Recapturing the feminine others: acknowledging femininity in all of its forms

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how internalisation of gender norms affects the exploration of femininity in gender-specific youth work programmes for young women and girls. This study is based on Beauvoir's (2010) idea that femininity is a product of civilisation, reflecting social distinctions rather than 'essential' differences between men and women. The perpetuation of perceptions that are fuelled by femininity, manifested in such areas as language, appearance and behaviour, has maintained the status quo generation after generation, and Stoller (2020) has advanced the perspective that 'gender' depending on a person's level of femininity or masculinity determines the societal structures to be occupied by women. The intersectionality theory proposed by Crenshaw (2023) also aids this study's understanding of the variety of identities and experiences that women have in regard to factors like race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. The study's interviewees provide evidence of the changing perspectives and experiences of the social change process that has been centred on girlhood and womanhood over generations. According to preliminary research, the increasingly complex and very diverse realities are not well represented by the current model for discussing femininity. Understanding the many frameworks through which young women and girls' lives are viewed, heard and embraced may need a moment of reflection in order to dispel today's myths and illusions surrounding femininity..

KEYWORDS

YOUNG WOMEN

GIRLS

GIRLHOOD

FEMINISM

SOCIALISATION

INCLUSIVITY

IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

Youth work has a long history of advocating young women's needs, assisting them in overcoming obstacles and inspiring them to challenge social norms. The voices of young women and girls are crucial for the main purposes of this article. Their involvement and contribution foster a conversational culture that may improve knowledge and comprehension of varied experiences, advancing society at large and the overall self-assured wellbeing of their identities. When you're young, you constantly compare yourself to a standard of normality and engage in conversations about what constitutes reality and who decides, or provides an opportunity, to bring back attention to differences and diversity, especially for girls and young women (Batsleer, 1996). Women have been struggling for equality and fighting oppression for years, and while the feminist movement has paved the way for new opportunities, prejudice and discrimination still have a substantial negative impact on women, restricting their ability to advance (Council of Europe 2022).

According to Hart (1992, p. 4), a child's 'participation' in society starts the instant he or she realises how much

power they have on events through their cries or movements. Today's young women and girls are embracing feminist ideals like 'flexibility, autonomy, and self-determination' (Budgeon 2011) as central components of 'new modern' femininity. Malala Yousafzai, Yara Shahidi, Emma Watson, Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg, Greta Thunberg, Samaira Mehta and Millie Bobby Brown have all pushed for young women to become significant forces for change (Courtney 2018; UNWOMEN 2020), though perhaps not as 'feminists' per se but rather as self-made individuals.

My research, which looked at how internalised gender norms may prevent women from exploring different facets of femininity, suggests that the way in which youth organisations promote sessions and programmes geared towards young women may have a big impact on whether or not young women and girls feel welcome and included in the space. This study is significant because there seems to be little understanding that being a woman entails being feminine, that people have different interpretations of what is deemed to be feminine due to factors like class, sexual orientation, religion and overall individuality, and that these interpretations should have a space in all-female programmes to enable respect and value for the various ways in which girls and young women interpret femininity.

GROWING PAINS IN GIRLHOOD

Identity is developed by the process of internalising one's own sense of self, which is viewed as the socialisation process. Millan (2002) contends that newborns lack a sense of self at birth and instead acquire one when they adjust to playing roles that are particular to their gender. Although it may appear simple to feel free to express oneself in a society with multiple identities, gender continues to play a role in the embedded structures and social positions that shape the identity control of young women and girls,

especially during the crucial transitional years of 'girlhood' (Rivière 2009; Butler 2011; Lindsey 2015).

Fashion also has a significant influence on the way that young women and girls are portrayed in the world, Our bodies continue to be a significant medium through which we as people express, among other things, the gender component of our identity. According to Wilson (1987, p. 117), 'Fashion is obsessed with gender, defines and redefines the gender boundaries,' which in the twenty-first century refers to the process of new interpretations of the individualisation of the social world based on the judgement that surrounds people's' fundamental relationship with their body and appearance. The concept of a 'dressed body' proposed by González & Bovone (2012, pp. 67–71) affirms the importance of clothing as a basic element of an individual's identity and explains how our clothing choices function as personal narratives for individuals to communicate either inclusion or exclusion. Olantha Moran contends in an article on Refinery29, that a woman's femininity is represented in the clothes she chooses to wear (Ives 2016), suggesting that she is in control of what she perceives as feminine in everything she wears. In the modern day, fashion has taken on the function of a form of resistance (Behnke 2016).

The bold claim made by Jordan (1989, p. 144) that 'When we get the monsters off our backs, we may all want to run in very different directions' still leaves plenty of space for discussion. With the elimination of ingrained images and messages that permeate the world, women who dominate with a particular conception of femininity and those who exercise some degree of control and authority over women who are perceived as different may now take the time to get to know these women outside the boundaries of the predetermined 'feminine model'. Women have been shown to exist in various forms and sizes, where they dress and behave differently, and have different views, yet

they nonetheless often represent being a 'lady' (Mahdawi 2016). There is a genuine desire to adapt to the times, especially in light of the media's role in enabling people, particularly women, to take part in social change and new beginnings. However, much work remains, particularly in this day and age (Roderick 2017). Over time, the notion of femininity has evolved substantially. Instead of terms like 'caring' or 'delicate,' more than half of UK women (58%) now describe the modern female as independent, while 48% describe her as resilient (Elsworthy 2018). The emergence of the internet and social media has allowed girls and women to engage in new and interesting ways to exchange stories and insights, continuously rewriting what it means to be a female (Cottrell 2018).

In order to develop a culture of value, youth work must advise young women and girls to challenge and reject the myths and misconceptions that shape their thinking. The dedication to viewing girls as 'individuals' and producers in their own right rather than as miniature 'women in the making' encourages the focus on selfhood (Pomerantz 2009, p. 181).

METHODOLOGY

As generations change, youth workers come into contact with new individuals, unique circumstances and experiences that force them to constantly assess themselves in order to understand both their own role and Peck's (1990) concept of extending themselves. My primary focus was learning from young women and girls about their experiences of inclusion in a gendered-specific programme and the youth service's efforts to embrace and include those varied experiences in exclusively female settings.

At this early point, there is an absence of active research on the depiction of femininity outside of society's manufactured model, the deployment of debunking stereotypes, and stressing the variances in experiences that are vital and meaningful to the portrayal of feminine.

Participants in the study shared insightful knowledge and information based on their own experiences as well as their general awareness of how femininity is portrayed in society. This demonstrated the significance of these areas of investigation for the field of youth work.

A thematic analysis (Gibbs 2007) was used to record and connect dominant themes, culminating with five themes emerging from the findings, 'representation, socialisation, identity, communication and resistance.' The researcher adopted qualitative methodologies and completed three research methods using the triangulation of research method (Noble & Heale 2019), which included three semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke 2013) with a senior manager (head of service), a youth worker (team manager) and a volunteer, all females with experiences of girls' work. They are referred to as respondent A (RA: volunteer), respondent B (RB: youth worker) and respondent C (RC: senior manager). The second and third methods consisted of a questionnaire and a focus group which was undertaken with five young women. The young women's experience varied: some were from the all-female group facilitated/organised by a local authority youth service, while others had attended the group before but are a part of the LGBTQ+ group (using the pronouns she, her, they, them). The focus group participants are referred to as participants P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5. The three methods helped scope the value of and need for girls work, the assumptions that are built up from societal expectations, along with how/ if the young women are encouraged to explore beyond the societally anticipated perception of what it means to be female.

FINDINGS

Socialisation served as a foundation for participants' views of women's roles both individually and collectively in society and was one of the study's key themes. On a Likert scale, the participants were assessed on how much they agreed with the following statement: 'The representation of women in the media is very positive and empowering.' Three out of the five young women disagreed, and the other two were not sure. P5 emphasised that they only utilised social media to actively seek out and observe inspiring women. RA stated that while certain online influencers promote diverse depictions of emerging new femininities, social media still has a long way to go as some tales overshadow others.

> 'I feel like for young people, that's all they see. And it's not because they're searching it up. I think advertisements and like newsfeed and things like that. They're showing that.'

RB thinks that youth workers must be the starting point and suggests that instead of adhering to what is expected, they could collaborate with other professionals to explore alternative choices for creating an inclusive educational environment.

> 'If we're going to change, we need to actively look for people that are doing it differently to us and be like well come in, we need to work with you. And in doing so, we're not just like looking for resources, but also challenging ourselves.'

In the focus group, participants were given images of women and asked to divide them into two categories: 'feminine' and 'not'. The images and messages they were exposed to as children, according to all of them, were what influenced and shaped their portrayal of femininity. They also shared their definitions of femininity and if they personally felt feminine. A majority felt 'feminine' due to their connection to stereotypical qualities and attributes of being female (eg wearing make-up and being nurturing and emotional, etc). Different feminists have defined 'woman' differently across history: for example, Beauvoir (2010) argues that one does not become a woman at birth; rather, gender distinctions between men and women are the effect of upbringing or nurture. According to Stoller (2020), the term 'gender' is frequently employed to categorise a person's level of femininity and masculinity. The uniformity of feminine roles, which contributes to women's specified behaviour patterns and lifestyle habits, is positioned to have an influence on several aspects of life, causing the fundamental differences between men and women in the global social structure (Bettio *et al.* 2009). The media is the one that tells you 'no' in the current generation, as expressed by P3, who said that 'anything may be feminine'. P2 wasn't sure whether she felt feminine, because, despite being pansexual, she didn't feel particularly feminine in her opinion, whereas P5 stated that her knowledge and perception of femininity stems from a conventional view of feminine characteristics, but it does not stop her from recognising that young women still lead by their voices and understanding of the world.

> 'Definition of femininity is absolutely what you want it to be.'

RA saw femininity as whatever a young women or girl interpreted it to be.

> 'There is no real definition for femininity. I think it's just such a broad umbrella term. And I think, yeah, you just, it's just being a girl, it's the essence of being a girl.'

Gender expectations exist in every country, ethnic group and culture, although they can vary greatly within each of these. The focus group participants had a wide variety of interests, ranging from reading, cooking, playing video and computer games, watching documentaries, and watching anime. According to Ginwright *et al.* (2006), every one of us contains numerous selves and identities that might make us feel powerful or powerless according to the situation. RB suggests that having different women within the team enables challenges to take place, allowing the young women and girls to have different engagements with professionals that provide diverse

perspectives. Reflecting on her own experience and upbringing, RA relates how relearning things and meeting a range of young women opened her mind up to differences.

> *'It makes you really think you know, what you've been taught in school and what you've been growing up with? They're not necessarily right you know, there's so many different types of girls and feminine attributes in the world but we just taught a select few you know.'*

To increase access to these opportunities P4 made an interesting observation on how some girls are more closed off than others and might not want to go to a group with different people due to past experiences of being bullied for being different.

> *'I feel like it just needs to be brought to the attention that groups especially the group I'm in, don't get me wrong like everyone's lovely and so supportive and I feel like that's definitely what we need, because for girls that aren't really girly in a sense might not want to come to a place where they're forced to be girly and that's how they might feel before coming here because of how obviously again they've been bullied in past experiences.'*

Communication was a very important theme that was mentioned throughout and also discovered was the significance of the theme identity. Youth work methods underpin the dialogue that is embedded in informal conversations in groups (Ord 2016). The respondents expressed how trusting conversations help combat preconceptions and create opportunities for the young women to flourish emotionally and collectively. RA stated if you understand your girl group, then you understand not just more about them, but more about femininity itself. RA believes encouraging the girls to be free to be themselves allows them to be comfortable in themselves, and with that is the essence of femininity.

> *'Instead of going into girl groups, thinking, as youth workers, like, we're going to do this with them, we're going to do that with them. Maybe ask the girls what they want.'*

In order for young people to reach their greatest potential, youth work is committed to helping them develop their voices, influence and role in society, according to Westwood *et al*. (2014). The fact that they are all young women, regardless of their differences, usually serves as the unifying factor among them. Building a foundation for mutual learning to foster respect is the aim of the informal practice youth workers employ as 'the glue' to help construct 'stronger, more sustained communities' where young people may feel safe (Tyler *et al*. 2009, p. 112).

> *'Young people are still people, like they're still going to have their own biases and their own prejudices. And unfortunately, like, the youth club is like a breeding ground for that stuff to come out. Because it's a safe space, and they can say what they think, and they can say what they like, and, you know, that's great. But actually, as youth workers, we have to also be prepared to be like, I don't think that's okay, or like actually let's think about that and you know kind of like reflecting on things back to them.' (RB)*

CONCLUSION

Themes that emerged from the research focused on young women's self-assurance and awareness as well as the need for youth workers to combat our natural tendency to 'go along' with the status quo in spite of our own experiences (Soni 2011). Understanding and growing in one's identity appears to be the most important aspect in young women's participation and engagement, which is linked to the improvement in their health and self-esteem. Identity seems to be the goal of group action, claims Bernstein (1997).

The vulnerabilities of many young individuals had grown as we progressively emerged from the Covid-19 climate, and much of life had been reduced to being digital. The study showed that despite the fact that social media's development has made change possible and made individual preference and value a matter of choice, the media is still not always consistent in showing difference or making one feel appreciated. With consistent recycling of socialisation, new femininities cannot emerge. The professionals grew up at a time when many of society's norms and ideals were still based on traditions, which led them to develop constrictive language and conventional views that made certain behaviours acceptable. (Davies & Batsleer 2010), making them harder to overcome. While the young women in the focus group still face these expectations and assumptions from society, there appear to be more options and choices available.

To expand the distinctions that exist in reality, youth workers must offer up a range of practice opportunities with young women and girls, recognise the need for a conversational culture for them to come together, and provide spaces where they may feel confident. The opportunity to examine attitudes and behaviours in order to better assist with the challenges (such as lack of self-confidence, self-doubt, anxiety, peer pressure, suicide and insecurities, among others) faced during the transition from girlhood to womanhood would be provided by working alongside young women to develop collective principles to build confidence and cultivate a sense of community. The MeToo movement is a perfect example of 'local grassroots work' that spread to a global level and raised awareness of sexual assault survivors all over the world. The issues arise from the already planted seed that continues to silently re-embed itself in society as a result of socialisation. The sooner we realise that femininity is a part of being a woman and that there are various interpretations of what is considered feminine due to elements like class,

sexuality, religion and general individuality, the sooner we will comprehend the wide range of sizes, behaviours and attitudes that women exhibit.

This study has demonstrated the need for more action and the sector's need for capability, not just within all-female groups to ensure change advocacy but also to ensure that mixed youth groups and young men and boys are also in the background supporting this study's importance to the larger practice. RB mentioned the sector is *'to be flexible and adaptable, to meet as many needs as we can'*. The National Occupational Standards (2022) claims that its values are grounded in *'equity, diversity, and interdependence',* and that recognising differences helps young people's self-confidence develop and evolve *'in a supportive group environment'.* ∎

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