The 2005 Clare Burton Memorial Lecture

Girls, school and society: a generation of change?
Alison Mackinnon, University of South Australia

> [T]he last third of the twentieth century saw the most rapid and
> radical global change in the history of human gender and
> generational relations [in the West]. (Hobsbawm 2005, p. 9)

Firstly I would like to acknowledge what a great privilege it is to be speaking here in honour of Clare Burton, an inspiring feminist and researcher whose work has been instrumental in the field of gender equity and organisational change. I am also conscious of following those other wonderful speakers who have delivered earlier Clare Burton memorial lectures and I am most grateful for the opportunity to be the seventh speaker in this historic series.

As an historian I like to tell stories. Let me begin then with a tale of two young women known to me.[1] One, Marian, is a young European professional with an MBA from the most prestigious US university. She has impressive Chinese language skills. She is married, pregnant and currently working with a multi-national firm in China. Her husband, a young Englishman, is studying in Lausanne in Switzerland. Speaking to me recently of the impending birth of her baby, planned to take place in Lausanne, Marian, a native Dutch speaker, fluent in English and Mandarin, worries that her French may not be up to the trials of the delivery. She has not yet arranged for a midwife in Lausanne but realises she must do so soon – or rely on her husband to do it for her in time. Discussing where they will live after the birth of the baby and the completion of her husband's study, she muses that it is his turn to choose the country of

---

[1] I have scrambled key elements of these women's biographies to ensure confidentiality.

domicile and she will fit in. I listen in wonder. Her life is extraordinary to me, a woman of a generation that did not envisage this life of the new global professionals, the wandering tribes of the new economy. She is an entirely new phenomenon.

Let me now introduce Ruby (not her real name), a 15 year old we have interviewed several times for a study of early school leavers. Ruby lives on the outer fringe of an Australian capital city and attends a large state high school with a nominated disadvantaged status. She lives with her mother, a single parent, who has experienced some of the worst domestic grief that life can deliver. Ruby's brother died some years ago in brutal circumstances so Ruby and her mother are keenly aware of the dangers in the world out there. Ruby would like to stay at school and achieve her ambition to be a fashion designer, or perhaps a hairdresser, but she is considered by the school to be 'at risk' of early school leaving. She loves to visit the local shopping mall but knows she must avoid eye contact with certain people as she might be seen as too uppity, to think 'she's all that' (Simmons 2002, p. 103). As Richard Sennett reminds us, 'you survive in a poor community by keeping your head down' (Sennett 2003). She prefers not to visit the local capital city a short train ride away, preferring her own comfort zone. Ruby is as different from Marian as it is possible to be. The pattern of her life is not new but depressingly familiar for those who have studied for decades the school and home life of working-class girls. In this era of much vaunted opportunities for women Ruby will probably leave school early, bear children early and be unlikely to have a secure attachment to either a partner or the labour market.

In looking at these two young women are we looking at the past and the future, or at social class as it persistently reveals itself? Can they offer us a way into a consideration of key changes in women's education and lives over the last three decades? Is Marian emblematic of what sociologist Anita Harris calls the 'can-do girl', while Ruby exemplifies the 'at risk girl' (Harris 2004)? Is

Marian the neo-liberal ideal, Ruby the neo-liberal nightmare? Both are on the front lines of globalisation, positioned by twenty years of so-called economic reform, although one might be said to be a winner, the other a loser. Is Marian an example of what Beck calls the 'detraditionalisation' of gender and Ruby an example of what theorist Lisa Adkins (2002) calls a 'retraditionalisation'? Can these processes occur at the same time? Several recent authors (Harris 2004, Walkerdine et al 2001, Burman 2005, to name but a few) argue that girls and young women today are bearers of a new self, a neo-liberal subjectivity, one based on individualisation and self-invention. Anita Harris, for example, speaks of the 'act of regarding young women as the winners in a new world' (2004, p. 1). Young women today, she claims, 'stand in for possibilities and anxieties about new identities more generally'. Late modern times, she believes 'demand citizens who are flexible and self-realizing' (p. 2). '[P]ower has devolved onto individuals to regulate themselves through the right choices', she asserts (p. 2). 'Young women', Harris claims,

> are constructed as the ideal new citizens to manage these conditions (new patterns of migration, the retreat from the state, the shift towards privatization and marketization and a sense of uncertainty) when they are imagined as economically independent, as 'ambassadresses' for their nations, and as successful consumers. (Harris 2004, p.10)

Commentator George Megalogenis (2005) recently noted that fact in a different guise, arguing that the worker best suited to globalisation is the female part-timer. Is this what we envisaged when we argued for fundamental changes in the education of girls three decades ago?

Challengingly, Harris argues that the construction of the 'can-do' girl of the early twenty-first century is a coalescing of feminist narratives of choice with neo-liberal narratives of self-invention – narratives that have shaped policy,

advertising, programs and media (Harris 2004, p. 183). This unlikely marriage, of feminism and neo-liberalism, was unimaginable in the less individualised politics of the 1970s. And surely Harris's view of feminism with its focus on choice is also a product of our neo-liberal times, a *partial remembering* of the movement for women's emancipation. This view ignores the alternate vision of wide-ranging social change sought by the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and 80s.

Gender equity in schools was one of the major initiatives of 1970s and 1980s feminism. Animated by the belief that secondary schooling held key answers to the quest for equality, Australian women, and women across the English-speaking world, acted to reduce inequalities of access, curriculum and outcome for girls and women. They aimed to increase girls' school retention at senior levels, to increase their access to tertiary and vocational training, and to reduce outmoded stereotypes of male and female career destinations. In all, they sought 'more open life options' for both girls and boys, a world where 'sex need no longer dictate life patterns' **(**Schools Commission 1975 p. iii**)**. A key text *Girls, schools and society* (Schools Commission 1975) set out both the problems and the hoped for solutions. It is thirty years since that text was published and it is time to take stock of what we have achieved, what is still to be done, and how circumstances have repositioned the goals we aimed for. It is also thirty years for some of us personally since we began to reshape the terrain of education for women and girls. What did we hope to achieve? What messages did we give? Were our messages so easily co-opted by the neo-liberals?

Our generation has been accused by younger feminists of misleading them in the 1970s and early 80s with that hopefulness. 'You told us we could have it all', they say accusingly (see Campo 2005). Did we ever say that? Was it ever possible? It certainly did not seem to be so for my generation. We sought wide structural changes in order for *both men and women* to have more

balanced lives. So what has changed now? Clearly some young women like Marian think they can 'have it all', international career, husband and children: Ruby, on the other hand, does not expect very much at all.

The issue of gender and education was vitally important to Clare Burton. Ten years after the publication of *Girls, schools and society*, Burton also wrote about the key role of education. 'The combined influence of gender and class at schools is a central concern of feminist theory' she claimed in her influential 1985 book *Subordination: feminism and social theory*. She noted the conflicting pressures on the education system, pressing for both the elimination of discriminatory practices within the schools *and* the training of females 'realistically' to fit into their adult roles. This is what historians of nineteenth-century education for girls famously called 'the divided aim'. But what were those adult roles to be? Would a place within the labour market be vital for women's emancipation? Clare Burton wrote tellingly that 'from Engels on, the association of males with public life and females with private life has led to the supposition that, if women were in paid employment, their subordination would be undermined'. 'This line of thought', Clare Burton argued, 'has been modified by feminists, with the acknowledgement of both the "dual burden" (the divided aim) and the systematic discrimination against women within the labour market' (Burton 1985, p. 130). Twenty years after Burton's insights and her work to reduce that discrimination, to reduce that dual burden, we are still grappling with these issues.

The solution we envisaged –adapting the labour market to fit women's lives – has not taken place. The adaptation that has occurred is that many women have tried to fit the labour market – by adopting a male work pattern, by postponing childbearing or by forgoing childbearing altogether. And many are hurting. If they are the bearers of a new self, if they embody the anxieties of our age then our age needs fixing. Perhaps Rachel Simmons' claim that 'In a culture that cannot decide who it wants them to be girls are being asked to

become the sum of our confusion' may be closer to the mark (Simmons 2002, p. 116). In this lecture I want to return briefly to that key text *Girls, schools and society* and to revisit its themes and assumptions. I then want to draw from a recent study of girls 'on the margins', an ARC-funded study I undertook with colleagues Julie McLeod, Jane Kenway and Andrea Allard, to provide a corrective to the prevalent view that girls have it all, are over-performing and that the problem now lies largely with boys. I will conclude by drawing on recent thinking about girls, schools and society and expanding the claim that they are the new subjects of a neo-liberal age. Overall I argue that education matters and that any moves to limit the participation of girls and women at any level of educational provision represent a step backwards. However, education is not enough.

Girls, schools and society

The *Girls schools and society* report was produced in 1975 by the Committee on Social Change and the Education of Women, a committee that reads today as a Who's Who of women's education and feminism. Chaired by Ken McKinnon, Chair of the Schools Commission, it was led by the late Jean Blackburn, educator *par excellence,* and included other luminaries such as the sociologist Jean Martin, Elizabeth Reid (women's advisor to Prime Minister Whitlam), Susan Ryan (later Minister for Education and the first woman in cabinet) and Daniela Torsch – all of whom were or became prominent in women's educational policy and writing. Appendix D of the report provides a list of consultants and research assistants employed on the report: that list includes interestingly: Clare Burton, Teresa Brennan, Eva Cox, Wendy McCarthy and Anne Summers – to name but a few. Clearly many leaders of the women's movement saw education as a key to women's liberation (and I deliberately use the language of that time). The committee hoped that, should the recommendations be implemented, 'Australian schools will be better equipped to educate women and men so that they are both competent, high in

self-esteem, self-reliant, independent and equally capable of co-operation, empathy and social interaction'. Further they stated that 'We believe that it is only if we educate men and women equally that we can achieve a democratic society where women and men regard and act towards each other as equals.' (Schools Commission 1975, p. vii). The report acknowledged its genesis in the women's movement: 'The women's movement has redefined the issues in ways which must be confronted'. It boldly stated in its terms of reference that it was 'to examine the extent of underachievement by women and girls in education and its contribution to the inferior status of women'. It did not refer to the issue of the over-performance of boys. While cognizant of the fact that stereotypes damaged both boys and girls they found that 'in the present circumstances the expectations in which girls are raised are more broadly damaging' (Schools Commission 1975, p. 8). That was because the female stereotype in Australia was 'one of dependence, inferiority and self-doubt and of incompetence in areas where social power and status are involved'.

Some of the report makes strange reading thirty years on. For instance the comment that 'the objective circumstances of Australian society no longer oblige females to see their lives as being defined by child bearing and rearing, even though these activities are very important ones', seems curiously dated. It could only come from a time with demographics such as those described in the report:

> 3.12 Women's life expectancy has increased and is still on average about seven years longer than men's. Marriage and child bearing are practically universal for women and the great majority of women have completed their child bearing by the time they are 30. The size of families has declined to an average of less than three children and the median age of marriage has fallen to 21 for women and 24 for men. Fertility control is well established among all social groups. (Schools Commission 1975, p. 22)

How radically our demographic patterns have changed. The report also noted that female labour force participation began to accelerate in the early 1960s and that by 1974 42% of all women over 15 were in the labour force, with the most significant change being increased labour market participation of married women. Clearly women were marching back into the workforce. Differences between those with more and less education were significant however: the report noted that 62.4 of women graduates were in the workplace but 25% of women aged 15 and over who had only primary education, a difference that persists today.

School retention was of considerable interest to the report writers. They concluded that 'girls remained disadvantaged in relation to boys in length of schooling and only an established equality of some years' duration will be sufficient to allay legitimate concern on this score' (Schools Commission 1975, p. 35).

The report heralded a whirlwind of activity in the education of girls over the next decade – activity in which many of you, many of us, were intimately involved, whether as beneficiaries of the changes or in teaching courses on girls and education and in women's studies, shaping educational curricula and policy and arguing for affirmative action in teacher promotion and in employment. I began teaching the history of education in the Department of Education at the University of Adelaide in 1976 and I well remember the excitement of the *Girls, schools and society* report and the sense of outrage at the overt discrimination it revealed. I recall all those photostated feminist articles which circulated from hand to hand, sending me into a frenzy of reading and writing in the history of women and education.

And we have been successful, very successful. Perhaps too successful as the backlash against feminist objectives and the assumption that girls are 'over-

achieving' seems to attest. Women complete Year 12 at a higher rate than young men and have done since the mid 1970s, with their completion rate increasing from 28% to over 80%. They constitute the majority of university undergraduates – the enrolment of women has exceeded that of men since 1977 (Gregory 2002, p. 44), although their post-education trajectories are not as rosy. Women graduates fill many key positions in the professions and business. They stream into courses such as law, medicine, business and, to a much lesser extent, engineering. Women do still want to change the world: they engage disproportionately with issues of human rights, environmental change, the rights of indigenous people and world peace.

There are many 'can-do' girls (Harris 2004), girls with success and an appropriately ironic young femininity, motherhood fashionably delayed to come along at the right time, now over the age of thirty – when a career has been well established. This is a huge difference historically – these young women are a new type, with Marian, with whom I began, an exemplary international example. Marian embodies an insight from the work of English researchers Rachel Thompson and Janet Holland, who claim that 'from our data it is apparent that physical mobility may be a prerequisite for social mobility and social reinvention' (Thompson and Holland 2002).

In historical terms this level of change is unprecedented. As the eminent British historian Eric Hobsbawm notes, '[T]he last third of the twentieth century saw the most rapid and radical global change in the history of human gender and generational relations [in the West]' (Hobsbawm 2005, p. 9). He also noted somewhat ominously that such change 'has not so far penetrated very deeply into the rest of the world' (Hobsbawm 2005, p. 9). In relation to the rest of the world Scandinavian sociologist Goran Therborn writes of 'humanity's long patriarchal night' (cited in Hobsbawm 2005, p. 8). That night still falls over much of the globe and seems unlikely to change any time soon.

'We are clearly facing a revolution in social and personal behaviour',
Hobsbawm stated in a review of Therborn's recent book (Hobsbawm 2005, p.
9). Yet for many it is a stalled revolution, an unfinished revolution: for others
little has changed.

The stalled revolution

The revolution in education and work has penetrated very unevenly into the
lives of young women in the West. Since the 1970s economic inequality has
soared in developed capitalist societies. It might be argued that, while for
Harris's 'can-do' girls life has changed for the better, for a small proportion of
young women, those often constructed as 'at risk', opportunities have
contracted rather than expanded. It is a curious category: 'at risk'. As Anita
Harris suggests, 'The at-risk category operates in a particular way in relation
to young women, for they are imagined as both the passive victims of
circumstances beyond their control, and also as wilful risk takers who use girl
power to their own (self-) destructive ends' (Harris 2004, p. 26). We hear
much of the language of risk these days. Sociologist Ulrich Beck has argued
persuasively that we live in a 'risk society', one where the old paradigm of
wealth distribution in a society of scarcity has been replaced by a new
paradigm arising from 'the production, definition and distribution of techno-
scientifically produced risk' (Beck 1992, p. 19). Like wealth, Beck argues, risk
adheres to a class pattern. But it does so inversely: 'wealth accumulates at the
top, risk at the bottom' (1992, p. 35). And industrial society is structured
through social classes while the risk society is individualised (Beck 1992, p. 3).

In the study to which I alluded earlier we interviewed girls and young
women who leave school early, or who are considered by their schools to be
'at risk'.[2] There we found a group for whom a future was less assured.

---

[2] Australian Research Council (Discovery grant, 2002–2004), *Young women negotiating from the
margins of education and work: towards gender justice in educational and youth policies and*

Despite increased retention of young people at school since the time of the *Girls, schools and society* report, early school leaving continues to be an important issue in Australia. According to a report from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum of 2004, 'in the short term early school leavers are significantly more likely to struggle in their initial transition [from school] than are Year 12 leavers' (Long 2004, p. 15).

Young women who live at the margins of work and education experience serious economic disadvantage relative to other young people (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000). McMillan and Marks (2003) found that, while 67% of non-completers in their study were in full-time work, only 55% of female non-completers were working full-time compared to over three-quarters of male non-completers. The Dusseldorp Skills Forum report claims that for those who have not completed Year 12 the chances of being unemployed are twice that of a secondary school completer and three times greater than those who have completed a university degree (Long 2004, p. 18).

The proportion of women with no qualifications who left school at 15 years has shrunken from 39% to 22% (Gregory 2002, p. 44). At the same time the full-time teenage labour market significantly contracted from 45% to less than 20% for young women so that the smaller minority who left school earlier had even fewer possibilities of meaningful work (McMillan and Marks 2003, p. 2). The Dusseldorp Skills Forum report claims that 15.5% of teenagers are facing 'a difficult transition from school and what researchers call potentially a long term risk in the labour market' (Dusseldorp introduction in Long 2004, p. 3). The proportion of girls is higher: 17%. Young people are now more likely to be employed part time than ever before (Long 2004). For the mothers of the girls in the study, most of whom also left school early, there was a reasonable expectation of work, and that expectation has diminished now.

Australian economist and labour market expert Bob Gregory has examined links between Australian women's increasing education and their labour market participation over the last three decades (Gregory 2002). These three decades are critical for the daughters and mothers in our study and are thus worthy of close attention. Gregory came up with some extraordinary findings. He concluded: 'So over the last 35 years women have had lots of education, no more full-time jobs but many women receiving higher rates of pay, lots of part time jobs and a spectacular increase in welfare support' (Gregory 2002, p. 49). In effect, he argues, 'general increases in education have been relatively unimportant in increasing the number of full time jobs or reducing the growth of welfare dependency' (2002, p. 50). 'Can this really be the promised land we sought in the early 1970s?' Gregory asks. It is certainly not what the authors of *Girls, schools and societies* envisaged.

Much research has charted the growth of professional jobs for well-educated women and the fact that, as Gregory attests, their rewards have increased significantly. Yet it is important to realise that at the time when more women were gaining higher levels of education the numbers of full-time jobs were dropping precipitously. Youth researcher Johanna Wyn writes of 'the failing nexus of education and employment' (Wyn 2002, p. 78). However, we are interested here in the fact that over these same three decades the growth in the number of welfare recipients exceeded the growth of full-time jobs. As it might be predicted that some of the girls we interviewed will become welfare recipients at some point in their lives, as indeed many of their mothers are or have been, this story is of key importance. We might also reflect on the use of the term 'welfare': regarded by many in the 1970s as a triumph of social policy, it has come to have very negative connotations, the term 'welfare mum' for instance conjuring up a sense of failure and abjection.

Our study explores this aspect of generational change as it relates to young women's experiences of early school leaving. We interviewed the mothers of the young school girls 'at risk' and their experiences of work and family. And we considered another group – young women who had left school early and were now in their early twenties – and we looked too at their mothers. This generational aspect is particularly important as the social universe experienced by these young women today differs significantly from that experienced by their mothers as we have seen. It also takes us through the terrain of the 1970s. The mothers of the young women interviewed for this study attended school during the 1960s and 1970s. Some were the beneficiaries of the early outcomes of the *Girls, schools and society* report.

By accessing the views of the young women as well as their mothers we were able to gain considerable insight into the continuities and discontinuities in these women's lives across generations. And, as Clare Burton wrote, 'mothers play an enormous part in interpreting the school to the child (a need more frequently acted upon than that of interpreting the child to the school)' (Burton 1985, p. 127).

A common theme across the interviews with the young women was the desire to be different to their mothers, particularly in terms of the mothers' working and family lives. For example, it was common for the school girls to talk about wanting a different job to their mothers, and wanting to begin their family later in life (i.e. in their early 20s) and have fewer children. Some young women talked about wanting to be different in terms of career, but similar to their mothers in other respects. For example, when asked if she wanted to be like her mother, one young school girl responded:

> Um in a way, yeah, I do; in a way I don't – with the career she
> took and that – but in a way, yeah, I do … just cool and
> understanding and stuff like that, yeah. (Bronwyn)

The mothers also want their daughters to have a different life to them. They want their daughters to stay at school, or go back to school, and undertake further education. They want their daughters to wait to have children. Yet despite this desire for difference, an important continuity across the generations of participants in this study relates to early school leaving and young motherhood.

Out of the 18 mothers that were interviewed in South Australia, all but two had left school before completing Year 12. Many of mothers also had their first child at a young age, with the age of first pregnancy in this group ranging from 16 to 25 years. Similarly, in the post-school cohort, fifteen of the girls have children (or have been pregnant and miscarried), with the age of first pregnancy ranging from 14 to 24 years.

While the young women in the at-school group talked about waiting until they were older to have children, several expressed a sense of having no control over their lives in this respect. Brigitte, for example, talked about her ambitions to finish school and become a chef. She describes the main obstacle to this ambition being lack of access to the right training, but also mentions that falling pregnant could disrupt her plans, as has happened to people around her. Kirsty also talked about early childbearing, saying that while she hopes to go to university she does not think it will happen. Instead she suspects she'll 'just be at home with some kids and not have a job'. While she knows of young women who have had babies at 14, she feels 16 or 17 would be a more suitable age, and she would not mind having children at that age. Yet despite growing concerns about low fertility in Australia, early childbearing is not seen as respectable and can lead to stigmatisation of the mother.

A further cross-generational continuity related to attitudes towards school completion. The young women and their mothers whom we interviewed recognised the importance of school completion, particularly in terms of the future economic benefits. Most of the young women who were still at school expressed the desire to stay at school and complete Year 12. For some this was in order to achieve their career goals. Alice, for example, would like to work with children or animals and realises that she must complete Year 12 to achieve her goal.

The mothers expressed a strong desire for their daughters to complete their schooling. One commented that her daughter 'knows I'm adamant that she's staying at school' (at-school mothers' focus group). Yet, despite this stated desire, the participants had either left school early, or were deemed 'at risk' of doing so. When faced with the possibility of their daughters making the decision to leave, the mothers talked about supporting their daughters' decision *because they want their children to be happy*. One mother was anxious about her daughter having to make her own decisions, feeling unable to influence her. She stated:

> Yeah, we'd love them to stay at school obviously and do the best that they can, but then ultimately in the end what can we do? And they get to a certain age and they make decisions for themselves anyway so you can only try and guide them along, can't you, but like you said so ultimately in the end if they're happy, whatever certain age they get to, you can't make them do any more. (At-school mothers' focus group)

This view was reflected in the interviews with the at-school girls, one of whom responded as follows when asked if her mother wants her to stay at school:

Yeah, she does think I should do that. But if it was my choice to leave she would be with me. She doesn't push me into anything I don't want to. She's just, what would you call it? Like accepts me for what I want to do and everything like that. (Bronwyn)

In many of these narratives there is a sense of fatalism far from the notion of individualistic self-invention, seen as the characteristic of the 'can-do' girl. Viviane has four children: the youngest and only girl is Josie. Viviane wants Josie to stay at school: 'I would love to be able to find a way to get Josie to school more often because she's the last one, Viviane claims. 'I would love to see her go through to Year 12 and do something you know, something that – not because I want to be proud of her but because I want to see her do good in her life, something that she is enjoying'. Josie does not see her way ahead clearly; she feels other girls have an easier road to take: 'it's just that they seem to know what they are doing'. Josie's path to Year 12 seems very bumpy, more like an obstacle race – she is repeating Year 8, has a tutor to help with maths and English and is often absent from school. She would like to do better as, she points out, 'if I achieve next year and get higher grades, maybe they'll like me better'. Yet achievement is elusive: when we visited, Josie could not concentrate at school as her cousin had died recently and memories of him and his funeral beset her. And what does Josie think about the future? 'I want to be a hairdresser but then they say you have to have long fingers and stuff like that – the hands have to be a certain length ... I don't know if you have to go to college to do all that kind of stuff'. But Josie is philosophical about the future: 'I don't know [she laughs]. It's like you just go with whatever, it's like dealed out to you'.

Is the future dealt out to Josie? And why does she feel so helpless at determining it?

Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) talk of our age as that of reflexive individualism, of the individual biographical project. We must all reflexively construct our own individual biographies (Beck 1992, p. 3). We are, as Michael Pusey points out, 'the risk managers of our own lives' (Pusey 2003, p. 1), a notion that is meaningless in the lives of those whose risks are greatest.

Much current policy reflects that understanding of the individual biographical project, the choice biography. In several states policies have been established to encourage girls such as Josie to stay at school. Here in South Australia, for example, the Futures Connect strategy deals with both school retention and training, placing considerable emphasis on transition portfolios for each young person, one that 'engages each young person *in deliberate reflection about his or her school and community activities, and includes a plan of action to achieve desired goals and aspirations*' (DECS *Futures Connect* 2002). This language of reflection and of imagining the future conjures up the individual biographical project. What, I wonder, is Josie's 'plan of action'? How does she reflect on her school and community activities? Can she imagine herself as mapping out a biographical self? And if she gets it wrong is it all her own fault?

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu usefully describes the ways in which expectations and aspirations of subordinate groups are scaled down to what is possible, or as he puts it '*the choice of the necessary*'. People form dispositions, he claims, which engender aspirations and practices compatible with those objective requirements: 'the most improbable practices are excluded, either totally without examination as *unthinkable*, or at the cost of the *double negation* which inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, *to refuse what is anyway refused* and to love the inevitable (Bourdieu 1977, p. 77, original italics). The notion of 'refusing what is anyway refused' is heartbreakingly apt here for many young women like Josie on the social and economic margins.

But the mechanisms behind it are as much institutional as individual, or pathological.

We identified several key elements as crucial to the construction of better options for the young women in our study (Oster, Mackinnon and Kenway 2005). The desire to finish school was overridden, in some instances, by the young women's need to have their basic psychological and physical needs met. These most basic needs include the need for safety, security, care, and above all for respect and trust. In many cases these needs were not being met, with many of the young women and their mothers reporting experiences of physical and psychological trauma at home and at school. These experiences make it extremely difficult for the young women to focus on school work, indeed to remain at school. The issue of respect is vital and was often mentioned by our participants: as Sennet points out, when a society only singles out a few for recognition, 'it creates a scarcity of respect' (Sennett 2003, p. 3). The need for respect has become a mantra, the British government making it a catchcry for their policy towards their disaffected young 'hoodies' for example. We might also detect it through the sounds and sights of the Paris riots: young people speak of being 'dissed' or disrespected, or worse, of not being seen. The issue of recognition, of respecting the rights of those who are unequal has become literally a burning issue in a society that only validates individual success (Sennett 2003, p. 54f).

Factors in the school environment were critical for other girls. Many experienced difficulty in the transition from primary to high school. It was common for the young women to talk about finding primary school relatively easy, but then experiencing difficulties with their schoolwork as they progressed through high school. Both the young women and their mothers reported being bored at school and finding subjects pointless and irrelevant. Another school factor in early school leaving relates to the complex and sometimes conflicting relationships the participants had with their teachers.

The social environment of the school is critical in young women's decisions to stay at school or leave early. There are two aspects of the impact of the school environment, which were also discussed by their mothers. The first relates to harassment, bullying, fighting and a prevalent non-academically oriented social environment. This aspect drove both young women and their mothers out of school. The second relates to the importance of friendship to young women at this stage of life, and the ability of strong friendships to help keep young women at school for longer, although the dissolution of friendship groups can have catastrophic effects to the contrary. Again the fear of 'putting their heads above the parapet' is critical (Sennett 2003, p. 96)

The desire or need to work and be independent is a factor that has the capacity to pull young people out of school and into the workforce before completing their schooling. While this was not particularly significant for the young women who were still at school, it was a factor that impacted on some of the post-school young women's decisions to leave school early, and was most evident in the interviews with the mothers. The economic environment when the mothers were leaving school was one in which the likelihood of finding work was relatively high compared to the current economic context. Today's young women who are leaving school early face the serious prospect of unemployment, or at best only part-time and/or casual employment, as we have seen. And what will their bargaining power be in the brave new world of Howard's 'reformed' industrial relations?

The responses to these needs must be recognised as institutional issues, as issues of class differences and lack of equal provision rather than as the results of bad individual decision making. Safer home and neighbourhood environments, better support services at school, the elimination of bullying and harassment, appropriate and challenging curricula and opportunities for work experience are all institutional responses that can meet the needs of the

'at risk' girls. But most important is a realisation that the risk they carry is not individual, or pathological, or even familial, but is inherent in the structure of the broader society.

The report *Girls, schools and society* used the language of choice. 'The focus of change in schools should be the increase of opportunities for informed and rational choice and the development in young people of the confidence and capacity to exercise choice' (Schools Commission 1975, p. 158), it claimed. However, it based that choice in a clear understanding of the unequal society in which choice takes place. Now the rhetoric of choice has been hijacked by the neo-liberal agenda: we are all the agents of our own choices. Not only the 'at risk' girls and young women but those claimed to be more successful, the young women who complete not only their schooling but university degrees, higher degrees and professional training are faced with issues of their personal lives that increasingly appear as individual decisions, as investments even. As one of the young women interviewed in Chilla Bulbeck's research claimed: 'We are all individuals who can invest in ourselves and do what ever we desire' (Bulbeck 2005, p. 65). Should they form a partnership, take out a mortgage, have a baby now or later, consider child care, balance their work and life? It is all just a matter of making the right choice! And having it all! And if it does not work out then feminism can be blamed for leading them to believe that they could.

Such a focus, highlighted in manufactured clashes between generations in the opinion pages of the daily newspapers (see Campo 2005), masks the cultural-political interests of our times, where nation-states are caught between the desire for stripped down services and increased regulation and, at the same time, the need to provide for a diminishing labour force by maximising workforce participation. The Business Council of Australia has not overlooked this latter point: they too are concerned to improve school retention, arguing that 'education exits' will reduce Australia's GDP and

ability to deal with an ageing population (BCA and Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2005). They view early school leavers as a significantly untapped economic resource. Their modelling, based on an Access Economics report, shows that extra years spent at school translate into extra participation in the workforce and extra productivity (BCA and Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2005). This is the type of language and argument that might prevail in neo-liberal times when a vocabulary of social justice will not.

If, as Harris and others argue, girls and young women 'stand in for possibilities and anxieties about new identities more generally', or 'are constructed as the ideal new citizens to manage these conditions … when they are imagined as economically independent, as "ambassadresses" for their nations, and as successful consumers' (Harris 2004, p. 10) there is a heavy price to pay. 'We have been sold short on our feminisms if all we have is rampant individualism and further market penetration via practices of escalating individualism' claims British theorist Erica Burman (2005).

However, lest I seem to be objectifying young women and their amazing ability to deal with the complexities of their lives, I should heed Carolyn Steedman's advice to attend to the difference between cultural or literary artefacts produced *by* and *about* girls and young women (Steedman 1986). Many have developed wonderfully ironic comments on society that enable them to take a distanced approach. Glass artist Jacqueline Knight, currently working at the Jam Factory, exemplifies this postmodern playful and ironic stance in her creative approach to modern femininity.

The gap between those who do well at school and those who leave early for uncertain futures is widening. Furthermore school, indeed even university success, does not currently guarantee job security, or access to the ever more seductive consumer market. Nor may this be the way in which young people measure their life goals and achievements. Johanna Wyn's research shows

that many young people value developing personal relationships and family/home life above the goals of pursuing work or career (Wyn 2002, p. 78). Women who work part-time to accommodate the needs of children face 'stalled careers' according to a recent Melbourne Institute HILDA study (Overingham 2005, p. 3). Here we need to disentangle the desires of those women for careers with competing desires for children and family. Popular culture is increasingly seeking to portray women as tired of change and ready to retreat to the kitchen, as family members before careerists, as neglecting their children or as out-of-control consumers. Feminism is depicted as forcing women to do everything, a gross distortion of its aims.

So is this the time to complete the revolution that Hobsbawn suggests is at hand? Is this the time for a new *Girls, school and society*, one where we could reinsert collective political action into the individualised world of today? What do we need to happen? It is crucial to link the undoubted educational gains with workforce options. We might use the leverage we have in this changing demographic climate where we need young women both to be in the workforce and to give birth to the next generation. If women are the workers best suited to globalisation surely they can increase their bargaining power? If the ideal worker of the old industrial standard, of the Harvester Judgement, was the full-time male employee surely the benchmark employee of globalisation will be the female part-time worker? In a far reaching document produced after an international colloquium at ANU in 1992 the following proposition was put forward: 'begin with the notion of the woman as the representative worker, displacing the male norm' (Bacchi et al 1992, p. 6).

Were such a notion to be adopted all sorts of other propositions follow, such as 'shifting from a rationality of the market to a rationality of care', 'demanding an education system which places as much emphasis on preparing boys for their future responsibilities as parents and partners as it

does on preparing girls for the workforce', 'developing new worker profiles which include the recognition of non-market activities' (Bacchi et al 1992, p. 6). Does this sound like dreaming?

The desire of many young women to have challenging, secure jobs and a partner and children is critical to both their futures and that of Australia. How could a government attuned to women as the major part of workforce growth continue to resist claims for a well-paid national maternity leave scheme, affordable child care and access to flexible careers – flexible that is on women's terms rather than on those of an employer? We have achieved an impressive level of educational change but we have done so in the face of a radically different labour market. Is this a 'policy disjuncture' (Wyn 2002, p. 79) that education alone can resolve? I do not believe so. My view is that we need a revolution such as replacing the benchmark male worker with a female worker in order to really transform both women's lives and education systems. In my historical work I have written a great deal about the quest for both love *and* freedom (Mackinnon 1997), that is, women's desire for satisfying work and private lives. I do not believe we have the conditions right yet to achieve that for more than a few. Now is a time to dream of new possibilities, to continue that unfinished revolution begun in *Girls, schools and society*. I feel sure Clare Burton, with her passion for equity, would agree.

References

Adkins, L. (2002) *Revisions: gender and sexuality in late modernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

Bacchi, Carol, Bev Thiele, Joan Eveline and Jan Currie (1992) *Shifting ground: the dialectics of work and care*, Canberra, ANU.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, Ulrich (1992) *Risk society: towards a new modernity*, London, Sage.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*, trans R. Nice, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press.

Bulbeck, Chilla (2005) '"Women are exploited way too often": feminist rhetoric at the end of equality', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 20, no. 46, pp. 65–76.

Burman, Erica (2005), 'Childhood, neo-liberalism and the feminization of education', *Gender and Education*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 351–367.

Burton, Clare (1985) *Subordination: feminism and social theory*, Sydney, London, Boston, George Allen and Unwin.

Business Council of Australia and Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2005) *Increasing participation in education and training: key policy steps, joint response by the BCA and Dusseldorp Skills Forum to research undertaken by Access Economics Pty Ltd entitled The Economic Benefit of Increased Participation in Education and Training*, Melbourne, Business Council of Australia.

Campo, Natasha (2005) '"Having it all" or "had enough"? Blaming feminism in the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1980–2004', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 84.

Collins, C., J. Kenway and J. McLeod (2000) *Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and in their initial destinations after leaving school*, Canberra, Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Department of Education and Children's Services (2002) *Futures Connect*, Adelaide, DECS, http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/files/communities/docman/1/FuturesConnectStrateg_Broc.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2004.

Gregory, Bob (2002) 'Can this be the promised land? Work and welfare for the modern woman', *Dissent*, no. 9.

Harris, Anita (2004) *Future girl: young women in the twenty-first century*, London, New York, Routledge.

Hobsbawm, Eric (2005) 'Retreat of the male', review of Goran Therborn, 'Between sex and power: family in the world 1900–2000', *London Review of Books*, vol. 27, no. 15, 4 August, pp. 8–9.

Long, Mick (2004) *How young people are faring: key indicators 2004*, Sydney, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, http://www.dsf.org.au/papers/169.htm

Mackinnon, Alison (1997) *Love and freedom: professional women and the reshaping of personal life*, Melbourne and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

McMillan, J. and G.N. Marks (2003) *School leavers in Australia: profiles and pathways*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, Victoria, Australian Council for Educational Research.

Megalogenis, George (2005) 'Women match men in pink-collar economy', *The Weekend Australian*, Inquirer, 12–13 November, p. 26.

Overingham, Caroline (2005) 'Women face stalled careers', *The Australian*, 26 September, p. 3.

Oster, Candice, Alison Mackinnon and Jane Kenway (2005) *Staying or leaving? A report from the project 'Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work: towards gender justice in educational and youth policies and programs'*, Magill, South Australia, University of South Australia.

Pusey, Michael (2003) *The experience of middle Australia: the dark side of economic reform*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Schools Commission (1975) *Girls, schools and society: report by a study group to the Schools Commission*, Canberra, Commonwealth Schools Commission.

Sennett, Richard (2003) *Respect: the formation of character in a world of inequality*, London and New York, Allan Lane.

Simmons, Rachel (2002) *Odd girl out: the hidden culture of aggression in girls*, New York, Swartz.

Steedman, Caroline (1986) *Landscape for a good woman: a story of two lives*, London, Virago.

Thompson, Rachel and Janet Holland (2002) *Inventing adulthoods: young people's strategies for transition*, Final report to the ESRC, http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/fhss/ff/reports/final_report.shtml.

Walkerdine, Valerie, Helen Lucey and June Melody (2001) *Growing up girl: psychosocial explorations of gender and class*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Wyn, Johanna (2002) 'Children, families, schools and change: shaping new, participatory research agendas' in Margot Prior (ed), *Investing in our children: developing a research agenda*, Canberra, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, pp. 69–82.

"Instead of a school being inclusive and trying to bring on everybody, it is writing people off," Williams told me. "The long term costs to our society are astronomical. These are the young people that don't get that investment, they don't get the results that they need, so they don't end up getting the work that they need. I'm not saying it always leads to poor outcomes but it can exacerbate. Perhaps the lives of a whole generation of students would have turned out differently. to have someone on their side, rather than someone against them; to not always feel like a burden; to get the resources they needed, and to have someone talk to them and listen when they said it hurt. @annielord8. The School and Society: Being Three Lectures (1899) was John Dewey's first published work of length on education. A highly influential publication in its own right, it would also lay the foundation for his later work. In the lectures included in the initial publication, Dewey proposes a psychological, social, and political framework for progressive education. Notably, this includes collaborative practical experimentation as the central element of school work. He argues that the progressive approach is