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**THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GIRLS
SPEECH TO THE FAWCETT SOCIETY: 8 MARCH 2004
DAVID BELL, HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS**

Introduction

Good Morning

I am delighted to be able to talk to such a distinguished audience on International Women's Day, not least in these impressive surroundings. I'm particularly pleased that this seminar has been organised in partnership with the Fawcett Society. Millicent Fawcett, as you will know, played a major part in gaining votes for women and was a tireless campaigner to improve women's rights. The Fawcett Society continues to campaign for women and men to be treated as equal partners in today's society. So, what more appropriate organisation can there be to host a seminar on girls' achievement?

In my speech today, I will be celebrating the substantial achievements of girls in the classroom and women in the workplace over recent years. I plan to draw from Ofsted's inspection evidence and other educational research to highlight the differences in the academic achievement of girls and boys at school.

It **is** a fact that girls do better than boys academically but that the success girls enjoy at school is all too often not mirrored later in life. In my speech this morning, I intend to look in more detail at this issue and make some proposals that aim to equip girls with the life-skills and self-confidence to fulfil their future potential in the workplace.

I will also highlight a number of issues associated with underachieving girls and the challenges that must be tackled if we are to ease the cycle of poverty and deprivation that young women face if they drop out of the education system.

Impressive achievements

Before I discuss these issues in more detail, I would like to spend a few moments, on International Women's Day, celebrating the considerable academic achievements of girls and young women in this country:

- girls make significantly more progress at school, with more girls than boys achieving five grades A* - C at GCSE level



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- girls outperform boys in Advanced courses with 44% of girls gaining the top A/B grades compared with 41% of boys
- more girls than boys enrol onto university-level courses; recent statistics show 53% of first class degrees were awarded to women and 48% of women gained an upper second degree compared with 40% of men.

It is encouraging that women increasingly take their rightful place in national and international politics, in business, the professions, organisational leadership and sport. For example, here in the Palace of Westminster we have the greatest number of female MPs ever, including of course Helen Jackson MP who is chairing today's event.

Twenty years ago, only 5% of MPs were women compared with 18% today, and women make up 24% of the current Cabinet. In wider society too, almost a third of secondary head teachers and almost a quarter of the civil service top management are now women. In neither case is it half, but it is slowly improving.

Behind the headlines

So, the statistics appear to show that girls are doing very well and that boys are the problem. But despite the early head-start that girls appear to have in the race of life, they do **not** seem to gain the golden prizes at the finishing line in terms of careers and salaries.

For the girls gaining the magic threshold of five "good" GCSEs, one might expect them to start their careers looking forward to a future full of pay, power and progress. Yet for many of these young women, their academic achievements do not translate into similar advantages in pay levels or status in later life.

Despite the Equal Pay Act, "equal pay for work of equal value", and the Sex Discrimination Act, there are still wide pay differences between the sexes. In 1999, women working full time earned 82% of the average hourly pay of men, and that dropped to 60% for part time working. Women earn, on average only 63% of male earnings. Overall, women continue to earn considerably less than men even with good qualifications. For example, male graduates earn 44% more than female graduates by the time they reach their 50s.

Whilst the issue of workplace equality is obviously far removed from Ofsted's remit within the education sector, I firmly believe that we must address some of the underlying issues in order to tackle future employment and career inequalities. I therefore intend to recommend to you today a number of proposals aimed at helping



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society shatter the “glass ceiling” of the workplaces of tomorrow by removing the “perspex panel” of peer pressure today.

Subject and career choices

Some of the current differences in employment and pay can be explained by career choices which remain strongly gender biased. More women than men choose to work in the “caring professions” of social work, nursing and teaching which have historically had lower rates of pay.

This gender bias begins early. At school more boys than girls choose information technology at GCSE; not many boys choose art and design. In vocational qualifications, more girls take health and social care, while very few of them choose engineering.

This carries on through school. At A-Level, more than twice the number of girls choose English, sociology and art and design and more boys choose mathematics, physics and design and technology. These patterns continue into higher education choices.

These early decisions can affect pupils’ careers later in life. Many girls are automatically excluded from scientific and technological professions because it would have required them to specialise in these areas at an early age.

These choices can also lead to girls taking lower paid jobs. Figures show that in engineering and construction, 97% of modern apprentices are men who earn £115 a week. This is a large contrast with the 89% of social care apprentices that are women and earn around £60 a week. Not only are wage rates higher in occupations traditionally male, but even within the same occupational areas men are paid more than women. Maybe we should also ask, why does society pay lower salaries to workers in caring professions?

This picture leads me to ask why young people make the choices they do. A Department for Education and Skills (DfES) report last year investigated the influences on young people’s choices about post-16 pathways. It found that they are strongly influenced by what their parents and peers think is appropriate. In addition, choices can be influenced by ethnic origin. But there is some encouraging news. Despite the strong influence to choose according to gender, girls are somewhat more flexible than boys. It appears to be easier to change girls’ ideas about setting foot in traditional male professions than it is to shift the perceptions of boys to work in a traditional female profession.



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Addressing the imbalance: the family factor

To address the imbalance between women's academic achievement and men's employment success, society must challenge the long-standing cultural assumption over the role of the family's primary carer.

Girls should feel that their education has prepared them to go on and succeed in their chosen profession as much as boys. It is important to make the point to today's young people that caring for children is a **shared** responsibility. Despite some of the more lurid suggestions that are made, to advocate this position is not to "force" people back to work and away from looking after children. It is not to suggest that somehow caring for children is a low-level and unfulfilling task. Nor is it to say that the balance of responsibilities will always be the same over a working life. But what is important is to ensure that choice is maximised. And that can best be done when both women and men are supported as parents in developing their careers, if that is what they wish to do.

I think that we face important issues as a society in ensuring that people are enabled to manage the different aspects of their lives. Part time work, job sharing, looking after children full-time, career breaks and the like are all vital but we need to be able to treat these as valid choices that enable women in particular to feel that they can balance their responsibilities. Too often, it is seen as an "either/or". Either you work full time and acquire the benefits of a career that is commensurate with your qualifications, sacrificing a more balanced lifestyle or you lead a life in which work is only one element which enables other responsibilities to be managed more effectively but which does not enable potential to be fully realised. These issues are often more sharply focused for women but it could be argued that real change will only come about when **both** men **and** women do not feel that they have to make such invidious choices.

I was interested therefore to meet recently Nicola Allan, a job share headteacher from Colleton Primary School in Twyford, Berkshire. Her and her job share "other half" are both parents of children who want that balance in their lives but also to fulfil their potential as school leaders. Despite the temptation to work a five day week, when only employed for three days, Nicola says that this arrangement works well and I'm going to see for myself when I visit the school at the end of May.

Of course, this interesting arrangement has only happened because a governing body were prepared to do something which is considered a bit unorthodox and make such a joint appointment. If we reconvened today's event 20 years from now, would



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this arrangement still be quite as unusual or will employees of the future, both men and women, demand such flexibility, even in more senior positions?

I am encouraged by the Government's ongoing work to improve opportunities for parents to balance their work and childcare responsibilities through the new parental leave and flexible working rights introduced last April. I hope more and more parents make the most of the caring opportunities that these new rights present for families, including an increase in parental leave, and the legal right for parents to request flexible working arrangements.

Nature and nurture

Human nature and evolution mean that there are differences between girls and boys. So, I don't have a vision of a "brave new world" in which we have androgynous individuals, with gender differences ruthlessly suppressed. But we have to be alert to differences that are conditioned and which actually mean that one gender does better or worse than the other, really for no good reason and certainly not for one that is "natural".

It is easy to mock the whole idea of role models and what children pick up in the media. But if we believe that television can be a powerful influence on young lives, and who doesn't, then having a balance of "strong" and "gentle" characters of both sexes is important. So, I can't get excited enough to insist that Postman Pat is accompanied on his rounds by Postwoman Patricia in the interests of fairness and justice. But more power to the elbow of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, a strong fictional female character if there was ever one! I'm being facetious to a point of course but it is not "political correctness gone mad" to want to ensure that different kinds of characters of both genders are well represented in the media.

Advertisements aimed at boys are noisy and action packed with powerful images. It is unsurprising that overall, children's perception is that it is better to be a boy. One study asked boys and girls what it would be like if they woke up one morning as a member of the opposite sex. Girls were positive about being a boy – they saw boys as more active, athletic, aggressive, more able to travel and have a better career. Boys were negative about being a girl – they see them as passive, weak and restricted in their activities. I wonder what of this attitude transfers to adulthood?

Studies tell us that boys more easily dominate classroom discussion; that boys' laddish behaviour can have a negative effect on girls' learning and that some teachers have lower expectations of girls and find boys more stimulating to teach. We must deal with these matters in schools.



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Use of language is equally important. The use of the word “girl” is often used as an insult, meaning “not up to it” or “can’t hack it” or “inadequate”. It is naïve to think that this has no effect on girls. There is a clear link here with homophobic bullying where boys in particular are exposed to bullying if their manner or behaviour is not quite “tough” enough for the prevailing male culture.

The issue of single sex schooling is a much debated topic, and there are points in favour of both single sex and mixed schools. What matters is that children are treated as individuals and that their particular needs and aptitudes are properly addressed. And of course, knowledgeable, interested and enthusiastic teachers can make lessons enjoyable and rewarding for all pupils, girls and boys.

There are already plenty of examples of good practice in schools breaking down the girl/boy divide. One simple step taken from some schools is to sit girls and boys down together to work. This enables them learn from each and makes them less likely to focus on impressing their friends.

Some schools have found organising their day into single sex classes for some classes helps. This allows teachers to challenge boys’ underachievement and teachers can enhance girls’ competence in maths and science. Other schools have given specific pupils mentor support. Although this support is often given to boys, a recent study, “Girls’ Voices”, worked with schools which gave girls an opportunity to speak up and found that providing a mentor significantly improved their self esteem, attitudes and attainment.

So how do we encourage girls to enter the more lucrative, and typically male-dominated, professions and careers?

Careers advice needs to open up the breadth of opportunity and challenge stereotyped views. Schools, and teachers, need to ensure they do not hold negative stereotypes themselves. There is evidence that we perceive girls’ achievements being the result of hard work rather than the intellectual prowess which boys possess. Girls are brilliant too. The Connexions Service recognises that some girls need a different approach to be able to make better choices after school. Baroness Greenfield reported to the Department of Trade and Industry last year on the under-representation of women in science, engineering and technology. The government’s strategy resulting from that initiative intends to fund training for science teachers and technicians, so that science is taught in a relevant way to the community and meets the needs of all pupils especially girls.

Underachieving girls



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I have spent some time outlining suggestions that I hope will help our academically talented girls take up their rightful place as the new generation of world-class working women.

I would now like to turn your attention to an issue that is often overlooked by society - the issue of under-achieving girls. Although girls outperform boys at school, there are still a large number of girls who do not reach their potential academically. Much research, including some of Ofsted's work, has been devoted to identifying ways to help the "bad-lads". But of course, boys do not have a monopoly on problems. Disengaged girls also need help and support to encourage them to take an active interest in their learning. Indeed the consequences for these "lost-girls" can often be more life altering than for boys. In short, girls can be left holding the baby, often literally.

Aggressive behaviour in girls is viewed inconsistently: some girls can avoid the sanctions boys would draw down while at other times such behaviour is seen as inappropriate for girls and punished more harshly. Girls are more likely to be criticised for their appearance and behaviour than are boys. There is a lack of specialist provision for girls with behavioural difficulties; resources to support poor behaviour are too often oriented towards boys and not helpful or available to girls.

Girls are the perpetrators and victims of bullying in much the same numbers as boys. However, girls' bullying tends to be quieter and often uses psychological distress rather than physical intimidation. Girls can feel this bullying most painfully. It saps their self esteem and motivation to work. Indeed our evidence shows that for girls bullying can be more surreptitious and more frequent than for boys.

Girls experiencing difficulties at school can, very quietly, exclude themselves from lessons. This withdrawal from school and from learning can also be the result of abuse outside school, including sexual abuse. Girls are also more likely to self harm as an extreme way of getting relief from painful lives and a lack of control. A few contemplate suicide – and some, tragically, take that step. We don't always have sufficient monitoring of these quieter needs in our schools. That a girl is withdrawn and isolated can be hard for teachers to notice in a busy lesson.

Even where girls do not experience extreme problems, they often underestimate their own potential. Boys are prone to feeling pleased with themselves having achieved middling success; girls are more likely to notice the inadequacies of their work. As an adult, there is a tendency to encourage girls to be quiet and dependent, and boys boisterous and self-reliant. This continues as they grow up. Boys are often



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given greater opportunity to explore their environments, whereas girls are more likely to be sheltered and protected.

So, at the same time as wanting to draw attention to issues about those girls at the opposite end of the spectrum to the most academically able, we must not lose sight of those, probably still the majority, who are not now, or unlikely to become, highly visible. The same issues that I raise earlier apply. How can we enhance choice across a wide range of school subjects and occupational groups? What can we learn from those who push back the boundaries and go into occupations dominated by men, like the six female train drivers, employed by Midland Mainline that I occasionally see when I come into work from home? How can we ensure that women, whether they work at home or elsewhere, are able to do what they want to achieve their life choices in a way that leaves them comfortable and at ease? In short, how can we become a society that allows more people to fulfil their potential?

Conclusion

For each child and young person, there is a complex interaction of social, personal and educational factors which influence how well they succeed. The best schools do not cluster together large groups of pupils and treat them all to an undifferentiated diet of teaching or support. They are able to deal with individual needs and avoid stereotypes.

Much of what will help girls is part and parcel of what good schools do. Ofsted reported on those factors which help boys including: a positive learning culture that stimulates high standards and insists on good behaviour; good teaching and learning; tracking performance through good use of data and assessment which values work and offers clear advice on how to improve. For girls we might add a focus on teaching styles particularly in maths and science.

The ethos of schools and careers advice must continue to break down stereotypes. And, while some girls remain quietly disengaged from education, making no fuss but simply not succeeding, we need perhaps to redress the balance and ensure that being quiet does not mean that you are invisible.

Education is a right. It is concerned with skills and competences; delight in reading and learning throughout life; basic and subtle knowledge of our world and how to cope as a citizen, to be responsible for your actions but also to stick up for yourself without fear and to contribute to the well-being of others with confidence and pleasure. Education should allow all to make real choices during their lives.



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We still have a long way to go before women are able to take full advantage of their potential in our society. In education, teachers have helped many girls achieve well, more so than at any time in our nation's history. But many more girls **could** succeed and the challenge for all of us is to enable them to do so. And when they do, they can move on, safe in the knowledge that all that can constrain them is the limits of their own ambition.