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Growing up a Girl

In 2021, Soma Sara, a 22-year-old Londoner, set up a new website to which harrowing testimonies, describing how girls and young women experienced a 'rape culture' in schools in the UK, flowed in at an extraordinary rate.[1]

There were accusations of sexual assault of girls as young as nine. Some claims reported shaming of girls after classmates had circulated intimate photos without their consent. Experiences of misogyny, frank sexism and sexual violence shook the establishment even more so because many of them came, at first, from young women at expensive, fee-paying schools. Their testimonies are backed up by the findings of the UK arm of an international charity: 58% of girls aged 14–21 report they have been publicly sexually harassed in their school, college or university grounds.[2]

Since then, Soma has appeared in the media worldwide, and everyone, everywhere is talking about 'Everyone's Invited'. When I was able to catch a call with her, she had just returned from rollerblading.

Suddenly I felt old.

I didn't burn my bra in 1970, when the feminist protesters famously stormed the Miss World competition in London, because I was still too pleased to be wearing one, but I was energised by the feeling that our moment, as girls and women, had finally come. We were not going to be ignored or patronised for having opinions, prevented any longer from doing technical drawing or woodwork at school, or playing football if we wanted to. We were going to be free to make our own choices in life, regardless of our gender. It was exhilarating.

Now Soma was telling me about the battles she was *still* fighting.

'What surprised me most,' she said 'was the scale and the speed in which it [Everyone's Invited] kind of took off and blew up . . . we thought that it would take decades to give that kind of exposure to this problem. It was just an extraordinary tidal wave of voices.'

What these young women have begun to talk about is also closely related to our growing concerns about their mental health.

Tamsin Ford is the professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Cambridge University, and she's been involved in a great deal of the research in this area in the last couple of decades. She is also someone I know personally. She possesses a warm and down to earth manner that I would appreciate if I were a teenager and needed to talk about my problems. Perhaps, I thought, she could help me to understand why growing up a girl doesn't seem any easier now than it did for me back then.

'So, what changes for girls now in their teenage years?' I started off, when we'd managed to establish a flaky Skype connection across the length of Britain.

'It's complicated,' she replied. In early childhood, boys with mental health problems *outnumber* girls, because boys are more

likely to be diagnosed with autism spectrum, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and behaviour problems. But then, later, it evens up. At secondary school age, emotional problems increase in both genders, but more so in girls. Then there is a *huge* leap, particularly in girls, in the 17- to 19-year-old age group with 31.6% of girls screening positive for a probable mental disorder compared with 15.4% of boys in the latest survey in England in 2023. Eating disorders were four times more common in young women aged 17–19 years (20.8%) than young men (5.1%).[3]

The Adult Mental Health Survey (APMS) happens every seven years in Britain, and thousands are interviewed. The last one, APMS 2014 published in 2016[4] concluded that 16- to 24-year-old women 'have emerged as a high-risk group, with high rates of CMD (common mental disorders – such as anxiety and depression), self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder. The gap between young women and young men has increased.'[5] According to Tamsin, young women in their late teens in this country seem to have a significant problem with their mental health: 'Referrals to child and adolescent services have rocketed up and talking to colleagues on the front line it is nearly all young women.'

Young Women are Harming Themselves

Jane told me over the phone from London how her problems began during revision for A-levels, when she felt under pressure with her schoolwork, but there were also problems at home. Like many of the younger women I have listened to, her most difficult times were thankfully behind her, because the last thing I wanted to do in interviewing her was re-traumatise someone by listening and then being unable to offer any support.

'I started self-harming, and it . . . kind of spiralled.' Her voice dropped and almost seemed to fade away.

'Did it help?' I asked.

'I was using it as a release . . . it helped in the moment, but I had to do it more and more to have that impact.' Often that is the case. She ended up in the emergency department of a local hospital and was then referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Jane, who is Black British, was then in sixth form and not only struggling with school but also very worried about her family, who were going through a divorce. Her cousin, to whom she is close, had also been recently raped while away at university. The case went to court while Jane was sitting her exams and, not surprisingly, all of the stress affected her performance.

'It felt like a whirlwind at the time. I focused on my schoolwork, that was the only thing I had any sense of control over. That's what I blamed it all on. Everything else was just a bit too messy to get my head around.' It sounded to me like she had felt very frightened and powerless to change anything.

The methods people choose to harm themselves change with the times.[6] When I think back, I don't remember self-harm being a common thing young people I knew did when they felt stressed out, although I know it happened in my wider circle of friends and acquaintances, and usually when something traumatic happened, like the breakup of a relationship.

Like many others of my generation, I read Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*,[7] and identified with the frustration that the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, experienced with the limited opportunities open to her in life in American middle-class society in the 1950s as an intelligent, creative woman. A couple of decades later, many of us still felt, like Esther (and Sylvia herself), rigidly constrained by the need to conform to the expectations of others about how young women should behave. I never reached the point that she did, where she overdoses on her mother's sleeping pills and hopes to die, but there were moments in my earlier life when I considered it, feeling both entrapped by circumstances and hopeless about the future.

As a young doctor it was part of my everyday work to talk to people who had been admitted to hospital after taking an overdose of

medication. Arriving on a ward in the morning there would usually be one or two young women, and they were more commonly women, hooked up to heart monitors because they had taken overdoses of tricyclic antidepressants, which can affect the rhythm with which your heart beats and be lethal in overdose. The effects of the other common pill that people overdosed with, paracetamol, can be counteracted if you receive a dose of an antidote within enough time at the hospital, and it is now much harder to buy in large quantities than it was in the past.

In the 1960s, overdose with aspirin was more common. That was the period when it became very clear to doctors that young women were more likely than men to try to harm themselves, but without the *intention* of taking their lives, usually because of difficult life events and problems in their relationships. A new word was even coined for it – 'parasuicide'.[8] Before that, until 1961, attempting suicide had been a criminal offence in the UK, and people did not seek help in fear of prosecution. A psychiatrist with whom I trained told me how he sent a distraught and sobbing girl (thankfully she was an actress) around six chemist shops in Edinburgh asking, 'May I have 200 aspirins, please?'.[9] No one refused, though she was asked 'Are you all right?' and told, 'You should go and have a cup of tea.' Everyone, but especially pharmacists, are more aware of the risks these days, though a cup of tea continues to be advice given to people in a crisis. If only more caffeine was the solution.

'I do wonder about the seriousness with which women's mental health problems are taken,' said Louis Appleby.

He's been one of the voices trying hard to get women's mental health problems on the agenda and was for several years the clinical director for mental health for the National Health Service (NHS) in England. We've known each other since we were students.

He acknowledged there is an issue, fundamentally, with how our society, and health services, fail to help women with mental health problems, particularly those who self-harm.

These young girls are viewed as 'wasting our time'.

They aren't seen as asking for help *in the right way* and not behaving like patients, and especially women patients, ought to behave. Doctors and nurses tend to reject people who expose their inadequacies. They feel challenged by people they don't understand and whom they are unsure how to help. They hope women will just shut up and go away, but it isn't clear how women have to behave to be taken *more* seriously.

In recent decades, self-injury by cutting or some other method has become increasingly common with a rise in the number of girls and young women admitted to hospital for this reason.[10]

In spring 2022, girls and young women aged 17–24 in the UK had the highest prevalence of probable mental health problems (31%) across all age groups of children and young people, and 71% of these girls and young women said they had tried to harm themselves at some point in their lives.[11] Young girls are beginning to self-harm at a younger age than boys[12] and girls from the poorest backgrounds are five times more likely to self-harm than those from higher income homes.[13]

The way in which young women are sometimes treated when they ask for help after self-harm is appalling. Lesley, who grew up in Scotland and developed an eating disorder in her teens, told me, 'I had cut my leg quite badly. The doctor just looked at me and stapled me up without anaesthetic and it was so painful. I don't think he would have done that if I hadn't self-harmed. Also, I don't think he would have done that to a guy.' Many young women who self-harm have told me this has been done to them.

Lesley reported to her consultant what happened, and the emergency doctor insisted to him that she had consented to it. She proffered a wry smile, 'You're always not believed.'

Listening to her, I had no doubt she was telling the truth, yet something like this encounter is repeated regularly in British hospitals.[14]

Why don't young women get believed? We've been trying to challenge such negative, judgemental attitudes for decades, yet so little has changed. It all seems to come back, once more, to women

not behaving 'appropriately' and asking for help in the 'right' way. Louis told me about the rise in suicide in young women under 25, with the largest rise in suicide rates in 2021 since records began.[15] What is particularly worrying for me is these young women increasingly receive a diagnosis of 'personality disorder'.[16] That happened to Lesley even though she had already been diagnosed with an eating disorder. Fortunately, 'personality disorder' was removed by her consultant. Why is it so hard for women to get effective help? And should we even be saying someone has a 'disordered personality', especially when they are so young? There is often an assumption that self-harm is 'attention seeking' and 'a cry for help' but among those who self-harm the suicide rate is considerably higher.

Louis's own research team[17] found there were several pointers to the causes of why young people take their lives: experiencing abuse of all kinds, domestic violence, bullying, bereavement and the internet (including bullying on social media) and *these were more common in young women*.[18] He told me how he was worried about what he called 'normalisation of self-harm': 'It becomes a coping mechanism that society starts to sanction.'

In other words, it's becoming an acceptable and routine way of coping with stress. I don't know if that's true, but it's certainly something that more and more girls and young women are doing in response to what is going on in their lives.

For Jane, as for many young women, it was a combination of things, both schoolwork and a family crisis, that led to her self-harming. The perpetrator was a friend of her cousin, and Jane's uncle blamed his daughter, asking 'Why were you even alone with him?' When her cousin shared what had happened, it really affected Jane. She told me, 'It's a different culture, different generation, kind of thing but it's something we internalise. We have to be sure, because if something happens it will be your fault.'

Fortunately, she was able to get support from a therapist who helped her to recognise the impact of these pressures and to find

other ways of coping with her painful feelings. When we talked, she described herself now as better, but still anxious. I could hear in her voice how deeply these events had affected her. *It will be your fault.* That's a terrible burden of responsibility to bear.

What else is contributing to the problems that young women are facing?

Social media and peer pressure both play a part.

What Part Does Social Media Play?

Social media can be toxic, but as a child psychiatrist, Tamsin insisted that the jury's still out on exactly what part it plays.

It certainly has its positives. Living alone for long periods during the Covid-19 pandemic, it's been an important connection for me with the world. There are several people who I first 'met' on social media only to connect with later in real life, Tamsin included. Young people *do* get help online, from WhatsApp discussions about homework to support from others when they are feeling low.

Starting college in India, Naina at first found Facebook a good way to connect with people, but after being trolled she withdrew.

'I just got scared of it. I would go to my classroom, and I would see people laughing, looking at me, and I would assume they were laughing about me.'

Later, she tried to return but told me how she would see other people having fun. Which led to comparison with her own life.

'And it left me feeling that I could be doing more, so much more. *Having fun*'.

Instagram and Snapchat seem to have a particularly negative impact on self-perception.[19]

Lara, who developed an intense phobia of food when they were 14, which then developed into anorexia, told me how they started

documenting their journey on Instagram, and quickly picked up quite a few followers.

'I was the only person who was a healthy weight experiencing an eating disorder. And it really badly affected my body image.'

Constant comparison is a theme with so many young women.

'Everyone was trying to look as though they were recovering. And it seemed a very competitive world of people posting miniscule meals and body checks.'

'It wasn't a healthy thing at all, for me to be there.'

Yet, Lara said, it still felt like a 'community' even though they recognised it was harmful. They did eventually manage to recover, but then relapsed later at university.

'By this point, I had around 10,000 followers. There were a lot of people who I felt were looking up to me. I'd let them down and I felt very guilty.'

The impact of social media seems to be greater on teenage girls than boys[20] and teenage girls are particularly more likely to be both bullied and cyberbullied. Those found in research to have an emotional disorder *did* report more hours online to researchers. It must be oppressive to see the world looking at you through the judgemental lens of Instagram.

Several girls told me how social media seemed to heighten and magnify the impact of what was already happening to them and how they seemed more preoccupied by what happened online than male friends and siblings.

Hannah, aged 17 and currently doing her A-levels, attends the same school as her twin sister Becky, in the south of England. She told me, 'Boys don't worry about just posting *whatever*. Girls, it's often a lot more, well not *staged*. But you could tell there's been five or six photos, and they've chosen the best one.'

As most research is just a snapshot of one point in time, we don't know if the problems people report with social media are causal or correlational. Are young women more troubled because they spend so much time online? Or is it simply that those who are feeling low or

anxious retreat to an online existence? So, what happens online might simply be symptomatic of other difficulties.

The content of some sites is very harmful indeed. After the death of his daughter Molly, Ian Russell began to campaign for the media giants who control social media to take responsibility for the graphic content relating to suicide and self-harm that he discovered his daughter had been viewing on Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest prior to taking her life.[21] On these sites you could find yourself being 'coached' by a person or a group of people, posing to you as someone completely different, and meanwhile encouraging you to cause yourself significant harm. Even to kill yourself. On the notorious 'Pro-Ana' sites, some persuade young women with eating disorders to lose even more weight.[22]

Being bullied on social media is toxicity of a higher order than anything limited to real life, even though that can be bad enough. There is simply no escape from it. It *can* make things much worse, but this is a more complicated story than just about social media on its own.

It is about pressure, competition – and the requirement of young women to conform.

An Awful Sense of Pressure

Over and over, I heard the same word from young women.

Pressure.

Not only from others, family, school, peer groups, but also from what girls put themselves under in order to fit in and conform with what is expected of them. The burden of responsibility that Jane talked about was just one example. There were many others.

Lesley, who is now 30, and was diagnosed with anorexia in her teens, said that she hadn't thought much about the impact of gender at the time but had reflected on it when she was older. There were plenty of cues and so much pressure. 'Girls should be like . . . delicate, quiet, nice. Be nice. And don't be bossy. Don't be like . . . don't be big.'

She corrected herself. 'No one *says* "don't be big" but don't be *seen*. "Don't stand out." And yeah, I think that there's less of that pressure put on boys who are told "be leaders" and *are* told to stand out.'

Boys and girls are socialised in different ways. Lisa, a postgraduate student who grew up in a small town in Ireland, agreed: 'There's more pressure on girls from such a young age to kind of be like, neat and tidy and allow boys to be boisterous or be expressing themselves.' Girls get rewarded for being 'quiet and being proper'.

At Lisa's all-girls school the pressure to look and act in a certain way definitely contributed to her feeling bad about herself and her appearance. I could detect, even with our fragile internet connection, how deeply it had affected her. She told me there were unofficial 'rules' about the length of your skirt and the height of your socks that were understood among pupils, not imposed by the school yet subtly enforced by the other girls. These included the wearing of make-up, even though many girls weren't yet allowed to wear it by parents. 'At the time,' she explained, 'I'd be down on myself. I think if I'd had more self-esteem to fall back on, it would have been a great protective factor. I'm shocked how low my self-worth was.'

Bullying is a risk for both boys and girls. However, for girls, bullying is less physical and more about relationships: spreading rumours, nasty gossip and shutting people out of 'in' groups. So, it's harder to identify.

Hannah, still at school in England and doing her A-levels, said that girls tend to have an immediate ring of friends, and there is always an exclusive 'cool entourage'. She belonged to a group of quiet introverts that didn't really talk to anyone else. Characters in the films *Clueless* and *Mean Girls* came to mind. She laughed, 'No one watches those films and says, that is what my high school career is going to look like. You know that it's fiction. But at the same time, if I look at the people who I consider more vulnerable, they're striving for that kind of ideal, which is a little disturbing.' As ever, it's those who don't fit in and are struggling, whatever their gender, who are most at risk from being bullied, and cyberbullied, too.

It can have a lasting impact on your life. Recently, a friend of mine was moved to tears recalling how she was bullied about 30 years ago, mostly but not exclusively by boys, about her shape and appearance. I was bullied at secondary school for working hard. There was a clique of three girls, very much that 'cool crowd' who on one occasion placed a damp apple core inside the pages of an exercise book that contained my hand-drawn and carefully coloured in map for geography homework. It was ruined. They made my life hell, taunting me in the playground and ensuring I was never chosen for teams. These are the experiences we never forget.

Girls are also given very *confusing* messages. Sometimes they are told they *should* stand out, because that's how they will succeed, especially when they are in competition, not only with boys, but also with each other.

Lucy, who grew up in Lebanon but now lives in London, was very clear about the importance of standing out: 'You have to wear the cooler outfits if you are going to be thought attractive. I did feel that I had to be thought attractive.' I remember that too, and how hard it was on a limited budget when other girls with wealthier parents always wore the latest fashion and carried the best handbags.

However much feminism discourages competition between us, women *do* compete, especially when it comes to relationships – starting with being able to call someone your best friend. Something I'd forgotten about until sitting down to write. That awful feeling that the girl you thought was your 'bestie' has been seeing more of others and you feel left out. Even worse if they are all on a WhatsApp group that you aren't included in. Competition between women begins early and continues through our lives, even if as feminists we'd prefer to ignore it.

Then there are the problems that arise if you stand out in ways that a girl is not supposed to – by excelling at school, especially in science.

In co-ed schools it is still difficult to get girls to take up science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects even though they offer the best employment prospects. My attractiveness

to the opposite sex in a mixed-sex school was considerably diminished by being more successful than them as one of the three girls at the time taking A-level physics and chemistry. However, it was very clear my physics teacher was more comfortable with teaching his subject to boys than girls when the 'lads' would all go along to after-school science activities he organised. Deciding to not conform, by not behaving 'like a girl should', can drain one's reservoir of self-esteem.

Naina, growing up in India, said she has always had to fight.

'When you are born your father has a question to answer. Should he save money for your wedding? Or should he save money for your education?'

She *was* given opportunities to study, but other family members were often critical of her parents for spending the money, and of her own choices too.

'I remember a relative telling me that you should not take this engineering branch, but you should take that one. Because girls don't do mechanical engineering.

'He knew nothing about engineering himself.'

Girls *can* do science and maths, but sadly so many still think that they shouldn't, can't, or don't want to.[23]

Lucy, growing up in an affluent home in Lebanon years later, still experienced that sense of being 'out of place' in maths. She felt patronised by her teacher when he felt the need to explain things to her in a class full of boys: 'He was a lovely teacher, don't get me wrong . . . there were always more girls in the lower-class and I thought that's maybe where I belong.' It's tragic that girls still report how gender stereotypes hold them back at school.[24]

Despite this, girls are outdoing boys consistently in education and pushing themselves even harder. Expectations are powerful. Not only what people expect of you but also what you expect from yourself, or just don't believe you can achieve. Girls outnumber boys now in training for what used to be male-dominated professions, such as my own. Perhaps it isn't surprising that people are asking 'what is

happening to the boys?' but that should not come at the expense of diminishing girls' hard-won achievements.

'I was told "you will have to work twice as hard as men",' Tamsin said.

Me too. My overwhelming teenage anxiety was about examinations. Getting through my A-levels, in which I did less well than had been expected of me, probably in part because of my state of near panic throughout. For Hannah, doing her A-levels in England today, much of the anxiety of her female peers is about preparing for what they are going to do when they have finished with school. Hannah was aiming high but told me of a talented friend with low self-esteem she was concerned about. She didn't want to try for Oxford, because she just didn't think she was good enough. Boys more often seem to have fewer doubts.[25]

And there is *still* a pressure to be in a romantic relationship.

Lisa experienced this at her school in Ireland, although she was convinced that would *never* happen to her. She began to become more severely unwell during her final examinations: 'I just couldn't really concentrate . . . and I felt like I was going to ruin my whole future, and there was nothing I could do because I wasn't functioning.'

'I'll never, ever marry, I want my independence,' I told my parents, then spent an awful lot of time worrying about being in a relationship. That was the massive contradiction of my youth, and another reason why so many of us in our women's group years later talked so much about men. They let us down, but we still adored them or believed that we should.

I'm transported back to 17 again, sitting listening to my favourite album, waiting for the phone in the hallway to ring and trying to convince my parents that I'm doing my homework. Desperate to hear from someone who has promised to contact me when he comes back home, and he *is* home now. Of course, he doesn't call, and I can't call him, that isn't *done*, so I feel stupid to have believed he would. Broken-hearted, I avoided that music for ages afterwards. If my failure to hear from him had been publicly discussed on Instagram;

or pictures of him out with someone else had been posted and discussed; derogatory comments had been made about me by anyone on such a public forum or he had put up an embarrassing intimate photo of me, I would not just have been distraught. The shame might have sent me into a deep well of despair that I would have had problems climbing out of. The emotional fallout from broken relationships can be profound.

Today, some clearly manage to resist getting into a relationship in their early teens but, as Hannah put it neatly, 'There's kind of a pressure to hit the milestones and every single book on the shelf seems to be one of those trashy, girl meets boy, and they live happily ever after stories.'

Romance novels still sell in their millions.

I read them too.

Neither Hannah nor her twin sister Becky were in a relationship, and were clearly very comfortable with that, but many around them felt the pressure to find someone. Becky said she had overheard a person in her class getting very upset in the changing rooms because she had broken up with a boyfriend, not because she liked him, but because then she would be the only girl in her peer group without one.

That's tragic.

All this pressure to compare ourselves with others means we can push ourselves too hard – not only to meet our own high standards but also to seek approval from others. Perfectionism feeds into the awful repetitive thoughts about low self-worth that can trigger depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts and dissatisfaction with how you feel about your appearance. All of which is more common in girls than boys.[26] It can affect every aspect of our lives. In our increasingly sexualised and glamorised society there seems to be more pressure on girls – to look perfect, *and* be financially independent, but to be able to run the house as well. So, a young woman must be everything.

But *only* within certain acceptable parameters.

There is one final pressure on girls: to 'stay safe'.

'Stay Safe'

Over half of girls and young women aged 11–21 say they don't feel safe when they're outside on their own.[27] Is it surprising? In England and Wales, the highest number of rapes within a 12-month period was recorded by police in the year ending September 2022: 70,633.[28]

Like Jane's cousin who was raped by a friend, so many girls and women have and still are being regularly subjected to sexual assault and even rape. That command to 'Stay safe' is something drilled into us from childhood. The stories posted on Everyone's Invited reveal the sheer extent and horror of the problem.

Thousands of women demonstrated on the streets of London following the murder of Sara Everard in 2021. She was walking home alone and stopped by a police officer, someone we are told to trust. We know from CCTV that he even showed her his warrant card. He then raped and murdered her.

Lucy, who grew up in Lebanon, was told by her mother, every time she went out, 'Don't go to the bathroom alone, always have your wits about you.' Her mother had given her safety rules that she knew by heart and are still engraved there to this day. 'I've always been hypervigilant … I'm always looking to see if there is anyone walking behind me.'

That is something we all do. Thinking about what we are wearing, what route we use at a particular time of day, what we take with us. I carried around my own personal weapon, a pointed umbrella, for years when I lived in a city.

Because I remember vividly being followed through the empty streets of Edinburgh when, drunk and more than a little miserable, I decided to leave a party at 2am and walk home. Terrified for a few minutes, and realising the man was now only a few steps behind me I ran and caught up with a couple going in the same direction, gasping, 'Can I walk with you please?' My pursuer laughed and turned around. So many of us have been there and can count among our family and friends, women who have been sexually assaulted.

For Jane, whose cousin was raped, fear of assault became a stark reality. That sense of responsibility, to behave 'properly' and *control* ourselves, is drilled into us, and we are held to account when we are blamed for how men *choose* to behave towards us.

As the founder of Everyone's Invited, Soma Sara told me, 'These are taboo topics, and when girls speak about them, they're often silenced, and invalidated and told that what they're saying isn't true.' Her voice dropped and I could tell that her passion was intensely personal, 'When I did try and stand up for myself, I was gaslighted,[29] and kind of ostracised a little bit by my peers, that's really powerful.'

Being silenced and disbelieved has a potent impact on how young women feel about themselves. It makes us doubt our own judgement and lose our confidence. We can feel humiliated, confused and despairing.

It's Not Just About 'Increasing Self-Esteem'

'She has low self-esteem, that's at the root of her problems', someone would say about a patient in my supervision group of young, female therapists when I worked in a psychological therapies service. Everyone else would nod, perhaps identifying, only too well, with the problems of the patient we were discussing. What was less clear was how we could increase a young woman's self-esteem in half a dozen sessions of therapy, which is all the health care system in England would allow.

Many women lack self-esteem, and we stock up on our reserves of it in different ways – by trying to boost how we feel about our appearance, performance at school, at work, and our success in relationships. Yet trying too hard can make us feel worse. Self-esteem plays a big part in our vulnerability to depression, our health, and how satisfied we are with our lives. You might expect that the wealthier and better educated we are, the higher our self-esteem should be, but there is little evidence of that,[30] and even though some of the young women

I'd listened to were from 'better-off' backgrounds, they were still seriously lacking it. We need to understand where all of that 'lack of self-esteem' in young women in our society originates, and challenge it at source, rather than only telling girls and women that they are short of it and must try to do something about it, all by themselves. Or telling them that they aren't resilient enough. It isn't just about what is going on inside of us, but what we, as girls and women, have to battle against in the world. For some of us the hills we must climb to feel good about ourselves seem like mountain ranges. We don't simply need 'self-esteem' but time and space, in conversation with trusted others, support groups or therapy, to deal with those painful feelings about what has happened to us.

Self-help, alone, certainly won't sort out that, and society isn't going to change in an instant either.

I love inspiring stories about women who have broken the mould of conformity that life tries to enforce on them, and who have managed to live their lives to the full – women who no longer worry all the time about 'controlling themselves'. I found it difficult to get into Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*, perhaps because I didn't personally identify with her story, but some of the young women I interviewed for this book all clearly did, and strongly recommend it. It is a powerful story of breaking free from having to conform with what other people expect of you. However, what concerns me more is the suggestion that we just need to buy something, read it, and that will solve our problems. It can just feel like the pressure to speak in the same kind of language about our lives, which inspirational authors use, is another kind of conformity. Has business just harnessed 'feeling good about yourself' to sell us even more stuff?

So where do we go from here?

What Must Change?

Attitudes towards women seem to have gone into reverse during my lifetime.

'My colleagues who are doing much more teaching say young men have just gone back to appalling ways of behaving, sexism and misogyny,' Tamsin told me.

This is exactly what the young women who post to Everyone's Invited are talking about. We are living through an extraordinary age of contrasting absolutes in which in one plane of existence the ex-president of the United States could boast about his misogynist views, and yet in another the #MeToo movement of the current fourth wave of feminism, a new eruption of consciousness, especially in the *online* world, is finally challenging the abusive behaviour, unwanted touching, harassment and frank assault that we women have always been told is 'just how men behave' when we dare to complain. However, alongside the rise of popular feminism, with its emphasis on body positivity, empowerment and building women's self-esteem has come the frightening rise in popular misogyny, occupying the same very public platforms on social media.

This behaviour is quietly tolerated in our society and is harming our young women. It isn't enough for our feminism for be popular on social media and to be, as Sarah Bannet-Weiser in her quite brilliant book, *Empowered*, puts it, 'all the rage'. Everyone's Invited has powerfully amplified the voices of young women and brought into sharp focus what they suffer in our society. From being unheard to being, at least, acknowledged.

Now we need to follow their example. Get out there and challenge the sexist structures in our society.

But not just tweet about it, do something.

There are some things we can lobby our politicians about.

They must get serious about the real damage that is being done to young women in some places on social media. At last, there seems to be some movement on this in the UK when it comes to sites promoting self-harm.[31]

Fast access to therapy is *crucial* for young people.[32] Young women have taken their lives when they have heard how long the waiting list

for therapy will be. Every day is so important when you are young and what seems inconsequential to adults can feel immense because your experience of being alive is so much shorter. Therapy might also need to be longer than a few sessions only and provided more than once. Tamsin said, 'We don't say Ventolin doesn't work if you have another asthma attack.' We keep on using it.

Parents can get involved too both in lobbying politicians and in challenging providers directly to get those who are educating their children to do more.

Problematic misogynist attitudes to women and the key issue of 'what is consent?' needs to be addressed *head on* in sex education in schools and by the governing authorities of colleges and universities.

There's also a great deal that schools could do about bullying.

It has long-term health consequences and young girls should not be left to deal with it on their own or have to move away to another school, as my friend had to, to escape her bullies. Girls are much more likely to experience indirect forms of bullying that are hard to specifically identify, and more difficult to address. Nevertheless, we know there are effective approaches that can help, such as empathy training, peer group interventions and restorative justice.[33]

Much more support is needed for teachers trying to help girls struggling at school – and even more so since the pandemic. Teachers don't need training to be therapists, but they do need to have a therapist or counsellor working alongside them to support them.

The content of the curriculum can be controversial, but it must include impact of conventional beauty standards spread by advertising and on social media platforms on body image, particularly for girls. Social media teaching should be provided by trainers who are nearer in age to students. Young people who can talk about social media in a more realistic way than older adults often do.

However, parents must also recognise that their children are being exposed to sex and pornography at a much younger age now, online. It may be an uncomfortable topic to talk about at home, but it cannot

be ignored any longer. It's the reality of our time. We'll come back to this and the growing misogyny in society in a later chapter.

Some things, we as women and girls must, as ever, do for ourselves.

We must all become activists too, but in ways that feel comfortable for us.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many of us met in 'consciousness-raising groups' to talk about our lives and the connections between our feelings and our experiences of everyday sexism, long before that term was coined. Out of that came the realisation that 'the personal is political'.

Likewise, Soma Sara talked about regularly reaching out to other women.

'It's about creating a space for people to share, that's free of judgement, of shame of humiliation, that's about listening and empathy; also making sure survivors have access and are signposted to any help that they might want or need.'

What we do for *each other* is important. The personal is *still* political.

Jane's close friend helped her to start talking, and that might be all that is needed, but a therapist helped her to find coping mechanisms she hadn't previously possessed. She also writes, something I've found helpful throughout my life. Overall, she feels much better now: 'I know a lot more about myself. Now it's more of an anxiety issue, less of low mood.' I'm pleased for her, but angered by the pain that she, and her cousin, had to go through just to grow up as girls in this world.

The pressure for girls to conform to society's expectations of them remains as powerful in many ways as it was for my generation and that of Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood before me.

Not only are the problems that girls and young women experience with their mental health not taken seriously enough.

The difficulties they still face growing up in our society are also *completely underestimated*.