

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Taking centre stage? Girlhood and the contradictions of femininity across three generations

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Kehily, Mary Jane (2008). Taking centre stage? Girlhood and the contradictions of femininity across three generations. *Girlhood Studies*, 1(2) pp. 51–71.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2008 Unknown

Version: Proof

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.3167/ghs.2008.010204>

<http://berghahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/gs/2008/00000001/00000002/art00004>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# Taking centre stage?

## *Girlhood and the contradictions of femininity across three generations*

Mary Jane Kehily



---

### ABSTRACT

New femininities suggest that young women, no longer content with subordinate status in the bedroom or on the periphery of youth cultures, appear to have found their voice as the ‘can do’ girls of neo-liberalism. Familiar tropes of new femininities position young women as agentic, goal-oriented, pleasure seeking individuals adept at reading the new world order and finding their place within it. Has femininity finally found a skin that fits or are there cracks in this unparalleled success story? The article examines this question intergenerationally by looking at young women’s experience across time, specifically, as documented by feminist scholarship from the 1960s to the present and contrasting this with the experience of being a girl as articulated by three women in the same family—grandmother, mother, daughter. Analyses of these accounts provide an insightful commentary on social change and feminine subjectivity, highlighting continuity and change while pointing to the ever present contradictions of femininity that may be reshaped and reconfigured over generations.

### KEYWORDS

girlhood, new femininities, social change, generation

---



## Introduction

A loosely worked consensus of late-modernity presents a dichotomous view of gender relations in the West. While young men are commonly viewed through the lens of ‘crisis’, young women emerge as the ideal neo-liberal subjects for post-industrial times (Epstein et al. 1998; Aapolo et al. 2005; Harris 2004). Young men may be represented as the recently dispossessed, pale shadows haunting a de-industrialized landscape, while young women appear to take centre stage in the reconfiguration of labour patterns, consumption practices and gender roles. It could be argued that late-modernity unshackles women from the patriarchal



past. In post-industrial times the ‘feminization’ of labour holds young women in high esteem as flexible, presentable and capable workers. No longer subservient to the male breadwinner, the new feminine subject is economically independent, liberated from the confines of the domestic sphere and, with the help of new reproductive technologies, actively able to realize the possibility of ‘having it all’ and ‘doing it all.’ The fuchsia-pink hue of late-modernity can be seen as part of the prevailing zeitgeist, giving young women license to exercise agency as assertive and ‘out there’ individuals, in step with ‘new times.’ Young women in the contemporary period *appear*; their visibility is part of their unassailable presence in the new girl order.

This article aims to explore changing modes of femininity in post-industrial times. I want to do this in two ways: firstly, by looking historically at the ways in which young women have featured in research-based accounts from the 1960 and 70s to the present and secondly, by looking empirically at the experiences of intergenerational chains of women over the same period. This dual approach purposefully sets out to understand the present through a consideration of the past; an historical trajectory that offers insights and commentary upon the condition of femininity in late modernity. The article engages in a critical dialogue with feminist scholarship and particularly with the work of Angela McRobbie, whose study of young women for more than 30 years captures the shifting contours of youthful femininity, thus acting as a barometer for feminist thinking at particular moments. The article draws upon two studies I have been involved in: The Making of Modern Motherhoods research project and collaborative work with Anoop Nayak, drawing upon and revisiting our earlier work on young people and gender identities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Girls in the 1960s and 1970s**

Representations of femininities in late modernity mark a decisive discursive shift with the portrayal of young women in the industrial post war period. The visibility of girls in the contemporary period exists in marked contrast to accounts of youthful femininities in the 1960s and 1970s as absent or marginal. Feminist scholarship of this period was concerned with the subordinate status of young women. This was,

of course, the era of some landmark studies of youth culture—Willis's (1977) enduring ethnography *Learning to Labour* and *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) documented the spectacularly expressive exploits of young men. Anyone with a passing interest in youth research could be forgiven for thinking that youth cultures were largely populated by white boys. Feminist scholars responded by asking: do girls have a presence on the youth scene and, if so, why are they largely absent from so many studies (Canaan 1991) McRobbie and Garber's (1975) consideration of the position of girls in relation to youth cultures in the UK provided a valuable insight into young people's cultural worlds from a gendered perspective, paralleling developments in North America that document the emergence of new forms of female subjectivity associated with teenage girls (Kearney 2005).

McRobbie and Garber (1975) draw attention to the ways in which girls have been overlooked or misrepresented in studies of youth culture. They argue that gender is, like social class, a structural inequality that materially affects the life chances and experiences of individuals. It is from this perspective that they discuss the position of girls in youth subcultural settings. A starting point for McRobbie and Garber is the social space that girls occupy in society generally. They speculate that the relative absence of girls in subcultures may hinge around issues of gender and space, with girls being more centrally involved in the 'private' domestic sphere of home and family life rather than the 'public' world of the street where most subcultural activities seem to occur. Looking at girls in youth cultures, therefore, shifts the focus from oppositional forms to a consideration of modes of conformity. There are dangers for girls in hanging around on the streets. Beyond the obvious danger of physical assault, girls' presence on the street could be associated with sexual promiscuity and carried the ensuing risk of a damaged reputation (Griffin 1985; Lees 1986). McRobbie and Garber discuss the significance of mass culture to the lives of young people and particularly the ways in which marketing and consumption are gendered. For girls, new patterns of teenage consumption engaged them in more home-based activities: experimenting in changes of clothes, hairstyles and make-up, often in the confined space of the bedroom. Many studies of the period point to the ways in which young women are frequently defined in terms of their sexuality: their physical attractiveness, sexual availability and reproductive capacities become tropes for the general

appraisal of girls as individuals and as a social group (Canaan 1986; Lees 1986). McRobbie and Garber conclude that where girls do appear in youth cultures it is usually as appendages to young men, adding that it is important to look at the ways in which young women interact among themselves to form distinctive leisure cultures of their own.

Within Western societies, a wide range of feminist researchers over many decades reminds us of girls' sociability. Studies of girls indicate that they have an immense capacity for affective affiliations manifested in friendships as spending time with each other, talking to each other and supporting one another (Hey 1997). The other side of female friendship, insightfully documented by Hey (1997), focuses upon intra-gender conflict between girls and the ensuing practices of inclusion and exclusion that mark female friendships. In a study of young women's participation in youth clubs in the 1970s, McRobbie (1978) offered a particular reading of the exclusivity of girls' friendship groups. She suggested that the working-class girls who attended the youth club formed a clique that was zealously guarded and difficult to access. McRobbie described them as huddled together in the margins of the youth club, talking, smoking and reading magazines, while boys played table-top games in the central space. McRobbie's analysis of emergent femininity in this setting points to the importance of the female friendship group as a site of support and solidarity in young women's lives, acting as a buffer-zone in the face of the demands placed upon them by a sexist and patriarchal culture. McRobbie argues that through a shared enjoyment of popular culture and the practice of female friendship, young women prepare for their future roles in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers. From this perspective, young women's friendship networks and magazines such as *Jackie* perform an important preparatory function in enabling working-class girls to cope with the exigencies of patriarchal power and subordination.

### Changing modes of femininity: rave cultures

In her later work, McRobbie (1994) suggests that the relationship between gender practices and social structures have undergone dramatic change since the 1970s. In keeping with other feminist scholars, McRobbie indicates that "there is now a greater degree of fluidity about what

femininity means and how exactly it is anchored in social reality” (1994s). McRobbie uses the example of rave culture to illustrate some of the differences in what she terms “changing modes of femininity.” Here McRobbie focuses upon the presence of girls in the rave scene that flourished in the UK and mainland Europe in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. As a point of contrast to the economic boom of this period and the corporate boast of Thatcherism, rave, in its initial stages, eschewed commercial culture and capitalist ethics in ways that Willis (1990) would term “symbolic creativity.” Rave parties were organized by young people themselves and commonly held in disused buildings in out-of-town locations. New technology was used to inform ravers of the ‘secret’ location and also as a strategy for deflecting police involvement and dispersal.

What kind of image of femininity, for example, is being pursued as female ravers strip down and sweat out? Dance is where girls were always found in subcultures. It was their only entitlement. Now in rave it becomes the motivating force for the entire subculture. This gives girls a new found confidence and a prominence. Bra tops, leggings and trainers provide a basic (aerobic) wardrobe. In rave (and in the club culture with which it often overlaps) girls are highly sexual in their dress and appearance (McRobbie 1994: pp. 168–169)

There are striking differences between girls’ participation in rave culture and McRobbie’s description of young women in the Birmingham youth club of the 1970s. The girls in the earlier study existed on the margins of male-dominated space and did not attempt to play a part in the activities on offer at the youth club. They did their own thing on the fringes. By contrast, girls at raves have moved to take centre stage. Their participation in the party is that of a full-on reveller, like their male counterparts. There is not a separate role designated to boys or girls; rather there appears to be a common entitlement to the pursuit of pleasure and excitement. McRobbie suggests that this gives young women status and an increased sense of confidence. Within the context of the rave, young women can engage in free and uninhibited expressions of pleasure. McRobbie suggests that the point of tension for girls exists around sexuality. In the era of HIV and AIDS young women may dress in sexually provocative ways, while simultaneously regulating their sexual behaviour in a concern for health in a changing sexual climate rather than because of externally imposed notions of reputation.

What McRobbie's portrait evinces is the unconditional acceptance of girls on the rave scene. Rave—in its diverse and hybrid forms—continues as part of a global scene alongside a resurgence of interest in 'going out' in the traditional sense of a night-on-the-town. Town and city centres across the UK have spawned a range of club-style venues—theme bars, pubs, late-night drinking venues and clubs aimed at young people. For Chatterton and Hollands (2003), this forms part of a new night-time economy constructed by corporate capital that ultimately leads to a highly regulated and increasingly similar set of going-out experiences. In previous work on the night-time economy Hollands (1995) identifies a shift from *production* to *consumption* where young people's identities were once formed primarily in relation to the labour market, but in the present era the emphasis is upon new patterns of consumption and identity formations through the market. Binge-drinking and the ensuing social problems associated with excessive alcohol consumption has become a feature of night-life in these locations leading to commentaries positioning young women as 'ladettes' (Jackson 2006), whose drinking patterns and behaviour emulates 'irresponsible' young men. There is concern among health professionals that young women are drinking heavily, while police and local authorities express concern about rising levels of violence and public order offences. As Gonick (2006) points out, moral panics focusing on out-of-control girls can be seen as an expression of anxiety concerning the changing position of young women in society.

### Post-feminism and Active Girlhood

How do girls feature in the changing landscape of late-modernity? How has the experience of being a girl changed since the 1960s and 1970s? Contemporary research on girlhood indicates that there are different ways of being a girl and that femininity is no longer so rigidly defined or hinged to the domestic. The embracing of pleasure by young women in the 1990s through rave/club culture, television, magazine readership and fashion and beauty has been observed by feminist scholars as the emergence of new forms of femininity marked by moments of celebration, freedom and fun (Hermes 1995; McRobbie 1994; Brunsdon 1997; Kehily 2002). Terms such as 'post-feminism,' 'third wave feminism' and

'new femininities' have been deployed to characterize the changes in young women's experiences and their engagement with the social world. The terms themselves are open to contestation in different contexts, signalling both an anti-feminist backlash and new ways of understanding feminism in contemporary times (Hollows and Moseley 2006).

At its most generative, the 'post' of post-feminism signifies a way of thinking and acting beyond the rubric of feminism and may imply some critique of former orthodoxies. However, as with other terms such as post-colonialism or postmodernism, the new moment grows out of the past and cannot fully escape the shadow of the earlier period. As Sonnet (1999) declares, "The current post-feminist 'return' to feminine pleasures (to dress, cosmetics, visual display, to Wonderbra 'sexiness') is 'different' because, it is suggested, it takes place within a social context fundamentally altered by the achievement of feminist goals." In this respect gender in late-modernity is characterized by a blurring of boundaries between the feminine and feminist. Young women's presence in the night-time economy is equally as visible as is young men's as the girls' night out, birthday celebrations and hen parties become a high profile feature of the city centre pub and club scene. The contemporary moment appears to further enhance the emergence of new femininities in its appeal to individualised subjects as agentic controllers of their own destiny (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). This poses complex issues for sexual politics when girls and young women come to regard a right to pole-dance, sport playboy bunny logos or have drunken one-night stands as an expression of autonomous girlhood. Like feminist forms, 'active girlhood' places an emphasis on the rights of the individual to be an active sexual subject without recourse to moral judgement from patriarchal discourse.

Active girlhood extends beyond the sphere of leisure, sex and sociability. The processes of globalization have increasingly relied upon the flexible labour of young women. Shaped by the contours of a girls-own success story narrative in the educational sphere, young women appear as well-groomed, well-governed subjects at the heart of neo-liberal reform. The education of girls and their increased visibility in the social domain coincides with the decline of radical sexual politics in the West and particularly young women's rejection of feminism as a political project. There are of course many ways of reading these changes. A well-rehearsed view, sometimes posited by young women themselves,



suggests that feminism has ‘eaten itself.’ Young women have new-found freedoms as the inheritors of a feminist movement that has successfully made itself redundant. While not necessarily acknowledging the impact of second wave feminism, young women report feeling estranged from publicly available versions of feminist politics: the anti-male sentiment, the language of oppression and feelings of anger, marginality and missed opportunity rarely resonate with their lives or experiences. The legacy of feminism for many young women exists in the mythic and less than glamorous figure of the ‘angry feminist’ whose militancy is to be both feared and reviled (McRobbie 2004). An alternative way of reading the individualism of contemporary femininity is to place it within the context of an intergenerational dialogue that young women may be having with their mothers and grandmothers. Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg’s (1994) study of intergenerational chains of women in Norway suggests that the individualism of young women in the present period can be seen as both a response to and a conversation with the ‘battle of the sexes’ style feminism of their mother’s generation. Viewed in intergenerational terms, young women may be exploring points of continuity with previous generations in ways that creatively rework feminism rather than reject it.

Walkerdine and her co-authors (2001) take a different approach to the contemporary construction of new femininities. They offer a perspective on new femininities premised upon the salience of social class. Providing a counter narrative to the self-invention of late-modernity, they argue that the remaking of girls and women as modern neo-liberal subjects needs to acknowledge the ways in which social class shapes young women’s experiences of education, academic attainment and their subsequent life trajectories. Class is commonly viewed as a feature of modernity associated with fixed employment, stable regional identities and meritocratic forms of social mobility based upon educational and economic success. Walkerdine and her co-authors’ study of young women in the UK is a salutary reminder of the centrality of class in young women’s lives. Their analysis points to the ways in which the regulation of femininity is related to sexuality and, crucially, that it works differently upon the bodies of working-class and middle-class girls. For middle-class girls the emphasis is upon educational success and a professional career in which the possibility of early pregnancy

is not allowed. By contrast, academic success for working-class girls involves identity rupture, the transformation of self and a move away from family and community. Working-class girls bear the emotional cost of becoming bourgeois subjects in forms of pain, loss and fragmentation. From the perspective of working-class young women, early pregnancy may be an attempt to resolve some of the contradictions involved in the transition to adult womanhood. Becoming a mother disrupts the educational process while affording young women a particular role and status in the local community. According to what Walkerdine et al. suggest, working-class and middle-class girls become 'each other's Other' (2001) existing as cautionary examples of what you could become by transgressing the regulatory framework.

For middle-class girls, working-class fecundity is represented as 'pramface,' conjuring up the stereotypical image of a working-class young mother on a housing estate, while middle-class girls remain excluded from girls' friendship groups as 'snobs' and 'weirdos.' Two further studies generatively explore some of the themes developed by Walkerdine et al. Elsewhere Aapola et al. (2005) and Harris (2004) suggest that the lives and experiences of young women in the contemporary period can be understood in relation to two competing discourses—'girlpower' and 'girls at risk.' Girlpower—the active girlhood discussed above—suggests to young women that they can get what they want and do what they want. In this respect girlpower exists as a seemingly new version of femininity for new times that can be seen in a range of assertive and individualized expressions of power, characterized by third wave feminism. Girls at risk, on the other hand, articulate a set of moral and social concerns in relation to young women such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, drug taking, involvement in crime, and, particularly, young women's participation in gangs and violent crime. What are apparent in these representations are class-specific productions of femininity, each of which is a trope of excess. Furthermore, the excesses of 'girlpower' and 'girls at risk' discourse cannot be seen as literal expressions of where girls are in relation to each other. Rather, they make subject positions available to young women across a range of social sites (Gonick 2006). Given the life experiences, trajectories and resources available to working- and middle-class girls, this is of course not a relationship of equivalence.

## **Back to the future? Consumption and the regulation of new feminine subjects**

McRobbie (2004) suggests that young women are newly positioned in contemporary culture as subjects of consumption, a status congruent with the agentic individualism of new times. Fluid and ever-inventive market practices incorporate feminist and feminine themes into consumer culture while aggressively seeking out girls as consumers. A feature of consumer culture is the increased hyper-sexualization of girls; soft porn images, playboy logos and lewd slogans exist alongside 'girl-power' messages and feminist themes. McRobbie (2004) argues that the neo-liberal shaping of female subjectivities based upon the pursuit of pleasure, hedonism and sexual freedom marks a re-segregation of gendered worlds in which young women are managed and regulated by regimes of consumption. The 'I'm a princess' spending power of girls energetically embraces desires for self-improvement, pampering and indulgence in ways that re-inscribe young women within the disciplinary power of gender subordination.

In a cautionary discussion of feminist scholarship and cultural forms, McRobbie (2004) suggests that feminists may have over-celebrated the pleasures of consumption and underestimated the market's appetite for innovation. In an attempt to celebrate young women's engagement with consumer culture as agentic and pleasure-seeking, feminist scholars may have overlooked the tensions and pain of 'doing' girl. Furthermore McRobbie asserts that the emergent codes of sexual freedom and hedonism associated with new femininities should be understood as new technologies of the self rather than celebratory expressions of changing female subjectivity. The renewed emphasis upon the regulatory world of femininity and gendered forms of oppression conjures up, once again, the image of young women in that Birmingham youth club in the mid-1970s. Sitting on the margins while young men occupy the main space, these young women passively awaited their place in the patriarchal order, the oppressive demands of their over-determined futures mitigated only by the solace and support found in female friendships. More recently McRobbie (2006) suggests that the fashion and beauty industry, in particular, punish young women through a self-imposed drive for complete perfection. While the new social contract of late-modernity offers young women political subjectivity in exchange

for the evolving capacity to work, consume and be sexually independent, McRobbie indicates that there is a “new sexual contract” taking shape in which women conform to the regulatory powers of the fashion and beauty industry while simultaneously renouncing any critique of patriarchy. Has the experience of being a girl seemingly changed while the regulation of femininity takes on newly pernicious guises or has feminist scholarship come full circle? The conceptualization of young women as neo-liberal subjects caught in the double-bind of consumer culture and late-modern governmentality may bespeak some of the investments feminist researchers make in girls’ subordinate status while articulating some key features of the new girl order.

In mapping out the terrain of new femininities, commentaries may have a tendency to emphasize fissures with the past at the expense of continuities. The seemingly different new girl order may present a reshaping of normative femininities that provides many points of connection with the past. Looking at feminist scholarship across several decades suggests that young women in the contemporary period live the contradictions of femininity as in the past and continue to be subject to regulatory forms. The proliferation of femininities and the extension of girlhood can be read as further manifestations of a contradictory feminine condition that engages young women in ever more artful ways of managing the inconsistencies inherent in identifying as young and female.

### Take three girls

The following part of the article develops an empirically-led perspective on the experience of growing up female. Focusing on three generations of women in the same family and drawing inspiration from interview based accounts of youthful femininity as *lived* over time (McLeod and Yates 2006; Henderson et al. 2007), the biographical data points to the significance of family dynamics and socio-cultural positioning in the shaping of feminine subjectivities and the exercise of agency. In the interests of brevity the biographies of the three women are presented in summary form, highlighting key events in their lives and critical incidents as they emerged in the interview and finally, and a sketch of their health profile is offered.

### **Nancy, b. 1946, mother of Gillian, grandmother of Kim**

Nancy grew up in Edinburgh in an aspiring working-class family. Her father was a skilled labourer in the building trade, her mother a fulltime mum. She recalls her parents as strict. Mum was a good homemaker who commanded respect and used the wooden spoon on children who misbehaved. When Nancy was 17 her father was offered a job at the company's branch in Zimbabwe. Nancy had been accepted into a nurse training course in Edinburgh but gave it up stay with her family. "In those days you did what your parents wanted you to do" she says. In Zimbabwe they had a big house, lots of land and servants. As affluent ex-pats they mixed with other ex-pats and maintained a strong connection with Anglophone culture through British newspapers and cultural products. As a young woman Nancy was expected to go out with people from this community. She met her husband in her late teens and had first child at the age of 19. She had 3 more children in quick succession. The marriage broke down when her daughter Gillian was 5 and the youngest child was a few months old. Her husband banned her from seeing the children. She moved away, remarried, divorced because of his drinking problem, then moved back to Scotland 5 years later. Back in Scotland, she worked as a traffic warden and has recently retired. She didn't remarry. She was reunited with Gillian when Gillian was 27.

Health profile: no serious health concerns.

Born in the immediate post war period before the advent of second wave feminism, Nancy conjures up a girlhood in which family forms and gender roles were clearly defined and well established. Father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker provided the template for family life in which children knew their place and were expected to adhere to the rules of the household. Doing "what your parents wanted you to do" is a motif that haunts Nancy's account, indicating that she had little scope for self expression or for the exercise of agency. This form of subservience learned in girlhood plays a significant part in her life trajectory. Although she has a pathway to adulthood through nurse training, Nancy gives this up to migrate to Zimbabwe with her family. She does not recall feeling aggrieved or rebellious about this. Rather, Nancy rode the wave of her family's social mobility during this period, enjoying the comfort and affluence of expatriate life. As a young adult, however, she is not able to reproduce the domestic arrangements her parents

modelled so expertly. Marrying a man who is difficult and controlling, the marriage breaks down when her four children are still very young. Somewhat unusually, the children stay with their father while Nancy is banned from the house by her ex-husband, who also prohibits her from seeing the children. Nancy's second marriage lasts four years before she returns to Scotland and she doesn't see her children again until they are adults. Nancy's troubled personal relationships in adulthood produce a family narrative imbued with the trauma of fissured mother-child relationships. She has been unable to establish a relationship with her sons and, though she sees her daughters, feels unable to make up for lost time. They have to start again, renewing and rebuilding in the present.

### **Gillian, b. 1966, daughter of Nancy, mother of Kim**

Gillian was born and brought up in Zimbabwe by her father and stepmother once her mother left. She was sent to boarding school and recalled that her family had money and social capital during her girlhood. Her stepmother told the children that their mother had gone away. Gillian rebelled in her late teens and became pregnant, age 20. Her father wanted her to have the baby adopted but she insisted on keeping it despite feelings of shame and the breakdown of her relationship with the father of her child. Subsequently Gillian became estranged from her father, stepmother and from the father of the baby. She found a job in an insurance company while a single parent, met her husband, had 2 more children—Kim the elder of the two. Gillian's husband died of AIDS related illness after a troubled relationship during which he had many affairs and was mentally ill. The company Gillian worked for became embroiled in political conflict and Gillian grew concerned for the safety of her family. A family friend emigrated to England and she joined him in the UK to escape the trouble. They later married and had a child. Gillian was reunited with her mother in her late twenties. Her mother attended the birth of her youngest child.

Health profile: was anorexic during late teens/early twenties, now clinically obese, has mobility problems, respiratory problems and high blood pressure.

Born and brought up during the flowering of second wave feminism, Gillian could have been one of McRobbie's *Jackie* generation,

preparing for life as a wife and a mother through popular culture while a teenager, before absorbing the zeitgeist of feminist change and possibility as a young woman. Her biography suggests that she may have been touched by the spirit of the feminist movement if not directly involved. Unlike her mother, Gillian is not prepared to obey her parents and accommodate their rules and expectations. Refuting the values of her parents' generation, Gillian enacted a form of rebellion that entailed a swift transition to adulthood—becoming pregnant, leaving home, getting a job and living independently as a single mother—by the age of 20. Her belief in her own autonomy and determination to do what she wanted rather than what her father wanted came at a price, creating yet another rift in parent-child relations and the double edged bind/pleasure of being economically self sufficient yet without family support. Drawing strength from her maternal grandmother rather than her mother, Gillian invested in the matriarchal identity of 'strong woman,' built to survive and determined to protect herself and her children from the vagaries of troublesome men and hard times. In what can be seen as a recuperation of earlier family practices, Gillian modeled her parenting style on her grandmother, adopting a strict but caring approach, assigning children jobs around the house and punishing misdemeanours with a wooden spoon. But, unlike her grandmother, Gillian had always worked outside the home, climbing up the career ladder from secretary and clerical assistant to company buyer. In this respect Gillian became the main parental figure, maintaining the family's socio-economic status by taking up both male and female subject positions in the household.

**Kim, b. 1989, daughter of Gillian, grand-daughter of Nancy**

Kim was born and brought up in Zimbabwe until the age of 10. She has an older stepbrother, younger sister and younger stepbrother. Kim's father died when she was 8 though he was already estranged from the family. Her mother remarried, they all moved to England, where her mother had another child. Kim had trouble adjusting to life in the UK. She was consistently bullied at school, left 2 schools because of bullying and then joined a home schooling programme at the age of 15. The nephew of her stepfather came to stay at this time and shortly

after Kim fell pregnant. Her mother claimed that this young man bullied her and coerced her into sex. Kim has consistently refused to talk about it. Kim gave up formal schooling and lost contact with the father of her baby. She had the baby when she was 16 and continued to live at home. Kim completed a parenting course for young mothers while she was pregnant and she began to access an education course after the child was born.

Health profile: suffered post natal depression, developed an eating disorder after the birth of her daughter and also has recurring anxieties about her health: Gillian calls Kim “my little hypochondriac.”

Coming of age in the post-feminist period, Kim grew up with a taken-for-granted notion of gender equity. Being a girl has not been experienced by her as a barrier to education or aspiration. At school in Zimbabwe she worked hard, played football and cricket and did what she wanted to do. Academically successful, she had plans to become a lawyer and declared to her family that she would never have children. The move from Zimbabwe to the UK was traumatic for Kim. Her identity as high achieving, can-do girl made her unpopular with peers in her new social context. She was bullied at school and left formal education. While on a home schooling programme, Kim’s bedroom became her personal space, her classroom, and the site of her sexual initiation with her stepfather’s nephew—an event that she subsequently treated as a taboo subject. Her family and friends were shocked by her pregnancy—she ‘didn’t seem the type.’ As a single teenage mother Kim did not experience the shame that was visited upon her mother. Her family did not judge her. Rather, they supported her decision to have the baby and continued to play a key role in helping her to cope with the demands of young motherhood. Kim was contradictorily positioned within the family as a child with a child. She was reliant upon her mother and stepfather for financial and emotional support and was unlikely to achieve independence in the near future.

### Looking intergenerationally

Looking in cameo at the experiences of these women over three generations involves a recognition that femininity works on and through the body. Embodied notions of growing up girl are linked in a myriad



ways to matters of health, body image and sexuality. As an indicator of well-being and the ability to act on the world, the health of the body constitutes part of a socially situated story of gender. Maintaining a presence on the margins or at the centre may play a significant part in young women's experiences of embodiment and sense of self. Such experience can be seen in real and symbolic terms—real in the sense of confinement, where you are allowed to be/feel entitled to be and where you feel comfortable shapes young women's lives in significant ways, and symbolic in the sense that taking up space/lurking on the fringes, being visible or invisible can be played out on and through the body. Nancy's account of herself as a young person subject to the authority of others consolidates her marginal status in the family. This is followed by the experience of marriage which positions her in the subordinate status of wife. Her gendered status make family relations difficult to maintain post-divorce—to the point where she 'disappears' from her children's lives. Gillian and Kim break with the 'having no say and no control' persona. They maintain a presence in their family and retain some autonomy and agency. However, their presence in the family is not entirely untroubled. Both women develop eating disorders as young adults, suggesting that at the level of the psycho-social the idea of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility may be difficult to resolve. Eating too much or not eating enough, as featured in Gillian and Kim's health profile, can be seen to be an embodied response to a socio-cultural context that is in dialogue with the dynamics of space and gender—a way in which women comment upon their legitimacy to exist in particular spaces.

The agency of the three women over time provides a commentary upon changing family forms and their relationship to parental authority. The grandmother, Nancy, expresses restricted forms of agency in a pre-feminist era where parents had the last word and women were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Her daughter Gillian developed a heightened sense of herself as agentic and autonomous in keeping with the spirit of second wave feminism but experiences the shame of rebellion and subsequent estrangement from her family. Growing up in post-feminist times, Gillian's daughter Kim is poised to reap the benefits of intergenerational change and new times as the 'can-do' girl of late modernity. Becoming a teenage mother at the age of 16, however, positions her contradictorily as agentic and dependent, 'choosing'

a biographical path that entails reliance upon the family, the curtailment of educational opportunity and limited mobility.

Thinking about the women's biographies in relation to the feminist scholarship discussed above it is possible to trace intergenerational shifts in the experience of girlhood from submission to patriarchal authority to rebellion against parental authority and finally to accommodation within the family. This pattern mirrors key themes in feminist research that document the marginal status of girls in the 1970s to the present era of active and visible new femininities. In the biographical accounts girlhood appears to be less proscribed over time. However, this is only part of the story. The accounts of Nancy, Gillian and Kim indicate that the experience of girlhood is closely bound up with family dynamics and intergenerational resources, conversations and silences that shape the contours of young women's lives. The crucial role of the family in the shaping of feminine subjectivity is largely under-developed and little recognized in cultural studies approaches to femininity and culture. Preferring, rather to focus upon the significance of friendship groups, subcultures and participation in popular culture, many studies in this tradition overlook the family relations that provide young women with a key site of identification and dis-identification that has a powerful impact upon the unfolding of gendered lives. Furthermore, such studies commonly overlook the importance of critical incidents that reconfigure family relations and gendered experience. Divorce, migration, social mobility and early pregnancy take on special significance within this intergenerational case study as events that have a dramatic impact on girlhood and subsequent womanhood across generations.

The overarching theme of this intergenerational story is one of downward social mobility, fading affluence, declining social capital and the lack of cultural capital. In less than a decade Gillian and her family move from occupying a position of affluence in Zimbabwe to living on a sink estate<sup>2</sup> in a new town in the UK, a loss of status that signals a troubled reintegration into working class life on the borders of social exclusion. Gillian recalls leaving Zimbabwe with "three children and four suitcases," an emblematic memory of who they were and what was left. Downward mobility for this family appears congruent with growing health problems and increasing reliance upon state support, social services and medical services. Focusing upon intergenerational matters illustrates the importance of family narratives and social expe-

rience across generations and the ways in which these have an impact upon family members as agentic beings and gendered subjects. Locating the trajectory of the family in terms of social mobility as going up or going down offers the possibility of 'talking back' to key themes of late modernity such as individualization and the biographical project of self. Looking intergenerationally points to the class inflected nature of social experience and the ways in which biographies exist as complex configurations of time, place and intergenerational dialogue.

## Conclusion

This article has considered the ways in which new femininities take shape in the contemporary period. Drawing upon feminist scholarship from the 1960s to the present, it charts the increased visibility of young women from marginal subjects defined by the domestic sphere to active participants in the public arena of education, work and leisure. The article documents the processes of social change that make new femininities available and desirable. The feminization of labour in postindustrial times, changing gender relations and high water marks of achievement in the educational sphere set the scene for the emergence of young women as the ideal neo-liberal subjects. On the other side of the success story are the girls who remain untouched by the gold-dust of late modernity. Working-class and poor, these young women become positioned as the 'at risk' subjects of new times, prone to early motherhood, downward social mobility and social exclusion. Feminist researchers point to the class-stratified character of new femininities in which middle-class and working-class girls become 'each other's Other' (Walkerdine et al. 2001). Further feminist scholarship suggests that the 'can do' girl success story should be viewed critically as productive of new technologies of the self (McRobbie 2006; following Foucault 1978) where women collude in the competing demands of consumer culture and late modern governmentality. Looking at these themes through the lens of intergenerational research blurs the categories that characterize late modernity. Through analysis of an intergenerational case study of three women in the same family it is possible to glimpse something of the messiness of feminine subjectivity as it unfolds over time. Socio-economic circumstances play a key part in these women's

lives, but in a haphazard, stone-skimming way that is consequential but not determining. Kim, the youngest member of the intergenerational chain manages to embody both the ‘can do’ girl and the ‘at risk’ girl during her short life, moving from one to another in ways that resonate with family dynamics, socio-economic circumstances and biographical problems. Her story, and that of her mother and grandmother exist as illustrative examples of *lived lives* that are markedly more intricate and complex than the categories social theorists conjure up to speak about them.




---

Mary Jane Kehily is Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University, UK. She has research interests in gender and sexuality, narrative and identity and popular culture and has published widely in these areas. Her books include: *Gender, Sexuality and Schooling, shifting agendas in social learning*, (Routledge 2002) and, with Anoop Nayak, *Gender, Youth and Culture, young masculinities and femininities* (Palgrave 2008).

---



## Acknowledgement

With thanks to two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

## Notes

1. The Making of Modern Motherhoods is an ESRC funded project 2005 to 2007, with Rachel Thomson, Lucy Hadfield and Sue Sharpe. Award no: RES 148-25-0057. For a full account of collaborative work with Anoop Nayak see Nayak and Kehily 2008.

2. An area of social housing associated with urban deprivation and lack of opportunity—see MacDonald and Marsh (2006) for a study of young people in these settings.

## References

- Aapola, Sinikka., Marnina. Gonick, and Anita. Harris. 2005. *Young Femininity, girlhood, power and social change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Bjerrum Nielsen, Harriet and Monica Rudberg. 1994. *Psychological Gender and Modernity*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

- Bloustein, Geraldine. 1998. "It's different to a mirror 'cos it talks to you': teenage girls, video cameras and identity." in *Wired Up: Young people and the electronic media*, ed. Sue. Howard. London: UCL Press.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. 1997. *Screen Tastes, soap opera to satellite dishes*. London: Routledge.
- Canaan, Joyce. 1986. "Why a 'slut' is a 'slut': cautionary tales of middle class teenage girls' morality." in *Symbolising America*, ed. Herve Varenne. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Canaan, Joyce. 1991. "Is 'doing nothing' just boys' play? Integrating feminist and cultural studies perspectives on working-class masculinities." in *Off Centre: Feminism and cultural studies*, eds. Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey. London: Routledge.
- Chatterton, Paul. and Hollands, Robert. (2003) *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power*, London: Routledge.
- Epstein, Debbie., Jannette Ellwood, Valerie Hey, and Janet Maw, eds. 1998. *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Trans. Robert Hurley. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self Identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gonick, Marnina. 2006. "Between 'girl power' and 'reviving Ophelia': constituting the neoliberal girl subject." *National Association of Women's Studies Journal* 18, no. 2:1–23.
- Griffin, Christine. 1985. *Typical Girls? Young women from school to the job market*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart and Tony Jefferson, eds. 1976. *Resistance Through Rituals: youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. London: Hutchinson.
- Harris, Anita 2004. *Future Girl: young women in the twenty-first century*. New York: Routledge.
- Henderson, Sheila J, Janet Holland, Sheena McGrellis, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson. 2007. *Inventing Adulthood: a biographical approach to youth transitions*. London: Sage/The Open University.
- Hey, Valerie. 1997. *The Company She Keeps: an ethnography of girls' friendship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hollands, Robert. 1995. *Friday night, Saturday night: youth cultural identification in the post industrial city*. Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Hermes. Joke. 1995. *Reading Women's Magazines*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hollows, Joanne and Rachel Moseley. 2006. "Popularity contests: the meaning of popular feminism." in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, eds. J. Hollows and R. Moseley. Oxford: Berg.
- Jackson, Carolyn. 2006. "Wild girls? An exploration of 'ladette' cultures in secondary schools." *Gender and Education* 18, no. 4: 339–360.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. 2005. "Birds on the wire: troping teenage girlhood through telephony in mid twentieth century media culture." *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5: 568–601.

- Kehily, Mary Jane. 2002. *Sexuality, Gender and Schooling, shifting agendas in sexual learning*. London: Routledge.
- Lees, Sue. 1986. *Losing Out: Sexuality and adolescent girls*. London: Hutchinson.
- Lincoln, S. 2001. *Teenage girls' bedroom cultures: codes versus zones, unpublished paper*. Manchester Metropolitan University.
- MacDonald, Robert and J. Marsh. 2006. *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's poor neighbourhoods*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- McLeod, Julie and Lyn Yates. 2006. *Making Modern Lives, subjectivity, schooling and social change*. Albany, NY: SUNY.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1978. "Working class girls and the culture of femininity." in *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Women Take Issue*, London: Hutchinson.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1981. "Just like a Jackie story" in *Feminism for Girls: An Adventure Story*, eds. A. McRobbie & T. McCabe. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1991. "Jackie Magazine: romantic individualism and the teenage girl." in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. London: Macmillan.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1994. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. "Reflections on Young Women and Consumer Culture." Paper presented at HM Treasury, London, as part of the AHRC Cultures of Consumption Programme.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2005. "Notes on 'What not to Wear' and post-feminist symbolic violence." *The Sociological Review* 52, no.2: 97-109.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2006. "Top Girls: young women and the post feminist sexual contract." Paper presented at ESRC Identities and Social Action public lecture, The Open University, Milton Keynes
- McRobbie, Angela and Jenny Garber. 1975. 'Girls and subcultures,' in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth subcultures in postwar Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. London: Hutchinson.
- Nayak, Anoop and Mary Jane Kehily. 2008. *Gender, Youth and Culture, young masculinities and femininities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Sonnet, Esther. 1999. "'Erotic fiction by women for women': The pleasures of post-feminist heterosexuality." *Sexualities* 2, no.2: 167-187.
- Walkerdine Valerie, Helen Lucey and June Melody. 2001. *Growing up Girl, psychosocial explorations of gender and class*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour, how working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.
- Willis, Paul. 1990. *Common culture: symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.