

# Most girls just want to have fun

It's not glass ceilings; women just prefer the sunshine, according to a new book. **Judith Woods reports.**

**T**here's a thought that occasionally strikes me as the parent of a daughter: if, as we are constantly told, girls are wiping the board with boys academically, how come men still rule the world? Similarly, I've noticed that friends who have sons are taken aback at how behavioural and physical problems are more prevalent among boys.

They are more prone to cot death, four times more likely to suffer from autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and, according to analysis published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, are 24 per cent more likely than girls to die in their first year.

Still, their anxious mothers can console themselves that boys who avoid or overcome early hurdles, will generally go on to earn more, climb higher in their chosen profession and generally outstrip their sisters by the time they reach their late 30s.

But it won't make them any happier. Studies show these high-flyers will be significantly more miserable than their bright, ostensibly under-achieving female colleagues. But hey, that's a price for ruling the world.

So why are gifted girls not fulfilling career potential? Is it time to lob yet more brickbats at the glass ceiling?

Apparently not. According to a new book, there is no glass ceiling. Instead, women limit themselves – not because they can't handle the challenges at the top, but because they don't want to.

In *The Sexual Paradox*, clinical psychologist Susan Pinker tells us it's fatuous and does neither gender any favour to pretend girls and boys, men and women are the same. Contrary to our stubborn insistence that, given similar professional opportunities, men and women will behave in the same way, the sexes are motivated differently and respond very differently to competition.

"When you ask women what they want from work, they place great emphasis on the quality of their relationships at work and on working with people, not things," says Pinker. "An interest and an ability to contribute to a field are more powerful drivers for women, on average, than higher salaries, job security and benefits. Having a position of power is their lowest priority."

Pinker recounts fascinating Israeli research into competitiveness among eight-year-olds running races. Timed running alone on a 40-metre track, there were no measurable differences between the sexes. Competition made the difference. Boys ran faster against an opponent, boy or girl. Girls ran slower.

Moreover, when girls competed, the gender of their opponent mattered. Boys' performance improved whether they competed against boys or girls. Girls performed less well running against girls and faster against boys. Our conclusion from this says much about our attitudes as a society: do we need to overcome this "problem" by boosting girls' competitiveness, do we need to hold



Hand in hand ... girls place more emphasis on relationships than boys. Photo: Quentin Jones

boys back so girls can be as "good" as them, or do we simply accept girls aren't the same as boys?

Some girls, of course, exhibit as much ambition as the boys, and it's not always edifying.

We learn that men are "cowering in a world filled with bossy females", and feel undervalued and depressed. One survey revealed men want what American academics have dubbed a "renaissance" – a return to traditional manliness, when men derived status from being the main breadwinners.

This picture of injured male pride isn't borne out by the facts, however. There's no doubting women's capabilities: 60 per cent of students are female, as are almost two-

thirds of medical students. Yet in the upper echelons of virtually every profession, women are hugely under-represented.

According to the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management, Bedfordshire, just 11 per cent of directors at Britain's top 100 companies are women. British Medical Association figures for 2006 show women represented 37 per cent of hospital medical staff in England, but only 25 per cent of consultants and just 7 per cent of consultant surgeons.

Last month a report in *Economic Journal* showed women look lower down the career ladder to find jobs that allow more time with families, and as many as a third of

female managers take lower-skilled jobs when mothers.

But Pinker believes that, far from being systematically discriminated against, women are exercising a conscious choice by opting for a healthy work-life balance. And by being prepared to make financial sacrifices, they end up far happier at work than men. Pinker says one in five women are single-mindedly career-focused, and do just as well or better than male colleagues. But most women have a broader view of happiness "that's not usually compatible with reaching the extremes of their profession".

Economists in Britain, America, Canada, Japan and Sweden have found that women – despite taking home less pay – consistently rate themselves as happier in their jobs than men, something that has been dubbed "the gender paradox". But, interestingly, as women rise up the corporate ladder and the pressures increase, their satisfaction drops to male levels.

"There's an element of volition in women's choices that simply isn't being recognised," says Pinker.

So just what will happen to the next generation of girls? Will they aim for the boardroom, or, more likely, will they continue to reject the testosterone-fuelled 24/7 culture that promotion invariably entails?

It will be fascinating also to see how we, their mothers, respond when our gifted daughters end up juggling children and careers in part-time jobs for which they are shockingly overqualified. We might wring our hands a little, but will any of us, hand on heart, wish we'd brought up an attack dog instead?

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