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**State intervention, welfare and the social construction of girlhood in  
Australian history**

Robert van Krieken  
*University of Sydney*

*Abstract*

This paper provides a historical analysis of the role that state intervention into family life has played in the social construction of Australian 'girlhood'. It outlines the discourses and practices surrounding child welfare interventions and institutions in Australia between 1890 and 1940, focusing on the very different ways in which girls and boys were regarded as problematic future 'citizens', as well as the different institutional practices and disciplinary strategies they were subjected to. The paper works towards an explanation of those differences by locating them within broader social and scientific understandings of female and male 'nature', with specific reference to the notion of girls and women as primarily sexual beings. The paper concludes by exploring the implications that the history of the social construction of girlhood might have for current policies and discourses specifically focusing on girls.

*Correspondence:*

Dr Robert van Krieken  
Dept of Social Work & Social Policy  
University of Sydney  
Australia 2006  
FAX: 61 2 692 3783

## State intervention, welfare and the social construction of girlhood in Australian history

Robert van Krieken  
*University of Sydney*

It is now broadly accepted that childhood is not simply a 'natural' phenomenon, with the same characteristics across history and culture, but a *social* institution which varies in form in different historical and social contexts (Aries 1973; Synnott 1983; Neustadter 1989). Childhood is also increasingly regarded as a social *construction*, the product of specific policies and interventions, rather than the product of its own inner dynamics of development. The various attempts to actively shape the experience of childhood since the 16th century are then central to any attempt to understand and explain the form childhood takes today. State policies and practices play a central role here, as it has been through the state that most attempts to structure and organise childhood for a variety of purposes have been organised, and there is now an extensive literature on state intervention into family life (e.g Platt 1977; Lasch 1979).

What is less frequently acknowledged and examined is the idea that state intervention into family life might be a profoundly *gendered* process, with the construction of specific sexual, male and female, identities at its heart. By far the majority of work done on juvenile delinquency, child neglect and abuse, and the state responses to these phenomenon, rely on ungendered categories like 'youth', 'adolescence', 'childhood' and 'class' (Bellingham 1983; Bessant 1987; Shields 1983; Kociumbas 1988; Cashen 1985; Davison 1983; Gillis 1975; Humphries 1981; Carrington 1991), sometimes when they are in fact looking only at 'boyhood'. In a recent discussion of children in history, for example, one eminent historian of childhood makes only passing reference to gender distinctions in the section dealing with

sexual identity and activity, giving no analytic attention to the great differences between female and male sexual identities as they develop through childhood and adolescence (Jordanova, 1989). This can fairly be described as a feature of most of the literature on the history of childhood, which since Aries (1973) has concentrated almost everyone's attention on the question of how 'childhood' is understood and acted upon, rather than 'girlhood' and 'boyhood'.

Most of the central texts on state intervention into family life and the construction of childhood also focus primarily on the general development of the relationship between the state and the family and whose interests have been served by this development (Lasch 1977; Donzelot 1979; Platt 1977; Meyer 1983). Where gender is raised as an issue, it is analysed in relation to the different responses of mothers and fathers to the erosion of the boundary between the private and the public (Donzelot 1979) or the role played by middle-class women anxious to expand their 'ever-widening sphere' (Godden 1982; Windschuttle 1980a) through welfare and social work (Platt 1977; Lasch 1977). Even those examinations of the part played by gender inequalities, in the labour market and responsibility for child care, concentrate on parents and also leave to one side the very different ways that girls and boys experience state intervention into their families.

There is, however, a small but growing body of work that deals more explicitly with the gendered nature of state intervention into family life (Gordon 1986; Schlossman & Wallach 1978; Tyler 1986; Wimshurst 1984), and this paper aims to contribute to this analytic concern by identifying at least some of the central issues involved in the placement of the construction of girlhood and boyhood at the centre of the state construction of 'childhood'. I will do this through a discussion of the development of child welfare, primarily in Australia, but also in the United States and Britain, identifying the different reasons for

girls and boys coming into contact with child welfare authorities, the very different experiences they had of the child welfare system, and the explanations that can be provided for these differences. Any such explanation relies on an understanding of the social and ideological context within which girlhood was understood and acted upon, especially the notions of sexuality, adolescence, childhood, and gender difference which lay at the foundation of state policies in relation to those girls regarded as requiring intervention and transformation.

I would also like to signal the deeper conceptual significance of the issue, although I may not be able to work through all its ramifications here. The question is not simply one of including a topic or body of evidence into an otherwise unchanged conceptual framework from which it happens to have been excluded. As Deborah Tyler has pointed out, the distinction between girls and boys in some sense cuts across that between children and adults, and girls experience the transition in a very specific way. There were thus distinct tensions between understandings of the nature of childhood and those concerning the nature of female sexuality (Tyler 1986: 65), and ultimately we may need to question whether we should continue to use non-gender specific concepts like childhood and adolescence at all. Even if we do, it will have to be with far greater circumspection and in relation to a more limited and focused range of issues than is currently prevalent in the literature on childhood and youth.

Although my primary empirical focus is on the Australian historical material, I should also forewarn the reader that I make frequent use of secondary literature dealing with North America and Britain, largely because a number of analytic points are only made by particular writers in relation to their unique data. The, unwarranted, assumption I usually make is that the situation was roughly the same in different Western industrialised

countries, and I have left open the question of how and why differences in the state's involvement in girlhood may have arisen.

### *Sex and the Single (Young) Girl*

One consistent feature of the organised attempts to regulate the behaviour of young girls and boys was the very different nature of what was regarded as problematic. Boys disobeyed their parents and other authority figures, stole, and occasionally committed crimes of greater or lesser degrees of violence. While some girls also engaged in similar behaviour, by far the majority of those regarded as delinquent or in need of some form of intervention were defined in *sexual* terms. This meant that if they engaged in sexual activity before marriage, appeared likely to do so, or seemed to encourage other girls to do so, they were regarded as heading towards either permanent promiscuity or prostitution, and defined both as being in 'moral danger' and a moral threat to society. A number of differences also emerge in the treatment that girls and boys received. Girls generally were given longer sentences, were less likely to be put on probation, spent their time in more punitive and repressive institutional regimes, and spent more time and energy rebelling against their captivity (Schlossman & Wallach 1978: 71-2; Wimshurst 1984). The reasons for this are to be found in both the understandings and the practices of male and female sexuality dominant throughout the 19th, but especially most of the 20th century which form the foundation of current attitudes and practices towards girlhood.

A gender division has been present in state involvement in the welfare of children throughout the nineteenth century. In Australia, for example, there was a great deal of concern expressed in the early days of the convict colony by the clergy and the authorities about the number of women children abandoned by fathers and left to rely on the public

purpose, and children were regarded as the means of transforming the behaviour of the convict class over the long term. However, the first manifestation of this interest in family life was the establishment, first on Norfolk Island in 1795, and then after taking office in Sydney, of an orphan school for girls in 1801. The boys' orphan school was to wait until 1819. Girls were regarded as more in need of this kind of institution because it was female children who were seen as sexually vulnerable and as most essential for the construction of Christian domesticity in the colony. The girls in the Female Orphan School, for example were:

...to be educated only in view to their present Condition Life, and future Destination, namely as the wives or Servants of Common Settlers, Mechanics, and labouring people. They are therefore only to be taught to read and write, so as to be able to read and understand the Holy Scriptures; but they are to be well-instructed in common Needle-work; in making up their own clothes; in washing of Clothes and Linens; in Spinning and Carding: the Management of a Dairy; in Banking, Cooking, and all Species of Household work. They are also to be worked, occasionally, in the Garden and Field, as a Useful and Wholesome exercise, as well as with the view to fit them for Wives of Farmers. (Regulations 1818, cited in Govan 1951: 74)

Later the influence of Evangelism was to strengthen this concern with girlhood, and led to the establishment of a Female School of Industry (FSI) in addition to the orphan schools.

In England the Evangelical movement had grown in influence and was busy promoting its particular brand of middle-class Protestantism, with its emphasis on hard work and sexual purity. They attacked the moral laxity of aristocrat and worker alike, and 'soon acquired colonial agents'(Connell & Irving 1980: 65) in the 1820s, headed by the Protestant

clergy. They received a boost in 1825 with the arrival of Governor Ralph Darling and, more specifically, Eliza Darling, who was very much a part of the Evangelical movement in England. Together with similarly inclined wives and clergy, military officers, magistrates, surgeons and merchant traders, she sparked off a revival in colonial philanthropy, setting up the Female School of Industry in 1826, heading 'the first institution conducted entirely by women in Australia.' A second school also operated at Parramatta between 1829 and 1835 (Windschuttle 1980b: 3).

The aim of the FSI was to rescue destitute girls and to train them as domestic servants. The latter aspect certainly played a major role in its ability to attract funds, as subscribers were given preference for graduates of the school; the "servant problem" 'provided a powerful stimulus to subscribers and, in the school's early years, it was flush with donors' (Windschuttle 1980b: 12). However for reasons which are not entirely clear, it turned out a dismal failure in this respect -- up to 1831 there were nearly 400 subscribers and only 7 servants produced. The Female Orphan School fared much better, sending out 71 girls between 1825 and 1829, so only those interested in FSI's rescue function continued subscribing after the departure of the Darlings in 1831.

The FSI only ever dealt with a small number of girls -- never more than 45 in a year compared to the FSI's annual average of 120 (Govan 1951: 89). Why was rescuing this number of girls so important to those who kept pouring money and time into the school? Their evangelical concern with religious and sexual purity, especially and primarily among women, seems to have been sufficient to motivate them to try and generate as much of it as they could within an easily captured audience.

It cannot be said, therefore, that either the Orphan Schools or the FSI played a key role on the development of a particular kind of girlhood in the colony. Irrespective of the

aspirations the girls in the FSI might have acquired, 'their class position ensured their continuing employment as domestic servants to the middle- and upper-class subscribers to the school' (Alford 1984: 242). It was more the character of the labour market itself, with its sexual divisions, ample work available and effective mechanism for coercing people into it, which operated to impose the cultural values of discipline, obedience and submission, and the orphan schools and the FSI were largely ancillary to that.

However, intensified attention was paid to juvenile delinquency as a serious social problem throughout the course of the nineteenth century, resulting in the establishment of large-scale reformatories and industrial schools throughout Britain, Western Europe, North America and Australia. In Sydney in 1860, the Select Committee on the Working Classes in the Metropolis reported on a range of social issues, including the number of boys and girls apparently 'morally destitute' and 'floating about the streets and lanes like fish in a pond' (Select Committee on the condition of the Working Classes 1859/60: 1271, 1312). In relation to boys, the Sydney report argued that there was in fact very little real destitution and homelessness. The problem was more their moral condition: 'the evidence abundantly shews that a large class exist to whom the possession of parents is of no value in giving direction to their lives, and who are growing up to be an incumbrance and a curse to society' ('Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes', pp. 1456, 1272). With respect to girls the problem was their (supposed) sexual behaviour, with the evidence tending to be limited to colourful accounts of particular cases of 'young' girls soliciting as prostitutes or living with older prostitutes. The girls' real was difficult to determine; witnesses' assessments of age usually conflicted with the girls' own statements. Overall the picture drawn was not one of children being cast out on the streets by either their parents' poverty or their heartlessness and neglect, but more one boys' *activity* and girls' *sexuality* being left unsupervised.

This official concern about the waywardness of the rising generation was translated into action in 1866 with the passing of legislation allowing for the compulsion of vagrant and neglected children into youth into newly-established reformatories and industrial schools. What is important here is that the girls' industrial schools and reformatories operated in a quite different way from those which the boys entered. Girls generally entered them for reasons connected with their morality and sexual behaviour rather than petty crime. Honora Williams, aged 15, was brought to Sydney Central Police Court by her mother in 1870 because 'she left home this day fortnight, since which she has kept company with girls of bad character' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 8 November 1870). Given the ideological construction of women as bearers of society's domestic virtue, the girls' moral behaviour and the threat it posed to respectability was examined more closely than that of boys. Girls were given very different kind of attention from their male counterparts, with greater social restrictions placed upon their everyday activity and especially on their 'modesty'. Sexually active girls were regarded as especially dangerous, for as Deborah Gorham has put it for Britain, in the ideology and imagery surrounding youthful sexuality, 'the two familiar images of adult women, the angel-in-the-house and the fallen woman, have their counterparts in the opposing images of the child redeemer and the wayward, evil girl' (p. 370). Not that it necessarily protected that modesty, for while those younger girls boarded-out were supervised quite closely, girls in domestic service were sometimes raped by their masters or fellow-workers. Rather than being protected from moral danger, a number of girls were in fact subjected to a different, normalised form of it, inside instead of outside the home (Barbalet 1983: 88-94, 191).

For boys 'uncontrollability' was primarily defined in terms of disobedience and petty crime. The father of one boy admitted to the *Sobraon* in 1911 'says he has no control over

him, and is willing, provided the boy improves under discipline, to have him back in the course of a few months'. An insufficient commitment to the work ethic could also make one 'uncontrollable': one boy admitted to the *Sobraon* in 1911 said: 'I was sent here for being uncontrollable. For not working I think it was' (StaNSW 8/1751). When picture shows caught the imagination of Australian youth, they also became an increasingly common reason for 'loss of control'. One 10 year-old boy was committed to the MFHB in 1912 with the following entry: 'Uncontrollable, goes straight from school to the picture shows and comes home late at night. Mother wants boy sent institution' (StaNSW 8/1755).

For girls, however, uncontrollability focused primarily on their sexual behaviour; the NSW Industrial School for Girls, for example, was designated specifically for 'sexual delinquency' (Royal Commission into the Public Service of New South Wales: 461), and here too the parents themselves were often the initiators in having their daughters committed to the child welfare system. Girls suffered most from a sexual double standard in which they were blamed for being victims. In 1910 there was the following entry for a 13 year-old girl admitted to the ISG:

Living under conditions lapsing into career of vice and crime. Man named Robinson was tried for carnally knowing girl on her evidence but was acquitted.

So if under-age and raped, girls stood a good chance of being institutionalised as they had committed the crime. There was a sort of logic of 'protection' to it, but one which kept girls firmly within an established network of sexual power relations. Similarly with cases of incest, the least powerful person, the girl, was often the one who was punished. Another 13 year old in 1914:

Neglected, V & C. Brought to the Court on mother's complaint. Girl and step-father admitted reclining each night on stretcher on kitchen. Dr. Waugh deposed girl not *virgo intacto* and indicated more than one penetration. Has not been to school for 12 months.

Alternatively, working class girls who did not generally conduct themselves properly and buckle down to feminine domesticity and obedience, especially anywhere near the boundaries of sexual encounter, real or imagined, were subjected to state intervention. The ISG entries for some 15-year-olds speak for themselves:

Uncontrollable. Stays out late in company of young men and boys. Will not obey parents.

Associates with men and girl of bad character, has been cautioned by police. Admits immorality.

Uncontrollable. Untruthful, disobedient, uses filthy language. Wants to promenade street at night with boys.

Roughly 80% of the girls entering the ISG were admitted on this sort of charge, of 'lapsing into a career of vice and crime' (StaNSW 8/1758). The 'great majority' of boys coming before the Children's Courts, on the other hand, had engaged in offences 'common to boyhood', such as 'fighting in the streets, riding on the trams while in motion, bathing in public places,

robbing orchards, playing football in the streets' (SCRB AR 1912: 818). It should also be added, however, that far fewer girls entered the system than boys; in 1914 the Sydney Metropolitan Children's Court dealt with 1,717 boys and 172 girls, most of the latter being under 'uncontrollable' charges (SCRB AR 1914: 877).

This moral dimension seems to be what led to 'fallen' girls being seen as more 'difficult', and to the treatment of girls being more repressive and punitive. The girls' industrial schools were a regime of stone walls, lashings, solitary confinement, bread and water diets, straitjackets and various other forms of ill-treatment. This was quite a different situation from that on board nautical ships like the *Vernon*, where there was some trade training as well as better staff (Williamson 1982: 377-80). Whereas the *Vernon* came to be regarded with some civic pride, particularly while Frederick Neitenstein was Superintendent, Sydney's Industrial Schools for Girls was located first in a former military barracks and then the ex-convict stone barracks on Cockatoo Island. It was given incompetent and brutal administrators, and the girls protested repeatedly by rioting.

Although there was also no place given to church involvement in the official child welfare rhetoric, church institutions came to be allied with state agencies: they were an alternative location for specific categories of children, and Charles Mackellar in particular regarded church homes as ideal for girls, given what he saw as their greater resistance to moral reform once they had 'fallen'. As he put it in 1913:

Many authorities...are emphatic in their view that certain classes of girls -- namely, those who are sexually immoral and those of a hysterical, incorrigible types -- cannot be reformed in reformatories. Stress is everywhere laid on the necessity for the intervention in this work of religious organisations, and with this I am in hearty

agreement (Mackellar 1913: 1224).

Not that this view was necessarily shared by, say, the administrators of the Industrial School for Girls, in fact there was quite some opposition, but the overall result was that a greater proportion of girls found themselves in the care of church institutions instead of state reformatories or industrial schools.

### *Class, science and female sexuality*

A number of explanatory issues emerge from this rough sketch of how state intervention constructed some girlhoods, for it is not self-evident why these difference in the treatment of girls and boys should have arisen. The first point that many writers make concerns the issue of *class* differences in the perception of female sexuality. Middle-class welfare reformers thus appear to have either misunderstood and misperceived working-class female sexual behaviour, or simply attempted to transform it into their own model of appropriate, domesticated, femininity. The economic position of working-class women, the 'brutal bleakness' of their lives (Gorham 1978: 373) is then held to explain much of their sexual behaviour, certainly their responsiveness to men exchanging 'treats' in return for attention ranging from company to sexual intercourse, and often their willingness to become prostitutes. Few of the women working factories and shops around the turn of the century earned a 'living wage', let alone enough to pay for the big city amusements and pleasures which might make the drudgery of their everyday work more tolerable (Peiss 1983; Tyler 1986: 57). In New York city around the turn of the century, for example, department store managers advised their employees to supplement their inadequate salaries with the offerings of a 'gentlemen friend' (Peiss 1983: 131). This made the exchange of sexual favours for

social and economic advantage an attractive, perhaps essential part of working women's lives, and encouraged a free and easy attitude towards sexual interaction that the middle class simply could not comprehend.

The conflict over young women's sexuality can then be seen as based on an economic conflict between middle-class moral reformers unable or unwilling to recognise the material basis of working-class female sexuality and young working-class women simply accommodating themselves as best they could, and with maximum personal dignity, to a labour market exploitative of women's work. By simply trying to change working-class girl's sexual behaviour and defining it in terms of exploitation, middle-class reformers 'could ignore their own complicity in a more generalised exploitation of girls and young women' (Gorham 1978: 376-7). The same moral crusaders upset by young working-class women earning a little extra through casual prostitution was likely to also employ those very women on inadequate wages as domestic servants, shop assistants, office or factory workers.

The second point made by a number of writers is the significance of the 'sexual purity' and eugenicist movements from the beginning of the twentieth century. The differential treatment of girls and boys was to some extent transformed and intensified around the turn of the century, especially with the increasing prominence of social darwinism, eugenics, theories of adolescence as a particular stage of biological, social and sexual development and a domestic ideology of ideal family life (Davin 1982). For the middle class the period was a high point in their attempts to shape society and 'the nation' in their own image, with the working class and especially working-class children being the main focus of their attention. The health of the nation had to be improved, if not for the sake of science in itself, then for reasons such as: disease and ill-health could spread, and besides, it was unpleasant to look at. Stunted, unhealthy boys made poor soldiers, and the poor health of

mother and babies was worrying to those who saw a connection between population size and a nation's capacity to fight and win wars. Alongside infant mortality, the declining birth rate also became a target of investigation and concern, with Mackellar at the head of the Royal Commission into the declining birth rate lamenting the spreading use of contraception (Hicks 1978). The Boer War had revealed the extent of ill health among British slum children, and this in turn generated anxiety among some intellectuals about the health of working class youth within a general theory of 'urban degeneration' (Davison 1983: 143-174).

Another aspect of this degeneration was juvenile crime and delinquency, with factory work now being blamed for the delinquency and larrikinism of youth over the age of 14 (Connell & Irving 1980: 206). This concern and the anxiety about urban degeneration was in itself not new, it was as old as cities themselves. What was new was the willingness of middle-class groups to do something about it. Kindergartens, playgrounds and baby health centres were established, particularly in working-class areas, workers' housing was built and supervised, slums were cleared, child protection legislation passed and various youth organisations established to 'keep them off the streets': the YM and YWCA, the Boys' Brigade, the Scouts and Girl Guides (Maunder 1984). Intellectual developments like Social Darwinism, eugenics, the genesis of child psychology and psychological measurement, as well as the psychiatric profession's own interest in expanding its territory fed into this kind of concern, so that medically and psychologically 'scientifically' supervising and restructuring the working class became an obvious course of action for the state and its officials (Garton 1986; for a discussion of Social Darwinism in Australia, see Goodwin 1964). It was in this period, for example, that leading Australian social reformers like Charles Mackellar became interested in feeble-mindedness, coming back from overseas trips with a lengthy report and recommendations about what should be done about the feeble-minded: psychological

measurement and intervention almost took on the appearance of a panacea which would solve the more intractable child welfare problems.

There were in any case groups with moral objections to the apparent liberalisation of attitudes to sexuality which took the form of a movement for 'social purity'. The threatening breakage of the link between sexuality and marriage aroused fears that it would lead to the decay of girls' and women's homemaking and mothering capacities on the one hand, and men's commitment to children and dependent wives on the other. This latter aspect lay behind the support of feminist groups for social purity, which focused primarily on prostitution and raising the female age of consent to sixteen.

However, social darwinism and eugenics both gave this moral concern a *scientific* basis and raised the stakes, from the survival of the family to the survival of the nation and ultimately the human race. In social darwinist thought many of the apparently intractable problems of human society - poverty, crime, poor health, mental illness - could only be solved through careful management of reproduction, and a persistent theme in social darwinist and eugenicist writers was 'the obligation of the individual to promote the future of the race through sexual restraint outside marriage, and by rational planning of fertility with a well-chosen mate within it' (Reiger 1985: 195). Male sexuality was regarded as a biological constant, simply a natural drive essential to the survival of the species, but females were seen as better equipped to manage their sexuality and as morally responsible for both their own sexual behaviour and that of men (Bland 1982: 38)).

The impact of precocious female sexuality thus came to be seen as extending well beyond the immediate circle of the family, to generate a ripple effect throughout society and underlie all of society's ills. Sexual precociousness, in the form of masturbation and sex outside marriage, had in any case been regarded as a sure indication of mental deficiency

since the 18th century (Neuman 1975), which was why in Australia delinquent girls were not even given IQ tests as part of their initial assessment at the Children's Court; their problem was defined as 'sexual depravity', and this was itself regarded as a sure sign of mental deficiency. The fact that it was *working-class* girls who were risking producing children outside of marriage only made matters worse for some eugenicists, as they understood the very fact of being working-class to provide additional proof of their 'unfitness'. 'Sexually delinquent' girls were thus in trouble within eugenicist thought on two counts: because they were working-class, and because they were sexually active and therefore mentally deficient.

Another central feature of the dominant understanding of female sexuality was that girls and women were more profoundly and permanently affected by sex than males were. One of the foundations of what Murray Davis (1983) calls the 'Jehovanist' view of sexuality, probably most influential in the 19th century, but still a thread running through current sexual discourses on sexuality, is the idea that women's identity is far more radically transformed by sexual intercourse than men's, largely because sex is transformative of personal identity for both sexes in any case, but more so for women because of the penetration of the *insides* of their bodies, transgressing the usual boundaries between the pure and the unclean. As Deborah Gorham puts it, it was commonly assumed among social and welfare workers 'that illicit sexual intercourse had a permanently corrupting effect on the character of young girls' (Gorham 1978: 371). Youthfulness adds yet another layer to Jehovanist dismay, as children are also seen as more powerfully transformed by sexual encounters, having not yet fully developed a well-defined social identity. Once a young girl has lost her respectability, then, she could either never recover it ('I'm ruined!') or only do so with great difficulty, certainly only within marriage.

This idea was in turn responsible for the notion of the incorrigibility of girl

delinquents and the disinterest in providing them with the same reformatory and educational facilities as boys - institutional *custody*, protecting them from society and society from them, became seen as the only *treatment* required. It also underlay the unpopularity of probation as a reformatory strategy and the longer institutional sentences girls received (Wimshurst 1984; Schlossman & Wallach 1978). As Kerry Wimshurst has pointed out for South Australia, while boys were committed for a variety of terms depending on the offence, more than two thirds of girls coming before the Adelaide Children's Court in the 1870s were committed until the maximum age of 16 years, and by 1890 when the maximum had been lifted to 18, over 90 percent were committed until the maximum. The average age of girls committed was also higher, nearly 16 in 1890 compared to 12½ for boys (Wimshurst 1984: 275).

*Beyond the revisionist approach to girlhood?*

By now the broad contours of what might be called a 'revisionist' approach to the state's intervention in the construction of girlhood will be more or less apparent. A sensitivity to gender differences indicates that girlhood has been perceived primarily in terms of a particular model of female sexuality, and girls' identities have been regarded as tied to their sexuality and its nascent development into motherhood and associated domesticity. The profoundly unequal treatment of boys and girls can thus be seen as rooted a set of notions about the 'nature' of femininity and even sexuality itself. In addition, once one recognises the material conditions of working-class girls' lives, it also becomes clear that the perceived dangerousness of girls' precocious sexuality was based on a middle-class refusal or inability to acknowledge the connections between economic conditions and sexual behaviour, thus unjustly condemning as immoral what was in fact either economically driven behaviour or simply the product of an alternative and equally legitimate sexual morality.

However, there may be some problems with this revisionist account, and I would like to conclude the paper by briefly outlining them. The first concerns the alternative model of girls' sexuality being offered in the literature which has dealt explicitly with gender and state intervention. Most writers appear to adopt a 'repression' hypothesis, namely that dominant moral and scientific discourses mobilised very particular models of ideal feminine 'nature', translated them into practices (laws, procedures, institutions) which acted to restrain, redirect or repress an existing female sexuality either simply being expressed or being validly used by its possessors for ends of their own 'free' choosing.

While one might appreciate the virtues of going beyond seeing girls and young women simply as 'victims' of predatory and oppressive men, the danger being run here is that one model of female 'nature' might simply taking the place of another, with an underdeveloped sense of the social and economic contexts of girls' lives. If one asks why girls chose to stay out late at night, engage in a variety of sexual activities with boys and (usually older) men, there are a number of possible answers, with a variety of interpretations. If we take the example of 'treats', while we might say that girls engaged actively in sexual exchange, often in order to gain both social and material advantage, it important to take account of the overall economic and social framework within which their choices were made. What is interesting is that sex comes to be the girls' primary, perhaps only, social *resource*, and this raises the question of whether this has been created by a sexual division of labour, especially in relation to the jobs and salaries available to girls. Rather than celebrate girls' and young women's ability to get ahead in life by using their sexual power over men, we might be better concerned with the economic power males have which confines girls and women to that sphere.

Another answer which can be given to the question of why girls were rebelling

against their parent(s), staying away from home and working to earn more money than they could outside what we might now call 'the sex industry', is that there may have been something about their home lives which made them unhappy and contributed to their own self-definition in terms of their sexual attractiveness to men. Linda Gordon has pointed out that sexual delinquency was one of the escape strategies used by girls trying to escape what she calls 'domestic incest', namely situations where girls turned into second wives:

The girls not only became sexual partners to the male heads of household, but also virtual housewives, taking over housework, child care and general family maintenance as well as sexual obligations' (Gordon 1986: 254)

She points out that her examination of all the Massachusetts Society for the Protection of Children's female sex delinquent cases for the year 1920 revealed 40 percent of cases alleging incest and another 20 percent non-incestuous rape (Gordon 1986: 262). Add to these figures a likely group who experienced one or the other but made no allegation, and it becomes a very high proportion indeed. Generally Gordon's case histories seem to indicate a close link between incest and sexual delinquency, with the experience of incest anchoring in the girls' own psyches the idea that they were 'ruined' and destined for prostitution. Prostitution then becomes both an escape from paternal incest, providing economic independence, and a confirmation of its effects, constructing girls' identities around their sexual availability to men, and the idea that only sex could grant them any power (Gordon 1986: 264).

There are also some difficulties with the notions of 'freedom' and 'consent' underlying much of the revisionist work on girlhood. This is a particular problem in history, for the

concepts and categories we use to understand sexual relationships today may be to a greater or less extent inappropriate for understanding the experiences of girls situated in very different historical contexts. In any case, as Judith Allen has argued, 'absolute and modern notions of 'freedom' and 'consent'...are inherently problematic when applied to women and girls located historically in subordinate sexual economic relations of power with men' (Allen 1987: 626). The revisionist model might make decreasing sense of female sexuality the younger the 'females' concerned are. The issue of 'consent' is one of the most vexed problems in understanding how power operates in sexual relations between men and women, and all the 'age of consent' debates of the period were unable to completely resolve the issue. What sense does it make to say that girls freely engaged in sex, or even that they choose to define themselves in terms of their sexual attractiveness, when there might be little other option? It sounds a little like saying that working-class men and women choose to work.

Finally, it is important to understand the *social basis* of whatever state policies and interventions concerning female sexuality are in operation, rather than resting our analysis on a demonstration of their characteristics and effects. For example, ideas about what constituted appropriate behaviour for girls developed not only within the minds of social reformers and state legislators, they had an intimate relationship with notions of appropriate familial relations more broadly accepted in society. It was most often mothers who brought complaints of uncontrollability against their daughters (Brenzel 1983; Odem 1991; van Krieken 1991), so that the on-going disputes over the form that girlhood could and should take were as much, if not more so, between mothers and daughters as between girls and state agencies. The models and discourses surrounding girlhood were not simply invented by welfare reformers and state agencies, but were well-anchored in a broadly accepted set of

ideas about appropriate and ideal family relations (Sutton 1988: 239; van Krieken 1991). An accurate understanding of the development and impact of state policies and practices on girlhood depends, therefore, on a parallel analysis of relations between parents and their daughters.

This point becomes even clearer when we ask whether things have changed very much since. Lesley Johnson's (1989) study of 1950s Australian girlhood experiences indicates that sexuality was still regarded as a primary social resource for many 'teenage' girls, the only possible route to securing broader stability in their lives via their attraction to a man. In the early 1980s Howard Harris and Alan Lipman's report on the operation of a family group home in Britain a junior house parent is quoted as saying the following:

Girls in care are known to be more difficult than boys. Give me boys all the time. I'd prefer to work with just boys. If a boy sleeps around he's a big guy but if a girl sleeps around she's a slut. (Harris & Lipman, 1984: 270)

They paint a picture of girls being attracted to nightclubs by older men willing to provide money for cosmetics and clothing, pleasure and excitement, and of staff aiming, in contrast, to turn young women into 'chaste homemakers, devoted, modest and domesticated' (Harris & Lipman 1984: 270). Despite the broadened range of opportunities available to girls today, especially since the expansion of educational provision for girls after World War II, there thus appears to be a very persistent set of ideas about the nature of girlhood, female sexuality and heterosexual relationships that probably cannot be attributed simply to state policies and practices alone. They seem also to be part of a larger *culture* of sexual identity and sexual difference anchored in civil society itself.

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