# 1. *Education and Liberation*

# High School Women: Oppression and Liberation

*by Jenny Bull*

More and more people are seeing the way capitalism and this society not only create oppressive institutions but also warp each of us. I think the Women's Liberation movement fully understands how institutions warp individuals, and thus has a clear sight of the way women must work to be equal and human with each other and with men on the personal level, as well as working together on the political level to change the institutions in this society that create that oppression. What I want to talk about in this article are the more specific ways high school women are oppressed in this society — by schools, by their families, and by the social scene. I also want to talk about liberation — liberation as the personal strength to control one's own life, resist social pressures, and work together politically to change those pressures. I want to talk specifically about how this can be done in high school.

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*OPPRESSION*

In schools, compulsory attendance means that students are subjected to the systems's way of training people in capitalism — a system based on competition, status consciousness, conformity, and unquestioning obedience to authority. For women students, there is added oppression — not only are they unequal because they are students, but they soon learn to know their unequal place as women, both academically and socially.

Schools train people to fit into this society as it exists — therefore courses of study in school reflect the traditional subservient roles women are expected to play. For example, I took a year of required home economics (cooking and sewing) in high school, and many schools still



either require or strongly urge home ec for women. Rarely are men allowed to take these courses, and few want to. In other words, schools basically see women as future homemakers — "If you're going to get stuck with the shitwork, might as well be trained to accept it." Besides homemaking, the other use women serve is that of servant to men in business — as secretary or clerk. Therefore, you will find a large majority of women in typing and shorthand classes. The school is in effect saying to women students, "Your claim to business competence is that you are Mr. So-and-so's servant." On the other hand, there are various skills which men learn, such as woodworking and other shop courses, which women cannot take; again, this is not their role in society, they don't have the choice. In the academic areas, men are encouraged to take more intellectual subjects, especially math and science. It's o.k. if a woman does poorly in these subjects; she is not expected to be as competent. On a more general level, guidance counselors often limit a woman's academic aspirations, recommending less ambitious courses or colleges. So, men are generally prepared for leadership and authority roles, and women trained to be their assistants in preparation for a male dominated country and economy.

In general, what I am saying is that school views women's education as training for subservience rather than as equipping her to choose her own potential by exploring a wide range of possibilities. One of the purposes of this subservient training is that as women get jobs it keeps them from questioning their traditional roles. The secretary is trained in school to be a slave, to know she must obey the boss' orders, not to be independent, and to expect low wages. By teaching these attitudes, women are not a threat to the job hierarchy and can be easily exploited.

The other part of the way schools oppress women students is more personal; it has to do with the attitudes women have toward their intelligence and academics. The first and most important thing to say is that women have just as much intelligence as men, although few

*Channeled into traditional roles: Schools teach women to serve men, at home and at work, rather than allowing them to develop to their full potential.*

men or women act as if they believe it. This is one reason why women have just as good grades, if not better, than men in high school. However, being a "good student" in high school has little to do with intellectual ability and creative use of the mind. The good student in school is passive, does it the "right" way, is neat, follows directions, says what the teacher wants to hear — and all of these are attitudes women know well because theyare expectedto act this way all of the time. The obedient woman and the obedient student are both "good" in society's and the school's terms — and both lack creativity and independent thinking.

Women in high school often react to these oppressive attitudes in school in basically two ways: they either stay "feminine" or they try to become men intellectually. Neither is open or fully human. The "feminine" student never acts too smart, and especially never shows it if she knows more than a male student. This game has a lot to do with the male ego. Men don't like to admit that a woman is smarter than they are, and so any