

Our gender neutral culture erases girls as a sex

Do girls need single-sex spaces? Yes, now more than ever

by Stephanie Davies-Arai

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The silencing and suppression of women's voices in the UK today, and specifically discussion of the female experience, was most notoriously illustrated by the reaction to [J K Rowling's essay](#) last year on her experience of domestic violence and her call to recognise the need for female-only spaces. The default reading of Rowling's words, from media through to school resources was not that she was 'pro women' – standing up for legitimate rights for the female sex – but that she was 'anti-trans' – and therefore anti-trans rights.

Girls are watching, listening and learning what is permissible and what is not permissible for them to talk about in today's society. And what they are learning is that talking about women's rights, female biology and experience, feminist discourse; all of this marks you out as a bigot. Men and boys, meanwhile, are free to talk about anything they like, they even get a free pass on rape and death threats towards women like J K Rowling who step out of line. This was the real, headline story the media failed to cover: how can it be that even a national institution such as J K Rowling attracts such vitriol and abuse for talking about her experience of abuse as a woman? How could such blatant and freely-expressed misogyny exist and be tolerated in the UK in 2020?

But no, Rowling was accused of 'fearmongering' and 'weaponising' her experience of domestic abuse to attack the rights of trans people. She should have remained silent if she didn't want to be flogged in the public square; it was all her own fault.

There are many such examples of the policing of women's discourse, tolerated and sanctioned by government, public bodies and institutions throughout the UK. From the erasure of the word 'woman' and its replacement with the more 'inclusive' term 'womxn' or dehumanising and 'gender neutral' terms such as 'menstruator', 'pregnant person' or 'uterus owner' women must put up and shut up even as our humanity is stripped away.

'Gender neutral' language and public policy hides the difference between the sexes and covers up the unique disadvantages faced by the female sex compared

to the male. If girls are to be visible they need to be empowered to see themselves and talk about themselves as the female sex, without feeling that this is 'non-inclusive' and may offend.

A month ago there was an attempt to rush a bill through parliament that would set a precedent of "gender neutralising" motherhood in law; replacing the words mother or woman with "pregnant person" in the [Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances \(MOMA\) Bill](#). As Baroness Noakes highlighted, this is misogyny written into law. She said it is:

"... set within a broader context of **the erasure of women in society**. Those of us who care about the position of women have been increasingly concerned about the dilution of the [2010 Equality Act](#) with its protected characteristic of sex, not gender, which should protect women. Some organisations, deliberately or carelessly, conflate sex and gender. " [\[1\]](#)

Meanwhile girl-only spaces are shrinking, from Girlguiding UK to 'gender neutral' toilets in schools. In reality girls are being coerced into sharing private, intimate spaces with boys, without their consent.

Meaningful consent is different for boys and girls. More girls than boys will withhold consent to sharing private facilities with members of the opposite sex. The issue of consent is more important for females because women and girls are more vulnerable to voyeurism and sexual assault and can become pregnant. Although some factors, such as privacy, will influence both sexes, there are more – and more serious – factors for women to consider than for men.

'Gender neutral' policies in public services centre boys as the default and fail to consider girls and their different needs as the female sex. An approach that treats girls and boys the same is treating girls as if they are boys. In this case it would have a serious impact on girls' safety, including psychological safety, and access to public services. For girls who have experienced sexual abuse, encountering a man in the confined space of a public toilet or in a gym changing room would likely be re-traumatising.

Although both boys and girls experience difficulties in adolescence, for girls the changes in their bodies at puberty can be especially distressing. It is not uncommon for girls to feel disgusted and embarrassed by menstruation and distressed by painful periods and the fear and humiliation of leaking in public. The changes in girls' bodies, with the development of breasts and hips, are more

visible than for boys and provoke a reaction that boys do not routinely experience. Sexual attention from both the peer group and from older men can be frightening or feel dehumanising, humiliating and objectifying.

Girls' bodies may develop before they are emotionally equipped to handle the sexual attention, attention which may lead to groping or sexual assault. Girls experience a change in how they are perceived in a way that boys don't. Girls may experience this as moving from 'human being' to 'object' very quickly, and may experience their bodies as 'public property', with a corresponding drop in self-esteem and increase in anxiety. The attention that girls receive can lead to self-objectification and subsequent anxieties about measuring up to an ideal. The culture girls are growing up in today exacerbates all these problems.

Around puberty, as boys' lives typically expand, a girl's world shrinks: girls give up sport, become less active, take up less space, lose confidence. Girls are suddenly judged by very different criteria to boys; specifically how they look, how they measure up in the 'hot and sexy' stakes.

The experience of girls having to grow up in a sexist society is nothing new, it is just the form it takes that changes. And today's porn-saturated culture is the most extreme manifestation of a sanctioned contempt for women that both boys and girls imbibe like breathing.

The cultural factors now begin in childhood and continue as girls grow up: the rise in extreme gendered marketing to children over the past decade (including toys, books and clothes), [2] representing girls as passive pink stereotypes of femininity; the rise of the internet and social media platforms and 'selfie' and celebrity culture that disproportionately pressures girls; the increased sexualisation of young girls (for example in clothing and toys); [3] the spread of easily-accessible internet pornography and the assimilation of the porn aesthetic into youth culture through music videos, film and entertainment. These more recent developments have taken place during an era of increased public sexual objectification of women since the Sixties: in newspapers, magazines, film, advertising and tv.

The harmful impact on girls and women of the increasingly hyper-sexualised cultural representation of themselves throughout the decades since the Sixties has been well-documented.

We have been aware of the contributing factors to poor body image and mental health problems in girls since the report from the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Effects of the Sexualisation of Girls (2007).

“Research also links exposure to sexualized female ideals with lower self-esteem, negative mood and depressive symptoms among adolescent girls and women. In addition to mental health consequences of sexualization, research suggests that girls’ and women’s physical health may also be negatively affected, albeit indirectly.” [4]

The government-commissioned Sexualisation of Young People Review by Dr Linda Papadopoulos (2010) suggested in the executive summary that this sexualisation starts early:

“Children and young people today are not only exposed to increasing amounts of hyper-sexualised images, they are also sold the idea that they have to look ‘sexy’ and ‘hot’. As such they are facing pressures that children in the past simply did not have to face. As children grow older, exposure to this imagery leads to body surveillance, or the constant monitoring of personal appearance. This monitoring can result in body dissatisfaction, a recognised risk factor for poor self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. Indeed, there is a significant amount of evidence that attests to the negative effects of sexualisation on young people in terms of mental and physical health, attitudes and beliefs.” [5]

In this report Papadopoulos foresaw the mainstreaming of the sex industry and the spread of mainstream pornography through the rise in new technologies and its damaging effects on the health of young girls, as well as the rise in assaults against them.

Although issues such as low body confidence and eating disorders have also increased in boys along with the increasing objectification of the male body over the past decade, surveys consistently find that girls suffer body image problems and associated mental health problems such as depression, [6] anxiety, self-harming [7] and eating disorders at a significantly higher rate than boys. The rising rate of mental health problems in young women have been attributed to sexual violence, childhood trauma and pressures from social media. [8] Girls are particularly at risk of poor body image. The Mental Health Foundation Body Image report (2019) found:

"In our survey, 46% of girls reported that their body image causes them to worry 'often' or 'always' compared to 25% of boys." [\[9\]](#)

An Ofsted survey in 2011 of 150,000 children found that by the age of 10 a third of girls cited their bodies as their main source of worry:

"16% of fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds have avoided going to school because they felt bad about their appearance and 20% have avoided giving an opinion in public because of it. One in three girls would consider cosmetic surgery." [\[10\]](#)
Poor body image creates self-consciousness and a lack of confidence in the world and your right to take up space in it. Girls know that to be acceptable, the most important thing about them is how they look. This can lead to girls 'dumbing down' and focusing their efforts and energy on their appearance rather than their achievements.

Science writer, Matthew Hutson, wrote of the impact of objectification in Aeon magazine (2013):

"Yet it doesn't make sense to teach people from a young age that they are most highly valued as bodies. Sexualisation — resulting from beauty pageants or the general media landscape — leads girls and women (and sometimes boys and men) to be dehumanised by others, and it also leads to self-objectification, where that dehumanisation is internalised. Focusing on one's worth to others as a body can lead to eating disorders, reduced self-esteem, and depression. Girls can also fall prey to sexual stereotypes, avoiding other, more intellectual pursuits." [\[11\]](#)

A study by the Future Foundation think tank (2012) showed that:

"A generation of Britain's best and brightest young women is being held back from fulfilling its potential to produce future leaders, entrepreneurs and trendsetters because of insecurity and relentless societal pressure for girls to strive for physical perfection." [\[12\]](#)

Media features again and again in reports on the pressures on girls to look perfect. The Girlguiding Girls' Attitudes survey has provided statistics in this area for years.

The 2016 survey into the views of the UK's girls and young women, which surveyed over 1,500 young women, revealed that "36% of seven- to 10-year-old girls say people make them feel like the most important thing about them is the way they look" and that "almost 40% of the same group feel they are not pretty

enough, and 25% feel they need to be “perfect”. One in six feel ashamed or embarrassed of how they look.

“The findings suggest that the problem may be getting worse, with the survey reflecting a five-year decline in girls’ body confidence. Almost 40% of girls aged seven to 21 do not feel happy with how they look in 2016, compared with 27% in 2011.” [\[13\]](#)

Laura Bates of Everyday Sexism commented on the survey with some observations from her own work with girls in schools:

“Even at the age of just 12 or 13, girls already know that we live in a world where women are judged, first and foremost, not on their abilities or achievements, but how closely they match up to an unrealistic, media-mandated beauty standard. They feel, deeply, that they must strive to emulate the tall, thin, white, large-breasted, long-legged, glossy-haired, perfect-skinned models they see everywhere in adverts and magazines. They specifically reference the women they have seen online, from the unrealistic body shapes of pornography to “perfect Instagram girls”. [\[14\]](#)

Papadopoulos (2010) makes reference to the fact today’s generation of young people is growing up in an environment saturated with images as never before:

“The world is saturated by more images today than at any other time in our modern history. Behind each of these images lies a message about expectations, values and ideals. Women are revered – and rewarded – for their physical attributes and both girls and boys are under pressure to emulate polarised gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age. The evidence collected in this report suggests these developments are having a profound impact, particularly on girls and young women.”

Emerging evidence suggests that girls are the highest users of social media and that there is a link between high social media use and depression in girls. [\[15\]](#) The Millenium cohort study (2019) showed that girls’ much-higher rate of depression than boys is closely linked to the greater time they spend on social media and that as many as three-quarters of 14-year-old girls who suffer from depression also have low self-esteem and are unhappy with how they look. The report from the APA Task Force on the Effects of the Sexualisation of Girls (2007) found that:

“Frequent exposure to media images that sexualize girls and women affects how girls conceptualize femininity and sexuality. Girls and young women who more frequently consume or engage with mainstream media content offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects”. Papadopoulos (2010) found that:

“Exposure to the sexualised female ideal is linked with lower self-esteem, negative moods and depression in young women and girls.” [\[16\]](#)

A survey of over 1,000 girls aged 14-21 for the Plan International State of Girls’ Rights in the UK 2020 report found that:

“Girls’ bodies are constantly scrutinized and stigmatised: Cultural pressure to look a certain way remains a key source of anxiety in girls’ lives [...] From the images they see in the media to harmful comments at school, girls are feeling pressured to conform to unrealistic beauty and body standards. This is exacerbated by the exponential number of images girls are exposed to today – both online and offline.”

“Girls do not feel safe in public: The majority of girls living in both urban and rural areas reported being severely affected by continual street harassment. Girls said they don’t feel safe moving through the places they live on their own, and constantly have to adapt their behaviours to avoid being physically and verbally harassed.” [\[17\]](#)

The APA Task Force on the Effects of the Sexualisation of Girls found that:

“In the emotional domain, sexualization and objectification undermine confidence in and comfort with one’s own body, leading to a host of negative emotional consequences, such as shame, anxiety, and even self-disgust.” [\[18\]](#)

The Papadopolous report (2010) also linked poor body image caused by idealised notions of beauty with eating disorders:

“The mass media promotes and reinforces an idealised notion of beauty for both men and women, presenting standards – of thinness for women and of muscularity for men – that few can ever hope to achieve. The effects of this are apparent – eating disorders are on the rise. The eating disorder charity BEAT estimates that 1.6 million people in the UK have an eating disorder. The vast majority of these – some 1.4 million – are female. And now we’re starting to see what happens when you tweak the message – young women need to be not only

thin, but also sexually desirable. As anorexia increases so now does the number of young women having breast implants at an increasingly younger age.” [19]

The influence of porn has also led to girls worrying about intimate parts of their bodies and seeking cosmetic surgery such as labiaplasty. [20] Girls develop eating disorders in an attempt to control their bodies to meet impossible standards, or to try to escape the sexualisation that inevitably comes to them once their bodies start developing at puberty. Teachers report that the impact of degrading, humiliating and abusive pornography which is now easily accessible on children’s smart phones, is felt by girls as young as twelve who admit they are terrified of sex. The attempt to prevent the body from developing into that of a woman can be a protection against the role that girls see they are expected to play, a role that involves pain and humiliation they are supposed to accept and enjoy. The range of harmful effects on girls of a sexist and sexualised culture, outlined in these reports, includes the following:

- Lack of confidence in and comfort with own body
- Shame, anxiety, self-disgust
- Low self-esteem, low self-worth
- Depression, negative mood
- Eating disorders, anorexia, bulimia
- Negative impact on body image and sense of self
- Body dissociation and self-objectification
- Self-harming behaviours
- Increased vulnerability to seek cosmetic surgery

We see a similar list of co-existing mental health issues in an increasing number of teenage girls who don’t want to become women being referred to gender clinics. [21] The difference between now and 2007 when the APA Taskforce report was published, is that violent porn culture has expanded even further into the lives of young people and mental health problems among adolescent girls have soared.

Along with this, the rate of sexual harassment and assault of girls in schools across the UK is a national scandal. More than one in three girls at secondary school in the UK have experienced sexual harassment at school, according to a report in 2017 from UK Feminista and the NEU, ‘It’s Just Everywhere.’ [22] 24% of girls have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature. 66% of female sixth form pupils have experienced or witnessed sexist, misogynist language in school. A teacher said:

"In class boys talk about girls' bodies and what they 'would do to them', make female sex noises at the teachers and at girls, ask girls in class if a particular photo was them, have they got it shaved, what it looks like. Girls have cried in class several times due to abuse of intimate photos."

The recently revealed scandal of a 'rape culture' within UK public schools shows that the problem is not confined to the state sector. [23] Girls have been seriously sexually assaulted and raped in schools across the UK and rape has been described as 'normal' in private schools. [24] In response one school "silenced" women who came forward, according to one pupil.

A study of the most popular porn sites released this week has revealed that content accessible to first-time users includes criminal sex acts, including "sexually violent material depicting rape, upskirting and other abuse" and "non-consensual or incestuous acts, including where the subjects were described as drugged, unconscious or "very young"."

The study, published in the British Journal of Criminology, "is one of the most in-depth analyses of online porn to date and draws on the largest sample of mainstream material yet collected." It found that:

"Swathes of material depicting degrading and extreme violence against women were widely available to view for free and with no age checks." [25]

In another report from the Times, Head teachers have said that easy access to online porn is fuelling the sexual abuse exposed in UK schools:

"children were able to watch porn "often depicting aggressive, violent and degrading acts against women [which] have played their part in the burgeoning crisis"."

A female former pupil recounted:

"I remember boys showing us videos of porn — often quite extreme — quite a lot, and they had weird ideas about sex from porn that girls are up for violent/aggressive sex and mistaken ideas about what turns women on. It probably also influenced their language and the amount they called us sluts, whores etc." [26]

These issues are not "gender neutral".

The move to so-called 'inclusive' gender neutral language results in euphemisms such as 'peer on peer abuse' and serves to hide what is happening to girls and who the perpetrators are – boys. Girls are pressured to be inclusive and 'kind' while denying, suppressing and erasing their own unique life experiences as the female sex. Look what happened to J K Rowling.

The first step to resolving a problem is to name it. How can girls be empowered to name the problem in this gender neutral culture we've created?

Do girls need their exclusive, female-only spaces? Yes, now more than ever. Girls need to talk without taking into account the views of boys; without feeling pressure to perform femininity for them; without feeling the need to be inclusive and kind; without feeling they need to be careful about the language they use; without being made to feel they are wrong for talking about exclusively female experiences. They need older experienced women to support them, give them permission and actively encourage them to talk honestly and openly, to offset the emotional manipulation in a society that silences them.

Girls today, more than at any time before, need their own spaces away from boys. They need permission to exclude boys – an Equality Act right. They need help and support from women whose motivation is not to silence girls into submission but to inspire and empower girls to assert their right to use their voices and confidently speak out. They need more role models like J K Rowling.

[1] <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-02-22/debates/EF8A7974-0A9C-4F17-B9DC-B7D26E52D52F/MinisterialAndOtherMaternityAllowancesBill>

[2] <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/12/toys-are-more-divided-by-gender-now-than-they-were-50-years-ago/383556/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/apr/16/children-clothing-survey-bikini-heels>

[4] <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

[5] <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10738/1/sexualisation-young-people.pdf>

[6] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/young-women-mental-health-female-suicide-rates-highest-record-support-a8122451.html>

[7] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/087be17c-98ff-11e8-be18-9b68e74f878e>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/sep/29/self-harm-ptsd-and-mental-illness-soaring-among-young-women-in-england-survey>

[9] <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/body-image-report/childhood>

[10] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1363725/Primary-schools-tackle-negative-body-image-year-olds-battle-anorexia.html>

[11] <http://www.aeonmagazine.com/being-human/what-our-minds-do-when-we-see-someones-body/>

[12] <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/girls-interrupted-revealed-the-true-cost-of-low-self-esteem-7606258.html>

[13] <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/girls-making-change/girls-attitudes-survey/?301=yes>

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/04/young-girls-ashamed-survey-body-confidence?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

[15] <https://www.theguardian.com/society//jan/04/depression-in-girls-linked-to-higher-use-of-social-media>

[16] <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10738/1/sexualisation-young-people.pdf>

[17] <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/at-the-turn-of-the-decade-gender-inequality-still-affects-majority-of-uk-girls-reveals>

[18] <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10738/1/sexualisation-young-people.pdf>

[19] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-40410459>

[20] <https://capmh.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13034-015-0042-y#Tab1>

[21] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4396787/>

[22] <https://ukfeminista.org.uk/news/research/>

[23] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dulwich-college-reports-its-boys-accused-of-sex-crimes-to-police-5vg2tn5sq>

[24] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rape-normal-at-private-school-says-dossier-of-170-testimonies-5mqmp22jg>

[25] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/3e3d501a-9484-11eb-84a3-79b283cc3ba8>

[26] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/37fd1fda-93e1-11eb-8d6e-90b9b6b1f793>

<https://www.transgendertrend.com/gender-neutral-culture-erases-girls/>