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# Young women 'on the margins'

## Representation, research and politics

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Young women living on the educational, economic and spatial fringes occupy highly ambiguous positions in today's social fabric. These include young women who may have left school early, or have troubled histories with schooling, or are alienated from educational and other social institutions, often without paid work and often living in difficult material and emotional circumstances. They are known and yet not known. They are known, for instance, as difficult and also as being in difficulty; as dangerous and also as being in danger; of being exposed to risk and of putting themselves at risk; and as subject to state surveillance but also treated with indifference and lack of respect. Yet what do we really know about how they negotiate the challenges of their everyday lives? How do these young women get by and what strategies and resources can and do they mobilize? How do schools and other social agencies hinder or harm them and how might they better support them? And how are their lives and experiences regarded and represented – in the media, in schools, in policy interventions, in public imagination, and by themselves?

This volume addresses the educational, social, work and biographical experiences of young women who are routinely constructed as 'at risk', and explores the social and cultural representations that govern our understandings of them. Recent feminist scholarship on girlhood argues for the emergence of a 'new girl order' and changes in femininity in a post-feminist and post-modern era (Aapola *et al.* 2004; Driscoll 2002; Harris 2004). Sociological theories of late modernity speak in the language of transformation and de-traditionalization – of gender, of identity, of social relations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992; cf Adkins 2002). It is far from clear, however, whether these various arguments apply to young women living and learning on the margins. Do these young women epitomise a new or old girl order? How do changed social and cultural circumstances affect the gendered experiences of marginalization?

While the impact of feminism inside and outside of schools has brought real gains for many women and girls, the extent and form of such changes has been somewhat uneven and class differentiated. Focussing on overall gains and changes or on a new girl order can obscure both the experiences of those for whom success in conventional terms remains elusive and the heterogenous and complex

material and cultural spaces girls inhabit. The discourse of ‘new times’ can also overshadow proper consideration of whether or how patterns of differentiation and inequalities, as well as deep-seated cultural meanings and images, can persist or echo across time, place and different political and social contexts. This is not to suggest that such meanings and inequalities remain unchanged, nor to imply that they take the same form in twenty-first century Canada or Australia as they did in mid-twentieth-century Europe. Rather, it is to question notions of new times, or of new girl orders, which infer a simple view of historical processes – as if social change is abrupt and radically discontinuous with the past – and neglect to see the ways in which elements of change and continuity are part of the present.

The current strong policy and public attention to the educational experiences and outcomes of boys similarly works to overstate the extent of the transformation of gender/femininity by constructing a simultaneously normative and demonized vision of high-achieving girls whose success is at the expense of that of the boys. In this climate, gender equity initiatives are directed to redressing disadvantages experienced by boys and men (Connell 2005). From popular culture to educational policies, we more commonly hear stories about girls and achievement than we hear about the difficulties many girls continue to face. Girls are regarded as the new emblem of educational success, the ideal subjects of modernity, the group for whom schooling works. The so-called feminization of curriculum and assessment, the predominance of female teachers, and the effects of feminism in making girls more ambitious all combine apparently to ensure smooth pathways to success for girls. Yet, as numerous scholars and many practitioners have observed, the situation for many girls is neither so clear-cut nor so rosy. Questions about ‘which girls (and which boys)’ are advantaged and disadvantaged, valued or de-valued, stigmatized or valorized, must continue to be posed, but they also require answers that shed light on how these social and cultural processes of differentiation happen – at the micro-level of day-to-day practice, not only at the macro-structural level – and how they are experienced.

There is, then, a raft of discourses variously telling us that times are new, that what counts as gender-based injustice has altered, that women and girls are doing all right, and that girlhood and femininities are transforming. There remain, however, groups of young women who continue to experience significant difficulties in and out of school. Social and educational marginalization encompasses a range of experiences that extend beyond the issue of alienation from schooling. Nevertheless, how young people encounter school cultures and systems is interwoven with their negotiation of social and work cultures and the making of their day-to-day and future lives. From a policy and database perspective, young women who leave school early or who are alienated from school and other social institutions are among the most economically disadvantaged young people today (Collins *et al.* 2000; Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004). While such findings offer compelling evidence of inequality, they provide limited insight into the lived experiences of such women. The classification of these young women as ‘at risk’ has multiple discursive dangers, rendering social vulnerability as

personal failing, and making risk seem to be an acquired attribute of subjectivity, disconnected from the social, economic and cultural processes that produce risk. The category 'disadvantaged young women' is itself heterogenous, and crude statistical and policy-driven categories of disadvantage can mask diverse experiences and strategies. Robust understandings of contemporary gender and social disadvantage require empirically *and* theoretically engaged studies that recognize diversity within inequality and examine the subtle and not so subtle ways in which processes of change and inequality interact and are influenced by both local and global factors.

The chapters in this volume contribute important new perspectives to these matters, drawing out different dimensions to the experiences and representations of young women and social and educational marginalization in particular national settings – Australia, Canada, Malaysia and the UK. As such, the book allows for comparative insights that take account of local specificities in light of discussions about gender, justice, identity, inequality and social change, and their intersection, that have significance beyond national borders. Taken together, the chapters promote critical dialogue with policies and programmes that are intended to address (or paradoxically are oblivious to) diverse forms of gender-based inequality. Marginalization and injustice are processes that are not solely reducible to a single identity or social category – be that class, gender, ethnicity, race, location, sexuality, disability. The term 'gender-based injustice' is perhaps usefully understood as an assertion under erasure, and as an over-determined phenomenon, 'fundamentally constituted ... by a complex set of political, cultural and economic processes' (Swanson 2005: 88). Even so, working the tension between recognizing the effects and forms of gender-based injustice and marginalization, and destabilizing gender as the only type of social and identity differentiation, is one of the challenges facing contemporary feminism in education, and in other fields of social practice. The research projects discussed in this volume show some of the ways in which gender intersects with other social and identity factors, and the effects of this, particularly for young women living in poverty and difficult emotional and economic circumstances.

This book developed from a conference (held at Deakin University, Australia) on young women and social and educational marginalization that brought together scholars from Australia, the UK and Canada, along with policy makers, teachers and social and youth advocates, and representatives from youth and community agencies. The aim of the conference was to promote dialogue among these different groups of professionals and academics, and to address, from different perspectives, urgent concerns about the educational, social and work experiences of marginalized and stigmatized young women today.

The volume combines chapters that focus on young women's perspectives and their experiences with chapters that more directly address methodological and theoretical questions about how to research and analyse current forms, representations and consequences of social and gender-based inequality. It offers other researchers as well as practitioners insights into the challenge of how to

research social marginalization, and reflections on projects and programmes that have attempted to do so. The role and positioning of the researcher, the re-positioning of participants as subjects in and not objects of research, and issues of power, trust and reciprocity are all widely discussed in the field of qualitative methodology. But these issues are especially urgent when research is with vulnerable groups, and with young women whose lives may already have been scrutinized by any number of professionals attempting (ostensibly) to help or understand them. The chapters provide many practical and concrete examples of conducting research creatively and sensitively and these are interwoven with clear and concise explanations of relevant ethical and methodological issues alongside findings and insights.

Research approaches include cross-generational and longitudinal studies, and life history approaches that take biographical perspectives as their point of departure to develop: a longitudinal case study of a young British (Northern Ireland) working-class woman's journey through the end of compulsory education, showing how she develops a sense of personal competence over time (Thomson); life history narratives of an Australian Aboriginal mother and grandmother, their memories of their schooling and how these experiences influenced the ways in which they now intervene in and influence the educational experiences of their own children (Sanderson); a longitudinal study of a teenage mother, that began when the young woman was a pregnant school student, and examines dilemmas associated with her construction (by others, by herself) as 'same-yet-different' from her peers (Harrison and Shacklock); a cross-generational study of young women on the margins of education and work and the strategies of hope and longing that they and their mothers draw upon in constructing the possibility of a different kind of life (McLeod).

Several of the chapters address policy gaps, silences and disjunctions between rhetoric and embodied encounters and the lived effects of policy imperatives: a case study of the struggle to establish a school-based child-care centre is analysed in light of the current climate of educational 'policy hysteria' in contrast to the policy silence on the educational and social needs of pregnant and parenting students (Angwin and Kamp); the impact of new welfare reforms (Mutual Obligations Policies in Australia) on young women is analysed in terms of the subject positions these policies make available and how young women negotiate them (Edwards). The opening two chapters take questions about representation and image as a primary focus to examine: the ways in which stigma is attached to poor neighbourhoods and to the people who inhabit them, as well as the widening social-spatial polarization between the poor and not-poor and the particular consequences this has for women living in stigmatized communities (Warr); new approaches for analysing the cultural, spatial and political effects of contemporary representations of urban female youth, and the connections of these representations to historical images of women (Dillabough and van der Meulen).

Other chapters take a more school-based focus and draw on ethnographic and case study approaches to investigate: how Indian schoolgirls in Malaysia,

where Indians are an ethnic minority, negotiate shifting ways of identifying as Malaysian-Indian schoolgirls across conceptions of 'traditional' and 'western' girl and academic success (Joseph); the discursive construction of class-differentiated femininity through school sport in two different types of school, one an élite girls' school and the other a government, co-educational school (Wright and O'Flynn); the experiences of young women who left school early and their reflections on their schooling in relation to discourses about choice and the 'freely choosing individual' and intersections between gender and class (Allard); the positive impact that 'second chance' colleges can have upon the educational experiences of young women who have previously been alienated from schooling and the specific relational features of schooling that can make a difference (te Riele).

In combination, the chapters address the macro-picture of national and international policy and research on the social and economic effects of educational and social exclusion, the construction, representation and stigmatization of young women who are socially and educationally marginalized, and the micro-picture of the biographical experiences of these diverse groups of young women who are negotiating their lives from multiple sites located on many different margins.