Feminism gave women a glimpse of a happy world. But for young girls that promise is being dashed



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Non-stop social media, sexual objectification and pressure to perform at school are all contributing to young women’s declining mental health

*[[](https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2017/aug/30/feminism-gave-women-a-glimpse-of-a-happy-world-but-for-young-girls-that-promise-is-being-dashed#img-1)](https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2017/aug/30/feminism-gave-women-a-glimpse-of-a-happy-world-but-for-young-girls-that-promise-is-being-dashed" \l "img-1)*

*‘Teenage girls compare and contrast like no one else.’ Photograph: tommaso79/Getty Images/iStockphoto*

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Something is making many of our kids miserable. And it is not getting better. We know it and we don’t. There are constant headlines about the epidemic of mental health problems. [The police are now the triage point](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/28/police-phone-calls-mental-health-nhs) and cannot cope. Report after report highlights massive depression and anxiety among our youth. Every parent says: “I just want my child to be happy.” Really? Do we?

I ask not out of self-flagellation but because we tend to act as if the things that are making children feel so bad are completely out of our control. Teenage angst is hardly new. It is simply exacerbated by the conditions in which we live: relentless social media, exam stress, economic disenfranchisement and a sense that the world is on its last legs. None of this is a recipe for good mental health. Indeed, distress is all around us. Just ask teachers.

The long sleeves covering the cuts, the feet the wrong way round in the toilet cubicle, the teeth brushing; these things afflict so many girls. Boys do it differently, perhaps. Their desolation is terrible and lonely but, on the whole, girls are getting more miserable while boys are not. The annual [Children’s Society Report](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/30/study-shows-millions-children-uk-worried-crime) confirms this. It is an intelligent, multifaceted report that understands how disadvantage itself is complex.

There are all sorts of conclusions to be drawn from it, but I am interested in this gender gap in misery that has been widening and has not changed since last year. Not because I don’t care about boys, but because I see this manifest misery of some young girls as a direct result of the backlash against even rudimentary feminism.

The reduction of young women to an increasingly narrow range of conformist standards around “beauty” is part of this backlash. It makes girls deeply unhappy and obsessively self-policing.

Teenage girls compare and contrast like no one else. They see every imperfection and measure it against someone who is paid to look perfect. They feel lacking, worthless and angry. So they punish themselves. The all-purpose rubric of self-esteem comes into play, but to have self-esteem in a culture that only values certain “looks” requires rebellion.

While last year’s report highlighted how girls were unhappy about their appearance, this year’s shows that they are also frightened. Anxiety over personal safety is a big issue. Getting followed by “a stranger” is something girls fear. They talk of being scared by men blowing kisses at them in the street and being terrified at 13. I have three daughters and can confirm that sexual harassment kicks in at around 11. This cannot be a good recipe for mental health. It is a wonder, actually, that more of them are not broken.

How have the options become so narrow for so many girls in so many ways? Some of this is economic, but a lot of this is cultural. There exists an ongoing assumption that women’s rights have been “won” and no longer have to be fought for. From the late-90s, there has been a constant effort to push women back into their box. The most successful part of this backlash has been to reduce women to only their appearance, to pleasure-giving bodies, not pleasure-receiving bodies. This was enabled by the rise of online culture, where everything is visible.

The worth of a young girl can be measured in likes. The fish-faced popularity contest of the selfie world: lips, tits, abs and a plucked vulva. What more is there to life? The ideal woman certainly exists, and she is everywhere. A glimpse of stocking is no longer shocking. An unshaven leg is the end of civilisation as we know it. When Zadie Smith made her innocuous [remarks](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2017/aug/21/hair-makeup-tax-zadie-smith) about makeup being a waste of time, she was not talking about not enjoying oneself. Surely she was talking about that not being the meaning of life. For girls not to be so anxious that they need to know the difference between what they do for themselves and what they do for others. Many women still do not know the difference. Pleasure is a big part of self-esteem. And sure, that can come from looking good, but also from work or friendship; the sources are multiple.

I know this only because I lived at a time where I understood my worth was not only to be derived from my appearance. We had a glimpse of a world where women could be more than that because of feminism. My sanity probably depended on it.

So I feel for girls now who don’t feel good enough. Their distress is not simply individual. They can never be good enough in a culture that works full time to tell them otherwise. All the mental health helplines in the world cannot combat this.

There has been a concerted effort to turn back the clock, to push back on emancipation for women. The statistics on mental health for girls correlate with this for the last 15 years or so, at least. We could have read them as a sign of the coming conservatism a while ago, if girls had been heard and not only seen.