
Preface

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In response to an absence of girls and women in psychological research, researchers began in the early 1980s, with Carol Gilligan and her students from the School of Education at Harvard University leading the way, to investigate the development of girls and women. This research highlighted girls' and young women's strengths and strategies of resistance to conventions of femininity and the ways in which cultural constructions of gender shape girls' and women's development (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jack, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Taylor et al., 1995). The focus on the development and strengths of girls and women was radical in a field that had long been dominated by the study of boys and men and by a perspective that pathologized girls' and women's development. In the midst of this dramatic shift, psychological researchers also began to note other critical absences in the research on human development. Primary among these was a lack of developmental research on girls and women who were part of ethnic minority and/or poor and working-class communities. Although social science research was being conducted with Black and Latino girls and women from poor and working-class communities, the vast majority of these studies were problem oriented, focusing on issues such as teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and drug use.

By the mid-1990s, however, the situation began to change. A small but significant series of studies began to emerge that focused on the development and strengths of girls and women from ethnic minority and/or poor and working-class communities. In response to this work, Bonnie Leadbeater and I decided to edit a book together that showcased the best of these studies. We were interested in including work in this volume that revealed the ways in which *urban* girls and young women, in particular,

challenged widespread stereotypes of them, created their own identities, and maintained healthy relationships in the midst of discrimination, poverty, and violence. We focused on urban girls and young women because urban contexts provide the setting for much racial and ethnic diversity and because urban girls and young women were particularly likely to be ignored or misrepresented by the media and by the research community. This was the decade when conservative pundits created the notion of the “welfare queen,” and when urban youth, a phrase often confounded by the media and the scholarly community with Black youth, were routinely characterized as neglecting their education in favor of high-risk behavior. Our edited book *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities* constituted a sustained effort to bring together diverse scholars who were writing about and with urban girls and young women in ways that recognized their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths. It examined the development not only of Black urban girls but also of Latino and White urban girls. *Urban Girls* became a staple on the reading lists of many social science courses and was read widely in professional circles. It has informed, along with other books in this genre, programs and policies that seek to help foster girls’ sense of agency and nurture their resilience.

Then, an odd thing happened. Just as we were gaining a more complex understanding of girls’ and women’s development and improving their lives in concrete ways, there occurred—in academia but swiftly thereafter in the culture at large—a dramatic shift back to a focus on the development of boys and young men. Books on this topic muscled their way into bookstore windows and talk shows (e.g., Gurian, 1998; Kindlon & Thomson, 1999; Pollack, 1998; Way & Chu, 2004). Popular magazines ran title stories on the damage wreaked on boys by current pedagogical and psychological experts. Social scientists and journalists began to refer to a “boy crisis” that had presumably been undiagnosed and left unchecked, largely because academics and psychologists had been overly concerned with helping girls. It was boys, many claimed, who were neglected by researchers and by policy makers. If the 1990s was considered “the decade of the girl” (see Ward, this volume), then the first decade of the twenty-first century became the decade back to the boy. Evidence of this shift included a daylong conference focused on the healthy development of boys and men in 2004 sponsored by the Ms Foundation for Girls and Women.

The reasons for this shift are complex and include, most likely, the fact that girls and young women started to do better than boys and men by

various educational indicators, including college attendance (see López, 2003). The current interest in boys and men is altogether salutary, and the expansion of voice-centered research to include both genders has brought about important new insights. What has been lost, however, in the renewed interest in boys and men is an understanding of the ways in which girls and young women, particularly in urban contexts, continue to resist stereotypes, nurture their own identities and relationships, create safe spaces for themselves, and have the potential to bring or are in the midst of bringing about real social, educational, and political change within and outside of their communities.

When Jennifer Hammer, our editor at NYU Press, approached Bonnie and me to update and edit a second volume of *Urban Girls*, we welcomed the opportunity to supplement the existing volume with more current research. We were interested in bringing together work, even if it was relatively rare compared with that of the mid-1990s, that explored the ways in which urban girls are creating and sustaining positive changes in their lives. After contacting the contributors for *Urban Girls Revisited*, we discovered that despite the heavy emphasis on boys and young men in the popular press, there continues to be a group of researchers who focus on the vulnerabilities and strengths of urban girls and young women. However, the ground has shifted. The construct of “urban” is now more inclusive of girls from different communities in urban contexts (based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation). The language of strength, resilience, and resistance has also changed toward greater emphasis on the context of development and on relationships rather than solely on the individual. And there is a greater focus on the implications for practice and policy.

The chapters in this book reveal the ways in which the language, context, and discussion about urban girls have changed and opened up many new avenues of research and possibilities for intervention. Although the chapters in this book rely on diverse methodologies and samples, the consistent message is that urban girls and young women continue to challenge harmful stereotypes, create their own positive identities, and nurture life-sustaining relationships. However, they are not doing it alone. Family members, friends, partners, teachers, and mentors are critical interlocutors and participants in this process of development and change, and these relationships are sources of challenge, contradiction, and strength. This volume offers us a glimpse into the ways in which girls and young women from diverse urban communities are negotiating their relationships within

and across various types of institutions (families, schools) and contexts of development and the ways these institutions and contexts both foster and challenge girls' abilities to thrive.

Urban Girls Revisited underscores the necessity of continuing to include urban girls in our conversations about human development and to focus on vulnerabilities *and* strengths of individual girls *and* their communities, and not simply on shortcomings or on individual girls, respectively. It also implicitly and explicitly calls for an expanded view of "urban" and a more contextualized and relational understanding of girls' development so that researchers do not rank according to importance—girls or boys, urban or suburban, the individual or the context—but understand how all these strands are worthy of study in their own right and also shaped by all other strands. Bonnie and I hope that this volume helps to bring "urban girls" back into focus so that our understanding of development in context and of strength and resilience is enhanced and our ability to create better futures for all girls and women is greatly improved.

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