This may be why even raping a virgin or a respectable married woman as occurred in 'The Rape of Lucretia' is still regarded as if not the woman's fault at least a taint on her character. The transition between the two types of sexuality has been crossed and the woman, whether it is her fault or not, if raped has crossed irretrievably into the 'slag' category. This is one reason why so few women report rape to anyone. In Carol Lee's research on sex education in schools she describes how whenever rape was discussed there were at least a couple of boys who said:

"But women really want it Miss" or  
"You have to knock them about a bit for them to enjoy it."  
(Lee 1983)

The difficulty with these statements is that it is easy to reject them out of hand and regard rape as uncontrolled inhuman aggression of one human being to another - which it is - and stop the analysis there. What must be questioned is why these views are so prevalent, and what exactly is at stake. The girl has to deny her sexual desire to remain respectable but should she in any way indicate that she is

open to advances she is regarded as fair game and the implication is that rape is not the violent assault that it in reality is but is 'only what women really want'. Now it may be true that women do want to express their sexuality, they do want active sexual lives but this choice is denied them. Any indication of desire whether in the form of the way a woman dresses, speaks, looks or flirts is taken as grounds for the man to assault a woman. A slippage has occurred whereby the assumption of desire in a woman turns her from the 'good' virgin into the 'rapacious' whore who will go with anyone anywhere. 'You have to knock them about a bit for them to enjoy it' - and knocked about women are, night after night, month after month, as is shown by the studies of family violence that are emerging out of a wall of silence that has surrounded the cruelty that many women suffer within the privacy of the 'domestic haven'. It is such issues that need to be brought up and questioned in sex education classes though it is unreasonable to expect teachers to take on such a task without preparation and further training. Rape and violence cannot be explained as the behaviour of psychopathic sex maniacs but rather as actions which are the extension of the normal oppressive structure of sexual relations. It is by challenging the terms on which girls participate in social life that boys and girls can be encouraged to see their relationships not in sexist stereotypical ways but to see each other as human beings irrespective of their sex.

Thirdly, sex education - in the traditional sense - is also important as there is evidence that girls particularly have little knowledge of their sexual organs and responses, let alone the freedom to express themselves. Jane in this study graphically described her sister's fears about her pending wedding:

Jane "She's frightened of the night. She hasn't been to bed with boys or anything so she's frightened. She's getting married this Saturday."

Sandra "Wonder woman she won't be."

Jane "What's she gonna do when he jumps on top of her?"

Their description of sex as 'jumping on top of her' and as a searing experience is hardly a romantic or informed depiction of sexual love.

Tracy, when asked whether anyone talked about sex to her replied:

"My mum does talk about it. When mum explains it she talks like she's carrying a heavy load."

Sexual experience is for many women just like that - carrying a heavy load rather than an experience that lightens their load and lifts them out of themselves.

Likewise Stevi Jackson (1980) in Learning to Lose describes how the girls she interviewed equated sex with coition and had acquired little information about their own sexual responses or their sexuality. Given the focus on intercourse and reproduction in the knowledge available to adolescents, boys cannot but identify the penis as their chief sexual organ. Most girls on the other hand, did not even know of the existence of the clitoris. Investigation of the genitals is so heavily tabooed that few girls do so, as is implied by what the two girls, Sandra and Jane in this study, say.

Finally, sexual harassment in schools should be recognised and taken seriously. As Helen put it:

"My school work reflects how the rest of my life is going. If I am being sworn at at school or have trouble at home, my work suffers."

The sexual abuse that is often a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life in comprehensive schools amounts to a form of sexual harassment. Speech is a form of action and even if it is a reflection of the inequality between men and women which will change only when that inequality is overturned, sexist language can also be seen as a way of reinforcing the subordination of girls and women. The elimination of sexist language is a necessary condition for eliminating sexism in our society. The use of racist and sexist language, as Robin Lakoff<sup>(1975)</sup> suggests, is connected to the inferior social roles of blacks and women and needs to be continually challenged. A disciplinary code should be drawn up in all schools where such terms are outlawed, and deemed to be quite unacceptable. Sexual harassment and sexual abuse need to be taken as seriously as racial abuse. Teachers who turn a blind eye to them or even actively collude in denigrating girls should be rebuked. One difficulty is that many teachers are not aware of the double standard or accept it uncritically. A good sample of this lack of concern is given by Chris Griffen who reported this conversation with a fifth form teacher, Mr Yates, about girls who reported they had been attacked:

Mr Yates Some of the girls have been saying they've been attacked coming to school.

Chris Yes some did mention that to me.

Mr Yates Yes, well you don't believe them do you when they say that?

Chris But if they're worried about it ...

Mr Yates Yes, but some of them wouldn't know what it means. They're just having you on. These attacks are just nothing. They're not serious you know. (Griffen, 1985)



There is therefore a need for educating teachers and making them aware of the discrimination against girls, not simply in terms of option choices and career opportunities but also in terms of the unfair structure of social relations. Nonetheless, sociologists have been more blinded to the effect of gender than teachers, so it is hardly surprising that such attitudes persist.

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Nobody's Problem: the case of truancing girls in England

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For most people truancy is not the most pressing educational or social problem, even though it is widespread in the school systems of the West. Periodically there is a spate of publicity and outcry about it, often from the professional organisations of social work and educational welfare (see the Guardian 29.3.76; 31.12.76; 31.5.77.) And, rather surprisingly in view of the difficulties in defining and measuring truancy, it is favoured as an indicator of various sorts of social malaise. (Flynn et al. 1972)

There are indeed problems involved in assessing and interpreting the rates of truancy or, as it is often disaggregated, of truancy and non-attendance. This has led to some uncertainty over whether absenteeism amongst schoolchildren is as serious as some reports have suggested. On the one hand in 1975 The Central Policy Review Staff Report 'A Joint Framework for Social Policy' concluded that 'the symptoms of (disadvantaged youth) which cause most concern are truancy and delinquency'. Yet what surveys exist show non-attendance rates of about 10% and these have generally been interpreted by their authors as not revealing a serious problem after all. (DES 1974, ILEA 1972)

Such a conclusion can be reached on a number of grounds. With justification one might think that it is public perception rather than reality which has changed and, indeed, in England rates of school attendance have been surprisingly stable since about 1900 when they settled down to around 90%, where they have stayed ever since except during the second world war. (Hurt 1979, Rubinstein 1969, Gosden 1976)

The question is not whether truancy is a problem after all but what sort of problem it is. There are obviously questions of equity, justice, wastage and conflicts over where responsibility for school attendance lies. (Shaw 1977) One writer estimated the number of days schooling lost as equivalent to half a day a week for every child in school in Britain (Tyerman 1968). That seems a waste of resources but nobody has been able to show that there are any negative educational or occupational consequences to poor school attendance. Even recent research does not show ex-truants as having a harder time finding employment than good attenders. (Gray et al. 1983)

Poor attendance undoubtedly goes with low social class, poorer schools and, I shall argue, gender; which means that on the whole ex-truants will not lead the easiest of lives but it is difficult to tie any specific outcome to bad school attendance. Nevertheless there is a widespread belief that one sure consequence of truancy is a higher probability of delinquency. This fear of delinquency has suffused and distorted the discussion of truancy and non-attendance since the Gluecks tried scientifically to show such a connection (Glueck & Glueck 1954) and is based on the implicit assumption that the archetypal truant is a boy. Whatever the evidence (see May 1975, Pratt 1983, Tennent 1976, Farrington 1981, Power 1972) for the relationship between truancy and delinquency, it demonstrates a concern almost exclusively with boys.

As in so many other areas gender has not been considered very important until quite recently. Thus although it was occasionally noticed that girls had rates as high or higher than boys this was not discussed. (Holly 1966, Rutter 1970, Reid 1985) Although gender is beginning to appear in truancy studies (Gray et al. 1983) it is clear that part of the reason little headway has been made in analysing truancy stems from the hitherto common error of ignoring gender as a fundamental feature. It would be foolish to claim that it is the key to all understanding but, as so often happens, once gender comes properly into focus the whole picture changes.

As a topic truancy has sat uncomfortably on the fence between the sociological fields of education and deviance. Research in the area has suffered from a male bias, stemming probably from its proximity to criminology, abstracted empiricism, a blindness to the idea of normality and to that other, related, affliction noted and described by C. Wright Mills as 'the professional ideology of social pathologists.' (Mills 1943) Not seeing the wood for the trees meant no general or theoretical framework into which the 'problem' of truancy could be fitted.

At the broadest level the basic idea of social structure has been missing almost as much as the idea of gender. The individualistic tendency to view truancy as a sign of pathology in the child, the family, the neighbourhood or the school is myopic and has obscured sight of structural features (for a review of literature in these terms see Brown 1983). However once structural features, including gender, are recognised it is easier to see how they provide central axes around which the meanings of non-attendance or truancy and the attempts to deal with it are organised. Moreover it becomes possible to link the sexual divisions visible in the pattern of non-attendance to sexual divisions in the experience of schooling generally. Girls' absence from school, however it is finally classified, is the result of over-conformity and the double standards regulating girls' and boys' behaviour rather than non-conformity.

Of course the situation is complex. As a variable gender is not always stable and attempts to measure its effects are fraught. It is closely interwoven with age and class and with the particular school. Some schools have distinctly better rates of school attendance irrespective of their overall class composition or neighbourhood location (Galloway 1976, Galloway et al. 1985) In other schools gender seems to have a less firm hold over the behaviour patterns of pupils and efforts to combat stereotyping have been noticeably more successful, even though the staff there have not been especially progressive. (Pratt 1984)

When trying to incorporate a number of factors such as age, sex, class and school into a statistical explanation based on the demonstration of associations derived from the analysis of variance it is hard to show the simple effect of any single factor. Although sex is easily swamped by the effects of both age and the school attended and may seem to explain only a minor proportion of the variance, it may nevertheless still exert a strong influence, albeit one that has become overlaid.

In fact the way that gender operates may be compared to a residual rule, visible only in breach and then only under certain conditions (Scheff 1966). Such processes are less amenable to statistical representation and require a different approach. Thus in the research reported an overall and schematic picture of school attendance in two schools is supplemented with an account of

the categorisation of truancy, in particular by the Education Welfare Service. It suggests that there is indeed a relationship between the sexual divisions visible in the shape and rates of school absencies and the professional practises of the Education Welfare Service.

Located in a southern English town the pair of schools were neighbouring and chosen to emphasise differences in truancy rates. One school suffered from worse buildings, a recent amalgamation, a split site, a change of head following a period of prolonged sickness and, not surprisingly, a worse reputation and truancy rate. The other had been built more recently, enjoyed a more settled history and although, on a formal basis, both schools drew from a population of the same social class most local residents would sense that this school and its immediate environment was a shade better off than the other.

A ten per cent sample of children marked as absent in one of two weeks in the autumn term were interviewed. The sample was weighted according to the length of the absence. As the most common absence was half a day, proportionally more short term and fewer long term absentees were interviewed. This produced the first noticeable sex difference. Of the 122 children interviewed there were 66 girls and 56 boys. In one school the balance was 45/37 and in the other 21/19. Moreover girls were away more frequently than boys, a difference which was statistically significant. A similar difference in terms of the total amount of time spent away from school was visible and went in the same direction, with girls being away more than boys, but this difference was not statistically significant.

In neither school was it plausible to regard non-attenders as pathological in some way or other and it is perhaps worth noticing that in the school with the higher rate of non-attendance over half of the pupils were absent during each of the weeks. All research into truancy has been best by the problem of definition. (see Gray 1983, Hersov and Berg 1980, The Pack Report 1977, Hersov and Berg 1980, Pratt 1983, Reid 1985). Length of absence, cause and perceived responsibility combine to produce widely differing definitions which make data collection and comparisons hazardous. Much of the ground for maintaining distinctions and such separate categories as 'school refuser' or 'school phobic' as well as 'truant' and 'non-attender' comes from a professional need to maintain credibility and a sphere of influence. Knocking the experts is a cheap and cheerful pastime but Box's question (1977) of 'where have all the naughty children gone?' is still worth asking about truancy.

The short answer is that in general they are girls and have gone home, where they stay because of double standards embodied in a series of established and bureaucratised conventions for making a pretty awesome workload look manageable. It is virtually impossible for the Educational Welfare Service to keep to the letter of the law and investigate every unaccounted for absence. Even ten years ago the average number of children in the schools for which an Educational Welfare Officer was responsible was 3,400 (Macmillan 1977). If 10% of children are absent in any one day and even if most of the absences are regarded as acceptable with only 1-2% as 'real truancy' there would still be 34-68 children to follow. It would require remarkable powers of perception to be able to tell from a glance at the school registers what was truancy and what was something else. Yet the Educational Welfare Officers have to sort out absences somehow.

Educational Welfare Officers are, in the main, over 45, untrained, male and often ex-police. They have little to go on except their own judgements and this, not surprisingly, leads them to concentrate on a small number of children who they think they will succeed with or who, if they do not try, might get up to something terrible or delinquent. Thus as a matter of administrative convenience and self-justification most Educational Welfare Officers attempt to distinguish between truancy and non-attendance. For example

"Well a truant, I suppose is for some reason a child who won't attend school. A non-attender is a child who perhaps for a reason is away from school for short periods, or well - or even isolated half days - although isolated half days can become truancy. Perhaps the other way round. A truant is a non-attender who has no reason or specific idea that he doesn't want to go to school - not very clear, not very clear at all."

The distinction is hard to make and the instruction issued by the Local Education Authority to follow up 'any child that is persistently truanting for as little as one day in the week' is well nigh impossible. Thus the category of non-attender as it is used covers not only sickness, permitted holidays and religious observance it also includes a covert form of sexual discrimination. Non-attender is a more complicated though less morally loaded category than truant. Truancy is not excusable, non-attendance is. In one publication the non-attendance of very young children was described as 'irregular', of slightly older children as 'poor' whilst adolescents were termed 'truants'. (Family Service Units Lowe 1977) The length of absence only partly determines whether an absence will be regarded as a case of truancy; just as age increases the degree of perceived responsibility so, it seems, does gender.

As Educational Welfare Officers cannot follow up all the cases of absence they have to make some hard decisions. Through a sense of urgency and their fear of delinquency they are led to focus on boys stereotyped as truants and to ignore girls stereotyped as non-attenders. Thus the Education Welfare Officer quoted earlier

"Well if you use the word truancy - no - there are no circumstances. It is an offence"

"O.K. Are there any circumstances in which non-attendance is justified?"

"Yes"

"What are they?"

"Well you know broadly speaking non-attendance covers everything else except truancy. The first one to come to mind is sickness. Sickness covers a multitude of sins. I suppose you can say the next one is family commitment. Now you have got to be careful when you say this because it is not allowable under the law. But you get a family - the eldest of which is 14 or 15. Suddenly the father is rushed to hospital with appendicitis or something. Now this is immediate action. What is the logical thing to happen but the eldest girl stays at home to look after the children. Now this cannot really be allowed although it is allowed. You know under the circumstances what they try to do is - try to get a bit of work home to the child so that she can do a bit of work - or he can do a bit of work... You have got to bend the rules to allow that eldest child who can take up the reins of the family ... go to school late, come home early, do the shopping after school, this sort of thing."

It is the category of non-attendance that provides the cover for girls absence's from school. The Educational Welfare Officers may indeed value girls' education less than boys' but there was no direct evidence of that and the officer quoted above is, after all, only talking hypothetically although in doing so he is displaying some common stereotypes. The immediate reason girls are away from school more frequently is that as their absence occasions less response they are under less pressure to return.

No doubt the stereotypes of girls being safely at home is linked in turn to stereotypes of female delinquency. A common explanation of the lower rates of female delinquency stresses the 'victimless' nature of the crimes and the lack of opportunities for crime afforded by 'home' in the first place. In consequence both 'explanations' provide a rationale for intervening less often and less dramatically in both criminal and educational contexts.

The label non-attender is milder, is applied to girls more often and, as a result less official action follows. Strangely, for an extremely bureaucratized occupation no record of the Educational Welfare Officers' visits could be found and thus no way of proving that they visited boys more than girls although on the basis of self reports boys recalled being visited twice as often as girls.

This fits in with the initially surprising finding that girls were absent more often than boys: a result which was most striking in the so-called good school. (See Table 1) Nevertheless using data from Scottish schools Gray (1983) seemed to find the opposite namely that boys were away more than girls. Although his methods are impeccable his data is restricted to the fourth year who are markedly different from other pupils and other years.

At a later stage the attendance patterns over the whole year for those interviewed were compared with those for a control group of children who were not interviewed. In the apparently more favoured school the higher incidence of girls' absences was even more visible amongst those randomly sampled control group. As the group was representative of the school as a whole this suggests a genuine and widespread sex difference. There was less difference between the girls and boys amongst the original group of children interviewed, but then they had been drawn precisely because of their absences. When girls from either group were compared with each other the differences were insignificant, but this was not so for boys. Superficially at least this suggested that there was something normal or rather ordinary about girls absences but perhaps something special about boys' absences. In the second school the same comparisons were repeated but the results were not so clear. Again, girls were away more often than boys but the boys in the original group were not as easily distinguishable from the boys in the control group as they had been in the first school. The lack of a significant result can be attributed to the high variability in the number of absences as compared to the first school. When the data were arranged according to the total amount of time missed from school the patterns became less clear, although in the second school girls from the original sample missed, on average, even more schooling than the already high average for girls in that school. (See Table 2.)

Overall the effect of combining data from both of the schools was to swamp the clear result of the first school with the contradictory and less clear results from the second school which also happened to be larger.

Still, the simplest way of summarising the results is to take as a point of reference a second year boy at the 'better' school. He could be expected to be absent twice a term. His absences would increase as he went through the school. In the third year he would be away four times a term, this would drop in the fourth year to just over three times and rise again in the fifth year. Girls showed the same pattern but start 0.52 higher. Thus a girl in the first school would be away three times a term in the second year and six times a term in the third year. In the second school the patterns remain but the figures start 2.2. higher, (see Fig.1).

Undoubtedly there is a complex interaction between gender and age which may be enhanced by attending a particular school. At one stage we were surprised to find that gender was the least significant factor in explaining the patterns of absence for the control group - even though it was still significant at the 1% level. Age, or rather the year at school, seemed to be far more influential, indeed four times as much as gender. However, if one remembers that girls established their patterns of absence a year or two before boys it is possible that much of the effect of gender is subsumed under age soon after entering secondary school, as a result of what used to be called the greater 'maturity' or 'precocity' of girls.

The fourth year is a crunch point and has a complicated effect on the patterns of non-attendance and their interpretation. Schools and pupils make one last effort. New options are invented which possibly disguise absence by legitimating out of school activity such as 'Education for Leisure' or 'Community Service'. Exam preparation is in full swing and the rationale for attending school seems more real and immediate. At this point the patterns for boys' and girls' attendance both converge and improve. Gender seems to lose what explanatory power it had but I suspect that the more appropriate conclusion to draw is not the insignificance of gender but rather its volatility or sensitivity within the social structure. Something of this is shown in another study of school absenteeism, educational and occupational aspirations conducted in Francophone Montreal (Crespo 1985). There gender produced results which were also significant but variable.

In recent feminist writing there has been much discussion of the hidden curriculum in schools and of how working class culture and restricted educational opportunities converge to precipitate young girls into early adulthood (McRobbie and Nava 1984; Griffin 1985). This was undoubtedly happening in both schools but the process seemed to be accelerated in the second school. For example this child liked going to school some days but not others. Her mother coaxed her by offering her the chance of doing cooking when she came home as a carrot. She knew that her mother was keen for her to go to school and feared for her job - prospects if she did not.

"Do you think there are any good reasons for not going to school".

"No, there are only a few, that is, not being well, and unless your mother is out or some in your family you have got to look after. I had to one day because my mum was ever so ill and my sister went to school in the morning, that is when I went to Elm Grove, my sister went before me. My brother had gone on so I had to stay home with her."

"Was it her decision or your decision?"



"No, well I said I'll stay at home then. She said you'd better go to school. I said I'll stay and look after you, so she said alright and I got her a pillow down with a blanket and she laid on the settee and I made her hot drinks."

This child was good, cooperative and thought schooling was important. She spoke of the girl round the corner who stayed off school and would not get a job "She'll be one of the poor ones who has to live in a slum". She stayed at home simply because of her culture which stressed caring and providing personal services within the family for women and girls.

The next girl had been away rather a lot, and both she and her mother were simply more thoroughly tied into the routines of domestic life than to anything else.

"Can you remember what you did?"

"Well, I got up at 8.30, went down to the rent office, saw the bloke down there - then she bought some wool, er, then went down the post office, got a book out. Then got some shopping, went up my sisters, I took the kids out came back about 1.10, went down the town, got some more shopping; then we went home."

"And that was the day your mother decided to keep you at home?"

"I'm off every Tuesday."

"You're off every Tuesday?"

"Yes, she likes me, I get the pensicr and shopping."

"You do that every Tuesday and she doesn't mind that?"

"No"

"Is it that your mum thinks one day a week off is enough, you'd better go the rest?"

"Yes, she thinks it's alright as long as I'm in school."

"Why do you think she thinks that is is important to go to school, but not to go to classes?"

"Well, she thinks that if something happens to me and if I'm not in school they won't miss me or something like that. If I go to school and get my mark and then go out of school and then get run over or something... so she likes me to be at school because there is people about in school."

"Well, lets just recap. Last week you broke your finger, but the week before that you were in or not?"

"I weren't in Wednesday or Thursday."

"What about the week before?"

"Can't remember."

"In the last couple of weeks have you brought a note or anything?"

"Yes, brought one last week"

"That must have been about your finger was it? What did the note say?"

"Just that I didn't feel too well or had a headache or something".

"Was that note you wrote or your mum wrote?"

"A note I wrote."

Compare that to this boy:-

"Yes, I went up Race Hill and the school board came and they say 'why are you not in school?' and I say... then he calls me back and asks me my name and address, and me and my mate give a false name and address. Well, one thing, when you bunk off you're scared, but when you're allowed home you are away, you just hang around in your back garden, unless you have tonsillitis or something. But when you bunk off you've got to stay out. Because if you bunk off half way through the afternoon, it could thunder and that, and rain come down and you've got to find shelter quickly. You get soaking wet. That's why I don't bunk off."

Or, indeed to this boy who seemed to think that there was a critical point in the process of being missed.

"I don't think that for an afternoon it's not much you're missed, but a day and half a day, then you start getting missed. And then when it gets too far, say you've been away a couple of months and they have just forgotten about you."

"You think that?"

"Yes, that what I think. Yes, because this boy who we have wood-work with, this boy's been away for about a month, and they don't even call him out on the register even though he thinks he is here or he don't think he is here, they don't call him out on the register... He's not been in for the last month."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes because I saw him down the road the other day, and that, and talked to him and he had appendicitis and they had to stitch him up. I got him out there messing around and I split his stitches open and he's had to be sown up again and they will take the stitches out so that is why he has not been here. I told the teacher at first, so that is what he must think, so no one misses him, nobody asks."

Most children have some idea of what is likely to happen if they stay away. They think that the police, teachers, "school board" etc. will intervene, but they are not quite sure how. This fourteen year old boy said "Well, get into trouble, get detention, stay in... and you could be put in a home and you could be chucked out of school". Another fifteen year old boy put it thus: "You're made to come by your parents because if you don't come they're going to lose you".

money on you by the rates and that". Yet most children do not relate their own absences to the tales of consequences they recite. A twelve year old girl said:-

"The law say's you must go to school..."

"What do you think happens to people who don't go to school?"

"The school officer comes round to them if they stay off too long."

"How long do you think?"

"Think it's about two or three weeks."

"And what happens then?"

"Think they get done by the truant officer and then get taken to court."

"What do you mean 'done by the truant officer?' What can a truant officer do?"

"Well, tell them to come to school, and if they do it again, send them to court."

"What would they do then?"

"Make sure they did go to school or send the teacher to them."

"Would that be a teacher from this school or another teacher."

"Another teacher."

Lastly, another twelve year old girl:

"When you were in the juniors and you didn't come to school, what did your mum think about that?"

"Well, she says you've got to go to school. She didn't like it very much."

"What actually happened? Did anyone come and visit you?"

"No, I used to get a letter saying I got to go to school."

"And what did you do about it?"

"I used to take no notice of them."

"What did your mother say?"

"She say's you're going to be put in a home. You got to go to school. I says I don't care, in fact I used to say I'd rather go into a home than go to school."

"What about your dad?"

"Well my dad, he didn't used to say much, but he didn't like it, 'cause he was never there in the morning so there was never much he could do about it."

For most children it is parents not EWOs or the threat of court action which keeps children in school, and mothers seemed to be especially critical. However, children vary in how they perceive parental pressure. One rather odd result which suggests the influence of gender on perception and, ultimately, on patterns of attendance came from asking children if their mothers worked full-time, part-time or at all. Fifty-one percent of children claimed that their mothers worked, which is in line with national figures for that period: but more boys reported their mothers working part time than girls, who were more likely to report their mothers working full-time. It is hard to believe that the mothers of sons really did take part-time work more often than the mothers of daughters, thus a more plausible conclusion is that the children had already developed gender specific ways of valuing work and that, paradoxically, a low opinion of women's work may have inhibited boys from truanting if they believed their mothers to be at home. This possibility is at least reinforced by research showing a connection between maternal employment and sex role perception more generally (Robb & Raven 1981).

Throughout the district there was a tacit understanding between those who share responsibility for school attendance to tolerate a degree of truancy. Schools cannot be easily rid of difficult pupils and transfers cannot, or are not, widely used. This accommodation is especially visible in the excuses offered and accepted and in the work strategies used by Educational Welfare Officers.

Excuses are conventional rather than truthful. They function to maintain a relationship or social equilibrium and, insofar as they are a courtesy, they may be seen as the remnants of a different and competing moral order. Thus there are rules for interpreting them. A deputy head declared:

"As feretting isn't a reasonable excuse, one thinks it is the real one... why do we have to think, why think things up like that?"  
 "...You see with half of these they may have told you we went shopping, we went feretting, I was got up late. The chances are we get a note written by mum or dad saying he is ill in bed... You see, although these are no surprise to us, we know these are the reasons, we never get the reasons, we get 'Was ill', 'bad a headache', 'had flu', 'was under the doctor' and that's it.

Opportunities to punish either absence or lying about absence are rather limited, and although telling a lie often alters the balance of power (Bok 1979), in nearly all these cases there is nothing to be gained. Nevertheless, a suspicion that something might be gained seems to underlie the differential treatment of boys and girls. Boys, if they are thought to be up to no good, or working illegally, are seen as gaining something, whereas girls are seen to neither gain from their absences, if all they are doing is staying at home being little mothers, nor to lose so much from missing school. Again somewhat surprisingly boys offered medical or quasi medical excuses more often than girls. Roughly, and using self-reports, 55 percent of boys connected their absences to sickness and 42 percent of girls. They might be right. The General Household Survey, shows that doctors are consulted more for boys over the age of five than girls, and boys in the ten to sixteen age range have a higher rate of receiving medical care. But if boys absences are more closely scrutinised than girls, then perhaps they need more cast iron excuses. The importance of claiming sickness is that it removes responsibility and suggests that one has nothing to gain. Girls apparently are simply not so bothered. They are less firmly tied to schools and to schooling. However, the main point about excuses is that what is plausible is more pertinent than what is true.

It has been argued about truancy generally that 'the rejection is mutual' between pupils and schools, although truants seem to be people with a relatively low tolerance of unpleasant experiences either at school or work. (Gray 1983). If this is applied to a perceived sex difference it need not mean that girls are feeble but just that they are tied to schooling in a different way. A relevant comparison might be with women's behaviour in industrial disputes where women were more willing than men to take action because of their different relationship to the workplace (Hunt 1980).

The problem for the Educational Welfare Officer, after simply sighting the child, is to guess which one will be a long-term problem. If eventually, he wants to take a child to court for non-attendance, he must start and keep an attendance record showing persistent absence and the failure of all efforts to get the child back to school. But if he starts off being sympathetic to the child or family, he loses the chance of showing a really lengthy career of truancy. The final year of school is too late to start a record and too late for any court action to be effective. If non-attendance is tolerated more than truancy, it is easy to see how girls slip through this rather inefficient net.

None of this is new. Social historians have documented how the school board men used family poverty as grounds for being more tolerant of girl's absences than of boys' (Davin 1974). And in 1904 a scheme was mooted to formalise this by proposing to allow school managers to grant girls aged twelve or thirteen leave of absence to help their mothers with housework. (Dyhouse 1981). (1) And Marx's daughter Eleanor, when asked in a parlour game "What was the vice that she found most excusable?" not only answered "Playing truant" but as she qualified all her answers by gender, made it plain that this applied especially to girls. (Kapp 1972)

(1) Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deprivation 1904 vol.II, paras 2742-5. This was relayed to me by Carol Dyhouse who further pointed out that in the 1900's the issue of non-attendance divided feminists on familiar lines. Socialist feminists found their sympathy for the position of working class women and respect for their culture which sanctioned keeping girls at home to help overriding, whilst in the 1870s and 80's the Women's Educational Union was pressing for equal enforcement of school attendance on the grounds that girls must get their fair share of education.

Table 1 School 1: Averages by group per 1/2 term  
Absences

	females	males	
Overall	2.635	1.95	Significant at 5% level
Sample	2.71	2.36	x
Control	2.54	1.54	Significant at 5% level

Table 2 School 2: Averages by group per 1/2 term absences

	females	males	
Overall	4.48	4.13	x
Sample	4.92	4.42	x absences
Control	4.03	3.85	x

Brief comparison of schools

Absences and sessions absent are far higher at School 2

Overall combined totals

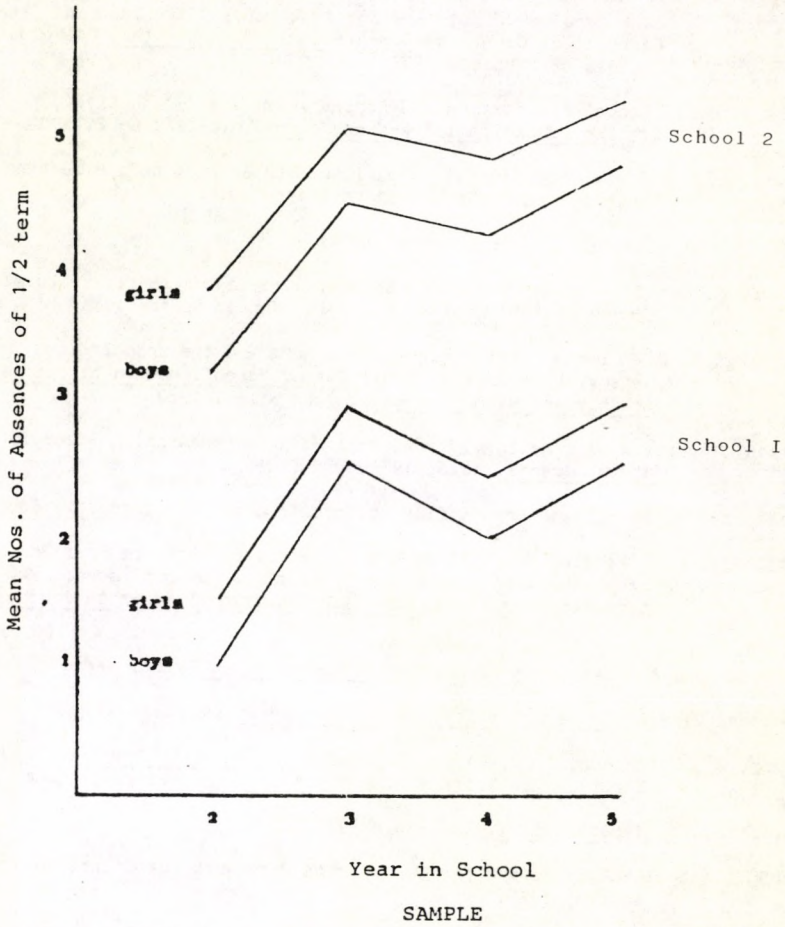
Boys

	Mean ses- sions missed	Mean absences	(per 1/2 term)
School 1	7.82	1.95	
School 2	15.48	4.13	

Girls

	Mean sessions	Mean Absences	(per 1/2 term)
School 1	9.98	2.625	
School 2	18.15	4.48	

Figure I



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Girls in Conflict with the School

by

Kirsten Reisby

I wish to present to you some results from and reflections over a qualitative study called School-life and Girlhood, in Danish we call it "Skoleliv-Pigelin" (School-life--Girl-life). The starting points for the project were two different types of research results.

In Denmark the group of young people who get neither occasional training nor educational qualifications for a job is called the residual group. A number of Danish sociological studies have shown that girls dominate this residual group. I will mention one, a longitudinal study which followed a whole year group (2,719 pupils) leaving school in 1976-77 in Aarhus, the second largest town in Denmark (Togeby, 1981). 25% of those studied in the Aarhus investigation were in the residual group, and 3/4 of these were girls. Generally speaking, both boys and girls in the residual group came from a low status milieu. But the Aarhus investigation revealed that girls are more influenced than boys by social events in their family (divorce, illness and/or employment). Furthermore, girls in the residual group had a more negative relationship with schooling than the boys, for instance disliking the school more, or having poor results in intelligence tests. (1)

The other type of investigation which we built on is educational-psychological research on sex differentiated socialization in school. Wernersson (1977) carried out a secondary analysis of American and Swedish research results about boys and girls in school.

She discusses the many and to a certain extent contradictory results. On the face of it, boys are the group which fares worst in school with respect to all forms of segregation arrangements (residual or special education, alternative classes, and so on). (2) Girls generally have success in school; they have better marks, they are described in positive terms by their teachers and so on. None the less the performance of girls seems to develop in a negative direction during the school years whereas boys show a more positive trend. Some of the reasons could be that teachers interact more with boys they are more interested in boys as people and give them more personal attention and more help. At the same time the subjects taught to the older children which are suitable for girls, in traditional terms, are fewer than those suitable for boys. Wernersson argues that in this regard the male role is extended (1977, p. 269) (3).

On the basis of these research results we formed the hypotheses:

- that school reinforces sex socialization;

- that girls do not get any help in finding their identity; they get no help in bringing to comprehension the fact of male domination in human relationships; they get no help in building up a sense of their own self-worth as females;

- and that those girls who are at risk in respect of success criteria such as getting further education or job training get no help from the school in their final school years.

In our project we were specially interested in these 'at risk' girls.

### Project Data

The at risk group of girls were to be found among girls from low status families. We had assumed that we would find three different types of behaviour in the classroom: girls who were active, who followed the lessons, reacted to the teacher's questions, and who took initiatives; girls who were quiet or silent, sitting following the lesson answering when questioned but seldom taking the initiative to do anything; and girls who were deviant and rejecting, who seldom followed the lesson, who often engaged in non-instructional activities such as whispering to each other, writing letters and so on. The girls in this group would form an alternative focus of interest (a sub-publicity in Habermas' sense) running parallel to the teacher directed interest of the whole class, the fully public activity. Our intention was if possible to follow two active, two silent, and two deviant/rejecting girls in the class and use them as key people for observation. I will revert to this, but first a little bit more with regard to the questions we wanted to answer. We wanted to find out what the interaction in the classroom is like between teacher and girls, between teacher and boys, between girls mutually and between girls and boys.

What expectations do girls have of the school ?

How do they understand their own situation in relation to the school ?

How do they understand their relations to girlfriends, to other girls, and to the boys in the class ?

What expectations do they have of life after school (work, family, adventures) ?

What changes will take place during the 18 months in school when the girls are between the ages of 14 and 16 ?

And finally: is it possible to establish an education which is more relevant for girls and, especially, is it possible to support the threatened girls by means of supplementary or different education ?

Our data were tape-recordings of lessons, daybook-notes, interviews with pupils and teachers covering 18 months and informal talks with people in the school and teachers and pupils. We did not have the chance to interview parents, and we did not have permission to question the pupils about their family life/private life.

We chose a school situated in the suburbs of Aarhus in a settlement of concrete apartment houses, and we chose one class at the 8th grade level. We worked together with three teachers, one female and two males. Being a case-study the project School-life and Girlhood does not yield a cross section of data about girls' lives in school. Being a qualitative study it presents concrete coherent contributions to an understanding of some girls' daily-life in school and their own feelings about and understanding of themselves and their conditions of schooling. Firstly, the case-study gives specific subject-related knowledge. But secondly: because the study deals with lower class girls in a power system, which as its functions has to reproduce the dominant ideology of the society, it can be supposed that some of the identified conflicts and traits in the meaning-structure of the girls' understanding of themselves and the society are typical. The results of the qualitative research can be used to generate new research. The overwhelming problem of a qualitative study is to fulfill the demand of validity. The 'truth' can only be decided through argument in a discursive dialogue. The conditions for such a dialogue are that the interpretation process and theoretical frames of reference are visible. These conditions have been met in this study.

#### Impressions of Girls in Conflict with the School

There is a break. One corner of the classroom is occupied by six girls, well-shaped girls in close-fitting pants and large sweaters, tight around the bosom. Some of them are sitting, some of them lying in the broad window frame, and the rest are using the tables. Heads and arms are tangled up, loud screams, laughter and loving rough words penetrate through the air. Soon a head appears, soon a leg is fighting its way out. The bell is ringing, other pupils come in, the teacher is arriving. Slowly, a little demonstratively, the bunch of girls extricate themselves. With a great deal of movement, laughter, and loud remarks the girls find their chairs. On their way a boy gets a knock on his head, another gets a push, a pencil case is being pinched. Now each of them is sitting on her chair glancing at each other, a glance at the teacher, before one of them with a loud sigh lays down across the table. The lesson can begin.

Well developed young women with an enormous appetite for life sit at the school desks with their heads full of thoughts, of boys, of discothèques, dresses, music, everything that makes life worth living. We know such girls, and it is easy enough to understand the conflict/clash between the demands of school, mediated by teachers, and the needs and interests of girls like these.

In the next section of this paper, I want to present a simple case story of a 'deviant' girl, called Sanne. Next I will present an analysis of resistance and counteractions used by the groups of deviant girls in their interactions with the teachers; and, in the final section, I discuss possible consequences for

the lives of these girls, in the light of their ever being independent women.

### Sanne

Sanne is chosen as typical of the girls we observed with deviant school behaviour. We described Sanne in the daybook during the first days of our observation as a fair-haired rather chubby girl. From one moment to the next she would change from tired resignation to giggling, shouting, and laughing. Sanne has difficulties in reading but not in maths. She has received special education in reading and private lessons. There has been a conflict between her parents and the school about this problem. Sanne does not like school but at the same time she wants to learn something. Like the other girls Sanne is convinced that school knowledge and the techniques of reading, spelling, and maths are necessary for her career. However, she likes handcrafts best, which in that respect are unimportant. For her own part, friendship is the most important thing about school. She says she wants more impressive teachers, but at the same time she wants the right to express her own opinion. In her own view she is a 'trouble maker', a term used by the girls. Her ideal is to be a person who masters something and who will achieve something showing other people what she is capable of and that she can manage her own life. Now in the middle of the 8th grade, she has for the last 3 years had a girlfriend, one of the girls we characterized and studied as a silent girl. The two girls' descriptions of their friendship at its best have all the ideal traits we know from women's experiences: openness, fidelity, trust and mutual and equal value. They have handled conflicts too, in this friendship. But just at the time of the first interview they were separating. Sanne was becoming a steady member of the deviant group, which not only has a fellowship in school but more and more often gets together in the evenings and at the weekends as well. In the 9th year of schooling this group made contact with a group of boys. In the girls' opinion life has now begun. One of the girls describes its force of attraction: "It is a hard and more brutal sort of life". The boys are unemployed, they get money from the council, they sleep in the daytime, and in the evenings they are all together drinking in their homes, sometimes having sex, roaming the streets, going to the cinema, etc. Sometimes the boys want action, they attack someone at the disco or provoke a shopkeeper to fight. On one occasion the girls were brought to the police station together with the boys, but they had only watched the fight, so they were let out when they were fetched by their parents.

But Sanne has a problem: her boyfriend is violent and tough with her. The other girls have tried to help Sanne out of the relationship but at the same time they make excuses for him. He has no job, he is weak, just as the other boys are. Like the other boys it is as if he has to take revenge in some way or another. Because of this, he and the others fight when they are drunk. As a result sometimes innocent people have to suffer, say the girls.

At the end of her comprehensive schooling Sanne gets only bad marks, and at the same time she is depressed because her boyfriend has rejected her.

Sanne's life expectations change over the years; she wants to have a job, she wants to travel and have an exciting life. She says she won't have children if at all possible, she has learned from her mother who had them at an early age. But she is uncertain about the kind of work she can actually get: perhaps one year in England as an au-pair girl or learning EDB (to use data processing machines). She is worried about not getting a job, or about ending up working as a charwoman. In the 9th grade Sanne still wants to become an EDB-assistant. In a job-training week arranged by the school she chose to be a shop assistant in a dress shop for young people; but by the end of the 9th grade she has changed her mind. Now she wants to become a police-woman or a hairdresser. She thinks she has a chance of getting the last-mentioned job because her father's new partner has a hairdressing salon. If she has a family she plans to enrol the children in a day nursery if possible, while she either works full time or takes a part-time job.

We can describe and explain the problems of Sanne in this way. Sanne is deviant in her school-behaviour. As for the other pupils her interpretation of the aim of the school is--what we call--instrumental: schooling is only useful in relation to job training or further education--not in any way in relation to personal development and private life. Her understanding of herself as a pupil is that she is a trouble-maker. The contradiction between her deviant school-behaviour and her instrumental interpretation of the aim of schooling is transformed in an ambivalent resistance to school strategy. She is anxious about her dequalification, to which she in her own opinion contributes through her school behaviour, but she can alter this behaviour only for short periods. Her resistance to the teachers is whole-hearted, but her resistance to the teaching process is ambivalent. Her plans for the future reflect this conflict. She wants occupational training in order to manage her own life--at the same time she fears getting unskilled work.

We conclude that the school life of Sanne objectively as well as in her own understanding places her in the risk group. She may in the future be one of the young women of the residual group, who gets neither vocational training nor educational qualifications. But furthermore we suppose that she is threatened in her feminine gender development. Her resistance strategy is ambivalent. Her self-confidence is low and she is extremely subordinate to her boy-friend, both physically and psychically. In our understanding the optimal personality strategy for women is to tackle the basic contradiction of feminine sex-specific development of personality: if the girl has to maintain her feeling of self-confidence she cannot fully recognize that she physically and socially belongs to a second class category of mankind, yet on the other hand if she wants to maintain and develop her understanding of reality she has to recognize this (Ethelberg, 1983). Sanne has problems in handling this conflict. She considers herself really inferior as

a pupil in school and she subordinates herself in relation to male dominance. In spite of her wish to manage her own life--to be a self-confident person--it was not possible during her last school year for either the teachers or the researchers to support her in developing self-confidence and facing reality (the dominance of the male sex) without renouncing the self-confidence.

### School strategies of Deviant Girls

The group of deviant girls appeared to share a subculture. They are, from a middle class point of view, provocatively dressed; they are heavily made-up; their movements are violent; their verbal interaction is tough. Two of them follow fashion intensively; all the others think of themselves as being normal girls.

At the same time as the teachers disagree with the norms and behaviour of the 'deviant girl' group, the girls too distance themselves from the teachers, especially the one woman teacher. They think that she dresses like a hippie. As one of the girls said in an interview: "She is as she is, and we are as we are and this is why things happen".

At the sociological level the interaction in the classroom can be looked upon as a social class struggle. But we choose another frame of reference in order to analyse the deviant strategies of the girls. A school is a power system; teachers and pupils have different positions in this system. The teachers' position represents power; the pupils' position represents that of the powerless. The system relationship is that of superior/subordinate. Almost all the disciplinary problems arise from this relationship. However, even in a power structure every person is not required to exercise power all the time; there is the possibility of by-passing one's position and acting instead as a responsible democratic human being. In the school we observed both teachers and pupils acted both as agents for their positions in the power hierarchy as well as individual people. They moved almost unconsciously between the different "roles" and used these changes as a way of influencing the interaction. We have analysed the girls' counter-actions in the light of such a system theory.

We distinguished between four types of verbal resistance (although these are not exhaustive):-

1. attempts to destroy the teacher's agenda;
2. attempts to destroy the teacher's role position;
3. open protests;
4. attempts to ignore the instruction.

The first type, attempts to destroy the teacher's agenda, can be described as situations where pupils tried to prevent or devalue the teacher's steering of the lesson. This strategy can be used when the teachers introduce boring tasks or begin disciplinary lectures. For example on one occasion the teacher Nina accused the girls in our deviant group of not paying



attention and of disturbing some of her lessons. After listing some of the ways they had disturbed the current lesson she said:

"Your inattention is not only a problem for you".  
Helle: "It is a class problem".  
Jette laughs.  
Nina: "Yes".  
Stina: (ironically) "It is a collective problem".

Nina herself only used the word "problem" here, but from previous class discussions they knew that Nina would go further and name the problem as a class or a collective problem, and by anticipating her vocabulary they hoped to devalue her. They did not really succeed; but they did demonstrate that they had seen through Nina's way of tackling a problem and that they were still a group who did not subordinate themselves.

But this situation could be understood in another way as well. The girls reacted against Nina because they felt that she had transgressed her role as a teacher. She was moralizing on the basis of her personal norms for togetherness. In interviews they expressed contempt for Nina's and other teachers' tendencies to be moralizing. "She is so pedagogical", they say. So in this instance what they were doing could be interpreted as trying to denigrate her and so bring her back on track to act in her role as a teacher, as a representative of the school system.

The second, activity, attempts to destroy the teachers' role position is perhaps more specific to girls than the first one, which boys do too. Sometimes the girls ignored the structural role of the teacher and acted instead as if their relationship was a personal one. For example, one day Nina suggested separating the girls in our deviant group from each other in order to calm down the class.

Jette: "We don't want to be separated".  
Helle: "I would prefer to get a divorce !"  
The group laughs.  
Nina repeats her own suggestion adding that they may sit together two and two.  
Ulla: "Forget it, Nina".  
Nina: "Forget what, Ulla ?"  
Ulla: "Forget what you have just said".

The same strategy was used on Joergen, one of the male teachers. He was angry and spoke very sharply to Stine.

Ulla said: "Don't work yourself up, Joergen". (Joergen got more angry !)

In these two examples the girls are using the opposite strategy to strategy 1, i.e. they try to personalize the teacher's role and undermine it in this way. Both of the teachers were trying to use the power of their position to discipline the girls; the girls tried to get a more personal interaction by denying or undermining the formal role of the teacher. "Forget it, Nina", can be looked upon as a personal appeal for human understanding. "Don't work yourself up", can be

seen as an adult's comment, not to the content of Joergen's anger, but to his way of behaving. The girls don't try to argue; rather they try to get the teachers to drop the whole thing and accept the possibility of continuing the lesson.

It is very seldom that the girls make an open protest, or directly refuse to follow an order. More usually they protest by claiming justice. When Nina reprimands one girl, another girl may just at the same moment point out that some others also have to be reprimanded, as the following example shows.

Merete and Helle are whispering together across the classroom.

Nina: "Please Helle, will you stop your remarks across ..."

Helle: "Yes".

Ulla: "Why don't you say anything to Merete ? (one of the active girls)".

Nina: (to Merete) "Ok, will you stop it please".

In a history lesson, Joergen has disciplined the group of deviant girls several times. Suddenly he stops teaching and says, raising his voice:

Joergen: "Listen Sanne, I find it is too much to repeat it to you once more. You would do better to leave the room. It is a waste of time coming here".

Sanne: "It is the first time today you have asked me to be quiet".

Joergen: "It is the first time I have asked you, but it is not the first time I have asked you as a group".

Sanne: "So you don't have to tell me".

Often it is necessary for Nina to follow up the remark. The girls are hypersensitive to unfairness/injustice. As a powerless group they claim the rules should be upheld. It is not a question of democracy, more perhaps a question of not allowing the superior to use the rules in a personal and impenetrable way.

The deviant behaviour we defined as a withdrawing from the lesson and using the time to do something else is of course only one way of ignoring the instruction. We also observed other ways. Six months before the final examination the 9th grade has to pass tests of their ability in maths, spelling and so on. The day after the tests the whole class was silent during Nina's lessons. They did not interact with her at all. After two lessons she broke down, asked for an explanation and gave the class half a lesson to find out what they wanted to do. She was given one explanation: the deviant group, backed up by the others, claimed that the mother tongue lessons for the rest of the year should be used for spelling and essays. They were sure that they had not passed their tests to their satisfaction, so now they wanted instruction in these subjects rather than using more time for topic-centered instruction. They had been confronted with a new aspect of the power system, the official demand for basic skills. Now they request the teacher as a representative of that system to take responsibility for their

learning. That they in fact passed the tests in accordance with their daily performances makes no difference to the actual point.

The deviant group did not in fact alter their behaviour for the rest of the school year. We found that they had picked up some of the contradictions of the school system itself. The most central for them was perhaps, that the school with the teachers as its agents, talked about and tried to find time for "democracy". But at the same time only subject-related performances were evaluated.

I have not argued that these types of counter-reactions are always specific to girls. But I did find that some traits are related to the female sex. Girls have a wide range of experience with social relationships, and many good experiences with girlfriends. They have taken a lot of time to understand each other and other people. They have spent time taking the perspective of the other. They know the weak points of others and they are used to working out strategies for non-violent fights. During their girlhood they have learned how to exclude or to be excluded from a group, to ignore or be ignored, to make alliances and to be outside of the alliances of other girls' friends. From their girlfriendships they know that they are stronger together than alone. They know by experience that they have the potential ability to influence power-based decisions and conditions, but at the same time they are convinced that they cannot alter things radically. In their counter-reactions they show that they really do understand the dual relationship of a system: the position system of superior/subordinate and the possibility of establishing personal relationships within it. They move between the two modes of relationship in their attempts to influence the interaction. They use their sense of justice offensively as a claim for equal rights in order to make rules and get the teachers to act in ways they can understand and therefore influence. They know and use non-violent strategies when they ignore the teachers, the agents of power. They know that the powerless can get power, if only for a short time. (4)

#### Discussions of the Perspectives of the Deviant Group of Girls

We took as our starting point sociological results showing that girls from lower social classes, from families with experience of many "bad" social events, who are nonconforming to the demands of the school are most at risk with regard to further education and occasional training. We will know more after having interviewed them once more next autumn (Autumn 1986) as to whether that turns out to be the situation for this group of girls. Our study has revealed some aspects of the life situation for a group of girls of 14 to 16. Let me repeat some points: during the year and a half of the study the group was reduced from six to five girls. The sixth girl changed her school strategy and ended up with an active style of school behaviour. Why? Because she was ambitious about her life and was convinced that some of the ways for fulfilling her plans for life involved using the qualifying possibilities of the school. The other five girls had the same understanding of the qualifying function of the school, but they were double-bound in the perception of their

own school failure. They felt that the teachers were responsible for their bad standards in the basic skills, but as trouble makers they too were personally responsible for their dequalification. They couldn't find a way out of this conflict, but it influenced their life expectations. They all wanted to get a job, if possible an exciting job, at least a job offering them enough money to live their own life. But they were unsure about the particular sort of job and knew very little about actual job requirements. During their final years at school, their interests were centered around life outside school work: girlfriends, and the group, clothes, hairstyles, their sexual attractiveness, the hard and exciting world of the boys and problems with their boyfriends. They felt they would like to continue with this sort of life that they had started, but they were ambivalent too. They knew that the boys had transgressed the limits of what is permitted, that they were on the threshold of a criminal life, and they found that it was time to pull back if they didn't want to follow in the footsteps of the boys. The girls hoped that they could stop while the going was good, but at the same time they knew it would be difficult.

It seemed to us that what made them most vulnerable was their short life perspectives and, reasonably enough, their low expectations of their own position on the labour market. They already prepared themselves for casual jobs, but perhaps not for the hard material conditions which may be the consequence of such a situation. In the longer term we believe that these girls are also at risk in another way. It is important for the girl to realize that her development is dependent on her own way of tackling the contradictory conditions of a woman's life: on the one hand she must develop feelings of self-confidence, and on the other hand she must be conscious of the fact that in the real world of Danish society her sex is secondary: the male is primary. From this point of view the deviant group was most, and doubly, at risk. They had not developed feelings of self-confidence and they had not realized that their fascination with their boyfriends was related to the reality of this society, in which males are 'superior' to the female sex.

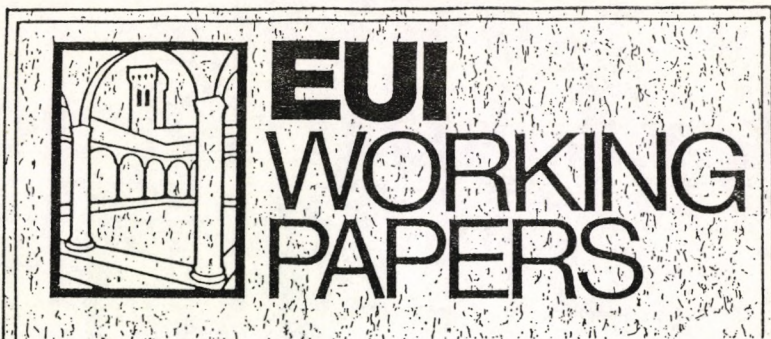
#### Notes

1. Another Danish study based on data from a year group of girls and boys, who were 14 years old in 1968, shows that the girls make up 60% of the occupational residual group. The author of one of the reports described the characteristics of this group in a similar way to Lise Togeby. It should be remembered that the percentage of youth unemployment was lower in the middle of the seventies. Bente Orum: Hvem blev restgruppe. En social karakteristik af restgruppen i en argang unge. Socialforskningsinstituttet (The Danish National Institute of Social Research). Meddelelse 34, Kobenhavn 1981.

2. We find the same picture in a Danish book on sex-differences in the school. Hans Hesselund: *Konstdiskriminering og skolen. - Der er piger og drenge, ikke blot born.* Kobenhavn, Gyldendal, 1980.
3. Many English investigations support Wernersson's results. I will only give some references here:  
Dale Spender's own articles in Spender and Sarah (eds.).  
Sue Sharpe's own results in her--in my opinion--classical book: *Just Like a Girl*, 1976.  
Michele Stanworth: *Gender and Schooling*, 1983.  
Furthermore some of the results from a Danish investigation printed after we had finished "School-life and Girlhood" ought to be mentioned. A detailed analysis of the interaction in the classroom showed that boys dominate the interaction quantitatively and that they also get more response and more positive responses from the teacher. The two researchers conclude that the way the girls are treated in school can be characterized as "systematic practice in inferiority" (p. 259). Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen and Kirsten Larsen: *Piger og drenge i klasseoffentligheden.* Pedagogisk Forskningsinstitut, Universitetet i Oslo, Rapport Nr. 2 1985.
4. For another and more comprehensive class and gender specific analysis of girls' resistance in classroom interaction see Lynn Davies in Stephen Walker and Lee Barton (eds.), 1983.

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