

Girls on the Edge

Simon Burton-Jones expresses his concerns about the media effect on today's girls, who are pressured to achieve perfection academically, socially and physically.

Has the world gone backwards for today's girls? The evidence is mixed but increasingly suggests so. Media has concentrated on the way girls out-perform boys in school results and the recently published 'The End of Men' by Hanna Rosin posits a public world shaped in the image of women where men are insecure and uncertain of their purpose. Yet beneath the surface, there are muddier waters for this generation of girls. It has been described by Stephen Hinshaw and Rachel Kranz as 'the triple bind' – the need to achieve perfection academically, socially and physically. They painfully describe this as: 'act sweet and nice; be a star athlete and get straight A's; seem sexy and hot even if you're not'.

The shift in emphasis has been subtle but pervasive and many women who have struggled for the cause of equality over their own lifetimes must feel disquiet at how quickly some of their gains have been rolled back. Fewer young people speak of feminism now; this has been translated into girl power, an ambiguous concept which wrests previously won liberties out of their original context and re-packages them as a passport to achieving any dream while, most importantly, remaining 'hot'. The struggle for equality between the sexes

triple bind does not seem to apply to boys in the same way. Social media is turning friendship into competition and blurring the boundaries between public and private appearance. Children who are struggling with relationships among their peer group would once have found release in the family home, a refuge from the volatile and unpredictable seas of the school corridor and playground. With social media, these pressures are imported mercilessly into the home. The competition to be popular, witty and alluring is as ceaseless for young people as the 24 hour news channels. Girls are especially prone to this game, with its emphasis on feelings and relationships.

By far the most poisonous pressure, however, is the need to be beautiful. Appearance has always been important and we should cherish ourselves as much as we love our neighbour, but something has changed in the last twenty years which places an irreproachable premium on girls looking perfect. For this we can thank today's adult generation, which edits the magazines, produces the programmes, directs the films and consumes the messages unthinkingly about the need for women to look just right.

Several news websites, which could be named, post articles about the terrible pressures facing girls today alongside pictures of women who are judged cruelly by the same news source for, supposedly, letting themselves go. Women in the public domain are pitilessly held up



was rooted in realistic and measurable goals about pay, maternity leave and promotion. The current mantra about 'following your dream' deceitfully suggests that anything is possible for girls as long as they want it enough (thereby giving spurious credibility to a number who achieve it because they have family money, personal connections or a combination of both). Serious campaigns for equality have resulted in unintended consequences for

this generation: the freedom to pursue a goal has been translated into the curse of pursuing every goal at once.

Boys may rightly claim that some of these pressures apply to them too. Expectations about getting the best grades, attending the best universities and finding the best jobs are a common pattern of anxiety for all young people, heart-breakingly so, in the very era when the final goal is least likely to be achieved. Yet the

The 21st century teenage ticking timebomb: pressures to excel academically, be physically perfect and sexually active push teenage girls towards emotional meltdown.

for physical scrutiny in a way that men are spared. Girls are not stupid; they can see these values and the need to conform. Worryingly easy access to pornography online is also corrupting some young minds, and encouraging a new contempt for girls in some boys who are ignorant of the historic equality campaigns.

Sexism is back, but dressed in the shameless clothes of post-modern irony which eludes judgment because its prejudice is not supposed to be taken seriously.

To safeguard this generation of girls is a task with wider obligations than just protecting them from predators. Every girl growing up needs protective layers of unconditional love, meaning and identity. The first of these is the wider family, within which children find esteem and understand values. Allied to this are what philosopher Edmund Burke described as the 'little platoons' of society – the voluntary groups which make up our civic life and within which children learn to relate to the wider world and understand citizenship, for example, sports clubs and girl guides. Churches may also be included in this circle, though they stand for something much deeper than other such groups. Here, girls and boys learn the value that God places on them. There is no more liberating belief than the faith that God

sent his only Son to die for us because he has loved each of us with an everlasting love. This is good news for all and it is sad that a generation of girls which needs to hear this most clearly is largely unaware of this message.

The disintegration of the local extended family, the paucity of our links in the neighbourhood and the decline of the Church have eroded the natural resilience of today's children – girls and boys – at just the moment when they are most at risk from a toxic culture streamed through their phones and computers. Government has a role to play in regulating media, but while it has spent copious amounts of time looking at the regulation of the print media, it has largely missed the impact of new digital and especially social media on the welfare of impressionable people.

Thankfully, we all contribute to the wider culture of our country and thus each have a sphere of influence in which we can mould others for good and help them see the love and purpose God has for them. Getting inside the world that girls must inhabit today is a first step to supporting them. When Jesus said we should be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, he had something more empowering in mind than straight A's and a flawless body.

** The Ven Simon Burton-Jones is currently archdeacon of Rochester.*