

New American Girl and How She Is Changing the World, argues that today's generation of girls, born in the early 1980s and beyond, have undergone a kind of collective psychological transformation that is the natural result of the gender equality of recent history. They are ambitious, driven, competitive, assertive, and confident as never before. "I mean, I know I can do anything, be anything, go for anything I want," says Kristy, a 17-year-old senior, a star student, and a star athlete who is headed for Princeton next year from Dalton, a prestigious private school in New York.

"I've heard it all my life. Go for it! Don't quit! You can do it. Sure, some people won't make it. Some people don't have what it takes. But me? No way. My future is wide open and I can do whatever I set my mind to do."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"I just know. It's mine."

It's true: Girls today are unlike any generation in our nation's history. Decades of change in the options for women have had their effect. They seem more entitled, empowered, and emboldened than any generation in our history.

And also somewhat myopic.

All this good news rests alongside a very different reality facing girls today. It doesn't cancel out gender disparity, especially when it comes to Guyland. Instead, the experiences of most girls and young women seem to run along a continuum, with Kindlon's Alpha Girls at one extreme. The other extreme tells a different story completely.

Consider, for example, the scene of ritual degradation called a "Circle the Fat" exercise, described by Margaret Soos, a pseudonymous ex-pledge at a California college. It is recounted in *Pledged*, journalist Alexandra Robbins's exposé of the secret life of sororities. It begins when the entire pledge class is led downstairs into the living room of the sorority house. Dressed only in their underwear, they are met by their sisters, who wear white robes. Large bed sheets cover the windows. The sisters hand them strips of white sheets and instruct them to blindfold themselves and lie facedown on the cold hardwood floor. Here's what happens next:

To ask a group of teenage girls and young women about their lives is to enter a world of entitlement and often even enthusiasm. As far as they're concerned, all those rights that their mothers and grandmothers had to fight for—the right to choose, to have control over their bodies, to enter any school, any profession, to be free of sexual harassment on the job or sexual assault on a date—are a done deal. Feminism's so over. Who needs a women's movement any more? They've already won!

They assume they'll have equal access to education and employment opportunities, and that they are just as capable as their male peers (if not more so) of achieving success. They're competing in sports with as much vitality and drive as men, and entering the job market—including the military, police and fire departments, and the political sphere—in unprecedented numbers. And no wonder—female characters like Zoey and Carly on Nick TV shows, and the acerbic Juno in the recent hit movie—are more clever by half than any of the somewhat clueless male friends and classmates.

Psychologist Dan Kindlon, author of *Alpha Girls: Understanding the*

And that's when the men entered the room, whistling and howling . . . The men circled us . . . I was becoming disoriented and felt nauseated. Something smelled toxic. Then something cold came into contact with my thigh. I gasped. 'It's okay, baby,' said one of the men. 'I'm just helping to make you look good.' The cold moved to my inner thigh.

Some women quiver, cry out, or wince. "The fraternity guys are here to help us all become better sisters," the chapter president says. "You need to hold still and be quiet."

When the men are finished, they depart, their work of humiliation done. The pledges are led upstairs to an "education room." Their blindfolds are removed, and they stand nearly naked in front of a mirror. "There was a moment of confusion as each of us noticed that circles and 'X's' had been drawn on our bodies in permanent marker," recounts one pledge. "These [are] areas that needed some work," the pledgemaester said to them. When one girl started to sob, one of the sisters scoffed. "Don't be a ninny," she said. This is "just going to make you a better person."

Robbins writes that she originally had assumed that such rituals were the stuff of urban legend. But over and over again she heard these stories, of "Circle the Fat" and the "Bikini Weigh," in which the pledges are weighed in front of the sisterhood (or a fraternity) and the audience yells out the number displayed on the scale.

How do we reconcile the star athlete gearing up for her first semester at Princeton with the sorority sister who is so utterly preoccupied with social status that she's willing to submit to hazing rituals like those described above? Why would any young woman collaborate in her own humiliation like that?

There are plenty of girls who avoid the more dire pitfalls of female adolescence in America today—from eating disorders to self-mutilation, reckless promiscuity to binge drinking. Yet many do not. And while there are several reasons that might explain the kind of self-hating behaviors described above, none is more relevant to our conversation than the pressures exerted by the culture of Guyland.

That's right: Girls have to contend with Guyland just as much as guys do. Just as Guyland is the social world in which boys become men, so too is Guyland the context in which girls become women. How they navigate those troubled waters will do a lot more than raise or lower her self-esteem. It can determine what sort of life she will have.

Much of a girl's social status is determined by her relationship with guys, even today. To achieve high standing with guys, and thus with other girls, a girl must conform to Guyland's notions of what a girl should be. The world of girls that Robbins describes is part of Guyland. Make no mistake: Girls live in Guyland, not the other way around. Whereas guys are permanent citizens, girls are legal aliens at best. As second-class inhabitants, they are relegated to being party buddies, sex objects, or a means of access to other girls. While guys spend their time posturing for the validation of other guys, the girls who live in Guyland spend their time working tirelessly for the validation and approval of *those same guys*. Guys have the parties, supply the alcohol, and set the terms for social life. If a girl wants to play, she has to play by their rules.

Even though they may have been raised by forward-thinking mothers, many of these young women don't seem to be able to envision an alternative to Guyland, and without a different reality in mind, they can't critically analyze what is happening. Nor can they disengage without paying a high price—they have to kiss their social lives good-bye. Though there are certainly exceptions, it's hard to expect young women who are trying to find relationships, learn about their sexuality, and have fun on campus to buck the system to this extent.

Instead, each girl must negotiate Guyland for herself. She must decide when to go along with it and when to resist. Will she acquiesce and be accepted as a "babe," or will she defy it and be branded a "bitch"? Will she bond with her girlfriends and thrive in an atmosphere of female solidarity, or will she abandon her friends every time a new guy expresses an interest in her? Will she defend and protect her sisters, or will she betray them? Will she even think of them as her sisters?

Girls are necessary to Guyland. They enable guys, legitimate guys' behavior, normalize it, and make it seem natural and inevitable. To fully understand Guyland, we need to understand how women participate

in it, how they keep it going, and how they also, and might more effectively, resist it.

Sisterhood Is Powerless: The Sorority as Microcosm

From their earliest initiations into the world of Queen Bees, BFFs, and cliques, girls learn two important messages: 1) after family, the bonds of friendship with other women are the most durable and important bonds of your life, and 2) your friends can turn on you in a heartbeat, they are not to be trusted because they just might sell you out. Of course, girls do form amazing—and amazingly resilient—friendships. And they also betray each other. Young women embrace that contradiction, learn to trust and not to trust, to reveal weakness and then be ostracized for it, to share their secrets and find that suddenly everyone knows. Young women want *Sex and the City*, but they get it coupled with *Mean Girls*.

There is no doubt that women help to create the male-female dynamics that animate Guyland. There is no doubt that women spend an enormous amount of time policing the behaviors of their friends and classmates. It may even be true that the closer the friendship, the more closely women scrutinize each other's behavior. And, sure, part of this scrutiny has to do with the dynamics of girls' lives themselves. But the question remains: Who benefits when girls are unsupportive and untrustworthy of each other, creating hierarchies to promote themselves at the expense of the others? Who benefits from this lack of sisterhood?

In sorority rituals like the "Circle the Fat" or "Bikini Weigh," young women are learning a valuable life lesson, and it's not about where their cellulite is. They are also learning that men are the judges of attractiveness and that their so-called "sisters" are willing to betray them for the approval and "fun" of their fraternity pals. They are learning, as Rosalind Wiseman put it in *Queen Bees & Wannabes*, that "girls' social hierarchy increasingly traps girls in a cycle of craving boys' validation, pleasing boys to obtain that validation, and betraying the friends who truly support them."

Girls have to play by the guys' rules. First, they have to be pretty, cute, and thin. Margaret Soos, whose description of the "Circle the Fat" ritual I discussed earlier, describes rush events in her sorority during which the heavier or less perfect sisters were forced to hang out in the house's kitchen, lest they be seen by pert and pretty potential pledges. In the spring of 2007, one sorority at DePauw University in Indiana purged all members who didn't fit the image that the national sorority now wanted to present. The "rejects" included girls who were overweight and minority students. Such concern was prompted by some suspicions that the prestige of the sorority on campus, especially in the eyes of the prestigious fraternities, had been slipping. A membership review by Delta Zeta's national administration invited a dozen members to remain living in the house—and twice that many were invited to leave. During a rush party, the national headquarters invited some "slender" members from Indiana University in nearby Bloomington to participate in place of the rejected women. Such a shameful display by a national sorority frantic about its image suggests something crucial: The core claims of eternal bonds of sisterhood are sometimes utterly hollow.

Second, girls definitely have to drink. The Commission on Substance Abuse at Colleges and Universities found that 76 percent of those women who did not binge drink in high school became binge drinkers if they joined a sorority—compared with less than 25 percent of those women who did not join one. Fraternity or sorority membership remains the best single predictor of binge drinking on campus.

And, finally, girls had better supply fresh meat. It's expected that sorority sisters will check out the first-year women, approach those who are hot or cool—that is, sexy or otherwise socially interesting—and invite them to the fraternity parties, reassuring these possibly wary young women that the guys are cool and friendly and will treat them with respect. The guys, as we've seen, often have other plans.

Many sororities and fraternities link up and share parties and social activities. The sororities become "Little Sisters" to the "Big Brother" fraternity guys. The Little Sisters will see themselves as "insiders" in the fraternity nexus, and, as such, entitled to the protection of the fraternity brothers from the potential sexual predation that might be accorded to

women who are "outsiders." It's the outsiders, sociologist Mindy Stom- bler found in her study of Little Sister programs, who are pressured to have sex—often by the Little Sisters themselves!

But sometimes it does cross a line. Sometimes sisters even turn sis- ters out. In 1997, Robbins reports, a sorority girl announced that her pledge class had to sleep with an entire fraternity at another college. "You have to sleep with the brothers here in order for you to cross over," the pledges were told. "That's your duty." At first, one girl thought it was a joke. But when she was told again that all of the pledges had to have sex with the fraternity brothers—as well as that fraternity's pledges— she refused and depledged.

Girls learn, through experiences like these, where their sisters' alle- giances really lie—with the guys. At one university, a sorority convinced a sister who was raped at a fraternity party not to report the rape because if she did, the fraternity brothers would "hate" them and wouldn't invite them to parties anymore. The pressure to be in good standing with the guys turned out to be far greater than the pressure to protect and defend their "sister." Guyland depends on female collaborators—if at least some women think that what they do is okay, then the women who don't can be dismissed as being uptight or bitchy.

These are extreme examples. But if this is happening in sororities, where young women join expressly because of the claims of sisterhood and vows of eternal friendship, you can imagine that it's happening throughout the other arenas where young women come of age in Guy- land. And it is. Consider how some wannabe girls will mercilessly tease a fat girl, or a flat-chested girl, or any girl who doesn't look perfectly perky—and then immediately look to see if any boys saw her do it, just to make sure it registered. (This is the same dynamic as a male bully who waits for an audience of potential bystanders before launching his attack.) Or how guys make friends with girls—because they want to have sex with that girl's friend.

In Guyland, too often sisterhood can be powerless. Yet female soli- darity is both a problem and a solution. There have always been women who collude with men in their own denigration, and there have always been women who defy sexism by bonding with other women. And there

have always been women who use their friendships with other women as a sort of ballast against the tide of domination by guys' rules. Some girls choose their female friends over the guys—and thus over Guy- land, even if it means being called "bitch" or "lesbo" or "freak" by the guys (and their female collaborators). Perhaps they just don't care; their self-esteem is strong enough to withstand that kind of peer pressure. Perhaps they have some core of self-respect that not only prevents them from becoming collaborators, but actually inspires them to join the Resistance.

Bitch or Babe?

Most of the time, a girl in Guyland seems to have a choice. She can either be a "bitch" or a "babe." A "bitch" does not model herself on a guy's expectations of her, but rather on her own expectations of herself. For her, the rewards of independence and self-respect far outweigh anything acceptance in Guyland has to offer. By identifying these independent-minded girls as bitches, guys can preemptively dismiss the rejection of Guyland that these girls represent. Since they refuse to play along, they're often shunned, excluded, or ridiculed. And their refusal may be sexualized, so they're likely to be gay-baited as well. After all, if you're not down with Guyland, then you must be a lesbian, right?

A "babe," on the other hand, conforms to a guy's visions of what a girl should be. The criteria goes something like this: She should be physi- cally fit but not muscular, sexy but not slutty, pretty but naturally, not dumb but not too smart, a drinker and party girl but not a drunk (and definitely not sloppy), adoring but not needy. An unachievable fantasy.

Many girls carve out a place for themselves in Guyland by befriend- ing the guys, either as "just friends" (or as "friends with benefits"). Indeed, cross-gender friendships are among the most important new features of adolescent and post-adolescent life. "My parents are, like, so *When Harry Met Sally*," says Kim, a junior at Brown.

Like, they completely buy into that thing that Harry says, you know, that women and men can't be friends because sex always

gets in the way. Like they just don't believe that I have guy friends. Like my dad says, "He's a boy and he's your friend, so he's your boyfriend" and I have to say [she speaks very slowly and deliberately here] "No, Dad, he's a boy and he's my friend, but he is definitely not my boyfriend. He's my 'guy friend.'" I mean, well, okay, we hooked up once, but then we just became good friends and it's totally cool. We're friends.

Intimate friendships that do not include sex turn out to be advantageous. By becoming sisterly, a girl gains acceptance, gets invited to the right parties, and her status as a friend can offer her a certain amount of protection from sexual predation. Sexual friendships offer some of the same advantages, though (as we've seen) things can get complicated if both parties aren't in some kind of agreement about the limits involved.

Navigating cross-sex friendships in Guyland requires confronting the centrality of homosociality—"Bros Before Hos." In a sense, the friendship needs to be "de-gendered"—indeed, "masculinized" as it will center, at least publicly, on her participation in things he likes to do. They'll watch sports together, but probably not attend the campus production of *The Vagina Monologues*. She needn't mimic his behavior—she doesn't have to get blind drunk, hook up randomly, or watch WWE—but she needs to be comfortable with it. In a sense, she is "guyified." Around her, guys can relax. She's safe and somewhat sanitized—and that insures her safety as well.

Another way for a girl to avoid being either a babe or a bitch is to become a "bro." These girls prove their mettle in Guyland through shirking such "feminine" traits as intimacy, loyalty, and openness and appropriating guys' behavior: sports, drinking, and sexual promiscuity. This approach can often backfire. Says Kathy, a 26-year-old Cornell graduate:

I thought the only way I was going to fit in with the guys on campus was to sort of be one of them. You know, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em? Well, I joined 'em. I drank myself stupid, had plenty

of hookups, and kept score just like the guys. It was ridiculous. They not only didn't like me—they had complete contempt for me. Acting as stupid and gross and fucked up as they were? As they *knew* they were? That did not increase my status! I didn't become one of the guys—I became one of the dogs, one of the pigs. Great.

"You seem a bit bitter about it now," I remarked.

Well, yes and no. The guys I knew made it pretty clear that they'd party with me because I was so much fun to hang out with, you know, just like them. I swear to God I even practiced how to spit. But they really didn't respect me acting like them. And it gradually dawned on me that they didn't respect themselves either—their contempt for me was sort of self-hatred. So that doesn't leave me feeling bitter, you know? That leaves me feeling pity for these guys. I mean, I'm way past that—steady boyfriend, good job, only moderate drinking. And my guy "friends"—I need to put that word in quotes—are like still wanting to be there, even if they are supposedly all grown up.

Kathy ultimately understood that female empowerment is really not about drinking a guy under the table, cussing like a sailor, or being a sexual predator. Certainly the goals of the feminist movement were not to enable women to be the best "bros" in town.

Playing by guys' rules puts women in a difficult spot. Since the traditional traits of femininity—kindness, patience, and nurturance—are antithetical to the definition of "success" in the public sphere—competency, assertiveness, ambition—women are constantly navigating between the two poles. When they are seen as competent and assertive, they're not seen as feminine; when they are seen as feminine, kind, and caring, they are not seen as competent.

There's an old expression in business circles that holds "men are unsexed by failure, but women are unsexed by success." For men, success confirms masculinity; for women, success *disconfirms* femininity—

it's seen as more of a tradeoff. To be taken seriously as a competent individual means minimizing, or even avoiding altogether, the trappings of femininity.

Several years ago, my students and I did a research project on the first women cadets at the nation's military academies. We interviewed about half of all the cadets in the first classes that had entered West Point in the mid-1970s, and then talked to about twenty from classes in the mid-'80s and mid-'90s. We also interviewed women from the very first classes at Virginia Military Institute and The Citadel. The women in those first classes at West Point described a similar dilemma. Said one:

It was awful. I felt I had a choice between being a bitch or a babe. If I was serious, stern, and a good commander, no one would ever see me as a woman. But if I let down my guard for even a second, and did something as natural as smile, I'd be branded a babe. Every guy would come on to me, but no one would take me seriously as a soldier. What I could never be was just me—a good soldier and a woman.

Other women in those first West Point classes described how they avoided any public contact—let alone commiseration or solidarity—with the other female cadets. One told me:

I learned pretty quickly to walk alone on parade grounds and to my classes from barracks. Every time I would walk with another woman, all the guys would like move over to let us pass, in a very grandiose gesture, you know, or they'd say something like "should I be afraid?" or "you gals plotting the revolution?" or something like that. I mean these were guys who were supposed to be the fiercest fighting machine on God's green earth and they were like cowering when two of us walked by.

She pauses, then laughs slightly in retrospect. "And it's not like we were even talking about them!"

Achieving "Effortless Perfection"

The good news on campus today is that more and more young women are beginning to recognize that the "bitch vs. babe" dichotomy is a false choice. Like their mothers, who "wanted it all"—a balanced career and family life—younger women want it all too. They want to be successful students, ambitiously pursuing their careers, and sexy women who will attract the right kind of guy. They want to be smart and pretty, feminine and successful. Yet this leaves many of them feeling like they have to live up to two impossible standards—they're expected to act "like a lady" while also acting "like a man." They have to be thin, pretty, and well dressed, even after they stay up all night studying for a final or writing a term paper. They also have to be tough and competitive, but they can't appear too eager in their assertiveness or it might be mistaken for aggression.

In a now-famous study of the life of women on its campus—from students to faculty to administrators to service staff—researchers at Duke heard a phrase that seemed to capture the core of this new femininity on campus: "effortless perfection." You can do it all, but you mustn't try too hard. In fact, you can't appear to be making any effort at all. In the study, Duke women said they felt they have to be "smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular, and that all this would happen without visible effort."

This goal is more wearing than it might seem. Said Jessica, a 21-year-old senior at Stanford:

I mean, just look at me today: I'm in jeans and flip flops and a sweatshirt, and this look is so casual, but do you know how long it takes to get ready in the morning and look like this? It's a studied look, and we work hard to appear that we don't care how we look. We work hard sometimes to conceal how hard we study. We work hard to eat, work out, stay fit, and never break a sweat. It's fucking exhausting!

Effortless perfection is an oxymoron. Impossible to achieve, it's a standard that demands that women work constantly, monitor their

behavior at all times, and remain vigilant about either appearing lazy, stupid, or ugly—or even appearing that they spend any time at all working on it. Jessica's right: It is exhausting to make it look so easy.

In fact, "effortless perfection" may be the closest thing there is today to a "Girl Code." Girls are caught between the twin demands of entitlement and inequality: They believe that they can do anything they want, be anything they want to be, and yet when they go for it, they're judged by standards not of their own making. Young women face what we might call the Goldilocks dilemma—whatever they do, it's either too hot or too cold, too big or too small. And it has to be "just right"—although no one has told them what "just right" actually is. And they have to achieve it with no visible effort expended.

Hidden beneath the mandate of effortlessness is another, older mandate: lack of agency. It's okay to have it all, but it's not okay to want it all. It's not okay to work too hard to get it. It has to happen passively, somewhere beyond consciousness. The appearance of effortlessness is the way young women reconcile such conflicting demands. "I just happen to be beautiful and brilliant, I can't help it. Don't hold it against me." Effortless also counters the feminine taboo against competition. It's okay to win, but not okay to try to win.

What Do Women Want?: The Messages Guys Get

Tom came up to me as I was gathering up my notes at the end of a lecture and hour-long Q&A at his college. He stood to the side, waiting politely until the other students had gone and then he told me his dilemma, sheepishly, almost apologetically, and yet with more than a trace of bitterness and pain.

I don't understand the girls—er, I mean, women—here. I mean, they say they want men to be more emotionally responsive and sensitive, that they want us to be good listeners and really caring. So I've become all that. I'm a really good friend, a good listener, sensitive, and all the rest. And they all want to go out with these macho assholes! I don't get it! What do women want?

Tom felt certain his question was unusual; indeed, he went on to tell me that he was sure it was different at other schools, and that his was unique problem. In fact, it's the question I am asked most often by guys. Molly, a senior at a large New England public university, asks the question I'm most asked by young women.

Jeff—that's my boyfriend—I mean, he is like really a great guy. He's my friend, you know, he really listens to me, is all sensitive and kind, and talks about his feelings. All that stuff. But when he's with his guy friends, something comes over him. He laughs at all sorts of sexist jokes, makes homophobic comments, and is just generally gross and offensive. What is up with guys when they are in groups?

What's up with guys is the Guy Code, the vows of silent complicity that men seem to take for fear that if they don't go along, they will be targeted themselves. Many guys *are* transformed when they are in groups of other guys. They do often become someone else, someone sometimes barely recognizable even to themselves. It's only when they're away from the group—alone with their girlfriends, or even with their female friends—that they can let their guard down. Close relationships with women, whether sexual or not, can offer guys a kind of respite from the relentless demands of Guyland.

Just because guys rule doesn't also mean that they feel powerful and in control. The hordes of smart, assertive, and confident young women may feel a bit overwhelming to many guys. "They don't know how to handle the independent girls, the smart ones, the ones who don't want to be tied down by guys because they want their careers first," one mother of a 22-year-old tells me. "It's like they get together with other guys and just circle the wagons."

This mother, herself a feminist veteran of all those struggles, raised her son to be empathic and understanding, sensitive and kind. "He wants a girlfriend," she tells me, "but now he ends up being the confident, not the boyfriend. And he doesn't know how to deal with these young women who are still drawn by the strong silent type."