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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet identifies fallacies of sex stereotyping and discrimination against females, and reviews recent research on sex-role development conducted by Educational Testing Service (ETS) in New Jersey. Throughout history women have been regarded as physically and intellectually inferior to men. Beginning in the 1960s national efforts have been made to demand equal opportunity for women in education, at work, and in the professions. Among these are supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment and members of the National Coalition of Organizations for Women and Girls in Education. Research at ETS shows that stereotyped sex-role development begins at birth. Infants are treated differently by parents according to their sex, and common toys for boys and girls suggest sex-role differences. In school these differences are reinforced when boys are assigned most leadership roles and classes are separated on the basis of sex for certain activities. The myth that women do not have an aptitude for math has been disproved when certain teaching and counseling techniques are used to promote students' positive attitudes about their capabilities. ETS is developing several new projects to help women identify their skills, especially those acquired through homemaking, and translate them into marketable job skills. (AV)

Focus 6

# Women--In Search of Equality

by

Leslie Aldridge Westoff
Editor

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Each issue of *FOCUS* discusses a critical aspect of education today and the work Educational Testing Service is doing to help cope with it. Most widely known for standardized tests, ETS is also the nation's largest nonprofit educational research organization. Its 2,000 staffers apply the tools of the social sciences to the problems of minority students, access to higher education, human development, occupational certifications, and a host of other areas that demand attention.

Photos by Del Merritt

# WOMEN— IN SEARCH OF EQUALITY

*by Leslie Aldridge Westoff*

## The Limiting Stereotypes

Ever since demands for women's equality swept through the land, across campuses, and into the offices and executive suites of business, society has been trying to catch up. The support system women need—from the earliest grades of school through midlife—has been lagging like an errant comet's tail, far behind the forces that are moving women ahead.

Perhaps the most pervasive hindrance to equality of the sexes is the burden of stereotypes we all carry with us. Stereotypes are, of course, exaggerated generalities that may be true. More often they are dangerous oversimplifications. Women, as well as certain nationalities and minorities, are frequently the prime targets of such thinking.

All through a woman's life, these preconceptions can plague her, limit her, determine her self-image, what goals she will set, what courses she will take in college, what career she will plan for, and how men will treat her.

Even as recently as the late 19th century, women were considered inferior to men because they were thought to

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have smaller brains. And since their wombs were supposed to draw energy from their brains, it was thought that they would be diverting needed strength from their primary function, childbearing, if they attempted more intellectual pursuits. Though no one believes this today, an abundant and equally fictitious collection of stereotypes continues to work against the woman who seeks equal opportunity in education and the professions.

Take the incident reported by sociologist Constantina Safilios-Rothschild of the University of California, Santa Barbara. She describes a class she observed meeting aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Academy vessel *Eagle*. Since the number of female students at the academy is still limited to 10 percent, the group gathered around a machine that is being demonstrated includes only one woman. As the male cadets crowd in, the lone woman finds herself at the fringe of the group and sees nothing. When it is her turn to operate the machine, she has no idea of what to do. The professor finally has to show her, she feels inadequate, and the men in the class perceive her in terms of the stereotype they have always had about women. When it comes to mathematical, scientific, or mechanical tasks, women are stupid and helpless.

Had women made up at least one-third of the class, according to Safilios-Rothschild, they would have been well-integrated into the group, and the men would have accepted them as individuals. As it was, the situation itself reinforced everyone's beliefs, and this woman ran a high risk of not being able to get a truly equal education.

Clichés about sex roles seem to have been handed down from one generation to the next like precious heirlooms. As they grew up, children were taught what they

were supposed to do by parents who perpetuated the myths of masculine and feminine destinies. Men were supposed to wash cars, change light bulbs, fix machines. They were free to find jobs or, with more education, to choose their futures from the status- producing and financially rewarding businesses and professions, though they were obligated to earn the money and take the risks, to protect and support their wives and children.

In return, women were expected to provide caretaker services, raise the children, above all remain at home, and stifle any professional aspirations they may have had. Ironically, women themselves, particularly in the past, have shared in strengthening the stereotypes which work against them, by perversely buying the message. And some still do. Much opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment is female. It is not only as parents that women have clung to traditional stereotypes.

## Women and Government Fight Back

But some have fought them. Perhaps gaining impetus from the Civil Rights movement of the '60s, feminist groups began to demand equal opportunity in education, at work, and in the professions. In the last decade, the first efforts at building support for women have begun to take hold in the form of women's studies, career advice, and counseling centers for women who want to return to college or find jobs.

To make government aware of women's needs, the National Coalition of Organizations for Women and Girls in Education, organized in 1975, lobbies in Washington for its almost 70 members, including the PTA, American Association of University Women, National Education Association, Women's Business and Professional Organization, and the National Council of Negro Women.

Government responded to pressure from women's, educational, and civil rights groups even before this. In 1972, Title IX was passed which prohibited sex discrimination in public education. Two years later, the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) was introduced in Congress by then-Senator Walter Mondale and Representative Patsy Mink, and passed in 1974. Its goal—to promote educational equality for females in this country.

As a result, the U.S. Office of Education was able to support over 80 projects in 1977 alone, which have a direct impact on promoting women's educational equity. Materials have been prepared at universities around the country and include training manuals and tapes for teachers, counselors, and administrators. There are aids to help teachers spot sex bias in textbooks, and to help administrators monitor their school systems for evidence of such bias. For example, taped vignettes were prepared by Mills College in California to demonstrate that women can excel in mathematics and science and enter nontraditional fields. Manu-

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als on planning and operating university women's studies programs have been produced by the University of Massachusetts, and information to help adolescents recognize their own sex bias was formulated at Cleveland State University. (All these materials are available from the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts.)

In addition, the National Institute of Education in its Experimental Program for Opportunities in Advanced Study and Research in Education has awarded grants to women and minorities to encourage them to develop educational research projects, many of which deal with the

problems of their own groups. In 1978 there were 23 such grants, totaling $1.5 million.

Passing a Congressional Act is one thing, but getting to the root of our attitudes is another. "There are overt differences in treatment of women that the law can do something about," says ETS psychologist Ruth Ekstrom, "but there are also covert discriminations, attitudes about what is right for boys and girls, attitudes you can't legislate but want to have an impact on." For this reason, perhaps, there has been a growing amount of new research on sex-role development, and on understanding stereotypes about sex roles and how to combat them.

## Where It All Begins

ETS social scientists have embarked on a number of studies as part of this effort. The scope of the research, all funded by government grants, includes such things as examining stereotypes in the behavior of parents toward their babies; studying school children, and altering their environment to try to change their stereotypes; observing how stereotypes prevent high school women from taking enough math to open educational and professional doors, and why some women nevertheless stick with math; helping women in midlife who, victimized by stereotypes all their lives, now need to break away from home and into colleges and jobs.

### In the Cradle

At the ETS Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children, psychologist Michael Lewis and his colleagues have found that, "by the time a child is five or six years old and ready to go into the school system, it has already learned its gender and stereotypic behavior. It has a five or six-year history of being taught this."

According to Lewis, sex-role differentiation starts even before a child is born. If the fetus moves a lot it is considered to be a boy, if not, it is assumed to be a girl. When it is born, it is announced as a boy or girl rather than just a baby. Lewis found that from the first moment parents interact with their child, they treat it differently, depending on its sex. Girls are not allowed to become dirty, while boys are. Toys also tend to be sex stereotyped. While it is true that girls are allowed to have trucks, boys won't be given dolls nearly as often. And parents also touch girls more than boys and respond to them more.

The researchers also noted how certain stereotypes are reinforced. For example, it was found that male and female babies don't differ in voice patterns, but their mothers do. Mothers talk more to babbling three-month-old girls than to babbling three-month-old boys. The result is that girls tend to use more complex sentences when they learn to speak, and to do more talking. The stereotype that women talk more than men may have its origins here. By one year of age, behavior is also affected. Lewis has demonstrated that girls will cry if confronted with a barrier, while boys will try to knock it down.

By age two, children realize they are either a boy or girl, and it is then that they begin to learn what society expects of boys and girls. They see that, around the house, certain tasks are sex-linked. When children grow older and begin to go to school, the process of treating them differently continues.

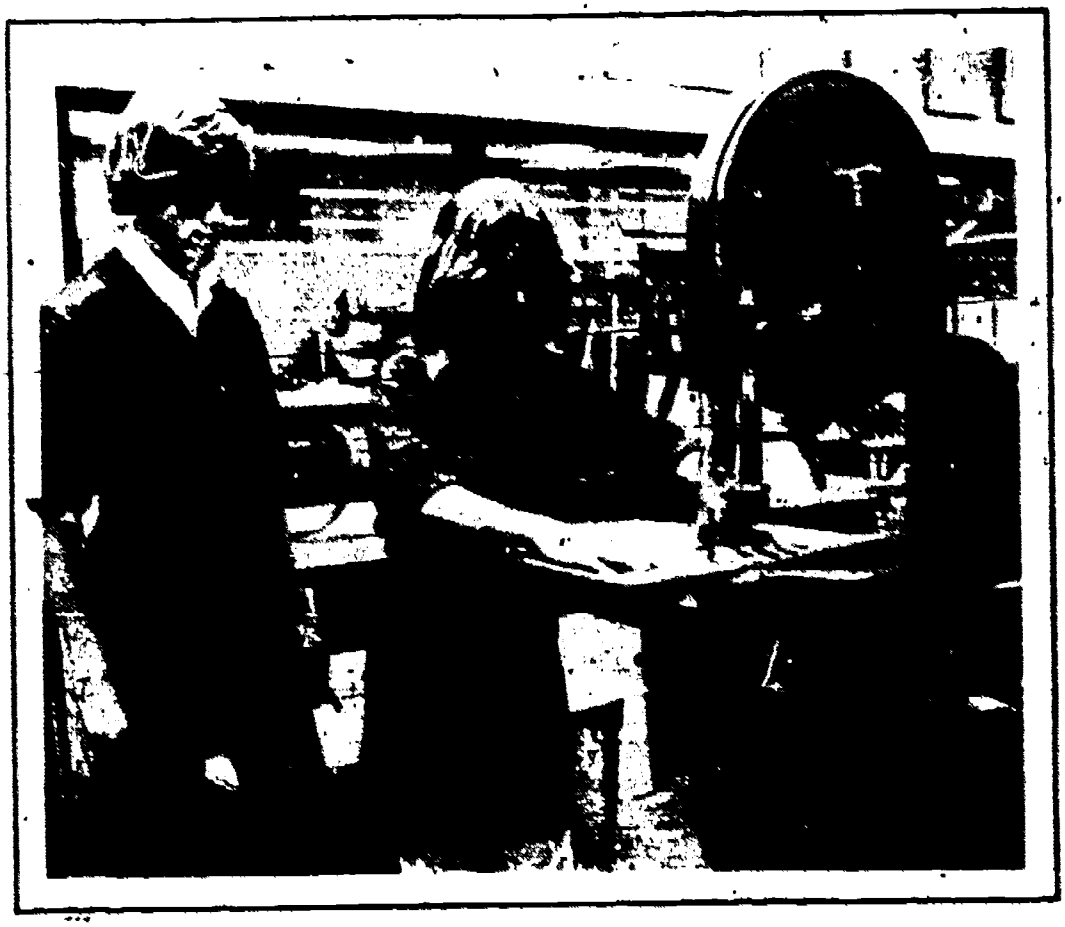
## In the School

Working with 900 fourth and fifth-grade students and their predominantly female teachers in New Jersey, ETS sociologist Marlaine Lockheed found that both students and teachers unconsciously behave in stereotype-producing and reinforcing ways. For example, teachers will allow chil-

dren to separate themselves by sex for certain activities or will automatically assign the leadership roles to boys. The stereotypical image evoked by the word "leader," she said, is one of a tall, strong, forceful, charismatic, intelligent man, perhaps a reflection of what children see in the real world. Does it mean, Lockheed asked, that boys are unwilling to accept girls as leaders?

In her survey, she found that fewer girls than boys thought they would be good leaders, and over one-fourth of the girls thought they would never be leaders. As one teacher involved in the study put it, "Girls are content to be the caboose on the train."

Almost no children could name a famous woman whose life they had studied in school. And although all of the children were in schools where male teachers have



been supervised by women principals or vice principals, only 15 percent of the children could think of a man with a woman supervisor.

Lockheed also noted that, in an effort to provide girls in their classes with a sense of leadership, some teachers will do such things as appoint a girl to be the head of a committee—unfortunately, all too often the cleanup committee. This, according to Lockheed, is not the answer. To break down stereotypes, the girl must be in a position of leadership that is not traditionally female, such as heading the science committee, or being in charge of the class project. In this way, boys will see—and learn to accept—girls as actual peers capable of leadership, and girls themselves will develop more confidence in accepting leadership roles, or even seeking them.

The way stereotypes take hold is alarming. Lockheed asked each of the girls in her study how good a leader she thought she could be. While a quarter of the fourth-grade girls thought they could be very good leaders, only 18 percent of the fifth-grade girls thought so. Again, in another question, she asked the children whether they would be comfortable being class president. Interestingly, as many

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as 60 percent of all the fourth-grade girls said yes, with an equal percent of boys concurring. But by the fifth-grade something drastic was beginning to happen. Only 49 percent of the fifth-grade girls said they would be comfortable as class president, while as many as 62 percent of the boys said they would. What was happening to the girls?

Said Lockheed, "All cultures teach their members what behavior and roles to expect, and our culture isn't

subtle about its message. Children learn from parents, peers, television, newspapers and magazines." If a girl is constantly ignored as a leader, if people don't treat her as one, she will stop coveting this role for herself.

In order to test the effect of manipulating children's expectations about a girl's competence, Lockheed and her colleagues tried several behavioral experiments. In one they observed groups, each composed of two boys and two girls, who worked at a cooperative board game. The researchers noted whether a child took physical control of the activity by picking up a marker for the game to proceed, or whether the child took verbal control by talking more than others. Afterwards, the players were asked to identify the person who stood out as the leader of their group.

The results were surprising. If a boy exerted physical and verbal control over the group, he was perceived as a leader. But if a girl exhibited the same physical and verbal control of the group, she wasn't recognized. Boy leaders were perceived as leaders; girl leaders were not.

In order to change children's perceptions, the research team taught a new group of girls how to build an electronic circuit which operated a light and a buzzer. The girls then taught the boys how to build the circuit. Both boys and girls were thus given an opportunity of observing a female peer behaving more competently than a male, thereby demolishing the expected stereotype about the relative scientific abilities of males and females.

As a control, other children were taught in single-sex groups how to build the circuit, but this time by an adult teacher instead of a girl.

What was the effect of the experiment? Children from the experimental and control groups were rearranged with strangers in groups of two boys and two girls and were asked to again play the earlier leadership game. It was found that boys and girls from the experimental groups—

where the girls had taught the boys to build the electronic circuit—were more likely to perceive a girl as a leader than were boys and girls from the single-sex groups who had been taught by a teacher and had not seen a girl excelling in a nontraditional role.

## Development Across the Ages

The strength of stereotypes is at times overwhelming, even blinding. People with limited experience don't see what they have been taught not to see.

How sex-role stereotypes develop across age and social class groups has been the subject of research by ETS psychologist Walter Emmerich. He and his colleagues asked students in late childhood, and early and late adolescence, to express their feelings about certain situations. For example, girls were asked to indicate on a four-point scale how much they would like or dislike a boy or girl who was involved in certain activities such as math, science, art, and music. Boys were also asked the same questions. Emmerich was thus able to map attitudes toward various stereotypes in boys and girls of different ages, and plot when, or if, attitudinal changes occurred.

It was found that, at first, children tend to prefer seeing other children of the same sex involved in a variety of activities, even when these activities are traditionally associated with the opposite sex. During adolescence, however, this inclination to favor their own sex diminishes.

Adolescent boys appear to go through a brief period when they recognize, at an intellectual level, that sex-stereotyping is unfair. But this attitude is soon replaced by more traditional beliefs. Adolescent girls also accept the usual stereotypes at this time. Why boys lose their stereotyp[illegible] temporarily and then return to them is one of the interesting questions to be answered, as Emmerich tries to

**"Girls seem to have a more difficult time than boys deciding what they believe, perhaps because their roles are the ones that are being changed."**

get at the intellectual and social forces that affect behavior in each period.

Attitudes which lead to stereotypes appear to progress from one stage to the next, as the child's intellectual understanding develops. If one could somehow interrupt the normal progression of developmental stages, it might prevent the stereotypes from forming. If adolescent girls, say, were to keep the same-sex activity preference that they had as young children, "it could become the basis for more liberated attitudes," says Emmerich.

He suggests that the dating-mating complex during this period may prevent this from happening. "But you can't dive into a particular period and say, 'Ah, let's alter the course of that period.' People construct experience differently according to their stage of development," Emmerich says. Thus, it may not be until after the adolescent years that many women begin to see the values of more egalitarian sex roles.

However, society's new responses to women's equality are influencing thinking among the young, and certain traditional sex stereotypes appear to be breaking down. For example, according to Emmerich's study, adolescents no longer think of the role of physician, scientist, or mathematician as particularly masculine, nor do they see talent in art or music as particularly feminine.

But, though sex-role values are changing, it is happening very unevenly. Girls seem to have a more difficult time than boys deciding what they believe, perhaps because their roles are the ones that are being changed. In some instances, Emmerich found, girls accept the traditional stereotypes (males as participants in rough team sports), in

others they resist the stereotypes (females as nurses), and in still others they accept, reject, and then may accept them again (males as physicians). Another sign of this uneven change is that sex stereotypes seem strongest in the areas of activities and interests—the things people do—and less pervasive in the area of how people relate to others personally.

## Taking the Myth Out of Math

One of the most damaging and inhibiting stereotypes that the majority of women have accepted is that math is a male pursuit, that there are mathematical aptitudes which

only men are able to develop, and that women will never need math anyway.

Because of this myth, girls do well in math until puberty (that is, through the period when they are primarily interested in girls, rather than boys), then their curiosity about numbers and abstract logic suddenly plummets and they get left behind.

ETS sociologist Patricia Casserly went out into the schools to investigate whether the math myth is valid, what makes most girls give up on math, and what makes some girls stick to it. She surveyed about 700 students in Advanced Placement math classes in eight high schools.

What she discovered is that the myth is no more real than the Abominable Snowman. "I don't find a math phobia among girls. And some of the girls in Advanced Placement had not always been good in math. I found no evidence to support the idea that math anxiety is more common for girls than boys."

One reason for our belief in the math myth may be that, although there is not more anxiety about math on the part of women, they do tend both to internalize and to express their perceived inadequacies more than men. If women run into problems they are likely to blame themselves, say they are not good enough and can't do math, while the boys blame the system—the teacher or the course.

There may also be a particular problem for some girls in adjusting to math because no one warns the more verbal ones that you don't read math the way you might read a book. "In *Vanity Fair*, you can look for ambience and skim the book," says Casserly. "In math, every word and symbol are there for a reason."

Counselors and teachers present another kind of problem for girls. A counselor, says Casserly, is not a person who is apt to be good in math. "Counseling is a social science kind of thing. Many of these people simply do not realize the importance of four years of math for girls in opening up

the full array of courses in college, not only the hard sciences but other fields such as social science and even aspects of journalism." In addition, female counselors tend to project their own math anxieties, which can be especially harmful for a girl.

In her survey, Casserly spotted examples of prevailing opinion which work against a girl's having equal opportunity in school or a profession. One male counselor, for instance, said, "Why should we encourage women to go into math and science? There aren't enough jobs. They will just throw men out of work."

On the subject of girls taking advanced math in high school, another counselor remarked, "I would never encourage it. I mean, it's usually their last year and there are so many fun things going on. Wouldn't it be frightful to spoil a beautiful record by doing poorly in a course your senior year? I hate to see a girl get in over her head."

But to a boy not doing well in math, a counselor is likely to say, "Well, you better keep on with this; you'll need it."

There are many excellent teachers and counselors but, says Casserly, "There is a carry-over in older people's minds. They are afraid of math the way they are afraid of snakes, though they may never have confronted either one."

Five years ago most of the girls in high school Advanced Placement math classes were math and science majors. Now that is no longer true. Girls, as well as boys, are beginning to understand the importance of math as part of a general education. Society has become more technological. "Today," says Casserly, "every woman needs math to be a functioning, literate adult."

In her study of secondary schools that have been successful in attracting and holding young women in strong

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**"Girls pursuing math. . .say their teachers always encouraged and listened to them in the early years. . ."**

math programs, Casserly has ferreted out some factors that seem responsible for these girls' persistence in math. She believes these elements can be used by all schools to encourage girls to take math as seriously, and with as much urgency, as they take four years of English. Surprisingly, the schools don't have any special program. What they do have is "a collection of bright people doing what should be done." Some of the common elements include the following:

- Girls pursuing math have good self-images. They say their teachers always encouraged and listened to them in the early years and were even interested in their outside hobbies and activities.
- Classes are usually homogeneous groupings of boys and girls at the same learning level in math. The earlier this weeding out takes place, the better. In the case of sequentially developed skills like math, a mixed-ability classroom doesn't help them.
- Teachers use older girls to counsel and tutor younger ones, and encourage classmates to teach each other.
- Teachers of Advanced Placement math classes thrive unabashedly on working with students who may be brighter than they. There is no embarrassing coverup of things they can't answer.
- Students are allowed, even encouraged, to take two math courses at the same time.
- Teachers have access to student's families and consult directly with them if grades begin to drop. (Virginia Shipman, an ETS researcher who studies the educational success and failure of poor children, also pointed out that a main factor determining success was the support of a warm parent-teacher-child relationship. See "Children of Poverty: Overcoming the Barriers.")

The implications for encouraging girls to outgrow the harmful stereotypes that exist in the field of math are obvious to anyone who looks at job openings and salary scales. Without a math background there are fewer openings, less opportunity for advancement, and salaries, in many cases, are going to be lower. A beginning engineer (greatly in demand) will get a starting salary of $18,000 compared to $10,000 for a job in the humanities or social sciences (often impossible even to find).

A calculus background, for a girl today, is what being able to sew and bake bread was to her grandmother 50 years ago. It not only makes her more desirable, in this case to an employer rather than a husband, but it is one of the great equalizers of opportunity for women. And by chance or design women are beginning to realize this. Among SAT takers, the percentage of girls who have had four or more years of math in high school rose from 37 percent five years ago, to 43 percent in 1979. That is still, however, far behind the boys, 63 percent of whom take math for four years.

## Helping Women to Find Themselves

Ruth Ekstrom is also concerned with helping women to escape the encumbering stereotypes and achieve their potential. She has studied women beyond the college years, women who have been homemakers but who now need or wish to return to work. Many have dropped out of school to marry and want to go back to prepare for a second career. Others, who have spent years raising children and caring for husbands, want to get right into a job.

And still others, known as Displaced Homemakers, are divorced, deserted, or widowed women with children to support, who must immediately convert their skills into regular paychecks.

Realizing that the skills learned during the years of homemaking and volunteering can be valuable, Ekstrom and her colleagues have prepared a workbook on "How to Get College Credit for What You Have Learned as a Homemaker and Volunteer." This book, to be filled in by the woman, helps her identify the specific skills she has learned from her unpaid work, for which she might receive credit in a growing number of colleges. A list of these colleges is included in the book.

Ekstrom is now working on two projects to help women identify and develop their skills, find a sense of self-esteem, and earn a salary.

The first is Project HAVE Skills (Homemaking And Volunteer Experience), geared to help a woman get a job by using her homemaking and volunteer talents. Three workbooks, one each for women, counselors, and employers, will be available in 1980. They will help a woman to recognize her hidden possibilities and use them either immediately or with more training; will help counselors direct women to appropriate jobs or training programs; and will help employers identify a woman's unpaid talents and apply them to tasks that they will be happy to pay for. Each will contain a competency job chart to help individuals match personal skills and job requirements.

The second, Project ACCESS (Assessing Competencies Concerned with Employment and School Success), is a system to identify what skills certain jobs require, and the kinds of life experiences that are relevant for each. Profiles of 20 occupations are being prepared, 10 that women can enter directly, and 10 that require vocational education. Such jobs as drafter, medical records technician, personnel worker, and credit manager are being examined.

Says Ekstrom, "By and large, most homemakers don't realize they have marketable skills. They say, 'I don't know how to do anything,' when many of their skills can be transferred into a job".

One of the strongest areas for women now is in jobs requiring managerial skills. Often they just need some initial training. Ekstrom suggests that, for example, a housewife could consider being a health and safety inspector. She already knows how to recognize hazards, and she can work with people. She simply adds some training to get the technical experience to go with her managerial expertise.

Or, if a woman is good at handling dress patterns and sewing, she may discover with utter amazement, as a state employment officer recently did, that "It's just like what they do in sheet metal work. Visualize a pattern. They do the same things!" Ekstrom points out that, by thinking of her sewing talents in this way, a woman takes "mind- boggling leaps, all of a sudden."

It is wise for women considering going back to college or getting a job to think of nontraditional work because the salary is better and because employers, who must consider affirmative action, will be looking for women in fields that have been almost all male.

Once in search of a job, the woman may well have to fight other limiting stereotypes. Some male employers tend to think a woman will be frivolous about her work rather than viewing it as a career. They may assume the woman just wants extra money and may drop out to have children, or if she is widowed or divorced, to remarry. This may be true for some, but certainly not the majority. Men also leave jobs, for many reasons, but they are not often penalized for it.

Now that more than half the women in the country work, and growing numbers want to, serious attention must be given to creating an even stronger support system for them. It is tragic to discover in midlife that you really wanted to be a scientist or mathematician or business executive, but no one encouraged you, and you didn't take math because teachers and parents still thought of it as a masculine pursuit, too hard for little girls—and they were wrong.

It is tragic to realize that you might have wanted to go into politics, where women are sorely needed, but from kindergarten on, there was always a boy at the head of the line, the ball was always thrown to a boy, and you learned your lesson very well, to follow meekly behind.

Understanding where stereotypes begin, how they work to prevent women from fully realizing their potential, and how best to combat them is a large challenge. The days when discrimination against women was socially acceptable are gone. But the reality of such discrimination dies hard.

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