The Panic Over Girls

Mike Males, Konopka Lecture, February 11, 2009

One of the most enduring qualities of civilization, eon after eon, is elders' panic toward girls. The fears are always the same: "Today's girls"—whenever "today" is—are shockingly brazen, promiscuous, and unladylike as no generation ever was before, menacing the existence of culture itself. But what is most surprising about the latest panic is that even after decades of massive change in the status of women, the fears toward 21st century girls—including those raised by seemingly progressive entities—still recapitulate the same ancient anxieties.

Books by scholarly and professional authors, pundits' commentaries, and mass-media splashes on girls' "new" pathologies perpetuate the bizarre combination of concern for girls' delicateness and fury at girls' aggressiveness:

- Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard R. Spivak (*Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice: How We Can Stop Girls' Violence*)
- Laura Sessions Stepp (*Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*)
- James Garbarino (*See Jane Hit : Why Girls Are Growing More Violent and What We Can Do About It*)
- Jean Twenge (*Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*)
- Mary Pipher (*Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*)
- M. Gigi Durham (*The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It*)
- Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne (*So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*)
- Rosalind Wiseman (*Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*)
- Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon (*Girl Wars: 12 Strategies that Will End Female Bullying*)

I've received protests to my harsh criticisms of these authors pointing out there are certainly a fraction of girls with problems—eating disorders, for example, or depression—and these authors are performing a valuable service to help that fraction. If that were the way these authors presented the issue, I'd have no problem.

But these books and accompanying public discussion go far beyond legitimate concerns; they loudly proclaim *all* girls are messed up and affirm the authors and their peers as morally superior, nicer, and mentally healthier than the entire generation of girls today. They call names, they indulge gossip, apply atrocious scholarly ethics, and curry favor with their elite peers by demeaning a younger generation they know can't fight back—exactly like the high-school "queen bees" and bullies they berate.

Name calling? Popular psychologist-author Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* brands girls "moody, demanding, distant, sullen secretive, depressed, anorexic, alcoholic, traumatized, fragile…saplings" suffering rampant "eating disorders, school phobias, self-

inflicted injuries… great unhappiness…and anxiety…" (all that before we're halfway through her first chapter!). In *Queen Bees and Wannabes*' first 15 pages, Rachel Wiseman calls girls "confused," "insecure," "lashing out," "totally obnoxious," "moody," "cruel," "sneaky," "lying," "mean," "exclusive," and "catty." "GIRLS ARE MEAN," emphasizes *Girl Wars* co-author Cheryl Dellasega (referring to those who haven't gone through her "relational aggression" program).

Gossip and character assassination? Harvard School of Public Health professors Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard Spivak warn of "increased rates of girls' arrests for violent crime, including homicide." Loyola University psychologist James Garbarino, accounces shocked Americans are witnessing a "recent, dramatic increase in violence by troubled girls." "The seriousness of [girls'] behaviors is reaching new proportions, resulting in criminal charges, school shootings, and suicides," Dellasega declares.

Commentators knew just about nothing about the Gloucester, Massachusetts, high school girls they falsely accused of forging a "teen pregnancy pact," but they still indulged sneering disparagements, later repeated in commentators' vilifications of the pregnancy of 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's 17-year-old daughter. *CBS Evening News'* crusade against girls, including inflammatory reports on binge drinking, Internet "dangers," (November 19-22, 2007), and violence typified the mind-numbingly identical girl-bashing reports. All featured dire emotionalisms by self-interested sources and zero factual evidence (unless staged videos of a minor scuffles, a girl's slap in a *Harry Potter* movie, and "Powerpuff Girls" cartoons are "evidence"). But when Pennsylvania State University criminologist Darrell Steffensmeier and the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Girls Study Group released comprehensive compilations of decades of solid measures showing girls' violence had not risen, commentators and the major media couldn't get interested.

Many authors go to ludicrous extremes to manufacture "evidence" that *girls' new freedoms and successes are making them sicker*. "From 1977 to 2000, there was a 13% increase in the number of women drivers involved in fatal, alcohol-related crashes," Martin declared, citing a notoriously unreliable lobby. (In fact, the numbers of women driving increased by 49% over that period, so women's drunken driving *rates* actually plummeted.) "Girls are having more trouble now than thirty years ago, when I was a girl," says Pipher, blaming "cultural changes" that leave girls unprotected. (In fact, in Nebraska of the mid-1960s when Pipher was growing up, girls were in much more danger of violent death and early pregnancy than in the 1990s or 2000s.) "As guns become more permissible and available to girls, that will unleash more aggression in them… This may already be happening," warns Garbarino. (In fact, the murder arrest rate for girls has plunged to an all-time low, as have girls' fatalities from firearms, and juvenile girls comprise fewer than 1% of homicide arrestees.)

I'll be equally blunt: Most popular books and media commentaries on girls are sloppy, mean, conceited works of fiction. They rely heavily on selective anecdotes, personal impressions, and quips. Their scary numbers—including the few for which they provide a source that can be checked—are wildly exaggerated, taken out of context, and often just made up. Had authors branded Jews as mean, Hispanics as promiscuous, or Arabs as mentally deranged, the authors would have been banished from respectable discourse as bigots. Why is it any less bigoted to use these same tactics to disparage an entire generation of young women?

This Is New?

Every older generation recycles the same panics about girls decade after decade, century after century. The 1940s and '50s, for example, brought a barrage of government-sponsored docudramas featuring lusty teen girls seducing and robbing innocent men, laughingly gunning down motorists, dying in gunfights with cops. "They start with stealing lipstick, finish with a slaying!" blared "frank truth" films like *Girls Under 21, Girls of the Night, So Young So Bad, Delinquent Daughters,* and *Girls in the Night*. Best-selling early-1950s books blazoned gun-brandishing teen girls and titles like *The Young and Violent, Jailbait*, *Juvenile Jungle*, *Teenage Crime Wave, Live Fast Die Young*, and (my favorite) *I'll Fix You*. Major magazines like *Life*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Ladies Home Journal* warned that hundreds of teenage "pickup" girls as young as 12 were making "the sex delinquency of young girls" the worst problem cities faced. "Are These Our Children?" (*Look*, 1942) and "Boston's Bad Girls," (*Pic*, 1943) clarioned "Everytown, USA," terrorized by girls gone berserk: "Arrests for drunkenness of girls are up 40 per cent… prostitution, 64 percent… truancy cases are up 400 percent… sex offenses involving teen-age girls, up 200 per cent… the average age of offenders is fifteen…"

Ah, yes... the tranquil Fiftie

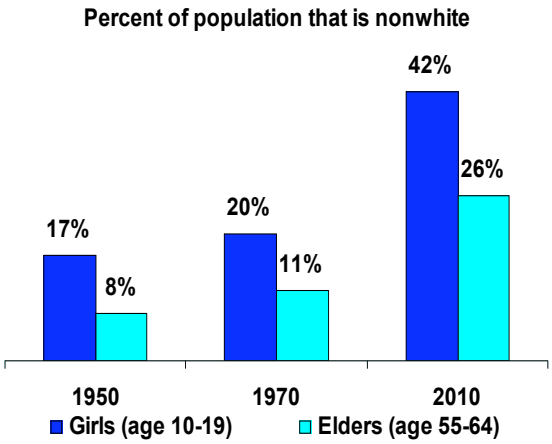
We also see a new round of books by Gen Xers citing their own sad examples. Courtney Martin and a number of self-proclaimed feminist authors claim today's troubled young female stars… Lindsay, Britney, Paris, Nicole, Amy, etc… suffer from alcohol, drug, and mental problems unheard-of in Hollywood of yore. David Letterman grills Nicole Richie: "What's wrong with young Hollywood today?" *Today?* Remember Judy Garland, Mary Pickford, Patsy Cline, Bette Davis, Veronica Lake, Rita Hayworth, Billie Holiday, Joan Crawford, Betty Grable, Maria Callas, Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, Lana Turner, and a few thousand others in Hollywood's perpetual roster of drinking and misery (and the leading men were much worse). Even Audrey Hepburn, an actress of exemplary behavior and temperament, swallowed some brandy to warm up one cold day in Paris on the set of *How to Steal a Million* and wound up crashing a Fox studio car through the portable stage lights—an incident seen as amusing in 1965 but would have been splashed as a Dr. Drew-tabloid horror story today

Like the authors above, I could simply spout my personal prejudice—which, from three decades of work in communities, families, wilderness work projects, and teaching, is that today's girls are remarkably well-adjusted and enjoyable as a generation and would make remarkable leaders. But what I "see" and what I speculate about young women today, along with whatever self-flattering views I might harbor about my morals and adolescence, tell you about *me,* not about "girls today." As a certifiable Baby Boomer, it pains me to confess: *My head does not contain the totality of the universe*.

Self-Righteous Girl-Fearing

I argue that the intensity of fear and meanness toward girls today is new and uniquely irrational. It's important to realize that past fears were raised by authorities whose societies were much more racially segregated and cohesive than today's and therefore much more committed to the future of their children. They represented family-style squabbles more than the us-versus-them tone of today's girl-bashing.

Why do we remember the Fifties as a time of safety and tranquility even though it was actually a more dangerous time to grow up? Back in 1950, 85% of America's youth, like 90% of its grownups, were non-Hispanic whites. Today, over 40% of youth are Hispanic, black, Asian, Native, or of mixed race, a visible reality in many cities and large states. Modern fears of youth in general and girls in particular occur against a backdrop of accelerating social and technological change along with a development unprecedented in any previous culture: transition from a majority race to a multiculture in which no race or ethnic group forms a majority. This transition will occur among youth by 2030—and probably sooner—and in the county as a whole by 2050, the census reports. California and most major cities have already undergone the transition. Even in Minneapolis, a majority of youth are nonwhite today, which may explain patently false statements by the city's police chief that youth now cause more than half of all violent crime and the national press's eagerness to breathlessly repeat it even though it is amply contradicted by the police department's own figures.



I argue that today's angrier, more intense fear of girls is tied strongly to racial transition. The claims made about girls… that they're more aggressive, violent, promiscuous, indulging wanton sex and childbearing… are stereotypes traditionally associated with racist concepts of minority women. Racial change combined with technological advances—new communications and information avenues, mainly through the Internet, that give girls broad, independent access to global cultures and contacts—is raising great fear among older Americans. Indeed, many commentators are clamoring to restrict young people's, especially girls', Internet use with the goal, as one authority argued (in the very liberal magazine, *Atlantic*), of preventing girls from going online without adult supervision. Virtually every TV station and newspaper now has a reporter dedicated to trumpeting the dangers of the Internet, which in reality appear to be virtually nil when researchers have examined the tiny number of actual cases.

In fact, girls appear adept at protecting themselves online and are safer there than in virtually any other venue, including home, school, and church. As far as I can find, the panic over girls' behaviors and safety in general appears almost completely unwarranted, while real dangers that menace a fraction of girls are almost completely ignored. Let's consider, then, what the best information shows about today's generation of girls.

Table 1. Percentages of high school senior females

responding to Monitoring the Future:	2005	2000	1990	1980	1975
Happiness					
I'm "very happy"	23%	23%	18%	18%	21%
Satisfied with life as a whole	66%	64%	65%	66%	63%
Having fun	66%	65%	68%	67%	64%
Enjoys fast pace and changes of today's world	50%	56%	58%	42%	45%
Daily participation in active sports/exercising	36%	35%	34%	38%	36%
Satisfaction with (percent agreeing)…					
Yourself?	70%	71%	69%	71%	66%
Your friends?	86%	83%	87%	85%	85%
Your parents?	67%	68%	65%	69%	65%
Your material possessions?	75%	73%	71%	75%	75%
Your personal safety?	71%	69%	66%	67%	68%
Your education?	70%	64%	64%	64%	56%
Your job?	60%	56%	60%	54%	56%
Values (percent agreeing)					
Important to be a leader in my community	46%	40%	33%	20%	19%
Important to make a contribution to society	70%	65%	62%	52%	55%
Important to have latest music, etc. fashions	51%	59%	70%	78%	77%
Important to have latest-style clothes	39%	42%	57%	47%	42%
Wants to have lots of money	59%	57%	63%	41%	35%
Wants job with status and prestige	67%	65%	69%	60%	52%
Wants job that provides lots of money	86%	86%	86%	89%	84%
Wants job with opportunity to help others	90%	88%	92%	91%	92%
Women should have equal job opportunity	95%	97%	96%	88%	82%
Wants to correct social/economic inequality	39%	39%	44%	35%	37%
Happier to accept things than create change	35%	39%	36%	39%	37%
Depression/pessimism					
Dissatisfied with self	12%	10%	13%	10%	12%
Sometimes thinks "I am no good at all"	24%	25%	28%	27%	28%
I'm "not too happy"	13%	14%	12%	17%	13%
Feels I am "not a person of worth"	8%	7%	6%	5%	5%
Often feels "left out of things"	29%	34%	36%	34%	33%
Feels there's usually no one I can talk to	5%	6%	6%	5%	6%
Feels "I can't do anything right"	14%	14%	12%	11%	10%
Wishes "I had more good friends"	44%	52%	50%	46%	50%
Not having fun	17%	20%	16%	13%	19%
Can't get ahead because others stop me	20%	26%	26%	21%	22%
Thinks "things change too quickly" today	46%	44%	44%	56%	54%
Thinks "times ahead of me will be tougher"	41%	42%	45%	54%	47%
Don't participate in sports/exercise (<1/month)	22%	22%	25%	20%	22%
Feels "people like me don't have a chance"	5%	5%	5%	5%	6%

*Source: Monitoring the Future (1975-2005).

Calming trends

I don't know what 30 million diverse girls ages 10-24 as a gender or generation are thinking, and I'm thoroughly unqualified to guess—and not just because of my gender, age, and last name. Virtually none of those making loud claims about girls today

actually bothered to discern what they think. Instead, they presumed to speak for girls, imposing their own views and quoting only those girls who make their points. I don't propose to copy that arrogance.

How, then, can we determine what girls as a generation are thinking and doing? There are two promising approaches, and if they turn out to be in agreement, we may have some confidence in them. One technique was in many ways pioneered by Dr. Konopka: the survey of a representative sample of girls. As you know, she took another crucial step: the use of focus groups in which girls could expand and clarify what their survey answers meant. Her snapshots of 1960s and 1970s girls still stand out as the best general research on attitudes I can find.

With regard to girls' attitudes, there are only two, consistent annual, long-term surveys: the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future,* which has surveyed a half-million high school seniors since 1975, and UCLA's *The American Freshman*, which has surveyed 16 million first-year college students since 1966. Together, these surveys reach about 90% of young women.

What do these surveys typically show? That very large majorities of modern girls are happy, well connected to friends, getting along well with parents, optimistic, and healthy, satisfied with material possessions, enjoying the fast pace of change, less fearful for personal safety, less likely to abuse alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, and definitely not depressed (Tables 1 and 2). Not only that, but these indexes have improved over the last 20 to 30 years. In particular, self-reported depression among girls has plummeted, along with much greater satisfaction with schools, jobs, optimism about the future, and eagerness to assume positions of leadership. Forty-six percent of high school girls today want to be leaders, a massive increase over their parents' generation (19% in 1975).

The "Generation Me" Myth

Interestingly, one thing these surveys *don't* show is that girls today are more narcissistic. In fact, questions on these topics show that while girls' happiness and sense of accomplishment are higher, their self-esteem is no higher than it was 30 years ago.

Those who argue that self-esteem, happiness, and accomplishment are not related to each other have a point, but they are grotesquely wrong when they disparage girls today as overly self-important, more miserable and greedy, and less accomplished than past generations. That is just malarkey.

Table 2. Percentages of college first-year women

who say they (are)…	2006	1990	1970
Aiming to obtain high degree (PhD, EdD, MD, JD, etc)	32%	32%	12%
Financing education through loans (first asked 1978)	64%	42%	27%
Planning to work off campus to pay for education	31%	21%	23%
Drank beer in the last year	37%	51%	43%
Smoked cigarettes in the last year	5%	8%	11%
Agree an individual can't change society	24%	24%	34%
Think married women should stay home	16%	18%	33%
Agree it's important to be community leader	35%	34%	12%
Agree its important to be well off financially	72%	68%	25%

Source: Higher Education Research Institute (1966-2006).

Let's look at two specific trends, the first of which is trumpeted and the latter ignored. It's true that girls (and to a lesser extent, boys) both in high school and college say one of their goals is to make more money (59% today, versus 35% in 1975). Critics like Twenge claim that proves today's girls are more materialistic and selfish than our noble, altruistic generations that valued developing "a good philosophy of life." So, how did we selfless Baby Boomers become the richest generations in the history of the world—the first older Americans, in fact, to be richer than our children and grandkids?

Why, other than fashion-driven greed, might girls today want to earn more money? There are some obvious alternative answers. First, girls suffered 50% divorce rates among their parents, part of the increasing turn away from traditional marriage among all ages, and have learned that they must acquire the means to support themselves. College undergraduate students now carry average student loan debts of $20,000 each. Today, 64% of girls finance college through loans, compared to 27% in 1970, and one-third of college women work full time, versus fewer than one in four 35 years ago.

Further, the real incomes of Americans under age 25 have actually declined over the last 30 years even as incomes among middle-agers rocketed upward. Girls could be seeking more money because they have to, as a healthy and practical necessity in a world in which family, husband, and government cannot be counted upon to pay their way. Interestingly, while women in college say they are more stressed today—more are balancing both work and education—the percentage saying they're depressed fell over the last two decades, to around 9% today.

Table 3. Percent of college first-year women saying they feel:

Years	Depressed	Overwhelmed by all I have to do
1985-89	11.4%	25.8
1990-94	11.0%	30.9
1995-99	10.4%	37.7
2000-04	9.3%	35.9
2005-06	8.7%	36.8
Change	-24%	+43%

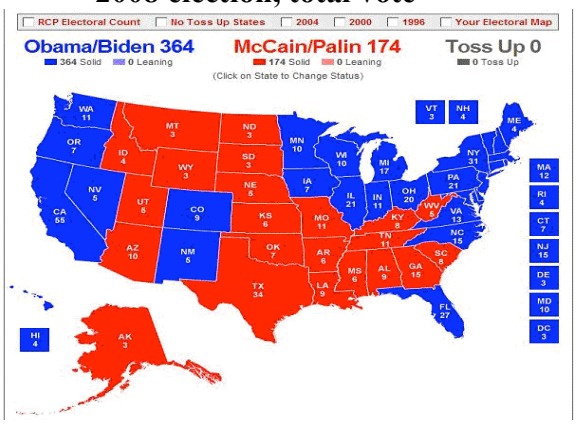
Source: Higher Education Research Institute (1985-2006) (questions first asked in 1985).

The other trend, which has been completely ignored, is girls' interest in improving society. As the percentage of girls who say they crave the latest fashions and consumer styles dropped from 77% in 1975 to 51% today, the percentage saying it is important to make a contribution to society rose from 55% to 70%. The best evidence indicates a move away from spending on themselves and toward more volunteer work and community participation.

Whether you welcome or fear girl revolution might be reflected in one outcome: exit polls for the 2008 presidential election indicate that had only young women ages 18-29 been allowed to vote, Obama would have won with a 68% percent margin, carrying 43 states with 511 electoral votes; McCain would have carried only 6 states (Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming) with 27 electoral votes. Mock elections indicate that girls in high school and middle school are even more liberal.

Many of you are aware of how dramatic the increase in young women's achievements in high school, enrollment in college, graduation and pursuit of advanced degrees, and now the invasion of professional spheres has been. Girls are taking over.

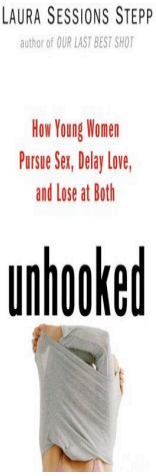
2008 election, total vote

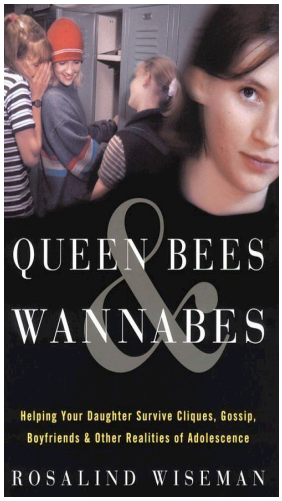


2008 election, young women's vote

In 1970, 30% of males and 23% of females age 18-24 were enrolled in school; today, 32% of males and 46% of females—including 60% of females ages 18-21. The female proportion doubled as the male proportion grew only slightly. Today, 58% of all undergraduate students, 58% of all bachelor's degrees, 60% of master's degrees, and even 50% of professional and PhD. degrees are women. If we look at traditionally male dominated fields, women now comprise 42% of all degrees in physics, 45% in mathematics, and 50% in business, law enforcement, law, and medicine. Where women still lag most severely is in full-time faculty positions and Congress.

The advancement of girls and young women into all areas of larger society has engendered great anxiety—and not just among conservatives and traditionalists who believe society and women themselves are damaged when women move outside the home. Just as we did a century ago when the battle for women's suffrage was raging, we now hear dire warnings that 21st century girls suffer unprecedented crises of mental disturbances, depression, materialism,





promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, violence, crime, and sexual and violent victimizations by boys, adult male predators, and peer girls.

But where are these crises? The best information shows massive declines in girls' serious crime (especially murder), violent death, self-destructive deaths, violent victimizations (especially rape and sexual assault), pregnancy, abortion, early motherhood, school dropout, and abuse of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (Tables 4-8).

Table 4. Percentages of high school senior females

telling Monitoring the Future they:	2005	2000	1990	1980	1977
Smoked cigarettes daily	20%	32%	30%	41%	45%
Smoked daily before 9th grade	4%	13%	10%	17%	12%
Drank alcohol (more than a few sips)	74%	78%	89%	92%	91%
Drank alcohol before 9th grade	19%	28%	32%	24%	21%
Binge drinking (5+ drinks in a row, past 2 weeks)	23%	24%	24%	30%	26%
Binge drinking more than 1 time	13%	14%	14%	20%	16%
Used amphetamines	5%	8%	9%	17%	16%
By physician's prescription	5%	6%	5%	11%	15%
Without a prescription	9%	11%	13%	25%	22%
Used amphetamines before 9th grade	0.60%	1.20%	2.60%	1.00%	1.00%
Used marijuana/LSD/other psychedelics*	45%	58%	44%	64%	60%
Used sedatives/barbiturates/tranquilizers*	10%	10%	8%	19%	26%
Used heroin/other narcotics/cocaine*	11%	13%	8%	14%	11%

*Treats those who used more than one drug as a single user of each drug.
Source: Monitoring the Future (1975-2005).

Table 5. Teens aren't getting pregnant and having babies and abortions at younger ages today

	Pregnancies per 1,000 teenage females by age group					
	Pregnancies		Births		Fetal loss/abortion	
Year	10-14	15-19	10-14	15-19	10-14	15-19
1950	*	*	0.9	80.6	*	*
1955	*	*	0.9	89.9	*	*
1960	*	*	0.8	89.1	*	*
1965	*	*	0.8	70.4	*	*
1970	*	*	1.2	68.0	*	*
1976	3.2	101.4	1.3	53.5	1.9	47.9
1980	3.2	110.0	1.1	53.0	2.1	57.0
1985	3.6	106.9	1.2	51.3	2.4	55.6
1990	3.5	116.3	1.4	59.9	2.1	56.4
1995	3.0	101.1	1.3	56.8	1.7	44.3
2000	2.1	84.5	0.8	47.7	1.3	36.8
2004	1.6	72.2	0.7	41.1	0.9	31.1
2006	*	*	0.6	41.9	*	*
Change, 2004/1976	-50%	-29%	-54%	-22%	-53%	-35%

*Indicates no data are available for that year. Miscarriage rates were higher in earlier years, and illegal abortions were estimated by public health authorities at 750,000 to 2 million per year prior to legalization in 1972.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics (2008).

Never in the time periods we can accurately measure have girls been healthier, less criminal, less endangered, less suicidal, and suffering fewer bad outcomes than they are today. These measurable outcome trends are exactly what we would expect to find among a young female population that reports feeling happier, better connected, and more eager to accomplish big things.

To show the pathological extremes to which the girl-fearing authors have had to resort to make girls appear more messed up, let's take two common claims: that girls are getting more violent and that girls are suffering widespread and increasing dating violence and endangerment from exposure to the Internet and larger society. Recently, two groups of researchers examined all available measures of violence over the last 25 to 30 years and came to the same conclusion I did from looking at the same sources: there is no evidence that girls are more violent today, and claims that they are result from anecdotes and prejudices, not trends (Tables 6-8). In fact, girls are less likely to commit homicide and robbery and far less likely to suffer rape, murder, and assault than generations of the past back to the mid-1960s—before that, measures are incomplete.

Table 6. Youth index crimes per 100,000 pop. **Factors influencing youth crime**

Years	Females	Males	Adult arrest rate	Youth poverty rate
1975-79	1,067.9	4,719.1	527.8	16.3%
1980-84	1,032.7	4,329.4	683.0	20.8%
1985-89	1,160.5	4,499.9	831.1	20.1%
1990-94	1,340.7	4,670.2	939.9	21.8%
1995-99	1,361.5	3,731.9	864.7	19.4%
2000-04	1,069.4	2,422.4	718.7	16.9%
2005-07	968.3	2,107.7	727.2	17.7%
Change, 1975-2007	-9%	-55%	+38%	+9%
Change, 1995-2007	-29%	-44%	-16%	-9%

Note: Index offenses designated by the FBI are murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Youth arrest rates are arrests of persons under age 18 per 100,000 population ages 10-17 by sex; adult arrest rates are arrests of persons ages 30-54 per 100,000 population that age.

Source: FBI (1975-2007). Each year's arrest totals for each population group are adjusted for the proportion of the national population covered by the report and are divided by the population of that group for the year to produce rates, averaged for five-year periods shown.

Table 7. Violence arrest rates per 100,000 girls ages 10-17 by type of offense

		Part I violent felonies				Misdemeanor
Years	All violent	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	assault
1975-79	62.9	1.1	0.5	21.1	40.2	115.7
1980-84	66.4	1.1	0.6	19.9	44.9	138.4
1985-89	80.6	1.1	0.9	20.1	58.4	210.9
1990-94	124.0	1.4	0.8	31.3	90.6	314.1
1995-99	135.4	1.1	0.7	26.4	107.2	453.8
2000-04	108.5	0.8	0.6	14.6	92.5	479.5
2005-07	106.8	0.6	0.5	19.5	86.3	505.6
Change:						
2005-07 v 1975-79	+70%	-46%	-1%	-8%	+115%	+336%
2005-07 v 1995-99	-21%	-46%	-29%	-26%	-19%	+11%

There is only one offense—arrests for mostly minor assaults—for which girls show an increase in recent decades… but guess what? *Every age group and both sexes show increases in this offense.* In fact, women in their 40s and 50s show much larger increases in assault arrests than girls do. So, what could cause assault to increase as other violent crimes fell? New laws, initiated in the 1980s, required police to make arrests in domestic violence cases involving evidence of assault, making criminal offenses of cases once considered household and disciplinary matters. In short, there was no increase in violence, only an increase in police response.

Table 8. Violent crime arrests per 100,000 population by age, sex

	Youth age 10-17		Adult age 30-54	
Year	Female	Male	Female	Male
1981	65.1	532.0	40.9	341.4
1985	67.4	526.3	44.1	353.4
1990	104.2	742.1	65.9	488.4
1995	152.9	845.9	103.9	538.7
2000	117.3	497.6	91.5	401.9
2007	104.4	474.5	107.0	314.5
Change:				
2007 v 1981	+60%	-11%	+161%	+3%
2007 v 1995	-32%	-44%	+3%	-42%

Note: 1981 is the first year statistics by detailed age and gender were compiled.

Second, are girls being beaten, stalked, and harassed more today by boyfriends and online predators? As noted, public health statistics and girls' self reports indicate that girls today are uniquely safe from violent victimizations (Tables 9, 10). There may indeed be quite a few dumb, rapist men lurking online—"To Catch a Predator" finds these men can be school principals, coaches, cops, youth workers, clergy, businessmen, fathers, even Homeland Security officers. So, it would seem that the message of this show—if there is a valid one—should be that young people are in danger going to school, church, stores, being around cops, or even being at home where, unlike online, they encounter predators directly.

Table 9. Rape victimization has declined dramatically among young women

Annual	Rapes per 1,000 females ages:		
average	12-19	20-24	All 12-24
1973-74	3.4	5.2	4.1
1975-79	3.6	4.1	3.8
1980-84	3.4	3.7	3.5
1985-89	2.9	3.1	2.9
1990-94	3.0	3.3	3.1
1995-99	2.9	2.2	2.6
2000-04	1.9	1.8	1.9
2005-06	2.2	0.9	1.7
Change	-35%	-83%	-59%

*Adjusted for female proportions of total rapes, 1993-2006.
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (1973-2006).

In reality, girls seem adept at protecting themselves. A University of New Hampshire study of thousands of police agencies nationwide found actual incidents of girls being assaulted, raped, or kidnapped by people they met online were extremely rare—perhaps a couple of dozen cases a year. That would be fewer violent and sexual abuses of girls than are inflicted by parents and caretakers in a single day.

But what about claims of a "growing epidemic of teenage dating violence"? Here we arrive at complete fraud. This panic has been fanned by fashion mogul Liz Claiborne, Inc. (logos: "Hip, Sexy, Urban, Energetic"), which peddles wildly exaggerated "teen dating abuse" surveys to market its jewelry, clothing, and "Love Is Respect" curriculum.

Claiborne and the major media regularly trumpet "staggering" "epidemics" of scary young-teen "hooking up," "sex," "violence," and "horrors." An entirely different picture emerges when Claiborne's actual survey is checked—something few apparently did. It found that 98% of 11-14 year-olds never had a partner hit, hurt, or violently threaten them and that 96% (including 99% of 'tweens age 11-12) had never gone "further than kissing or making out."

Table 10. All sex and violent crimes against young women have declined sharply

	Rapes and sexual assaults*/1,000 females age				Other violent crime rates, females age 12-24			
Year	12-15	16-19	20-24	12-24	Robbery	Assault	Homicide	All violent
1993	9.2	12.2	10.4	10.6	7.8	74.2	5.8	98.4
2006	6.4	5.3	3.6	4.7	3.7	37.1	2.8	45.6
Change	-31%	-57%	-79%	-65%	-64%	-50%	-52%	-54%

*Includes all rapes and other sexual assaults, completed, attempted, and threatened, first tabulated in 1993.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (1993-2006); National Center for Health Statistics (2008).

To balloon these calming realities into press panics, Claiborne grossly inflated the definition of "a boyfriend/girlfriend *relationship*" to include "sitting next to each other in school," "admitting that he/she likes the other person," and "calling or texting each other regularly." "*Hooking up*" included "flirting" and "holding hands." "Having sex" meant having friends or peers who guessed others "my age" might be "going further than kissing and making out" (that is, all rumors are presumed true). So, if 50% of 14 year-olds guess that any other 14 year-old they know might be having sex, that winds up being presented as "half of all 14 year-olds are having sex."

"Dating abuse" included partners who "made you feel bad or embarrassed about yourself," "made you nervous about doing something he/she doesn't like," or "tried to tell you how to dress"—even once. So, if a girl tells a boy sitting next to her in school that she likes the way he looks in a sweater, she's guilty of "dating abuse." By these lunatic criteria, Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher "hooked up" in an "abusive relationship." Parents, teachers, coaches, and spouses are serial "abusers."

Predictably, reporters don't mention authoritative Bureau of Justice Statistics reports finding intimate partner violence among teens has plummeted over the last decade. Older teens' risk of murder, sexual violence, and assault from intimate partners is lower than for ages 20-24 and 25-34 and barely higher than for 35-49, while younger teens have the lowest risks of any age except the elderly.

The Curious Indifference to Girls' Real Problems

The fact is, as girls and young women became more successful in the larger world, advanced higher in education, job, and political fields by leaps and bounds, and became more independent of men, their personal problems and dangers plummeted. The argument by radical feminists that the best way women could protect themselves from violence and personal troubles was to gain more economic and political power has been stunningly confirmed. Independent, intellectually and economically successful women are safer and happier women. What a shock.

What is shocking is the extent to which both conservative and progressive entities—including many feminists—have recoiled in fear at women's successes and argued in increasingly frantic tones and media splashes than young women *must be* suffering terrible mental and physical dangers *caused by their success*. The modern young women is "a bubbling, acid pit of guilt and shame and jealousy and restlessness and anxiety," announces feminist Courtney Martin (*Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*). "We are more diseased and more addicted than any generation of young women that has come before… succumbing to dangerous emotional numbs—eating disorders, binge drinking, and even harder drugs." These sentiments were reprinted in arch-progressive media insisting young women are damaged as never before—by their own achievements!

Table 11. Percentages of high school senior females telling Monitoring the Future they are completely/mostly dissatisfied with:

	1975/76	1980	1990	2000	2005
Yourself?	5%	4%	6%	6%	7%
Your friends?	3%	2%	2%	3%	2%
Your parents?	12%	10%	12%	11%	11%
Your material possessions?	6%	5%	8%	7%	5%
Your personal safety?	8%	7%	9%	7%	5%
Your education?	12%	7%	7%	7%	6%
Your job?	12%	10%	12%	9%	9%
Your life as a whole?	7%	7%	7%	8%	7%
In last year, did you feel depressed*	na	na	11%	10%	8%

Sources: Monitoring the Future (1975-2005) (high school senior girls); *Higher Education Research Institute (1966-2006) (college first-year women, question first asked in 1985).

There certainly are girls, around 5% to 7%, who are troubled with themselves and their peers (a number which has stayed constant for decades); a fraction that abuses drugs and alcohol (which has declined over the years); and a somewhat larger number who are unhappy with parents, school, and jobs, dissatisfactions which have declined over time (Table 11). Even for the largest gripe, parents, only 11% of girls say they are mostly or completely dissatisfied, with two-thirds getting along well with parents.

But let's accept, for argument's sake, that girls today indeed are suffering unheard-of troubles. What would we first assume is causing girls' problems? Here, studies and statistical correlations are consistent: girls who live in severe poverty, who suffer violent and sexual abuses and domestic violence while growing up, and who are surrounded by unstable, addicted, or violent adults are more likely by far to display serious problems themselves.

For an example common around the country, Minneapolis-St. Paul provides some of the starkest gaps anywhere. The poverty rate among urban African American youth are

12 times higher, birth rates 12 times higher, and murder rates 17 times higher than among suburban white youth. Urban white girls and suburban black and Hispanic girls display poverty, murder, and birth rates in between. These are staggering, and unfortunately typical, discrepancies.

Thus, we would expect that those claiming girls are more dangerous and endangered would be clamoring loudly for strong measures to reduce the debilitating poverty that afflicts seven million girls, to combat the 40,000 violent and sexual abuses confirmed to occur against girls in their families every year—more than 100 every day substantiated by state investigations—and to confront the epidemics of drug abuse, arrest, and imprisonment among middle-aged adults that create severe family problems affecting girls. Yet, in all the books today that pronounce girls more troubled, how much discussion do you see of poverty, abuse, and troubled adults? Very, very little. These issues are confined to a paragraph or two, a list, or not mentioned at all. Instead, these authors universally connect girls' greater troubles to girls' greater achievements and freedoms.

Curiously, however, commentators who brand today's girls more troubled seem largely indifferent to these real-life causal factors. Few mention the tangible realities girls face every day, such as the facts that three million girls under age 18 live in severe poverty (household incomes below $17,000 for a family of three), including one million in destitution (incomes less than half poverty of thresholds); 80,000 girls were confirmed victims of physical and sexual abuses at home in 2006; and several million have parents who are addicted and/or imprisoned. When authors reference these vital factors at all, they bury them in a few paragraphs or a list.

Nor can I find any commentators who discuss the salient fact that violent crime arrests among adult women of age to be mothers to adolescent girls rocketed from 33,000 in 1981 to 163,000 in 2007, and for men of age to be fathers, from 229,000 to a staggering 589,000—increases far outpacing the 60% rise in middle-aged populations. Nor have those portraying girls as more messed up cited the explosions in drug abuse and imprisonments among grownups in their parents' generation. Those who brand Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan as typical modern young women have not similarly dubbed their addicted, imprisoned fathers, suicidal grandparents, and unstable mothers as typical of older generations.

Instead of talking about real problems, Pipher dedicates dozens of pages to "cultural pressures" on girls, such as the Swedish Bikini Team in beer ads. Garbarino spends whole chapters blaming "The Powerpuff Girls" and Harry Potter's Hermione. Prothrow-Stith and Spivak exhaustively denounces celluloid heroines, led by "Lara Croft, Tomb Raider." Other authors likewise fixate on ads, movies, music, Internet social sites, and video games.

Evolutionary Fear

When scholars ignore real-life factors shown to cause massive pain, injury, and even death among girls in order to blame Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup, something is badly wrong. Behind authors' and commentators' disturbingly irrational attacks on girls lies their real fear: that girls' supposedly rising pathologies result from females moving outward from presumable "protected" home environments and into the larger world where, equally unsettlingly, girls are succeeding beyond all expectations. As young

women increasingly dominate higher education, major professions such as law and medicine, and even leadership positions, cries that young women are (*must* be!) more vicious, violent, and mentally disturbed have risen to a deafening crescendo. Girls themselves don't rank these culture-war nemeses as terribly troubling. When asked what they see as their most important problems, most girls cite issues such as education, economic concerns, family breakdown, war and violence around the world, global warming, environmental issues, and discrimination—that is, *real* problems. Virtually none cite MySpace, Internet threats, advertising images, fashion ads, beer commercials, MTV videos, Powerpuff Girls, or any of the fictional menaces authors insist are driving girls to misery and mayhem.

However, the eagerness of 21st century authors and commentators of both sexes, white and black, across the political spectrum to demonize girls with groundless panics *specifically linked to girls' rising success and externality* suggests how deeply threatening the traditional, gut-level fear of and for "girls out in the world" remains. Popular authors' deep discomfort with worldly, successful young women, couched in contradictory declarations of sympathy for the unprotected female psyche (much as 19th century anti-suffragettes worried equal rights would corrupt women's weak natures) and anger at modern girls' unladylike assertiveness, emerges in their books' first pages and dominates their anxieties throughout.

Pipher juxtaposes girls' supposedly new endangerment and desensitization with the purported fragility and vulnerability of girls venturing out of their once "protected place in space and time" into today's "toxic culture." Likewise, Prothrow-Stith and Spivak blame girls' supposedly increased violence on the fact that boys' and girls' "socialization differences are lessening, as illustrated by girls' participation in sports, enhanced academic opportunities, and expanded job possibilities" and equalized media treatments. "It used to be competitive aspects were not emphasized for young women, but now we're in a totally different world where they are actually encouraged to be aggressive," laments a minister approvingly quoted by Dellasega and Nixon. "Girls becoming more assertive" has produced "the good news of liberation and the bad news of increased aggression [that] is the New American Girl," warns Garbarino. "Underneath the Pollyanna story of our high achievement is an ugly underbelly" of rising mental illness, addiction, and self-destructiveness, writes Martin.

Girls' encouraging attitudes and realities don't seem to matter; these authors and commentators clearly *need* girls to be getting worse. Spreading fear of girls is their vehicle for expressing offense at modern popular culture and advertising images they see as promoting violence, unhealthy sexualization, addiction, and consumerism. Of course, offended commentators could just as effectively make their points by declaring, "modern ads and cultural images negatively affect *me*" without pathologizing girls.

The harsh lens of stigma has been trained on girls long enough; it's time to refocus it on those who fear and condemn them. It's strange enough that in the rich, dynamic diversity of modern American girls, girl-fearing authors and commentators see only desolation, brutality, and helplessness. Stranger still that they cast every standard of modern research and ethics aside in a monomaniacal stampede to deny girls' optimistic generational voices, active agencies, and tangible gains. But it is truly alarming that in this exciting time when dramatic new realities demand innovative evolution of traditional

gender concepts, fearful authors and commentators dominating public discussion are retreating back to antiquated sexisms and repressive "female supervision."

I call today's fear of girls "evolutionary fear:" the deep alarm across elder society that the fundamental order shaped by millennia of living in tribal monocultures is changing and diversifying through immigration and technology into an integrated, global multiculture humans have never before experienced. Margaret Mead first warned of this emerging fear in *Culture and Commitment* in 1970, one expression of which is the rising panic toward outwardly strong, successful girls. In the modern fairy tale, the Big Bad Wolf lurking in the cyberforest threatens to gobble up today's more independent and worldly girls, but the truly apocalyptic menace is the newly sophisticated Little Red Riding Hood who strays too far from home… and flourishes there.

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