

SuperGirl!

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In the early 90's, when Carol Gilligan and I wrote about the tyranny of nice and kind and the pressure girls felt to be perfect, we were illuminating the ways conventional femininity worked to shape girls' desires and relationships. Listening to educationally privileged girls, mostly white and middle class, we found that all too often the girls who excelled in school, who looked put-together, who sang in school choirs, volunteered in their communities, and smiled a lot were in various kinds of psychological trouble. A few stalwart resisters—some white and middle class, but mostly working class girls and girls of color--suggested this did not have to be the developmental trajectory, but for the girls who bought the ideal, it didn't feel like a choice.

Fast forward almost twenty years and perfectionism has raised its not so lovely head once more, in the form of a recently released Girls, Inc. report called The Supergirl Dilemma (www.girlsinc.org). A survey of members of the Harris Poll Online panel--2,065 students in grades 3-12 (1,059 girls and 1,006 boys) and 1,005 adults (604 women and 401 men)--tells us that "girls today experience intense pressure, at ever younger ages, to be everything to everyone all the time....Society appears to be making room for girls to transcend traditional expectations about abilities and aspirations, just as long as they also conform to conventional notions of femininity".

Sounds like déjà vu all over again. But perfect looks a little different this time around.

Consider the 90's, the beginning of a girl power movement that would result in gender equity debates and empowerment programs across the country. Young women expressed the desire and the pressure to prove themselves, not as boy wannabes, but as girls--even as they challenged, widened, and questioned the contours of gender itself, interrogating its relationship to race, social class, and sexual identity. Riding Third Wave feminism into the new millennium, young women made grrrl a verb and pink a power color. They could be feminists, activists, leaders, and be feminine.

We know what happened. The media and marketers loved the idea—not the feminist, activist, status quo questioning part, but the girly part. Twenty years ago feminists were encouraging supermothers to talk openly with their daughters about the choices available to them and help them see that the problem wasn't them, but stereotype-infused policies and practices that made little room for creative work lives and involved partners. Today the superwoman that girls are more likely to see is in the media. And she is juggling the pressures of appearance, consumerism, and an active sex life. She's more Desperate Housewives than working mom facing the second shift, Felicity Huffman's character, Lynette, notwithstanding. Girls have been sold a very particular form of

ubergirl lifestyle well before they've entered early adolescence. Given this reality, the Girls, Inc. finding that girls as young as 8 and 9 feel enormous stress and pressure to be pretty, thin, accommodating, and popular shouldn't be a big surprise.

The more interesting findings in this report aren't getting as much press. The survey reveals a pattern of gender differences that tells us something important about power and investment in the status quo. Girls and women, it turns out, question gender stereotypes to a much greater degree than boys and men. For example, girls are more likely than boys to dislike that boys have a right to discuss girls' bodies in public (88% vs. 67%); that girls are expected to do a lot of housework and take care of siblings (77% vs. 43%), that girls are expected to speak softly and not cause trouble (68% vs. 33%), and that girls are not supposed to be strong and tough (79% vs. 40%). These patterns of dissatisfaction are mirrored by women and men, and the adult gender gap is even wider. Although the Girls, Inc. report tells us very little about who these Harris Poll Online people are, the study suggests some racial variation—Black girls are less likely than White girls or Latinas to believe that popular girls must be thin (39%, compared to 67% and 60% respectively) or to think boys have a right to talk about girls' bodies in public (66%, compared to 54% and 55% respectively). Still, the similarities across race and ethnicity are more striking than the differences.

The real and present danger for the Supergirl is that she lives in close connection with too many people, boys and men and a surprisingly large percentage of girls and women, who don't have a problem with the messages that press her into that narrow ideal of what it means to be a girl.

It may seem as though not much has changed, and in some ways I think that's true. But the young feminists I work with at my nonprofit, Hardy Girls Healthy Women, offer an original and fresh form of activism, infused with irony, humor, and passion that counters any such glib conclusion. And truly, there's something very suspect about the unprecedented amount of angst about boys and the sheer volume of media selling a girl thinness, cattiness, and the fun of sexual objectification, while reminding her that if she expresses anger she will be labeled mean, if she feels or acts on sexual desire she will be called a skank. Such uneven messages and efforts to both incite and contain fear and anxiety open things up in interesting ways and give young women contradictions, complexities, and choices they didn't have 20 years ago. I'm mixing my metaphors here, but there are chinks in Supergirl's armor.