

Adolescent girls' sexuality

The more it changes, the more it
stays the same

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Army girls gone wild!
Lesbian girls gone wild!
Girls gone wild in Dallas!
Barely legal sorority girls gone wild!
Korean Girls gone wild!
Anime girls gone wild!

Results of a Google search on girls and sexuality (March 8, 2010)

At the last half of the twentieth century, not long after adolescence itself was invented, adolescent girls' sexuality was under heavy surveillance, and the root source of plenty of panic. An epidemic of teen pregnancy among African-American girls (not true); an epidemic of White middle-class girls giving boys oral sex in empty houses, in hallways and under table cloths (not true); an epidemic of teens rejecting relationships in favor of hooking up (not true). I suggest that one of the reasons these ostensible "epidemics" are grabbed, spun (and in essence created) by the media into the latest catastrophe is that they harbor possibilities of adolescent girls' sexual desire.

Good girls and bad girls

As we enter the next decade of the twenty-first century, the tightrope that girls walk separating good girls from bad has not been taken down but has in fact gotten tighter (Valenti 2008). Adolescent girls' sexuality is a fulcrum of contradictions: Girls want relationships, boys want sex, but everybody is just hooking up – no strings attached. "Virgins" can be reborn, but "sluts" can never shake the moniker that they still get. To be popular, with girls and with boys, girls are told to wear less and less to be more and more sexy, but girls who dress in skimpy clothes look like prostitutes. Girls are sexually aggressive, no longer sexual objects, but the coolest shirts are stamped with phrases like "Rub These for Luck" and "Who Needs Brains When You Have These?" "Sexting" is the latest supposed craze to incite panic among parents – and it's girls

sending naked pictures of themselves to boys, never the other way around – but girls who “sext” are pathetic, not normal.

So what is it? Are girls now just as into sex, just as sexually assertive as boys or does the double standard still rule? Do girls (finally) just want to have fun? While the media saturates us with the fantasy or fear that deep down, girls are into being like porn stars, they are still as vulnerable as ever to being labeled and scorned for evidencing real sexual feelings and more than ever under pressure to appear – but not to actually be – sex kittens. Adolescent girls’ sexuality is still not their own. And the landscape of what is normal sexuality for teenage girls, what “everyone” does or feels, is more confusing than ever.

The fundamental organizing principle of girls’ sexuality remains firmly in place: if girls want to be considered good, nice or even normal, adolescent girls are not (really) supposed to have sexual feelings of their own. And there is much inequity for girls embedded in this division of teen girls into “good” and “bad.” Stereotypes about African-American girls being hypersexual, Asian-American girls unlocking secret doors to male pleasure, Latina girls being hot, hot, hot make it very difficult (if they are middle-class or elite) and virtually impossible (if they are working-class or poor) for girls of color even to get on the “good girl” pedestal, and they bear the constant risk of being knocked off (American Psychological Association 2007).

Girls’ sexuality development

This contradiction continues to obscure what is normal for girls’ sexuality and its development. In fact, we know very little about how sexuality develops in adolescence. We do know that as the female body matures, sex hormones are released (Halpern et al. 1993). In addition to sexual development – i.e. getting breasts, hips, pubic and armpit hair – it is, on average, normative for girls to start to have sexual feelings in early adolescence. The new twist is that, as they go from early to middle to late adolescence, what they are actually supposed to do is *to seem to have them* – to “perform” sexual assertiveness, and not so much for their own curiosity or satisfaction, but as especially “good” objects of others’ sexual desire. In other words they incite desire rather than express it.

The irony is that in fact, most girls do experience sexual feelings in their own bodies – embodied sexual desire. These feelings may surface when a girl sees someone to whom she is attracted or while she is kissing someone she loves – or not. Learning how to become a sexual person – what sexual desire feels like, how to think about making decisions about sex, who is sexually attractive – is a normative part of adolescent development for both girls and boys. This process, called sexual socialization, includes learning to find the “right” people desirable, the contexts in which it is “appropriate” – or not – to have or express sexual feelings, and what are acceptable “sexual scripts.” These norms are conveyed by family, by peers, and by media. Girls continue to be sexually socialized into being sexy rather than being sexual, which results in girls and women learning not only that they are the object of another’s desire, that they are to be looked at, but that they also come to experience their own bodies in this fashion. An object has no feelings of her own. This message stands in stark contrast to other domains of young women’s lives, where they learn that they can be and do “anything,” producing yet another confusing contradiction anchoring female adolescence.

Girls’ sexual desire and the double standard

Given the escalation of the overt and in-your-face presence of sexuality in our social landscape, what’s the big deal? Why is even the possibility that girls might have and act on their own

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The concept women’s sexual Sexual subjectiv sexual feelings a happened,” whi identified as one The phrase “It j who is responsi object – rather that is, she has jectivity offers only sexy but dissociation from

sexual feelings such a problem? In fact, by the age of 19, the majority of girls have had sexual intercourse, more than half of girls have performed oral sex, and an increasing percentage have had anal sex (Advocates for Youth 2010). Some of these sexual encounters were protected, some of them were coerced; the little we know about young women's experiences of their own sexuality suggests that most of these encounters were not about young women's sexual desire or their sexual pleasure (Fine and McClelland 2007; Levy 2005; Tolman 2002, 2010). Why isn't *this* the problem?

Even as demands on teenage girls to be sexy have intensified and the sexualization of younger girls is now standard fare (APA 2007), young women's sexual desire is still not considered an anchor of young women's sexuality; dressed in heels, thongs and short skirts, in the end, it is desire for relationships that is (still) what girls are "supposed" to have (Bogle 2008). In fact, in order to keep boys – who are said to have uncontrollable sexual urges for which they cannot be held accountable – in check, the suppression of girls' sexual desire is required. If girls had or acted on their sexual feelings, the entire system would be in chaos – or so the panic goes. The norms and beliefs that sustain this conception, this construction of what normal and appropriate male and female sexuality are in adolescence, are institutionalized by the double standard. Without understanding or acceptance that girls too have and are entitled to sexual feelings, the double standard has not and will not budge. The interplay between these ideas is mutually reconstituting and reinforcing.

Resisting the double standard: sexual subjectivity

The good news is that in recent years, there has been some important and potent resistance to these constraining and unfair conceptions and norms. And some teenage girls refuse to be controlled by the regulating image of "the slut." That is, some girls claim their entitlement to their own sexual feelings, whatever they are. While few and far between, these resistant girls offer the outline of potential alternative stories of how young women might claim their own sexuality, and how social norms may be shifted. They are on the Web, writing zines, launching protests against being sexualized and objectified, creating communities where they can rant against this injustice, talk about how denying desire diminishes sexual and reproductive health, and gain courage and strength from knowing they are not alone. In unprecedented ways, teenage girls can take action not only in their personal relationships but in changing the "way things are." Bucking the system is hard work, and potentially socially and materially costly for many girls. But they have shown us that it can be done. They enact what researchers call "sexual subjectivity."

The concept of "sexual subjectivity" has recently been developed in relation to adolescent women's sexuality and its development (Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck 2006; Tolman 2002). Sexual subjectivity means having a sense of oneself as a sexual person who is entitled to have sexual feelings and to make active decisions about sexual behavior. It is the opposite of "it just happened," which is how many adolescent girls describe their sexual experiences, and has been identified as one of the only "stories" girls can tell about their sexual behavior (Tolman 2002). The phrase "It just happened" is passive rather than active; it literally has no people in it, no one who is responsible or accountable. Being a sexual subject is the opposite of being a sexual object – rather than solely being the target of someone else's desire, a sexual subject has agency, that is, she has her own desire as a compass in actively negotiating her sexuality. Sexual subjectivity offers an alternative to, and denaturalizes the idea that it is normal for girls not to be only sexy but also to acknowledge and be acknowledged as legitimately sexual beings. This dissociation from one's sexual feelings remains a key part of how young women are socialized

into their sexuality. Resisting this message is hard to do, but some girls do in fact do so. These girls have a sense of entitlement to their sexuality and also an awareness of the consequences of being a girl who has and acts on her sexual desire. These girls have figured out that if they do not let being labeled a “slut” affect them – that if they reject it as a viable way to think about girls’ sexuality – the label will lose its power over them, at least psychologically. These girls may have a hard road to plow socially, but the resilience that can come with this choice can also enable these young women to lead the charge to resist dividing girls into good and bad, the very heart of what keeps desire so dangerous.

Another tension that is developing is around sexual identity or orientation. The “good girl” is assumed to be straight – not lesbian, bisexual or not sure – if she is attracted to women. The fact that desiring girls is another “violation” is no accident. Heteronormativity – becoming a heterosexual person – has been considered what is normal and right. It is depicted on television as “the way things are” between young men and women, with a clear script for how everyone is supposed to behave (Kim et al. 2007). Many young women are rejecting this belief and claiming sexual identities that are not heterosexual, including having no label at all. Recently, both research and social changes have shown that having and acting on same-sex sexual desires is not uncommon for anyone, and for some people is the organizing principle of their sexuality (Russell 2005). Sexual fluidity – shifts and changes in whom women are sexually attracted to and/or with whom they have sexual experiences – has been documented in the last decade as a feature of female sexuality (Diamond 2009).

Wild girls?

The latest and most confusing notion about young women’s sexuality appears constantly in the media, which is that all young women and teenage girls are sexually aggressive and want to go out and get sex just like guys do (Levy 2005; Zurbriggen and Roberts, in press). This portrayal – and what is wrong with it – is best exemplified in the wildly successful *Girls Gone Wild* franchise. Primarily on location at spring break from college extravaganzas on beaches, this television series has created a spectacle of real young women performing male sexual fantasies – kissing other girls, having a threesome, masturbating for the camera, making it seem that young women are doing what they really want to do. In fact, young women will often say they want to bare it all and do it all, but a contradictory, ironic and very problematic slippage has actually occurred.

It is not an accident that virtually all of these young women are drunk when they take the dare to engage in a variety of sexual behaviors and exhibition of themselves. Many feel guilt and regret afterwards; virtually none of them describe these experiences as pleasurable or about their own sexual desire. It is about the desire to look and be seen as sexy. This is a desire that has been stirred, teased and aroused by the recent intensification of using sex – and sexualized girls’ and women’s bodies – to sell products. In fact, more than ever, sex has become something to give, to get, to trade and less about expressing emotions, a sense of connection to another person, or an embodied experience. It is not cool to want relationships – even when teenage girls (and boys) actually do. Perhaps this notion that relationships are toxic, risky or to be avoided is an unintended consequence of abstinence-until-marriage sex education, or the sensationalism of celebrity break-ups and heartbreaks which make relationships seem not worth the costs. Relationships require two authentic and complete people, which sexual objectification makes difficult. Constant exposure to images of girls and women who are portrayed only as sex objects is taking its toll on young women’s sexuality development (Tolman 2010).

Reinforcing girls

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Reinforcing girls' sexual well-being

Why is it that the more things seem to change, the more they in fact stay the same? Having listened to many teen girls and also boys talk about their experiences with sexuality and relationships, I can hear it loud and clear. Teen boys are under pressure to embrace and "perform" ideas about masculinity that include being dominant *over* (and especially not dominated *by*) girls, wanting and trying to "get" sex (whether they actually want to or not) and showing that they are not gay (Tolman et al. 2003; Pascoe 2007). Girls are still split into two groups by adults, peers, the media, and social institutions into good and bad. This division is predicated on sexual restraint of themselves and of boys and being successful but being feminine at the same time. While there is a large and growing movement to demand and secure sexual rights for LGBT people (and teens), there is no social movement for girls' sexual rights – the right to be a sexual person, to have resources to make safe, healthy and fulfilling decisions, and to be safe from violence. Danger still trumps pleasure for women and girls (Vance 1994). Interestingly, in developing countries, such demands have taken hold, fueled by community groups and alliances of girls with others in their communities to demand these rights (Tolman and Costa 2010). In the United States, we can learn from the successes that have been achieved to begin to change how we think, talk about and thus experience and negotiate adolescent girls' sexuality.

Rather than focusing on risk reduction, we can start thinking about the development of sexual well-being as a part of our humanity that we do, can and should begin to develop in adolescence and then foster across our lifetimes. Sexual well-being includes: sexual and reproductive health (and access to required resources); comfort with one's own body and emotions; pursuing one's desires (barring harm to others); and being aware of and having the freedom to act (without threat of violence, material or social consequences) upon our sexual desires. Sexual well-being also includes the ability to identify risk, to make choices that diminish risk when possible, and to feel comfortable, happy and empowered in one's own body. The idea that all girls have a right to sexual well-being is predicated in part on sexual subjectivity, on resisting a system of dividing girls into categories of good and bad and pitting them against one another, and on recognizing, resisting and reframing the ongoing gender inequities that still characterize young people's sexual lives. Tackling demands for masculinity in boys that have harmful consequences for girls as well, refusing to tolerate homophobia, and enabling young women to be comfortable with their own sexual feelings, will be part of the task of articulating and securing sexual rights for teenage girls.

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