

What's happening to our girls?

Maggie Hamilton

What's happening to our girls? (2008) is one of the first texts to critically examine how girls are faring in western society in the last decade. Since this publication, high-profile authors such as Melinda Tankard Reist, Leonard Sax and Michael Carr-Gregg have tackled the subject of girls' vulnerability in its many forms. Hamilton uses her interviews with girls, teachers, school counsellors, psychologists, police officers and medical professionals as a base for her writing. The state of girls is examined from birth to the late teenage years, with chapters devoted to each stage.

Hamilton's book is bleak and confronting. The reader learns intimate details of specific girl's lives; those who cut themselves, those who participate in pornography, those who shoplift or spend much of their lives at shopping malls, those who suicide and even those girls who have murdered before they were adults. It is grim subject matter and the reader is left feeling sickened and frightened for girls who face these barrages.

What's happening to our girls? presents a pessimistic and shocking view of girls. 'In a few short years our girls have become vulnerable – not just teen girls, but young girls and baby girls' (p. 252). For example, the chapter on 'Violent girls' details several stories of girls who have been physically brutal. Anyone who works with girls on a daily basis knows that these are extreme cases; most girls are not violent, the proportion of girls who commit violent offences is extremely low, yet an entire chapter is devoted to 'these girls'. Hamilton does inform readers of the many issues that girls face, but she fails to acknowledge the girls in society who are thriving, who do not drink to excess and have multiple sex partners, the girls who have strong self-esteem and who behave lovingly and selflessly toward others.

It is informative to read about how advertising companies specifically target girls and play on their vulnerabilities. The younger that girls can be captured as consumers, the greater the gains for these companies. 'Advertisers love tweens because they're worth billions. As these girls are unsure of themselves, they are more susceptible to suggestion than most' (p. 31).

Hamilton makes an interesting point, that as more girls are worried about how they look and what others think of them, 'this leaves little room for an internal life – to have the freedom to lose themselves in their own thoughts, dreams and passions' (p. 58). The chapters on girls in cyberspace are particularly informative (although much has been written on this topic since the book was published).

The greatest strength of *What's happening to our girls?* are the direct quotes from Hamilton's interviewees. This subjective, qualitative approach reveals much about the situations that girls face daily. A strong theme in the book is the role of parents. Hamilton discusses how parents must be involved and engaged with their daughters but the advice is generic rather than specifically helpful. The final chapter 'Where to now?' suggests that 'it is up to parents to minimise the time girls spend in front of TV,

on computers and shopping' (p. 252). There is also a need for schools to provide training 'to counteract the very real power of advertising' (p. 252).

Ironically, on the final page, Hamilton says this is 'no time to feel depressed or helpless'. Unfortunately that is exactly what readers may be feeling and despite being informative and helpful in places, *What's happening to our girls?* needs to be read in balance with the views of real girls around us, who are flourishing and thriving.

Hamilton, M. (2008). *What's happening to our girls?* Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin Books.

Maggie Hamilton. WHY ARE GIRLS as young as five years old concerned about their looks and addicted to shopping? WHY ARE YOUNG TEENAGE GIRLS having sex and binge-drinking, responding to chat-room predators, and bullying their peers via email and text messages? WHY ARE DEPRESSION, cutting and eating disorders on the rise, and why, with so much choice when it comes to careers, do so many just want to marry young and have babies? Over two years Maggie Hamilton interviewed girls, teachers, school counsellors, psychologists, and law enforcement and medical personnel to get an insider's view on