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**GROWING UP GOOD? MEDICAL, SOCIAL HYGIENE AND  
YOUTH WORK PERSPECTIVES ON YOUNG WOMEN,  
1918-1939**

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.



## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the discourses and organisations through which girls' development towards adult womanhood was framed and managed during the inter-war period. It examines how contemporary perceptions of social change following the First World War resulted in widespread scrutiny of girls' circumstances and behaviour, particularly their sexual conduct. It argues that representations and responses to girls were increasingly underpinned by the conceptualisation of adolescence as a critical period of change and instability. This understanding of adolescence pervaded both medical and lay discourses. It was interpreted through the prisms of gender and class, and served to legitimise increasing levels of intervention into girls' lives, mainly on the basis of their sexual behaviour or perceived exposure to sexual risk.

Adolescence was also represented as the period in which individuals developed moral agency. This study examines the increased importance ascribed to the moral training of the adolescent, in the context of widespread agreement of the need to express traditional moral values in ways that took account of social change. This was seen as particularly important for girls, not only because of their changing circumstances, but because of women's new status as enfranchised citizens.

The thesis explores the work of the Girl Guides Association and the Young Women's Christian Association in some detail. These organisations drew upon the discourses of social change, adolescence and citizenship to claim an enhanced role in shaping the development of young women. While histories of girls' youth organisations have tended to portray them as conservative movements intent on socialising girls into their future role as wives and mothers, this study highlights these organisations' commitment to preparing girls to understand and exercise their future responsibilities as citizens, and argues that such organisations were more complex in their purposes, and more varied in their approaches, than has previously been recognised.

## **Abbreviations**

ALRA	Abortion Law Reform Association
AMSH	Association for Moral and Social Hygiene
BMA	British Medical Association
BMJ	British Medical Journal
BOC	Board of Control
BSHC	British Social Hygiene Council
CAWG	Christian Alliance of Women and Girls
COPEC	Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship
DNB	Dictionary of National Biography
EES	Eugenics Education Society
GGA	Girl Guides Association
GFS	Girls' Friendly Society
JOC	Juvenile Organisation Committee
LCC	London County Council
LEA	Local Education Authority
MWF	Medical Women's Federation
MDA	Mental Deficiency Act(s)
MOH	Ministry of Health
NBRC	National Birth-Rate Commission
NCCVD	National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases
NCUMC	National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child
NCGC	National Council of Girls' Clubs
NCPM	National Council of Public Morals
NOGC	National Organisation of Girls' Clubs
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers
NVA	National Vigilance Association
SPVD	Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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## Introduction

In 1922, the organising secretary of the Young Women's Christian Association highlighted the importance of its work in 'fashioning the woman that is to be'.<sup>1</sup> This thesis explores the discourses and organisations through which girls' development towards adult womanhood was framed and managed during the inter-war period in England. The term 'girl' is used throughout this study to refer to young women aged between thirteen and twenty-five, with a particular focus on those aged thirteen to nineteen, in accordance with contemporary usage.<sup>2</sup> Histories of women take only limited account of girls, while histories of youth have most often focused on boys. Yet, scholars examining specific aspects of women's lives have often commented on the extent to which the qualities of womanhood are represented as both natural, and as needing to be taught to girls, so that girls can not be left to become women without guidance and active intervention.<sup>3</sup> The way in which girls are shaped towards their future role in society contributes to our understanding of the construction of femininity, and of the importance of age and class, as well as gender, in shaping power relations.

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<sup>1</sup> *YWCA Bulletin*, 2, 7 (1922), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> While the term is also used for children under thirteen, contemporary discussion of 'girlhood' focused attention on adolescent girls. Being described as a girl carried with it a range of implications of being immature, in need of care, protection and guidance – in short, not being a woman. It was used with considerable flexibility according to class and circumstances to denote women who, whatever their age, were perceived as needing some form of care. Thus, factory welfare workers might describe working-class women in their thirties as 'girls', while women defined as mentally defective could be called 'girls' in their old age. While this study will primarily use 'girls', 'young women' will also be used with the same meaning.

<sup>3</sup> See Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton, 1984), p. 101; Jane Mackay and Pat Thane, 'The Englishwoman', in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds.), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London, 1986), p. 200.

A number of general studies explore the position of women in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> These studies, however, leave the experience of girls largely unexamined. Despite Lewis's identification, following Juliet Mitchell, of 'socialisation' as one of the four key structures shaping women's experience, she gives only limited consideration to the experience of girls and their expectations of womanhood.<sup>5</sup> The collections edited by Oldfield and Purvis consider young women only in the specific contexts of education and popular literature (in effect magazines).<sup>6</sup> Roberts includes a chapter on youth, in which girls are described as experiencing a period of limited independence between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. However, her discussion, which derives from interviews with 160 women and men in Lancashire towns, emphasises the 'cultural ties and unities which united working-class people'<sup>7</sup> and thus tends to downplay the possibilities of difference according to gender and generation.

Roberts' approach, in which she juxtaposes recollections spanning fifty years without always indicating from which decade they emanate, also highlights the problem of chronology common to many of these studies. The inclusion of the inter-war years within a longer timespan makes it difficult to identify changes and developments specific to this period. In particular, these studies tend to ignore the

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994); Sybil Oldfield (ed.), *This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain 1914-1945* (London, 1994); June Purvis, *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945: An Introduction* (London, 1995); Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke, 1995); Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (London, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup> See Elisabeth Edwards, 'The Culture of Femininity in Women's Teacher Training Colleges 1914-1945', in Oldfield (ed.), *This Working-Day World*, pp.54-67; Penny Tinkler, 'Women and Popular Literature', in Purvis (ed.), *Women's History*, pp. 131-56 and June McDermid, 'Women and Education, in *ibid*, pp. 107-28.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, *Woman's Place*, p. 4.



extent to which the perception of the First World War as representing a fundamental break with the past was central to contemporary understandings of the inter-war years.<sup>8</sup> Using the language of ‘reconstruction’, organisations and individuals sought to articulate their perceptions of the impact of war and the need to find a means of expressing moral values in a way which took account of substantial social change. A series of semi-official enquiries into specific aspects of sexual morality and social policy, particularly those organised by the National Council for Public Morality (NCPM) and its offshoot the National Birth-Rate Commission (NBRC), provided a framework for these discussions.<sup>9</sup> Between 1913 and 1925, these bodies explored the declining birth rate and its consequences,<sup>10</sup> population and parenthood,<sup>11</sup> the effect of the cinema,<sup>12</sup> venereal diseases,<sup>13</sup> sex education and the adolescent,<sup>14</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘inter-war years’ indicates the way in which these years were retrospectively attributed some kind of unity by being framed within two major wars (and, perhaps, reveals assumptions about their relative lack of interest compared to these calamitous events). However, for the purposes of this study, the outbreak of the Second World War, which itself was to be seen as responsible for major social changes, offers an appropriate finishing point.

<sup>9</sup> The NCPM was set up in 1911, with the self-proclaimed aim of regenerating the nation’s morals. The National Birth-Rate Commission was in existence until 1925.

<sup>10</sup> National Birth-Rate Commission, *The Declining Birth-Rate: its Causes and Effects, being the Report of and the Chief Evidence Taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission, Instituted, with Official Recognition, by the National Council of Public Morals – for the Promotion of Race Regeneration – Spiritual, Moral and Physical* (London, 1916).

<sup>11</sup> National Birth-Rate Commission, *Problems of Population and Parenthood [Being the Second Report of and the Chief Evidence Taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission 1918-1920]* (London, 1920).

<sup>12</sup> National Council of Public Morals, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities, Being the Report of and Chief Evidence Taken by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry Instituted by the National Council of Public Morals* (London, 1917).

<sup>13</sup> National Birth-Rate Commission, *Prevention of Venereal Disease [Being the Report of and the Evidence Taken by the Special Committee on Venereal Disease]* (London, 1921).

<sup>14</sup> National Birth-Rate Commission, *Youth and the Race: The Development and Education of Young Citizens for Worthy Parenthood [Being the Fourth Report of and the Chief Evidence Taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission, 1920-1923]* (London, 1923).

the ethics of birth control.<sup>15</sup> Additional investigations focused attention specifically on 'sexual promiscuity'<sup>16</sup> and the 'relations of the sexes'.<sup>17</sup>

The war was seen to have a significant impact on the expectations of both women and young people, since both groups were believed to have experienced greater social and economic freedom as a result of the conditions of war. Although historians have argued both that the war accelerated developments already under way (a belief shared by some contemporary commentators), and questioned the extent to which the war did result in change for women,<sup>18</sup> the dislocation of war offered a powerful reference point for locating social change. This perception continued into the 1930s,<sup>19</sup> compounded, in the case of young people, by cultural forms (such as cinema, magazines and fashions) which targeted young people as consumers and encouraged the construction of a distinct 'youth' identity.<sup>20</sup>

The intersection between discourses concerning women and youth resulted in a focus on young women, whose changing experiences and aspirations were encapsulated in the phrase 'the modern girl'. Those talking about, and working

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<sup>15</sup> National Birth-Rate Commission, *The Ethics of Birth Control Being the Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the National Council of Public Morals in Connection with the Investigations of the National Birth-Rate Commission* (London, 1925).

<sup>16</sup> The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene's Social Morality Inquiry (1918-20) considered ways of dealing with 'sexual promiscuity'. The successor to Josephine Butler's Ladies' National Association, the AMSH aimed to 'raise the standard of character and conduct in sexual relations, to secure the recognition of an equal standard of morality for men and women, and to eradicate prostitution and kindred evils'. AMSH Constitution, *Annual Report* (London, 1921), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship, *The Relation of the Sexes, Being the Report Presented to the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship at Birmingham, April 5-12, 1924* (London, 1924), p. v.

<sup>18</sup> See Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London, 1989); Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the conclusions of a contributor to a 1936 collection of essays on women's position that 'the effect of the war years was to change the entire outlook for women'. Mary Agnes Hamilton, 'Changes in Social Life' in Ray Strachey (ed.), *Our Freedom and its Results by Five Women* (London, 1936), p. 246.

<sup>20</sup> For arguments that a 'teenage' culture emerged before 1939, rather than the more usually identified 1950s, see Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class Culture in Salford and*

with, girls stressed the greater freedom they expected and experienced, and the need for organisations and structures to respond to these expectations. While representations of the 'modern girl' often focused on middle-class young women, the perception of girls as experiencing change crossed class boundaries. This study will explore the way that organisations working with girls of all classes drew upon the image of the modern girl to represent themselves as responding to girls' changing needs and interests. These changes were perceived in both negative and positive terms. The (actual or perceived) sexual behaviour of girls remained a focus of anxiety throughout the inter-war period, although conceptualised in different ways according to girls' circumstances and the extent to which they were held responsible for their actions. However, girls were also represented as having a critical role to play in post-war reconstruction. While eugenic anxieties about demographic trends (expressed as fears that the population was declining both in number and in quality) focused attention on preparing girls for their traditional role as wives and mothers, the two-stage extension of the franchise to women also highlighted the need to prepare girls to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Despite these contemporary perceptions of young women as at the centre of social change, histories of the inter-war years have tended to represent this period as a regressive era which emphasised women's domestic role, typically summed up by the title of one of the few books specifically examining the experiences of women during the inter-war years, *Back to Home and Duty*.<sup>21</sup> Historians have related this

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Manchester, 1900-1939 (Buckingham, 1992); David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> See fn 18 above. See also Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991). Despite her book's title, Kent devotes only two out of six chapters to the inter-war years, Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, 1993).



focus on domesticity to the changing manifestations of feminism during this period, in which egalitarian feminism was eclipsed by 'new feminism' concerned with improving women's position as mothers. Lewis argues that although new feminism had the potential for radical social reform, this was undermined by its proponents' failure to engage with the social and economic realities facing most women, and by their adoption of a reformist approach which resulted in feminist principles becoming submerged under other social policy agendas.<sup>22</sup> Kent has highlighted the way in which new feminism's assumptions about gender difference, which underpinned its focus on the needs of women as mothers, served to reinforce the 'separate spheres' ideology against which pre-war feminists had fought.<sup>23</sup> This discussion of the decline of feminism has been complemented by explorations of the construction and manifestations of the ideology of maternalism, including the perceived urgency of the need to educate girls for domestic duties.<sup>24</sup> More recent studies have examined the way in which women's organisations that embraced the ideology of domesticity also promoted citizenship and women's rights. These works have paid particular attention to the overlap in membership and activities of feminist and non-feminist organisations, arguing that the contribution of non-feminist women's organisations to the history of the women's movement has been

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Lewis, 'Beyond Suffrage: English Feminism in the 1920s', *Maryland Historian*, 6 (1973), pp. 1-17. See also *idem*, 'In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between the Wars', in Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton, 1980). For other accounts which stress the weakness of inter-war feminism see Harold L. Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 1990), pp. 47-65; Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (Basingstoke, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent, 'The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War 1 and the Demise of British Feminism', *Journal of British Studies*, 27 (July 1988), pp. 232-53.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900-1939* (London, 1980); Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989). Diana E. St John, 'Educate or Domesticate?: Early Twentieth Century Pressures on Older Girls in Elementary School', *Women's History Review*, 3, 2 (1994), pp. 191-218.

undervalued.<sup>25</sup> The discussion of youth organisations in chapter five of this study will draw upon and extend this approach.

Historians have also considered the role of early twentieth-century sexologists and sex reformers in promoting marriage and family through a new discourse of sexual fulfilment for women within marriage. Kent argues that following the war, the reassertion of peace in the public sphere was seen to depend on the imposition of 'peace and order on the private sphere of sexual relations'.<sup>26</sup> This was achieved by the development, by sexologists and sex reformers, with significant feminist support, of a discourse which stressed women's sexual fulfilment through marriage. Jeffreys has offered a hostile account of the success of sexologists in undermining women's campaigns to transform male sexual behaviour and in stigmatising women who positioned themselves outside heterosexuality and marriage.<sup>27</sup> Jeffreys, who writes as a 'revolutionary feminist', has been both influential and controversial.<sup>28</sup> She has been criticised from a number of perspectives for minimising the complexities of the relationships between feminism, social purity and sex reform.<sup>29</sup> In the context of this study, her claim that women

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Davin's influential article devotes just two pages to 'between the wars'. Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, 5 (1978), pp. 9-65.

<sup>25</sup> Caitriona Beaumont, 'Women and Citizenship: a Study of Non-feminist Women's Societies and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1950' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1996); Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: the Women's Movement 1918-1928* (London, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Kent, *Making Peace*, pp. 107-08

<sup>27</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Jeffreys' position is supported by Margaret Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life: Feminism and the Politics of Sexuality c1850-1940* (London, 1994). Kent, as already indicated, offers a more nuanced account of the impact of sexology in the context of wider social concerns.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Mort, who argues that her account of the social purity movement downplays its contradictions and ignores its class dimensions. Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London, 1987). Hunt argues that Jeffreys, and revolutionary feminism in general, tends to depict women as 'helpless victims who need to be saved'. Margaret Hunt, 'The De-Eroticization of Women's Liberation: Social Purity Movements and the Revolutionary Feminism of Sheila Jeffreys', *Feminist Review*, 34 (1990), p. 24.

were ‘united by a common womanhood’<sup>30</sup> results in her ignoring the conflicting interests of age and class evident, for instance, in the campaigns for a higher age of consent.<sup>31</sup> Both Jeffreys and Kent also ignore the ways in which girls’ sexual activity emerged as a major concern during and after the First World War.<sup>32</sup> As Weeks notes, the new discourse of sexual pleasure within marriage was interwoven with the development of ‘new forms of control on behaviour outside the norms’,<sup>33</sup> and this study will explore the impact of these discourses of future sexual pleasure for women on the regulation of adolescent sexual knowledge and behaviour.

Concerns about the behaviour of girls were compounded by the increasing agreement about the importance of adolescence within individual development. From the 1970s onwards, scholars have considered the ‘socially constructed’ category of adolescence.<sup>34</sup> While the conceptualisation of adolescence as a critical period of life which would determine adult development predated the war,

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffreys, *Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Walkowitz notes that for both feminists and ‘more repressive moralists’, the desire to ‘protect young working-class girls masked impulses to control the girls’ sexuality’. Judith R. Walkowitz, ‘Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (1982), p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> Representations of sexually active young women are discussed by Lucy Bland, “‘Guardians of the Race’, or “‘Vampires upon the Nation’s Health’?: Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-Century Britain’, in Elizabeth Whitelegg (ed.), *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 373-88 (to which Jeffreys makes no reference) and Lucy Bland and Frank Mort, ‘Look Out for the “Good Time” Girl: Dangerous Sexualities as a Threat to National Health’ in Formations Editorial Collective, *Formations of Nation and People* (London, 1984), pp. 131-51. Jackson does not include these discussions in her references. See also Woollacott’s discussion of young women’s wartime sexual activity. Angela Woollacott, “‘Khaki Fever” and its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), pp. 325-47.

<sup>33</sup> Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 200.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, John R. Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations 1770-Present* (New York and London, 1974); Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?: An Oral History of Working-class Childhood and Youth 1889-1939* (Oxford, 1981); John Springhall, *Coming of Age: Adolescence in Britain 1860-1960* (Dublin, 1986); Harry Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, Class and the Male Youth Problem, 1880-1920* (Oxford, 1990); Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth: The Study of Youth and Adolescence in Britain and America* (Cambridge, 1993); Jeremy Roche and Stanley Tucker (eds.), *Youth in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (London, 1997); Tony Jeffs, and Mark K. Smith, ‘The Problem of “Youth” for Youth Work’, *Youth & Policy*, 62 (1998/99), pp. 45-66.



particularly through the work of G. Stanley Hall,<sup>35</sup> it became increasingly taken for granted in both professional and lay understandings during the inter-war years. This was interpreted in both negative and positive terms; while adolescence was a time of vulnerability and risk during which young people needed protection, it was also the period in which they would develop their capacity for independent moral choice. This conceptualisation of adolescence was informed by gender and class, resulting in shifting definitions as to who the adolescent actually was. However, far from undermining the validity of the concept of adolescence, this fluidity of definition served to enhance its usefulness as an explanatory and regulatory mechanism, and this study will explore how it was used to further specific professional interests.

Commentators differed on the age range they identified as constituting the adolescent years. While some argued that adolescence extended from around the age of thirteen to the mid-twenties, others interpreted it more narrowly. In general, these interpretations reflected both professional interests and the class of the adolescents under consideration. Medical and psychological discourses tended to use a broad timescale to discuss adolescence as a developmental stage, whereas the discourses of education and social welfare, which were more concerned with adolescents as a group to be managed, tended to define adolescence more narrowly. Their definition of adolescence as the years between thirteen/fourteen and eighteen/nineteen reflected the widespread concern that working-class urban young people, most of whom left school at fourteen, were exposed to excessive freedom and the unregulated amusements of the city. While the depiction of adolescence as a period of instability

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<sup>35</sup> G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York and London, 1904). Hall's work was popularised by J.W. Slaughter in *The Adolescent* (London, 1911).

and change applied to young men and women alike, by the inter-war years the perception of adolescence as more difficult and dangerous for girls had become commonplace. The conceptualisation of adolescence as a time of sexual risk for girls resulted in varying levels of intervention into their lives, at its most extreme resulting in the incarceration of girls (mostly but not exclusively working-class) on the basis of their sexual behaviour. Such interventions, however, were justified not simply as offering protection or punishment (regardless of how girls themselves viewed them) but as necessary in order to provide an environment in which girls were able to develop self-control and moral responsibility.

Historical discussion of the significance of adolescence as a regulatory mechanism has, however, focused on young men. Both Gillis and Springhall, for instance, acknowledge that their work ignores girls.<sup>36</sup> The only general studies of adolescent girlhood focus on the nineteenth century. Gorham examines the development of ideas about girlhood within middle-class Victorian ideology.<sup>37</sup> Her discussion of the late Victorian image of the 'modern girl' as representing a reworking of the feminine ideal to accommodate girls' broader educational and occupational expectations is pertinent to this study. Dyhouse's exploration of the socialisation of girls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stresses the role of youth organisations in teaching girls about femininity and their future domestic role.<sup>38</sup> While subsequent historians of youth work have repeated her conclusions, an examination of the work of two organisations, the Girl Guides and the Young Women's Christian Association, during the inter-war years reveals a

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<sup>36</sup> Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. xii; Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981).

more complex picture, in which those in positions of leadership drew upon discourses of social change, adolescence and citizenship to prepare girls for both a role within the family and for wider public responsibilities.

In contrast to North American historiography, which offers a considerable body of literature documenting the experience and regulation of early twentieth-century American girlhood, there has been only limited exploration of British girlhood during these years.<sup>39</sup> Historians have provided insights into specific aspects of girls' lives, particularly the cultural construction of girlhood and femininity, and education. Tinkler has explored the ways in which girls' magazines contributed to the construction and reworking of adolescent girlhood between 1920 and 1950.<sup>40</sup> Other studies have considered the role of the cinema, particularly the images emanating from Hollywood, in the construction of a distinctive image of 'modern' girlhood.<sup>41</sup> Scholars have also examined different aspects of girls' education,

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithica and London, 1996); Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work 1890-1945* (New Haven and London, 1993); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago and London, 1988); Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds.), *Desire: the Politics of Sexuality* (London, 1984), pp. 127-39; Steven Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach, 'The Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era', *Harvard Educational Review*, 48, 1 (1978), pp. 65-94; Joan Sangster, 'Incarcerating "Bad Girls": the Regulation of Sexuality through the Female Refuges Act in Ontario, 1920-1945', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7, 2 (1996), pp. 239-75.

<sup>40</sup> Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing up in England, 1920-1950* (London, 1995). Her account would seem to challenge that of Mitchell, who explores literature intended directly for girls, including advice manuals, popular fiction and girls' magazines, to suggest that the period between 1880 and 1915 saw the creation of a discrete identity of girlhood, no longer available after these years. Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915* (New York, 1995). Auchmuty also explores the creation of an independent girls' world through the 'boarding school story'. Rosemary Auchmuty, *A World of Girls* (London, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Cinema Culture and Femininity in the 1930s' in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds.), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), pp.179-92. Alexander argues that the cinema, together with other aspects of 'modern' behaviour such as smoking and fashion, allowed girls to differentiate their own aspirations from those of their mothers. Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London, Histories and Representations since 1800* (London, 1989), pp. 245-71.



including co-education and anti-lesbianism, physical education, and domestic education.<sup>42</sup> While most studies of girls and the criminal justice system cover the nineteenth century, Cox has examined girls' entry into and experiences of both the formal juvenile justice system and informal rescue system,<sup>43</sup> concluding that their treatment was determined by perceptions of both their sexual behaviour and their suitability for employment as domestic servants.<sup>44</sup> This study will draw upon her work, while offering a different interpretation of some aspects of institutional provision for girls.

This study draws upon a range of materials to identify the discourses influencing the management of girls' development and behaviour, and their impact on organisations working with girls. They include medical journals and textbooks, the reports of government and non-government enquiries, and sex education and marriage guidance manuals. In different ways, these sources offer vehicles for the dissemination of expert and professional opinion. Medical discourses aired in journals such as the *Lancet* and the *BMJ* and through the enquiries highlighted earlier not only had a powerful role in determining the representation of girls,

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<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: the Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1987); Diana E. St John, 'Educate or Domesticate?: Early Twentieth Century Pressures on Older Girls in Elementary School', *Women's History Review*, 3, 2 (1994), pp. 191-218; Annabel Faraday, 'Lessoning Lesbians: Girls' Schools, Coeducation and Anti-Lesbianism Between the Wars' in Carol Jones and Pat Mahoney (eds.), *Learning Our Lines: Sexuality and Social Control in Education* (London, 1989), pp. 23-45; Sheila Scraton, *Shaping Up to Womanhood: Gender and Girls' Physical Education* (Buckingham, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> As chapter four will discuss, a range of institutions existed outside the formal juvenile justice system to accommodate and train girls known to be sexually active, particularly those who had become pregnant or had contracted VD. Homes for sexually experienced girls were known as 'rescue homes', while those for girls perceived to be at risk of sexual activity were described as 'preventive'.

<sup>44</sup> Pamela Cox, 'Rescue and Reform: Girls, Delinquency and Industrial Schools 1908-1933 (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1996); *idem*, 'Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency', in David Wright and Anne Digby (eds.), *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities* (London, 1996), pp. 184-206. Cox's research was inspired by the under and

particularly those whose behaviour violated social expectations, but they provided organisations directly engaged with girls with a ‘scientific’ language in which to frame and promote the importance of their work in shaping girls’ development. Prescriptive materials such as sex education and marriage guidance manuals (which addressed respectively the issues of adolescent and adult sexuality), offered medical experts an important arena for defining ‘normal’ sexual development and shaping the progress of young women towards maturity. The popularity of these publications, which often remained in print for many years, indicates public eagerness for expert information (but not, of course, the way in which such information was used and interpreted). This study draws upon these texts, together with the records and publications of the British Social Hygiene Council,<sup>45</sup> which received public funding for its sex education programmes during the inter-war years, to explore the ways in which young people were provided with information about sex and the purposes such education was intended to serve.

The enquiries cited earlier offer an important source for perspectives on issues of morality in the context of social change. These enquiries provided a voice for, and served the interests of, those who were already influential in their fields, and are therefore valuable in revealing the parameters of expert opinion. Their findings were widely reported, and their importance as propaganda is evident from the NCPM’s description of itself as seeking to co-operate with those who ‘have under their control the vast machinery for instantly and effectively reaching millions of

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mis-representation of girls’ experience in Bailey’s history of the juvenile justice system. Victor Bailey, *Delinquency and Citizenship: Reclaiming the Young Offender, 1914-1948* (Oxford, 1987).

<sup>45</sup> Founded as the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases, this was renamed in 1925. In general discussion I shall refer to this organisation as the BSHC, but use the relevant title when discussing its work in specific years.



people'.<sup>46</sup> These investigations represent what Mort has described as the 'medico-moral' alliance which re-emerged in the early twentieth-century.<sup>47</sup> As chapter three will explore, organisations and enquiries addressing questions of social and sexual morality repeatedly stressed the extent to which they represented a convergence between medical, religious and educational expert opinion, while the individuals involved in them demonstrate an overlapping range of interests and allegiances. The case of Dame Mary Scharlieb, described by the *DNB* as a 'household name' who had familiarised the public with the work of medical women, illustrates this. One of the first women to train as a doctor, this devout Christian and eugenics sympathiser had a distinguished career as a gynaecologist and a particular interest in sex education. She was appointed as one of the first women magistrates, presiding over a juvenile court and acting as visiting magistrate to Holloway women's prison. She was a member of the Royal Commission on Venereal Disease and the National Birth-Rate Commission, a vice-president of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child, and sat on the executive committee of the British Social Hygiene Council and the council of the Girl Guides Association.<sup>48</sup> The inclusion of the Guides on this list suggests the ways in which practical work with girls was influenced by and

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<sup>46</sup> NCPM, *The Cinema*, p. vi.

<sup>47</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, Part 4.

<sup>48</sup> Scharlieb (1845-1930) was awarded the CBE in 1917 and the DBE in 1926. Her writings on sex, sex education and venereal diseases included *A Woman's Words to Woman* (London, 1905), *Youth and Sex* (London, 1914), *The Seven Ages of Woman* (London, circa 1915), *England's Girls and England's Future* (London, 1917), *How to Enlighten our Children, a book for parents* (London, 1918), 'The Moral Training of Modern Girls' in *The Claims of the Coming Generation* (London, 1923), *Straight Talks to Women* (London, 1923) and *Sexual Problems of To-day* (London, circa 1925). Discussing the 'fuzziness' of the perceived division between social purity and sex reform, Hall notes that Scharlieb supported Radcliffe Hall during the trial for obscenity of her novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 110. See Mary Scharlieb, *Reminiscences* (London, 1925); *Dictionary of National Biography*; Greta Jones, 'Women and Eugenics in Britain: The Case of Mary Scharlieb, Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, and Stella Browne', *Annals of Science*, 52, 5 (September 1995), pp. 481-502.

reflected wider discussions around social morality, and this study examines the intersections – both of ideas and individuals – between youth and other organisations.

This study also draws upon the records and publications of institutions working with ‘problem’ girls, the term frequently used to describe those girls whose behaviour or circumstances resulted in active intervention in their lives. Only a small minority of girls entered such institutions. Their work, however, is significant since it provides the most explicit approach to shaping and changing girls’ behaviour. In contrast, youth organisations worked with large numbers of girls, who chose to engage with them. This study pays particular attention to their work, since their claims concerning their social importance were largely based on their ability to reach and respond to the needs of adolescents who were not in contact with other organisations. I have chosen to focus on the Guides and the YWCA for a number of reasons. Both reached large numbers of adolescent girls, making specific attempts to work with both working-class adolescents and with ‘problem’ girls. The YWCA, for instance, developed work with unemployed girls during the 1930s, while the Guides ran companies within reform and rescue institutions. This study will examine the records and publications of both organisations to see how they located their work within wider discourses and concerns about girls, and the ways in which they used and interpreted the information made available through expert discourse and official reports, both to validate their work and to inform how they sought to direct girls’ development.

Many of these sources address the development and experiences of young men as well as young women. Although this study focuses specifically on young

women, it draws upon discussions of 'youth' in general. While it does not systematically seek to compare the experiences of young women and men, it does consider the ways in which gender-differentiated representations and assumptions resulted in specific approaches and interventions in order to manage girls' development towards womanhood.

Chapter one sets the context for the study, by exploring the ways in which perceptions of social change were expressed in discussions concerning girls' behaviour and expectations, particularly through the image of the 'modern girl'. Girls' increased financial and social independence was associated with sexual activity, which found a specific focus in anxieties about girls' sexual behaviour during and immediately after World War One, encapsulated in the image of the 'amateur prostitute'. The 'amateur' was seen to include girls of all classes. It was, however, the conditions of working-class girls' lives that continued to arouse most concern throughout the 1920s and 1930, and the chapter examines how perceptions of girls' sexual vulnerability and sexual activity became intertwined with broader concerns about conditions of employment, unemployment and leisure.

Chapter two considers how these concerns were compounded by the increasingly dominant characterisation of adolescence as a critical period of life, during which young people were open to both good and bad influences. This conceptualisation served to legitimise greater intervention into the lives of young people and their families, which, in the case of girls, was largely determined by their sexual behaviour. Sexually active girls were represented as needing protection, not only from others, but from themselves during the unstable years of adolescence. In

addition to this concern with the sexual behaviour of young, mainly working-class adolescent girls, however, the discourses of adolescence and sexology combined to regulate the progress of middle-class girls towards heterosexual maturity, through which they were expected to play an active part in directing their own progress towards womanhood, based on an understanding of what constituted 'normal' heterosexual development.

By the inter-war years, sex education was allocated an increasingly important role in the training of adolescents, as the equation of ignorance about sex with innocence was replaced by approaches which stressed the importance of knowledge. While there was a consensus about the need to regulate adolescents' access to information about sex through sex education, there were disagreements about the information to be provided, by whom and in what manner. Chapter three examines the debates about sex education, and the purposes such education was intended to serve. Inter-war sex education sought to warn young people of the adverse consequences of sexual experimentation. It also drew, albeit inconsistently, upon representations of adolescence as the time when the capacity for moral choice was developed, together with the discourses of marital sexual satisfaction, to offer young people positive reasons for exercising sexual restraint. The report of the National Birth-Rate Commission on adolescent sex education, and the work of the British Social Hygiene Council, which from the mid-1920s concentrated on the sex education of the adolescent, will be considered in some detail. Both organisations indicate the extent to which sex education was interpreted by gender and class, while the work of the BSHC reveals the ambiguities and anxieties which surrounded sex



education throughout the inter-war years, particularly the difficulties in controlling young people's access and responses to information about sex.

While sex education aimed to shape young women's moral development and behaviour, the discourses of adolescent instability legitimised more active intervention into the lives of girls defined as delinquent or as mentally defective. Such definitions were closely associated with their sexual conduct, and girls who displayed visible evidence of sexual activity, through venereal disease, pregnancy or prostitution, or who were believed to be exposed to sexual risk, were sent to a range of reform institutions. Although girls entered these institutions on a compulsory or quasi-compulsory basis, the institutions themselves stressed the 're-formability' of girls based on the development of individual self-discipline and the exercise of choice. Chapter four will discuss the various ways in which sexually active girls were depicted, and explore the work of the different institutions they entered as a result of their sexual activity. While only a small minority of girls entered such institutions, their work is significant since they represent the most extreme approach to categorising and managing girls' behaviour.

Chapter five seeks to draw together the issues and concerns discussed in earlier chapters through an examination of two youth work organisations, the Girl Guides and the YWCA. The limited historiography of youth work with girls has tended to portray it as exclusively concerned with preparing girls for their future domestic roles, and as controlling their sexual activity through removing them from the temptations of the streets. While it is clear that both the Guides and the YWCA attached great importance to women's roles as wives and mothers, during the inter-war years they also aimed to develop girls' capacity as citizens, in the context of

women's changing public role represented by the franchise. They also addressed the issue of girls' sexual behaviour, not merely by providing diversions, but by actively promoting girls' heterosexual development through sex education and providing supervised opportunities for girls to meet and develop relationships with young men. Both organisations represented this aspect of their work as proof of their responsiveness to the needs of the modern girl, an aspect which found its greatest challenge in their work with problem girls.

The emphasis of this study is upon public representations. The discussion of reform institutions and youth organisations does not examine the ways in which the ambitions of these organisations, as expressed in official reports and the organisations' own published materials, were translated into practice in individual units. Nor do they consider the experience of girls who engaged with these organisations, whether on the basis of compulsion or choice. However, the ways in which organisations seeking to manage the development of girls towards womanhood represented themselves suggests that it is an oversimplification to depict them as seeking simply to inculcate conformity and prepare girls for their domestic role. These organisations drew upon the discourses of social change, adolescence and citizenship, not only to distinguish their approach from those of earlier eras, but to prepare girls to fulfil their roles both as wives and mothers, and as citizens competent to exercise rights and responsibilities in the wider community. By examining the discourses and agencies shaping girls' development to adulthood during the inter-war years, this study seeks to reveal a more complex range of responses to girls than has previously been recognised.

## **Chapter One: The 'Modern Girl': Perceptions of Young Women 1918-1939**

During the years following the First World War, perceptions of social change affecting both women and young people resulted in particular attention being paid to the behaviour of young women, encapsulated in the image of the 'modern girl'. Girls' behaviour and expectations were believed to have been irreversibly changed by the greater economic and social independence they had experienced during the war. While the language of post-war reconstruction allocated girls a positive role in social regeneration, most discussions of girls' behaviour immediately after the war focused on the negative effects of change, with their sexual conduct coming under particular scrutiny. Widespread concerns about the prevalence of venereal diseases (VD) provided a specific context for such discussions, through which girls' sexual activity was interpreted not just in terms of individual morality, but as a threat to the nation's health. While anxieties about girls' sexual activity continued throughout the inter-war years, they became less focused on the specific issue of VD, instead becoming intertwined with broader concerns about conditions of employment, unemployment and leisure. This chapter will examine contemporary discussions of girls' changed experiences and aspirations, and will highlight particular aspects of girls' lives and the influences which were believed to make them vulnerable to sexual immorality. Later chapters will consider the ways in which discourses of adolescence and ideas of individual moral agency informed such discussion.

The First World War was believed to have resulted in permanent changes in the position of women. Immediate post-war commentators stressed the effect of women's war work, resulting not only in their increased economic and social independence, but greater public visibility. This was compounded by legislative

changes giving women new social and political rights, in particular the acquisition of the vote by women over thirty. The pervasiveness of this perception of changes in women's role is revealed in the claim, in the 1922 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, that the war had 'brought about that great and sweeping reform in the position of women which had been accomplished by 1920'.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the war had enlarged the horizons of young middle-class women, whose involvement in war work had freed them from the restrictions of 'provincial young-ladyhood'.<sup>2</sup> Although it has subsequently been challenged, the contemporary representation of the war as a turning point for women persisted throughout the inter-war period; according to Robert Graves' influential account, 'The Great War ... freed the Englishwoman.'<sup>3</sup>

Women, and young women in particular, were portrayed as holding a central role in post-war reconstruction. The destruction of war and consequent concerns about population levels focused attention on the role of women in regenerating the race through bearing and rearing healthy children. Introducing a book on the health of working girls, for instance, Hilda Martindale claimed that the war had led to the recognition that 'the working girl is one of the most important factors in a nation', since as a potential mother she could 'make good the fearful loss of human life' resulting from the war.<sup>4</sup> However, alongside this traditional stress on girls as future mothers, organisations working with girls represented reconstruction as both

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London, 1978). The phrase is used as the title for chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend, a Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London, 1995, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1940), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Beatrice Webb, *Health of Working Girls: a Handbook for Welfare Supervisors and Others* (London, 1917), p. 5. Martindale was H.M. Senior Lady Inspector of Factories.



offering new opportunities, and making greater demands on girls and women.

Discussing the 'girl of to-morrow', the YWCA claimed that 'the whole language of to-day is Reconstruction – a new age, new possibilities for women'.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these assertions of the vital role women had to play in reconstruction, their immediate post-war representation was largely negative. Susan Kingsley Kent highlights the extent of hostility to women, expressed in the views of one 1921 commentator that public attitudes towards women were 'full of contempt and bitterness'.<sup>6</sup> Animosity was directed towards single women in particular, who were seen to have benefited from the war at the expense of men, and who were represented as seeking to retain the greater economic and social independence they had gained during the war. The frivolous ways in which young women spent their money was much criticised; a government committee reported that working-class girls' expenditure on clothes had nearly doubled by the end of the war.<sup>7</sup>

Newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* encouraged their readerships to make links between young women's visible affluence and their purported sexual immorality, as in a report of a Liverpool County Council meeting in which a councillor deplored the large number of 'girls in their teens going about in fur coats and short frocks, with painted faces'.<sup>8</sup>

The war was also perceived to be responsible for restlessness and lack of discipline among young people. While some commentators acknowledged the tendency of each generation to reject the ways of their predecessors, the

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<sup>5</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 38, 6 (1920), p. 15. Youth organisations' representations of changes affecting girls will be discussed in chapter five.

<sup>6</sup> Kent, *Making Peace*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1919. Braybon and Summerfield discuss newspapers' hostile portrayal of women workers between 1918 and 1920. These former war workers were portrayed as either seeking to hold on to men's jobs, or as wrongfully claiming unemployment benefit, since they would not take

circumstances of war, in which fathers were absent and juvenile labour sought after, were seen to have produced a breakdown in family discipline.<sup>9</sup> Less negatively, some also argued that it was hardly surprising that young people lacked respect for their elders, since their mistakes had led to the carnage of war. As Alison Neilans, secretary of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene put it, 'this generation ... like all generations is showing contempt for authority – this generation more than others because of the war'.<sup>10</sup>

Writing in the early 1930s for the BSHC's journal, Camilla Wedgwood declared that post-war social change was the result of the intersection of the 'two big movements' of the age: 'the revolt of women and the revolt of youth. Neither, alone, would have brought about the present conditions; we owe them to the two combined.'<sup>11</sup> This intersection between discourses concerning women and youth resulted in a focus on young womanhood, expressed in the image of the 'modern girl'. Young women were widely discussed in the press; the extent to which their changing aspirations and behaviour were seen to be a matter for public concern and scrutiny is illustrated by an examination of the *Daily Mail*. For example, during the single month of February 1919, articles discussed a range of aspects of girls' behaviour: their reluctance to enter domestic service (a recurrent theme); the sexually active underage girl; smoking and the YWCA; the new freedom of the 'modern girl' in relations with men; a comparison of the merits of the 'independent, self-reliant girl of to-day' and her 'helpless, dependent' predecessor; the 'masculine

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the jobs – mainly in domestic service – offered to them. Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, pp. 115-32.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Edith Sellers, 'Boy and Girl War-Products: Their Reconstruction', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 1, 84 (1919), pp. 702-16.

<sup>10</sup> Discussion following Sir Arthur Newsholme, 'Some Aspects of Social Hygiene', in NCCVD, *Proceedings of the Imperial Social Hygiene Congress, May 12-16 1924* (London, 1924) p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Camilla Wedgwood, 'Recent Views on Modern Marriage', *Health and Empire*, 6, 3 (1931), p. 243.

girl'; the 'husband shortage'; and 'good-time' girls.<sup>12</sup> Girls were represented as demanding the freedom previously reserved for their male counterparts, and while individual columnists professed to find at least aspects of the 'modern girl' admirable, collectively these articles offer heavily qualified approval of youthful female independence. While the changes believed to have been brought about by the war offered a specific focus for discussing girls' attitudes and behaviour, public interest in, and ambivalence towards, modern girlhood persisted into the 1930s. Writing in 1936 about changes in social life since the war, author and former MP Mary Agnes Hamilton noted the 'innumerable articles' written about the 'contemporary young woman', from which a note of criticism was 'seldom wholly absent'.<sup>13</sup>

This was, of course, not the first – or last – time that girls' behaviour was the subject of public scrutiny. According to Deborah Gorham, the concept of the 'modern girl' which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century indicates the resilience of a continually reworked feminine ideal,<sup>14</sup> while Gillian Swanson has argued that the second world war led to youthful femininity becoming a 'key site for the redefinition of a modern British national identity'.<sup>15</sup> The recurrence of such formulations indicates the extent to which young women are seen to offer a touchstone of social change, in the context of the specific social, economic and

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<sup>12</sup> *Daily Mail* 4, 7, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24, 26, 28 February 1919. Melman has highlighted the amount of attention paid to middle-class young women – 'flappers' – by 1920s newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, and the extent to which their increasingly hostile portrayal was linked to the extension of the franchise to women over 21. Billie Melman, *Women and The Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke/London, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, 'Changes in Social Life', pp. 233-35.

<sup>14</sup> Gorham, *Victorian Girl*, pp. 56-8.

<sup>15</sup> Gillian Swanson, "'So Much Money and So Little to Spend It On': Morale, Consumption and Sexuality' in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds.), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), p. 81. I will argue later, however, that some developments she ascribes to the second world war were in fact evident earlier.



ideological concerns of different eras, and historians have identified the ways in which anxieties about social change following the war were expressed through popular representations of young women in the post-war years. As already indicated, Tinkler has documented the role of girls' magazines in constructing images of modern girlhood which acknowledged change but stressed the continuities between modernity and traditional femininity.<sup>16</sup> Angus McLaren notes the extent to which the post-war press called for 'the more stringent disciplining of hooligans, hoodlums and "problem girls"' in the context of an increasing preoccupation with the sex lives of the young and attempts to extend the period of dependency of young people.<sup>17</sup> Focusing on one particular area of concern - drug use between 1916 and the mid-1920s - Marek Kohn has argued that during this period 'young women became exceptionally clearly defined as a distinct group in society, and drugs became one way in which anxieties about them could be articulated'.<sup>18</sup>

It is significant that there was no male equivalent of the concept of the 'modern girl'. Young women were subjected to a scrutiny which did not apply to their male counterparts. While young men aroused concern because of what they did, particularly in the context of juvenile delinquency, all aspects of young women's behaviour were subject to criticism and examined for indications of sexual immorality. Girls of all classes were portrayed as obsessed with how they looked, with seeking pleasure and with 'having a good time'. Post-war fashions in clothes and hairstyles resulted in a new 'boyish' image for young women, while their

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<sup>16</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*.

<sup>17</sup> Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford, 1999), p.19.

<sup>18</sup> Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: the Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London, 1992), p. 8.

Angela Woollacott suggests that the discourse of 'dope girls' took up where that of 'khaki fever' left off, by representing a 'cluster of fears about women's sexual and social disorder and vulnerability connected to the racially threatening drug underworld. Woollacott, "Khaki Fever" p. 345.

adoption of public behaviour previously defined as male, such as smoking and drinking, scandalised many observers.<sup>19</sup>

### **Girls' sexual behaviour**

Young women's financial independence and defiance of what was considered decorous public behaviour was consistently interpreted as evidence of sexual immorality. While both young men and women were felt to have been adversely affected by war conditions, war was seen to have had a particularly detrimental effect on girls' femininity. Musing on the 'boy and girl war product' in 1918, Edith Sellers contrasted the 'wild, reckless, devil-may-care' behaviour of a group of teenage girls at a railway station with the 'comely young girls' they should have been had they been left to follow the normal path of domestic service and supervised progression into adulthood.<sup>20</sup> She concluded that 'the change is more markedly for the worse among the girls than among the boys'.<sup>21</sup> Her view was shared by others. Preaching on 'the modern girl' at an anniversary service of the Girls' Friendly Society, the Bishop of Edinburgh concluded that a 'widespread laxity of morals was combined with a distressing independence'.<sup>22</sup> Discussing the prevalence of VD, Florence Barrett, a gynaecologist and leading member of the Medical Women's Federation, similarly believed that 'at the moment young girls are not inclined to listen'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance Graves and Hodge, *Long Weekend*, pp. 39-44.

<sup>20</sup> Sellers, 'Boy and Girl War-Products', pp. 702-03.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 703.

<sup>22</sup> *Vigilance Record* (July 1919), p. 53. The speech was also reported in *The Times*, 20 June 1919, another indication of the extent of interest in girls' behaviour.

<sup>23</sup> NBRC, *Prevention of Venereal Disease*, p. 176.

As these last comments indicate, it was girls' sexual behaviour that offered the most immediate cause for public concern. Historians have debated the extent to which the war changed sexual behaviour. Arthur Marwick's influential account of World War One stresses the new freedoms, including sexual freedom, acquired by women during and as a result of the war.<sup>24</sup> The carnage of war, he argues, brought a new urgency to seeking pleasure, including pre-marital sex.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, other contemporary observers, such as Dr. Mary Scharlieb, acknowledged that changes in women's status and expectations predated the war.<sup>26</sup> Angela Woollacott's discussion of 'khaki fever' - a formulation for young women's increased, and increasingly visible, sexual activity during the war - argues that 'fear about young women's social behaviour was present prior to the war, a reaction to changes already occurring and those which threatened should suffrage be granted to women'.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this, the dislocation of war provided a touchstone for locating change. Women, and young women in particular, had become highly visible during the war - both physically, as they travelled to their jobs at often unsocial hours, and imaginatively, through the publicity given to women doing work previously undertaken by men. The result was an increased scrutiny of young women's public behaviour, in particular their sexual behaviour. Much of this scrutiny focused on the sexual behaviour of adolescent girls, particularly those aged around fourteen to eighteen. As will be discussed later, the construction of adolescence as a distinct

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Basingstoke, 1991, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1965).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.148-49. Kent argues that women who played an active part in the war represented it as a 'sexual coming of age'. Kent, *Making Peace*, p. 68. A study of marriage guidance also locates its development following the war's loosening 'of the traditional means of securing female purity'. Jane Lewis, David Clark and David Morgan, *'Whom God Hath Joined Together': The Work of Marriage Guidance* (London, 1992), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Scharlieb, 'The Moral Training of Modern Girls' in Sir James Marchant (ed.), *The Claims of the Coming Generation, a Consideration by Various Writers* (London, 1923), p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Woollacott, "'Khaki Fever' and its Control", p. 343.

transitional stage of life characterised by instability and change increasingly underpinned the approaches of professionals and agencies seeking to shape young people's development. Woollacott reveals the extent to which the 'khaki fever' panic focused on girls aged thirteen to sixteen. In contrast to nineteenth-century feminist and social purity discourses which had represented girls of this age as victims of male lust, this wartime discourse represented young women as actively and aggressively seeking sexual experiences,<sup>28</sup> encapsulated most vividly in the image of the 'amateur prostitute', or simply the 'amateur'.

The 'amateur' was the young woman who engaged in sex outside marriage for fun or in return for being taken out. As Lucy Bland has argued, while the terminology reveals contemporary difficulties in understanding active female sexuality outside prostitution, it was the difference between the 'amateur' and the professional prostitute which caused most concern, since, 'unlike the professional (assumed to be working class), the amateur was thought to be drawn from all classes. Amateurs also appeared to be much *younger* than professional prostitutes.'<sup>29</sup> This construction of the 'amateur' therefore focused attention on the sexual activity of 'normal' young women, rather than on the stigmatised prostitute.

These depictions of sexually active young women were located in the context of specific concerns about the relationship between individual sexual behaviour and national welfare. The early twentieth century had seen a convergence of fears about Britain's economic, military and imperial decline which found expression in eugenic discussions about the quality of the population and the perceived decline of the British 'race'.<sup>30</sup> The war reinforced these anxieties, not

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>29</sup> Bland, "Guardians of the Race", p. 381. Stress in the original.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 122-40.



only because of the slaughter of large numbers of young men, but because of the association of war with an increase in venereal disease. The subject of VD received extensive publicity during and following World War One, with both medical and lay publications stressing the importance of overcoming 'in the public interest, a mischievous tradition of silence'.<sup>31</sup> The findings of the Royal Commission on Venereal Disease, which stressed the 'grave and far-reaching effects of venereal disease upon the individual and the race' were widely publicised.<sup>32</sup> In addition to recommending the establishment of a national system of free and non-stigmatising treatment centres, the Commission stressed the need to keep the 'complex question of combating venereal disease before the public mind' and proposed that the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases be recognised as a 'permanent and authoritative body' for this purpose.<sup>33</sup> The work of the NCCVD, and the representation of sexually active young women as primarily responsible for the transmission of VD will be discussed in later chapters. The point to be made here is the extent to which VD provided not only the impetus for public discussion of sexual matters, but the context for a specific representation of sexually active young women in which individual sexual activity was defined as endangering national (often referred to as 'racial') health.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Times*, 10 January 1919. A *Lancet* reviewer made the sweeping claim that the campaign against VD was 'won the day that "syphilis" appeared in the headlines of a respectable newspaper'. *Lancet*, 22 March 1924, p. 603. Such comments ignore pre-war feminist efforts to publicise the prevalence of VD among women as the result of male sexual indulgence.

<sup>32</sup> Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, *Final Report of the Commissioners* (London, 1916), p. 65. The Commission had been set up in 1913.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* In addition to the Council's educational efforts, the problem of VD received rather less welcome publicity as a result of professional disputes concerning the role of preventive measures – by which was meant the individual use of various types of ointments before or after sex (rather than the use of condoms) – in controlling VD. These disagreements, which resulted in a group of (mainly male) professionals leaving the NCCVD to set up a new body, the Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease, were well publicised in the lay press, particularly *The Times* (see, for instance, 31 December 1918, 4, 7, 10 January 1919), arousing fears that such public evidence of disagreement was undermining the authority of the profession. See Bridget A. Towers, 'Health Education Policy 1916-1926: Venereal Disease and the Prophylaxis Dilemma', *Medical History*, 24 (1980), pp. 70-87.



Following the war, a range of widely publicised enquiries (to be discussed in chapter three) continued to focus attention on sexual immorality and its consequences. Individuals giving evidence to these enquiries played an important role in the construction of the image of the sexually active young woman, particularly emphasising the young age at which girls became sexually active. Several witnesses to the NBRC's committee on venereal diseases claimed that girls as young as fourteen were sexually active.<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Stanley, superintendent of the Women's Patrols Division of the Metropolitan Police, reported that she personally had dealt with over six hundred girls, of whom 168 were under eighteen and many aged fifteen or younger.<sup>35</sup> The years between 1917 and 1922 saw repeated attempts to amend the legislation on the age of consent, in which debate highlighted both the sexual vulnerability and the sexual precocity of girls aged thirteen to sixteen.<sup>36</sup> Witnesses to the NBRC's enquiries stressed the prevalence of immorality among girls of all classes. Captain A.F. Wright deplored the prevalence of VD among 'those who should be the virgins of the upper class',<sup>37</sup> while Edith Cooper told the Commission that many girls 'of the Secondary School type' were 'leading dishonourable lives'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the AMSH's enquiry into sexual morality stressed the extent to which respectable and well-educated girls were sexually active.<sup>39</sup> Such

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<sup>34</sup> See the evidence of E. B. Turner (former chairman of the BMA), Major A. Nelson, and Lady Barrett, NBRC, *Prevention of Venereal Disease*, pp. 112, 158, 171.

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Mail*, 23 October 1920. The concern with the youth of the girls is demonstrated in the *Mail's* use of the headline 'Girls of 14' for this story.

<sup>36</sup> While the age of consent for sexual intercourse had been raised to sixteen in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, the age of consent for 'indecent assault' remained at thirteen. It was finally raised to sixteen in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1922. This issue will be discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>37</sup> NBRC, *Problems of Population and Parenthood*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the evidence of E. B. Turner to the Sexual Morality Inquiry, 14 July 1919. 3/AMS Box 49, Association for Moral and Social Hygiene Collection, Fawcett Library, London. [Hereafter AMSH Papers].

assertions of widespread immorality among all girls provided the justification for a range of professional interventions, to be discussed later.

Girls' sexual activity continued to arouse concern throughout the inter-war period. Concerns about declining sexual morals, for which girls were held responsible, persisted into the 1930s. In 1935, for instance, the *Daily Mail* reported on a discussion of sexual morality by Church of England representatives, in which 'unusually frank views regarding morals – especially laxity among young girls' were expressed.<sup>40</sup> Opponents of contraception identified a clear link between its increasing availability to the unmarried and deteriorating standards of female sexual morality; the NBRC, for instance, rehearsed the arguments for and against the use of contraception, noting that unmarried women were able to gain information about contraception and were 'making use of it increasingly, with disastrous results'.<sup>41</sup> Widespread publicity was given to comments about the sexual precocity of young girls made by judges presiding over cases in which men were being prosecuted for having sex with underage girls. The statement by Mr Justice Travers Humphreys that 'as a rule the girl is very much more to blame than the man' was reported in at least two national newspapers as well as the local press.<sup>42</sup> However, although the incidence of VD remained a focus of discussion throughout the inter-war period, it ceased to provide the major context for discussion of young women's sexual activity.<sup>43</sup> While sex outside marriage was still condemned, its prevention was

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<sup>40</sup> *Daily Mail*, 6 June 1935. Press Cuttings, CMAC.PP/EFG/A.40, Personal Papers of Edward Fyfe Griffith, CMAC, Wellcome Trust, London. [Hereafter Griffith Papers].

<sup>41</sup> NBRC, *Problems of Population and Parenthood* p. xlvii.

<sup>42</sup> *Northeastern Gazette*, 22 February 1934. It was also reported in *The Times*, 22 February 1934 and *Reynolds*, 23 February 1934. Press Cuttings, Assaults: Strictures on Girls, 4/NVA, Box 104, S46J, National Vigilance Association Collection, Fawcett Library, London. [Hereafter NVA Papers]. This file contains around fifty items reporting judges' criticism of underage girls' sexual immorality.

<sup>43</sup> The shift of focus from the specific issue of venereal disease to broader issues of sexual morality is indicated by the renaming of the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases as the British Social Hygiene Council in 1925. I will discuss this further later.

increasingly placed in the context of the management of adolescence and the provision of positive recreational activities. Pre-marital sex was increasingly represented as the outcome of affectionate, even if short-lived relationships, or as anticipation of marriage, rather than as evidence of promiscuity.<sup>44</sup> This view was commonly expressed by those associated with social hygiene organisations. Dr Douglas White, active within both the AMSH and BSHC, is typical in his belief that prostitution was being replaced by ‘temporary liaisons of a more or less affectional character’; while he disapproved of such relationships, they were preferable to ‘crude promiscuity’.<sup>45</sup> Official figures at the end of the 1930s appeared to confirm perceptions of the prevalence of pre-marital sex among courting couples. According to a Dr. Garland, speaking at a conference on VD during World War Two, the Registrar-General’s report for 1938 had revealed that forty-two per cent of women under twenty who married during that year were pregnant, as were nearly a third of twenty-year olds. He concluded that ‘Full sex life before marriage is therefore widespread’.<sup>46</sup>

Subsequent chapters will explore the ways in which these shifting representations of girls’ sexual activity informed approaches to shaping girls’ development. Sex educationalists increasingly stressed the need to develop young

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<sup>44</sup> Gurney notes that Mass Observation observers investigating working-class holiday-makers’ sexual behaviour in Blackpool, concluded (with some disappointment, he suggests) that contrary to their expectations of finding ‘copulation everywhere’, young women were unlikely to engage in sexual intercourse unless they were in relationships expected to lead to marriage. Peter Gurney, “Intersex” and “Dirty Girls”: Mass-Observation and Working-Class Sexuality in England in the 1930s’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8, 2 (1997), p. 274-75.

<sup>45</sup> *Lancet*, 14 December 1935, p. 1375.

<sup>46</sup> *Lancet*, 6 March 1943, p. 314. Nearly 30 per cent of all women marrying that year were pregnant. A 1956 survey carried out by Eustace Chessier also offers some retrospective confirmation of an increase in pre-marital sex during the inter-war years. This found that around one-third of women born between 1904 and 1914 – i.e. reaching maturity in the inter-war years – had engaged in pre-marital sex, compared to under one-fifth of those born before 1904. For both cohorts, single women were only slightly less likely to report having had sex. As Weeks notes, however, such self-reported information from a sample biased towards middle-class women should be treated with caution. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 209.



people's willingness and capacity to regulate their own sexual behaviour, rather than simply depending on external controls or fear of the consequences of illicit sexual activity. Allied to this, it was argued that young people needed to be provided with positive opportunities for recreation and for developing heterosexual relationships based on companionship in regulated environments. For some adolescent girls, however, their sexual activity was seen to represent serious transgressions of social expectations, leading to their incarceration in a range of institutions.

### **Employment and leisure**

During the 1920s and 1930s, discussions about girls' sexual activity became increasingly intertwined with broader concerns about their conditions of employment, unemployment and leisure. These took a number of forms. Immediately after the war, perceptions of girls as having been spoiled by excessive financial and social independence were expressed in antagonism towards girls who rejected jobs as domestic servants. By the 1930s, an increase in the numbers of adolescents in the population, combined with higher unemployment levels, resulted in greater concern about their use of leisure. In 1933, for instance, the National Council of Girls' Clubs attributed the increased interest into young people's leisure time to the 'presence or fear of unemployment', the prospect of shorter working hours, and 'the very large increase in 1933 and 1934 in the number of fourteen year old girls and boys'.<sup>47</sup> While the employment patterns and leisure activities of both

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<sup>47</sup> National Association of Youth Clubs, 'Girls' Clubs News 1911-1981: A Personal Selection of Articles, Anecdotes and Pictures from Club Magazines of the last 70 Years', unpaginated supplement in *Youth Clubs*, 14 (1981). Investigating the needs of young people in 1939, A.E. Morgan reported that there were approximately three and a half million young people aged fourteen to eighteen in Britain. Their numbers had peaked in 1937 (because of a corresponding peak in the birth rate in



young men and women were objects of investigation during these years, concerns about girls were expressed within a specific moral framework related to the extent to which their circumstances were believed to expose them to sexual temptation.

Participation in the labour force was becoming the normal experience of both working-class and middle-class girls. Girls under eighteen accounted for one-sixth of all women workers in 1919.<sup>48</sup> By 1931 over three-quarters of sixteen and seventeen year-old girls were in the labour force, as were half of all fourteen and fifteen year-olds, and seventy-nine per cent of those aged eighteen to twenty.<sup>49</sup> Both girls' and boys' work patterns aroused concern. Their employment in 'blind alley' jobs<sup>50</sup> and the rapidity with which they changed jobs were considered particularly damaging, since they failed to acquire disciplined habits and were exposed less to steadying adult influence. While most discussion of 'blind alley' employment focused on boys, since it was expected that girls would naturally leave the labour force for marriage,<sup>51</sup> it appears that labour turnover was in fact greatest among girls under eighteen; a survey carried out in Leeds in 1938 found that nearly half of them changed jobs frequently, compared to only just over a quarter of boys surveyed.<sup>52</sup> During the 1930s the effect of unemployment on young men and women was also a focus of anxiety. Again, however, the dangers were interpreted differently for young men and women: while discussion about the impact of employment among young men focused on their failure to acquire habits of

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1920) and had then started to decline, leading him to conclude that in future adolescents would acquire 'a scarcity value'. A.E. Morgan, *The Needs of Youth: a Report Made to King George's Jubilee Trust Fund* (London, 1939), pp. 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 168.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>50</sup> i.e. low-skilled occupations which employed young school-leavers for low wages, replacing them with a new generation of school-leavers once they reached 17 or 18.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 49.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 35.

discipline and thus on their future employability (and ability to support a family), concern about young women considered the broader moral impact of unemployment.

Domestic service, the traditional occupational route for young women outside of the major industrial areas, was seen to offer more than just employment. It was represented as a way for working-class girls to equip themselves for marriage and motherhood, as well as offering a substitute for family discipline through employers' regulation of their employees' leisure time. Following the war, working-class girls' increased independence was seen to be demonstrated in their reluctance to return to or take up domestic service. This received widespread and hostile coverage in the daily press, as newspapers claimed to find numerous examples of girls failing to seek work (because of the generosity of the dole paid to them), refusing to take domestic work, or falsely claiming benefit.<sup>53</sup> However, a quarter of girls aged 14-19 still went into domestic service, making it the second largest area of employment after major industries, particularly the textile and clothing industries.<sup>54</sup> The proportion of girls in service increased between 1921 and 1931, largely as a result of Labour Exchange policies which forced many young women to accept domestic work by withdrawing their entitlement to benefit.<sup>55</sup>

Despite this emphasis on domestic service as a respectable occupation for girls,<sup>56</sup> commentators recognised that its conditions could bring girls into moral

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<sup>53</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, pp. 121-132. However, Giles notes that by the end of the nineteenth century observers had commented on the girls' unwillingness to enter domestic service, thus supporting, from another perspective, Woollacott's argument that changes in girls' behaviour identified with the war had in fact pre-dated it. Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life*, p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, pp.189-90.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis notes that inter-war officials administering unemployment benefits made judgments about girls' suitability for service based on their appearance, citing the example of one nineteen-year-old

danger. The majority of girls who ended up in voluntary rescue homes had been in service, and girls identified as prostitutes most commonly cited domestic service as their previous occupation.<sup>57</sup> While commentators such as Burt argued that domestic service attracted girls who were most likely to drift into prostitution because of their temperaments,<sup>58</sup> others cited the conditions of domestic service – its long hours, girls' isolation and loneliness and, in some cases, their vulnerability to seduction or sexual abuse – as contributing to their sexual vulnerability.<sup>59</sup> By the 1930s, the role of employers in regulating servants' leisure time had been moderated, leading Sybil Neville-Rolfe to conclude that the increase in non-residential domestic service, together with the influx of girls working in London shops and offices was contributing to an increase in 'sex-delinquency'.<sup>60</sup>

Other types of employment were also seen to bring specific dangers. The conditions to which girls were exposed in factories and shops led to claims that modern working conditions resulted in mental, physical and moral deterioration.<sup>61</sup> Factory girls were frequently represented as 'rough' and – from a more sympathetic viewpoint – the monotony of their work was believed to account for their unruly and boisterous behaviour outside work.<sup>62</sup> As I will discuss later, youth workers argued that they could compensate for these conditions by offering leisure-time activities

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who was dismissed as unsuitable for domestic service because of 'peroxide hair, plucked eyebrows and make up'. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Hubert Springer, *Moral Evil in London* (London, 1925) p. 111; *Downward Paths: An Inquiry into the Causes Which Contribute to the Making of the Prostitute* (London, 1916), p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Cyril Burt, 'The Causes of Sex-Delinquency in Girls', *Health and Empire*, 1, 4 (1926), p. 259.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, *Downward Paths*, pp. 164-72.

<sup>60</sup> Mrs C. Neville Rolfe, 'Sex-Delinquency' in H. Llewellyn Smith (ed.), *New Survey of London Life and Labour Vol. IX* (London, 1935), p. 294. There is some inconsistency in the way in which this writer (the secretary-general of the British Social Hygiene Council) is cited in various publications and committee reports. Since she is most frequently referred to as Sybil Neville-Rolfe I shall use this version.

<sup>61</sup> H. Durant, *The Problem of Leisure* (London, 1938), cited in Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> See Webb, *Health of Working Girls*, pp. 51-52. Lewis highlights the widespread assumption, even by sympathetic commentators, that factory girls were 'rough' or 'low types'. Lewis, *Women in England*, p.184-85. By the inter-war period, however, the consumer goods' industries (located



that appealed to factory workers. Factory employment was also seen to expose young girls to corrupting conversation and inappropriate knowledge. Birmingham Medical Officer of Health John Robertson, for instance, claimed that contraceptives were openly sold to women working in the city's factories and 'perfectly disgraceful pamphlets' were circulated to and widely read by young unmarried women in factories.<sup>63</sup> Specific occupations such as waitressing or acting were also believed to endanger girls; Burt singled out chorus-girls, programme sellers and waitresses, as well as domestic servants, as being exposed to 'risks and seductions which none but the strong-minded should be suffered to face'.<sup>64</sup> The monotony and low pay which were characteristic of most occupations open to working-class girls were also seen as contributing to girls' sexual immorality. Although discussions of prostitution tended to downplay the direct role of poverty or unemployment,<sup>65</sup> they identified girls' desire for money in order to gratify their 'vanity' and love of 'cheap amusement' as a causative factor,<sup>66</sup> while the life of the prostitute might seem glamorous to girls stuck in monotonous occupations.<sup>67</sup>

During the 1930s unemployment among girls aroused a range of concerns. In addition to the dangers of unemployment itself - seen to lie in the combination of

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mainly in South East England and the Midlands) were offering women new opportunities for work on assembly lines. Glucksmann's account of the development of these industries stresses both their preference for 'girl labour', and the strict discipline imposed on these young workers in at least some firms. Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (London, 1990), pp. 9, 97-101.

<sup>63</sup> Sir John Robertson, 'The Views of a Medical Officer of Health', in Sir James Marchant (ed.), *Medical Views on Birth Control* (London, 1926), pp. 170-71.

<sup>64</sup> Cyril Burt, *The Sub-Normal School-Child: Volume One, the Young Delinquent* (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1927), p. 180.

<sup>65</sup> A 1930s enquiry into the links between prostitution and economic conditions concluded that there was 'no evidence that poverty is in itself the cause of prostitution'. Sybil Neville-Rolfe and F. Semkins, *Poverty and Prostitution comprising Economic Conditions in Relation to Prostitution, by Sybil Neville-Rolfe, O.B.E. and Unemployment and Prostitution of Young Girls by F. Semkins* (London, 1934), p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> Burt, 'Causes of Sex-Delinquency in Girls', p. 269-70.

<sup>67</sup> *Downward Paths*, p. 39.



lack of money with a surplus of leisure - the depression prompted many girls to leave their homes to seek work in London or other cities. Freed from parental and community restraints, these girls were seen to be particularly vulnerable to the unregulated amusements of the city. In particular, girls coming from rural areas, or from Ireland or Wales, were represented as being liable to seduction by men taking advantage of their ignorance.<sup>68</sup> The difficulty of families' maintaining control over girls who were holding down jobs during times of high unemployment while their fathers and brothers were out of work was also highlighted. Responding to comments by a judge that young girls were 'entirely beyond any sort of control', a London probation officer, for instance, claimed that 'when the daughter is contributing as much or more to the family exchequer as her unemployed father, it becomes practically impossible for him to exert his authority'.<sup>69</sup>

Unemployment was seen to pose particular dangers to girls. In addition to specific fears that girls might compensate for their lack of income by bartering sexual favours, unemployed girls were also seen to be at risk from their excess unsupervised leisure time. The use of leisure was increasingly seen as a problem, as concerns about the effect of wartime indiscipline became subsumed in a more general anxiety about young people's lack of parental and other restraints and the emergence of a commercialised leisure culture targeting youth, leading the NBRC to declare that 'the hours of leisure are the hours of danger'.<sup>70</sup> Debate and discussion intensified during the 1930s, when a succession of publications examined the

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<sup>68</sup> See the reports of the NVA's work at railway stations included in its annual reports. In the case of Irish girls, the extent to which pregnant girls left Ireland for England was also stressed.

<sup>69</sup> *The Times*, 22 February 1934; *Reynolds*, 23 February 1934. Press Cuttings: Assaults: Strictures on Girls, 4/NVA, Box 104, S46J, NVA Papers.

<sup>70</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 20.

problem of youth and leisure.<sup>71</sup> By 1939 A.E. Morgan identified conditions of leisure, rather than work, as responsible for the 'waste' of England's youth, leading him to call for urgent action by the educational system and youth organisations to 'stop that rot'.<sup>72</sup>

Concerns about young people's unregulated behaviour, particularly in the urban context, were not of course new, and had led to the development of the boys' and girls' youth clubs movements in the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Youth organisations set out to develop young people's capacities for recreation, in contrast to what they saw as their aimless use of leisure time. Mary Scharlieb is typical in her description of the dangers posed by young people's 'loitering and foolish gossip', which she saw as jeopardising both girls' health (because it did not provide 're-creation' to prepare them for 'refreshing sleep and efficient work') and morality through their exposure to 'dangerous companionship'.<sup>74</sup> Young people's use of the streets for leisure continued to arouse concern among middle-class observers. Writing in 1939, Morgan deplored young men and women's hanging about on the streets to meet each other, describing their 'joking, giggling, teasing, or merely sauntering', as a 'harmless affair but ... a pathetically futile form of recreation'.<sup>75</sup> For girls, in particular, visibility on the streets was associated with sexual immorality; the extent to which class informed observers' readings of girls' behaviour is evident in Gladys Hall's description of the young 'amateur' as adopting either 'a noisy and demonstrative manner' or 'apparently engrossing talk, punctuated by loud laughter'

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<sup>71</sup> Titles included C. Delisle Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World* (London, 1932); Madeline Roof, *Youth and Leisure: A Survey of Girls' Organisations in England and Wales* (Edinburgh, 1935); Durant, *Problem of Leisure*.

<sup>72</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Frank Booton, *Studies in Social Education. Vol 1: Work with Youth 1860-1890* (Hove, 1985), pp. 6-39.

<sup>74</sup> Scharlieb, 'The Moral Training of Modern Girls', p. 121.

<sup>75</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 276.

in order to attract men.<sup>76</sup> While for Hall such behaviour was an indicator of promiscuity, other accounts of working-class courting habits demonstrate clearly that girls' loud or 'forward' public behaviour was accompanied by clearly defined conventions of limited sexual activity.<sup>77</sup>

By the 1920s, however, it was not just unregulated leisure time that was the focus of censure, but the increasingly commercialised nature of leisure provision. In Morgan's phrase, 'never before has youth been so captivated by the lust for exciting but passive pleasures'.<sup>78</sup> Young people, moreover, increasingly had the means to buy such pleasures; according to the *New Survey of London Life and Labour* of 1935, even those living at home retained some of their earnings and could therefore 'seek their own amusements'.<sup>79</sup> While the 'problem' of leisure clearly affected both young men and young women, concerns about young women specifically related to their morality and sexuality. Commentators constantly discussed the dangers that the post-war freedoms exposed young women to, particularly the lure of unsupervised urban amusements - the cinema, dance-hall, and increasingly, the car. In the 1930s, Sybil Neville-Rolfe (secretary-general of the BSHC) contrasted the constant supervision experienced by girls of all classes at the beginning of the century with the current era, in which 'in every social class young women, both at work and at leisure, are in the main independent of any supervision'.<sup>80</sup> Young men

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<sup>76</sup> Hall, *Prostitution*, p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Davies' description of the 'Monkey Parades' of Salford and Manchester in the first half of the twentieth century, in which young men and young women would parade up and down designated streets in order to 'get off' with each other. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 102-08. Giles uses oral history to examine the ways in which working-class women who grew up and married between 1900-1939 negotiated the customs of working-class courtship and the values of respectability to further their own advantage and self-esteem. Judy Giles, "Playing Hard to Get": Working-class Women, Sexuality and Respectability in Britain, 1918-1940, *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), pp. 239-55.

<sup>78</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 416.

<sup>79</sup> Neville Rolfe, 'Sex-Delinquency', p. 295.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295-96.



and women, she claimed, could now meet each other at the dance hall or cinema without incurring moral disapproval.<sup>81</sup>

Young people, according to some contemporary commentators, were forming a distinctive youth culture. Although, as a recent review of a history of youth has warned, we should recognise that ‘each historical period has its own commentators that fear the growing independence of youth’,<sup>82</sup> contemporary observers argued that the social and technological changes were compounding the effects of the First World War to create a distinctive experience of youth.<sup>83</sup> Writing in 1932, C. Delisle Burns argued that some young people aged between fifteen and twenty-five were ‘noticeably different in attitude from what their parents were when they were young’.<sup>84</sup> He attributed this not only to their experience of war and instability during childhood, but to social factors such as changes in education, the cinema, better food and more leisure.<sup>85</sup> Another commentator concluded that young people were ‘only too ready to kick over the traces’, arguing that this was the result not only of the war, but of the development of the ‘internal combustion engine –

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p 295.

<sup>82</sup> Mathew Hilton, reviewing Fowler, *The First Teenagers*, in *Journal of Social History*, 30, 3 (1997), p. 737. Fowler stresses the independence of both young men and young women during the 1920s and 1930s and argues that the origin of the ‘teenager’ should be attributed to this era, rather than the 1950s. However, Hilton finds his use of evidence uncritical, and identifies his lack of consideration of the position of domestic servants as a significant gap. Davies’s study of working-class culture in Salford and Manchester also identifies the emergence of a distinctive ‘teenage’ culture before 1939, in which young people negotiated limited independence within their families. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 82-108.

<sup>83</sup> The influential American reformer Judge Lindsey offered the strongest exposition of this view, arguing that because of technological advances and young people’s economic independence, ‘this revolt of Modern Youth is different; it is the first of its kind’. Judge Ben B. Lindsey, and Wainwright Evans, *The Revolt of Modern Youth* (London, 1928), pp. 158-59. Lindsey’s work received considerable coverage in the medical and lay press, particularly his proposals for ‘companionate marriage’, which would allow young couples without children to dissolve unions more easily. See, for instance reports in the *Lancet*, 17 December 1927, p. 1314, 1 June 1929, p. 1126.

<sup>84</sup> Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World*, p. 133.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33.



which removed the salutary brake of local gossip' together with contraceptives and 'erotic films and books'.<sup>86</sup>

From the First World War onwards, the cinema was believed to be a significant factor shaping the values and behaviour of young people, prompting various national and local investigations. The NCPM's 1917 enquiry into the effect of the cinema concluded that it was having a 'profound influence upon the mental and moral outlook of millions of our young people'.<sup>87</sup> The effect of the cinema, particularly the films emanating from the USA, continued to be a focus of concern, as revealed by a series of enquiries into the impact of cinema upon children undertaken in Birmingham, London, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Birkenhead during the early 1930s.<sup>88</sup> Although not totally opposed to the cinema, both Cyril Burt and Morgan deplored its moral impact; Burt argued that it created 'a yearning for a life of gaiety', while Morgan believed it had a 'cumulative effect on the nation of setting up a body of false standards of desire'.<sup>89</sup> Although they acknowledged that young people had been exposed to bad influences in the past, through 'the bloods, the sentimental novelettes and the melodramas', they believed that the cinema had far greater effect because of its popularity and its greater realism.<sup>90</sup>

Anxieties focused on the cinema's depiction of sex. While the NCPM's inquiry found only a weak association between the cinema and juvenile crime,<sup>91</sup> it

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<sup>86</sup> Semkins, 'Unemployment and Prostitution of Young Girls', p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> NCPM, *The Cinema*, p. xxi.

<sup>88</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (London, 1984), chapter four. The negative tone of the Birmingham enquiry, which was supported by leading local figures including the Birmingham's medical officer of health, the vice-chancellor of Birmingham University and Dr Potts, who was psychological advisor to the Birmingham Justices, is indicated by Dr. Potts' description of it as aiming to find out 'how far unhappy homes, divorce, illegitimacy and disease were due to the pictures'. Despite its local support, it failed to secure government action.

<sup>89</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, p. 148; Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 242.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> NCPM, *The Cinema*, p. xlvii.

expressed concern about the effect of films on young people's moral values arising from the 'suggestiveness' with which many of them dealt with 'sex relations'.<sup>92</sup> The effect of this on young women's morals aroused particular concern, since girls formed the mainstay of the cinema audience; according to Mass Observation in the late 1930s, cinema enthusiasts were 'young, working class, urban, and more often female than male'.<sup>93</sup> Young women were seen to be particularly likely to take the wrong messages from films; a member of the British Board of Film Censors told the NPCM that films should not depict women leading 'immoral lives', since the presentation of 'gaiety, luxury and admiration' might attract 'young girls of weak principles' regardless of the more explicit moral warnings offered by the plot.<sup>94</sup>

Historians have highlighted the role of cinema and other aspects of mass consumer culture in creating a distinctive image of girlhood during the inter-war years, through which young women negotiated their lives within the twin frameworks of modernity and femininity, change and continuity. Through cinema, particularly the images of Hollywood, girls gained access to experiences and images beyond their immediate circumstances. Kuhn has examined the role of 1930s cinema in constructing modern models of youthful femininity, which informed young women's 'experiments with clothes, cosmetics and courtship behaviour'.<sup>95</sup> Alexander also argues that after leaving school, girls' adoption of 'modern' youth customs such as smoking, using make-up, drinking, dancing and following contemporary fashions allowed to them to assert their individuality and differentiate

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

<sup>93</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Cinema Culture and Femininity', p. 178.

<sup>94</sup> NPCM, *The Cinema*, p. 105.

<sup>95</sup> Kuhn, 'Cinema Culture and Femininity', p. 188.

themselves from their parents.<sup>96</sup> Giles cites an interviewee who recalled that her family simply referred to her as 'Girlie' until she started work, when she was able to insist on being called by her actual name.<sup>97</sup> Alexander concludes that the inter-war period was a time when 'women's sense of themselves - indeed what it meant to be a woman' was changing.<sup>98</sup>

Other commercial developments also served to provide girls with a sense of identity. Tinkler has explored how the burgeoning girls' magazine market constructed 'new and updated versions of girlhood and femininity consistent with contemporary conditions and demands on girls growing up'. The audience for these magazines was differentiated by age, class and their position in what Tinkler has termed the 'heterosexual career' – their assumed and encouraged progression towards marriage and motherhood.<sup>99</sup> Contemporary commentators also highlighted the role of fashion in helping to create a common experience of youth for girls, in which class differences were obscured. Burns claimed that 'at least in leisure, it is difficult to distinguish the factory-worker from the doctor's daughter',<sup>100</sup> while Mary Hamilton declared that 'Clothes, hat, shoes, stockings, furs, bag, scarf – all are standardized; everybody wears the same'.<sup>101</sup>

These explorations of cultural constructions of girlhood are underpinned by a concept of adolescence as a transitional stage between childhood and the full responsibilities of adulthood. Some feminist historians have queried whether this

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<sup>96</sup> Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London', pp. 261-67. Giles also draws upon oral history to explore the meanings of girlhood in inter-war Britain. See Giles, "Playing Hard to Get".

<sup>97</sup> Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain*, pp. 118-19.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman', p. 247.

<sup>99</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>100</sup> Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World*, p. 25.

<sup>101</sup> Hamilton, 'Changes in Social Life', p. 234. Alexander, however, qualifies this, noting the ways in which working-class girls improvised to imitate the fashions they could not afford. 'Becoming a Woman', p. 263.

concept has any relevance to girls, since they were much less likely than their brothers 'to have been allowed a period of legitimate freedom, however transitory, removed from adult surveillance and unencumbered by responsibility for domestic chores'.<sup>102</sup> Tinkler endorses Dyhouse's characterisation of adolescence as 'essentially a masculine concept'.<sup>103</sup> However, it is clear from Tinkler's own discussion of girls' magazines that they reworked definitions of feminine behaviour precisely to legitimise a transitional period of fun and relative freedom for girls before they undertake the full responsibilities of womanhood. Tinkler comments that magazines were one of the few mediums to specifically address girls, and points to the letters received by magazines as evidence of girls' need for advice.<sup>104</sup> Some of this correspondence would seem to validate girls' experience of adolescence; there are, for instance, examples of 'agony aunts' supporting girls against over-strict parents in matters such as courtship and having fun.<sup>105</sup> While Fowler's study of inter-war youth pays little attention to gender differences, Davies concludes that although working-class girls in Salford and Manchester remained subject to greater parental control concerning their behaviour and appearance than their brothers, the years between starting work and getting married still represented a time of relative affluence and independence.<sup>106</sup> Despite Roberts's stress on the continuity of experiences and expectations between working-class young women and their parents in Lancashire between 1890 and 1940, she too identifies the years between fourteen

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<sup>102</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 119.

<sup>103</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 72.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8. However, other responses quoted by Tinkler underline the need for young people to accept parental authority.

<sup>106</sup> Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 82-108.



and twenty-five as a period of relative independence for working-class girls.<sup>107</sup>

Contemporary research into the leisure-time activities of adolescent girls and boys also substantiates the existence of a period of at least limited independence for working-class girls. This found that although fourteen year-old girls were still expected to do domestic chores, unlike their brothers, by the age of sixteen their duties had lessened, leaving them with more time for leisure activities such as cinema visits where, according to the researchers, they engaged in 'love-making'.<sup>108</sup> Girls' period of personal independence therefore appears to have been delayed rather than denied completely; parental encouragement of heterosexual relationships at an appropriate age offered them some legitimate freedom.

## Conclusion

This chapter has set out to provide a framework for the rest of this study. It has examined the ways in which concerns about social change resulted in particular attention being paid to girls throughout the inter-war years. While much of this focused specifically upon girls' sexual activity, all aspects of their lives were scrutinised, with their conditions of work and, increasingly, their use of leisure time

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<sup>107</sup> Roberts, *Woman's Place*, pp. 39-41. Roberts concludes that working-class children were 'brought up by, and developed into, a conforming and conformist generation'. *Ibid.*, p. 11. While there may be specific local factors encouraging this continuity between generations, her account gives little consideration to contemporary perceptions of change, or the ways in which young women's circumstances, aspirations and experience changed – or were represented as changing – in the fifty years of her study. For another account which stresses the ways in which working-class girls' experiences and training in the home encouraged them to be deferential see Pam Taylor, 'Daughters and Mothers - Maids and Mistresses: Domestic Service Between the Wars', in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London and Birmingham, 1979), pp. 121-139. Dyhouse's study of the nineteenth and early twentieth century also argues that mothers provided girls with an 'image of how their own lives might take shape'. Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 30.

<sup>108</sup> H.E.O. James and F.T. Moore, 'Adolescent Leisure in a Working-Class District', *Occupational Psychology*, 14, 3 (1940), p. 137.

seen as particularly important. New forms of consumer culture, which allowed girls access to images and experiences beyond their immediate experiences, also encouraged the development of a distinctive identity of girlhood.

These discussions concerning the circumstances of girls' lives were increasingly underpinned by the discourses of adolescence. While young women – and their families – might perceive adolescence as a time of limited personal independence, professional discourses were increasingly representing adolescence as a time of tumultuous change during which the individual was particularly susceptible to both positive and negative influences. Although adolescence was represented as a time of vulnerability for both young men and women, the nature of this vulnerability, and development towards maturity, was determined by gender. Concern about girls' behaviour was increasingly underpinned by two complementary discourses. The increasing focus on adolescence as a period of instability and vulnerability provided a rationale for new efforts to shape the development of young people, including active intervention into their lives; in the case of young women, the need for such intervention was primarily determined by their class and their sexual activity. At the same time, a range of discourses and agencies stressed the relationship between individual and national health, and the need, in the context of post-war social changes, to equip young people to regulate their own behaviour based on individual moral choice informed by science and medicine. These issues will be explored in the next chapters.

## **Chapter Two: Managing a ‘Critical Period of Life’: the Problem of Adolescence**

The changing circumstances of young women’s lives, examined in the previous chapter, provided the context for an increasingly interventionist approach into the management of their behaviour. The years of adolescence came to be seen as a critical period during which young people’s future would be determined, and during which they were believed to be open to a range of influences. This chapter will explore some of the ways in which conceptualisations of adolescence were used to legitimise greater intervention into the lives of young people in general, and young women in particular. Although the existence of adolescence as a formative stage of life went largely uncontested, its definition was fluid, and I will consider the ways in which the significance ascribed to it varied according to gender and class, providing the basis for a range of professional groupings to expand their role in managing young people’s development towards adulthood. While adolescence was seen as posing difficulties for both young men and young women, it was represented as a particularly crucial stage of girls’ development towards maturity. This was interpreted differently according to class. For working-class girls, adolescence was seen as a time of immediate danger, during which they needed to be prevented from engaging in premature sexual activity. In contrast, discussions of adolescence among middle-class girls considered their development in terms of their effective adjustment to their future heterosexual and reproductive role.

## Theories of adolescence

American educationalist G. Stanley Hall is usually credited with the ‘discovery’ of adolescence.<sup>1</sup> His theories were characterised by three main ideas: recapitulation – the belief that individual development mimicked that of the human race, progressing from supposedly primitive culture to modern industrial civilisation; an emphasis on adolescent ‘storm and stress’; and the overriding importance of the idea of puberty within adolescent development.<sup>2</sup> His massive two-volume text, *Adolescence*, drew on a range of religious, scientific and medical discourses. Griffin argues that Hall’s incorporation of diverse, often contradictory discourses was a major feature in the ideological influence of his work,<sup>3</sup> and my discussion will examine ways in which the concept of adolescence lent itself to a range of interpretations. Hall’s theories were widely disseminated in both Britain and America,<sup>4</sup> and his work was popularised by eugenicist Dr. J.W. Slaughter, whose short book, *The Adolescent*, aimed to make his ideas more accessible to teachers and parents.<sup>5</sup> Introducing Slaughter’s text, educationalist Professor Findlay stated that it should be read not just by those concerned with the education and welfare of adolescents, but by everyone who is ‘sensitive to larger movements of

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p. 28. Griffin, however, challenges this, arguing that Hall’s work represented a synthesis of late nineteenth-century ideologies around education, sexuality, family life and employment, reflecting a ‘combination of discourses around “race”, sexuality, gender, class, nation and age which were very much rooted in a specific historical moment’. Griffin, *Representations of Youth*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Springhall, *Coming of Age*, pp. 30-34; Griffin, *Representations of Youth*, pp. 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> See Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, pp. 115-38 for a discussion of Hall’s influence on British understandings of adolescence in girls.

<sup>5</sup> Slaughter, *The Adolescent*. This had been reprinted six times by 1929, and was recommended for reading by YWCA youth workers, among others.



scientific inquiry'.<sup>6</sup> The concept of adolescence thus apparently offered scientific legitimacy to a range of approaches to directing young people's development.

While Hall's work and its popularisation predated the war, it became increasingly influential during the inter-war period. As Penny Tinkler has put it, the years 1920 to 1950 were 'notable for attempts to demarcate the contours of adolescence as a period of transition between childhood and adult maturity characterised by emotional, physical, psychological and philosophical change'.<sup>7</sup> Doctors, psychologists and educationalists expounded on the nature of adolescence for both professional and lay audiences, leading Cyril Burt to declare in 1930 that 'No period of mental growth has been so intensively studied as this critical phase'.<sup>8</sup>

Hall's theories did not receive universal support. Some contemporaries rejected an essentialist construction of adolescence, most notably anthropologist Margaret Mead, whose study of Samoan youth argued that adolescence was culturally defined.<sup>9</sup> By 1930, Burt claimed that some of Hall's ideas, particularly those concerning heredity, had recently been subjected to 'considerable criticism and modification'. But, said Burt, the 'facts' outlined by Hall remained valid.<sup>10</sup> The characterisation of adolescence as a critical time of life during which future adult

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cyril Burt, 'The Contribution of Psychology to Present-Day Problems: II. The Young Adult', *Health and Empire*, 5, 2 (1930), p. 87. Although now largely remembered for his supposed use of false evidence to support hereditarian theories concerning intelligence, Burt (1883-1971) was a significant figure in the development of child psychology. His appointment to London County Council in 1913 earned him the title of 'the first official psychologist in the world', and gave him a platform from which to train others for similar posts. His three major textbooks of the inter-war years – *Mental and Scholastic Tests* (1921), *The Young Delinquent* (1925) and *The Backward Child* (1937) were influential. He was a member of the Eugenics Society and the British Social Hygiene Council, and a frequent witness to official and semi-official inquiries exploring issues of adolescence and delinquency. See Deborah Thom, 'Wishes, Anxieties, Play, and Gestures: Child Guidance in Inter-War England', in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880-1940* (London, 1992), pp. 200-219.

<sup>9</sup> Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Burt, 'Contribution of Psychology to Present-Day Problems', p. 87.

development would be determined pervaded both medical and educational discourse. Sex educationalist Norah March is typical in describing adolescence as the 'great formative time of life' upon which depended a 'healthy, happy, well-balanced and well-conditioned maturity',<sup>11</sup> and, conversely, as a period 'fraught with many dangers'.<sup>12</sup> Discussing the 'problems of adolescence', Dr. Sybille Yates claimed that many young people found 'the strains of adolescence too much; they cannot get past this stage without coming a crash'.<sup>13</sup> The most extreme evidence of the dangers posed by adolescence was seen to lie in the association of the years between fifteen and twenty-five with the onset of some forms of severe mental illness, notably schizophrenia and manic-depression.<sup>14</sup>

### Defining the adolescent

The conceptualisation of adolescence was clearly informed by both gender and class. Girls occupied an ambivalent position within the discourses of adolescence, being both ignored by and central to its construction. Hall's construction of adolescence was based on middle-class American boys. He makes his focus on boys explicit in an introduction to a 1921 publication on the adolescent girl, in which he describes the 'psyche of the budding girl' as 'about the very most unknown of all the great domains in psychology'. In contrast, he said, 'he had tried to summarize' what was known about 'this crisis in a boy's life'.<sup>15</sup> Hall excludes

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<sup>11</sup> Norah March, *Towards Racial Health: a Handbook for Parents, Teachers and Social Workers on the Training of Boys and Girls* (London, 1918, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1915). pp. 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Lancet*, 29 April 1933, p. 939.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Hall, *Adolescence*, 1, pp. 264-282; *BMJ*, 8 December 1923, pp. 1090-95, 24 July 1926, pp. 151-55; *Lancet*, 19 October 1935, p. 905.

<sup>15</sup> Preface to Phyllis Blanchard, *The Care of the Adolescent Girl: a Book for Teachers, Parents, and Guardians* (London, 1921), p. xii.

women from the full range of adolescent developmental processes. Women, he says, are 'nearer the race', and therefore less individualised.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, 'woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as man does' since she remained open to all interests and emotions.<sup>17</sup> Slaughter also excludes girls from his discussion of the 'storm and stress' of adolescence, since they had only a 'minor interest' in intellectual matters.<sup>18</sup>

This association of adolescence with masculine development has been perpetuated by historians of youth. Gillis, indeed, argues that the 'invention' of adolescence in England was the result of the reform of the public schools in line with a changed masculine ideal during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> As a result of such gendered and class-based constructions, early histories of youth and adolescence focused almost exclusively on young men, with the omission of girls regretfully acknowledged in introductions or alluded to in a footnote.<sup>20</sup> More recently, historians of girlhood have considered how definitions of adolescence and maturity exclude women. Dyhouse argues that in a society based on the sexual division of labour, women cannot achieve adult autonomy, since their maturity is equated with the acceptance of economic dependence on men through marriage.<sup>21</sup>

Yet despite this focus on adolescence as a male process, Hall offers a gender and class determined representation in which adolescence is both critically important and difficult for girls. Girls' adolescent development was more important than that

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<sup>16</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 2, p. 616.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 624.

<sup>18</sup> Slaughter, *The Adolescent*, p. 53. While Slaughter is less opposed to higher education for women than Hall, he still concludes that motherhood (actual or vicarious) remains the 'central fact of a woman's life'. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Gillis, *Youth and History*, pp. 95-131.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii; Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 117.

of boys, since their health was vital to the 'welfare of the race'.<sup>22</sup> Two chapters of *Adolescence* are devoted specifically to women. Chapter seven considers 'periodicity' (menstruation) while chapter seventeen discusses 'adolescent girls and their education'. Together they propound a deterministic view of female development in which, as a contemporary feminist critic of Hall put it, women are portrayed as 'pathological invalids in a universe merciless to women as a sex'.<sup>23</sup> In particular, Hall's lengthy discussion of girls' education draws upon a 'consensus of professional opinion'<sup>24</sup> to stress the differences between men and women and to condemn feminist approaches to education, particularly higher education, as ignoring the 'law of sexual differences'.<sup>25</sup>

Hall also portrayed adolescence as posing particular dangers to girls' mental and physical health. Discussing mental illness, he draws upon a range of studies to suggest that girls are at greater risk of mental breakdown during adolescence.<sup>26</sup> His lengthy discussion of girls' education argues that the demands placed on girls' bodies at adolescence meant that they need to be protected from overwork and excessive physical activity in order to devote all their energies to the essential job of establishing a regular menstrual cycle.<sup>27</sup> For Hall, then, girls were included in the discourse of adolescence and adulthood only in terms of their future role as mothers; they were excluded from the discourses of intellectual change and development. It

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<sup>22</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 2, p. 637.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 2, p. 583.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 617. Hall believed that higher education damaged young women's menstrual pattern. He acknowledges some disagreement about this, as many female college students reported that they did not experience any problems, but concluded that their evidence was of little value, since they were unlikely to confess to pain if this would jeopardise their educational prospects. He therefore decided that the 'doctor's objective and personal tests and opinions are nearer the truth', leading him to conclude, tortuously, that 'it is, to say the very least, not yet proven that the higher education of women is not injurious to their health'. *Ibid.*, p. 589.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 1, pp. 264-78.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 2, pp. 561-647.



is clear that this construction of adolescence is both informed by, and serves to reinforce, specific constructions of masculinity and femininity. As Dyhouse summarises, Hall characterises adolescence as a time of challenge, ambition and growth for boys, but as a period of instability for girls.<sup>28</sup>

Many commentators followed Hall in this representation of girls as particularly vulnerable to the stresses of adolescence.<sup>29</sup> As a result, while many works on adolescence largely ignored girls or referred to them as an afterthought, others set out to explore the specific nature of female adolescence.<sup>30</sup> Many of these works were written by women, providing them with an opportunity to engage in arguments about the nature of femininity and the role of women, and to enhance the importance of women professionals in understanding and managing adolescence in girls. These female constructions of adolescence in girls followed Hall in many respects. They stressed the primacy of securing women's reproductive role and the importance of motherhood for the 'race', and stressed the difficulties of adolescence for girls. Yet, as will be seen, they also offered significant challenges to Hall's arguments, particularly in relation to the incapacitating effects of menstruation on girls.

Mary Scharlieb depicted adolescence as particularly challenging for girls, since puberty was delicately balanced between the normal and the abnormal and any

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<sup>28</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Dyhouse notes that by the early twentieth century there was a growing consensus that 'adolescence constituted a period of extreme difficulty for girls'. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> British publications included Katharine C. Dewar, *The Girl* (London, 1920); Blanchard, *Care of the Adolescent Girl*; Evelyn Saywell, *The Growing Girl, her Development and Training* (London, 1922); Mary Chadwick, *Adolescent Girlhood* (London, 1932). American publications available in the UK included William I. Thomas, *The Unadjusted Girl, With Cases and Standpoint for Behavior Analysis* (Montclair, New Jersey, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1923); Lindsey and Evans, *Revolt of Modern Youth*, which devoted considerable attention to the 'Girl Question'; and Elsie M. Smithies, *Case Studies of Normal Adolescent Girls* (New York and London, 1933).

sudden excitement was 'likely to lead to disaster'.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, a collection of essays edited by Scharlieb included contributions entitled 'The Care of Adolescent Boys' and 'The Problem of the Adolescent Girl'.<sup>32</sup> In her introduction, Scharlieb reinforces the point, describing the problems of adolescence in girls as 'very similar, but still more urgent and difficult' to those experienced by boys, and claiming that the author understands girls' 'peculiar and varied psychology as far as anyone can be said to understand it'.<sup>33</sup> No corresponding statement is made about the difficulty of understanding boys. A similar 'common-sense' understanding of adolescence as more problematic for girls is offered by the writers of a handbook on girls' clubs: 'Girls, it will be admitted by most people, are more difficult to understand during adolescence than boys.'<sup>34</sup>

American psychologist Phyllis Blanchard, a pupil of Hall, offered a dramatic perspective on the difficulties of female adolescence. Blanchard mixed the discourses of psychoanalysis and racial welfare to argue that adolescent girls experienced conflict because the attainment of adult femininity demanded that they sacrifice their own individuality. Women's role in society, she claimed, depended on the ability of the adolescent girl to pass through

her great crisis sanely and normally, to emerge from the years of her probation a true woman, strengthened by the bitter conflict which she has undergone, and ready to cast aside all thoughts of self in the interests of humanity and of the race.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 190.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Scharlieb (ed.), *Sexual Problems of To-Day* (London, circa 1924). My emphasis. Tinkler also highlights this difference.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>34</sup> Gertrude and Godfrey Pain, *Girls' Clubs: a Practical Handbook for Workers among Girls of Eleven to Fourteen, Including Games and List of Yarns* (London, 1932), p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchard, *Care of the Adolescent Girl*, p. 24.

A similar depiction of the adolescent years as a time of conflict for girls until they understood that 'woman reaches her full stature along the lines of self-sacrifice' was offered by Edith Saywell, in her more accessible text *The Growing Girl*.<sup>36</sup>

Blanchard and Saywell thus endorse the vision of adult femininity offered by Hall, but stress the difficulties it brings during adolescence. This, it should be noted, is in sharp contrast to Slaughter's assurance that the girl's 'narrow limits of choice' concerning her occupation of the future (i.e. motherhood) 'save her from many difficult problems and serve to make her choice a continuous one'.<sup>37</sup>

Assertions of 'narrow limits' for women did not go unchallenged. Sex educationalist Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, for instance, while stressing the need to educate girls for their future role as mothers, briskly dismissed as prejudice the objections raised by 'many estimable men' to girls' education, employment or athletics.<sup>38</sup> In *Adolescent Girlhood*, Mary Chadwick explicitly rejected the views of 'some psychologists or medical men' that the female mind remains at a childish or adolescent stage.<sup>39</sup> Such views of womanhood, she argues, are the result of a specific cultural (and, though she does not say so here, a specific class) ideal, since it is '*the cultivation* of this particular type of woman, conservative, clinging and docile' which has 'led to the belief that the woman is a more primitive and rudimentary being, possessed of a more simple and childish intelligence, than the man'.<sup>40</sup> She further criticises male medical perspectives on female adolescence as

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Slaughter, *The Adolescent*, p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, *Seven Stages of Childhood* (London, 1937), pp. 216-17.

<sup>39</sup> Chadwick, *Adolescent Girlhood*, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152. Stress in the original.

underestimating its difficulties,<sup>41</sup> and for their assumption that the adolescent girl is filled 'with keen pleasure' by the changes taking place in her body.<sup>42</sup>

Chadwick's depiction of female adolescence stresses the need to engage with the totality of girls' lives. This reflects both conflicting gender and professional interests. The 'medical men' Chadwick criticises are incapable of understanding adolescent girls because their contact is restricted to specific medical settings. In contrast, Chadwick writes as someone who has had 'personal contact with a very large number of girls at this critical age'.<sup>43</sup> Chadwick's background appears to have been in nursing (she was a member of the Royal College of Nursing), offering, it might be claimed, a more rounded understanding of girls' lives.<sup>44</sup> Her challenges, however, are addressed to women as well as men. She criticises women teachers or doctors (who she describes as having 'masculinity complexes') who believe that puberty should not cause 'physical pain or mental conflict' and therefore make no allowances for the stress suffered by girls in their charge.<sup>45</sup>

Chadwick stresses the difficulties of adolescence for girls of all classes, describing it as a time of 'severe conflicts', frequent nervous breakdown and suffering.<sup>46</sup> In stressing its difficulties, she clearly seeks to act as an advocate for the interests of girls, arguing that their problems do not receive the 'attention or understanding' that they deserve.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, she notes that 'there is usually more outspoken hostility awakened by adolescent manifestations in the girl than the boy',

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Review of *Adolescent Girlhood* in *Health and Empire*, 8, 1 (1933), p. 65. The reviewer praised her 'remarkable insight into the difficulties and problems which face the child'.

<sup>44</sup> Her previous titles are cited as *Difficulties in Child Development*, *Nursing Psychological Patients*, and *Psychology for Nurses*. She also wrote two specific works on menstruation.

<sup>45</sup> Chadwick, *Adolescent Girlhood*, p. 236.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138-39. Her discussion, however, focuses on middle-class girls; her chapter on school life, for instance, focuses on girls in single-sex secondary or boarding schools. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-40.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



although both demonstrated ‘similar exaggerations, vanities, and efforts at ruthless self-expression’.<sup>48</sup> However, despite this sympathetic approach and the rejection of some claims about the limitations of adult womanhood, she follows Hall in her preoccupation with the overwhelming demands their biological development makes of girls, thus pathologising female adolescence. Her disclaimer in the final chapter that adolescence is relatively easy for many girls does little to dispel this.<sup>49</sup> This is underlined by the *Health and Empire* reviewer, who advises those who think that *Adolescent Girlhood* deals with ‘the girl who is perhaps not quite normal’, that ‘if we only knew the whole truth, probably even the most apparently normal have had some of the difficulties with which the writer deals’.<sup>50</sup>

Female adolescence thus offered a site for working out arguments about the nature of femininity and the role of women, as well as promoting contesting gender and professional interests. The characterisation of adolescence as a period of particular difficulty for girls offered a focus for enhancing the status of those who claimed special insight into the development and needs of girls, and I will discuss the incorporation of understandings of adolescence into youth work later. For girls, however, the depiction of the difficulties of adolescence, even from a sympathetic perspective, served to stress the need for adult intervention to manage their development.

Just as discussions of the significance of adolescence for girls offered different emphases, so too was there a lack of consensus about the age range encompassed by adolescence. While its existence as a period of difficulty and vulnerability was increasingly taken for granted (and remains fundamental to most

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>50</sup> Review of *Adolescent Girlhood* in *Health and Empire*, 8, 1 (1933), pp. 66-67.

contemporary discussions of youth<sup>51</sup>) its precise demarcations were fluid and open to a wide range of interpretations. Historians such as Springhall and Hendrick have noted the difficulty in establishing precise boundaries for adolescence.<sup>52</sup> They fail, however, to consider the extent to which this imprecision served to enhance the strength of the concept in explaining and regulating young people's development and behaviour.

Springhall argues that the modern concept of 'adolescence', equated with the teen years, can be distinguished from an earlier understanding of 'youth' which extended from the mid-teens to the mid-twenties.<sup>53</sup> However, contemporary debates do not support this distinction. Hall himself had characterised adolescence as comprising the years from fourteen to twenty-four,<sup>54</sup> and commentators, particularly doctors and psychologists, offered a range of different reasons to support their contention that adolescence extended well into the mid-twenties. Scharlieb and Sibley believed that adolescence might last 'even up to twenty-five years', at which time the individual was 'approximating to the adult type'.<sup>55</sup> Dr. Helen Boyle claimed that adolescence spanned the years from '13 to 21 or even 25, for the brain is believed not to complete its growth till 25'.<sup>56</sup> Dr. Sybille Yates defined it as the years between fourteen and twenty-one, but added that this limit 'is necessarily arbitrary, and can be extended both ways, as adolescence does not suddenly begin or end'.<sup>57</sup> Cyril Burt went further in defining the end of adolescence as a gradual process, since the 'whole cycle is not over until the young adult is married, and has

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<sup>51</sup> See Jeffs and Smith, 'The Problem of "Youth" for Youth Work', for a critique of age essentialism.

<sup>52</sup> Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p. 7, Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Springhall, *Coming of Age*, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 1, p. xix.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Scharlieb and F. Arthur Sibly, *Youth and Sex: Dangers and Safeguards for Girls and Boys* (London, 1913), p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> A. Helen Boyle, 'The Unstable Adolescent Girl (*Not* the Mental Defective)', *The Journal of State Medicine*, 41 (January-December, 1933), p. 708. Emphasis in the original.

founded a home and family of his own'.<sup>58</sup> Such a definition clearly conflates physiological change with the social expectations equated with (male) adulthood.

Other commentators, however, interpreted adolescence more narrowly. The National Birth-Rate Commission report *Youth and the Race*, which considered the moral education of the adolescent, did not define what it understood by adolescence but implicitly associated it with the end of compulsory schooling at fourteen. Similarly, A.E. Morgan's discussion of the 'needs of youth' defined adolescents as 'the boys and girls most of whom have left school but who are not adults: for simplicity those who are fourteen years of age but not eighteen'.<sup>59</sup>

This divergence in definitions of 'adolescence' reveals two different, but complementary perspectives: adolescence as a stage of development, and adolescents as a group whose behaviour needs to be managed.<sup>60</sup> What these perspectives share is the representation of adolescence as a process of 'becoming' rather than 'being'. This process could be actively directed. According to Dr. D.K. Henderson, superintendent of Glasgow Royal Mental Hospital, adolescence was a 'period of plasticity and elasticity, a time when good or bad habits are most easily cultivated, when a step is taken either in the right or wrong direction, and when adjustments and adaptations are most easily effected'.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, it is the lack of precise definition of adolescence that gives it its significance: it is the period during which development can be shaped. The concept is therefore circular; adolescence ends when an individual is seen to have completed the process of

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<sup>57</sup> *Lancet*, 29 April 1933, p. 939

<sup>58</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, p. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> See Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 115.

<sup>61</sup> *BMJ*, 8 December 1923, p. 1091.

becoming, whether this has resulted in satisfactory or unsatisfactory entry into adulthood.

The way in which this process was managed among girls, however, was determined by class. In general, medical and psychological discussion of adolescence as a stage of development tended to adopt a broad age range, and, implicitly or explicitly to focus on the progress of middle-class girls towards heterosexual maturity. The circumstances of most middle-class girls' lives meant that they were considered to be protected from premature engagement in sex. Instead, professional concern focused on the possibility that the heterosexual development of young women from these backgrounds might become interrupted or distorted, particularly through their experience of masturbation or same-sex relationships. Discussion therefore focused on the ways in which their future sexuality might be guided along the right lines. In contrast, discussion of adolescents as a group reflects concerns about the undisciplined and unsupervised behaviour of working-class girls. The major dangers facing these girls were seen to be those associated with premature sexual activity. It was their current behaviour, in which their heterosexuality was all too evident, which offered cause for concern. This is not to suggest that working-class girls did not masturbate or develop same-sex relationships, or that middle-class girls did not engage in heterosexual activity – indeed, popular representations of the 'flapper' and the 'bright young things' of the 1920s depicted middle and upper-class girls as engaging in hectic and frivolous lifestyles which might include sex. Rather, the discourses through which concerns about young women's sexual irregularities were identified and represented, and the responses they evoked, were determined by class. Interventions directed primarily at working-class girls therefore focused on institutional protection and control, while



those directed at middle-class girls stressed the role of medical, psychological and educational approaches to shaping their development towards adulthood.

### **Managing adolescent behaviour**

For most social reformers, it was not adolescence as a stage of development which mattered, so much as adolescents as a group whose behaviour needed to be managed. Educationalists and welfare workers therefore tended to adopt a narrow definition of adolescence, reflecting their concern with the practicalities of controlling the behaviour of young people. Anna Davin has discussed the extent to which the nineteenth and early twentieth century promoted the concept of childhood dependency, and the role of compulsory schooling in enforcing and prolonging this period of dependency.<sup>62</sup> With the establishment of a uniform school-leaving age of fourteen through the 1918 Education Act,<sup>63</sup> attention focused on young people over this age. The discourse of adolescence now offered a scientific rationale for raising the school-leaving age or otherwise extending the period during which young people remained in some form of education. Significantly, the Board of Education report usually referred to as the 'Hadow report' was actually entitled 'the education of the adolescent'; this recommended raising the school-leaving age to fifteen to give the education system 'larger opportunities of moulding the lives of boys and girls during the critical years of early adolescence'.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London, 1996).

<sup>63</sup> Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, pp. 219-20. The Act had also set up a system of continuation classes for young people aged 14 to 18 (although the introduction of classes for 16-18 year-olds was postponed). However, according to Hendrick a combination of financial restraint, local authority inertia and opposition from business resulted in the failure of this approach to extending the reach of the education system.

<sup>64</sup> Board of Education, *Report of the Consultative Committee on the Education of the Adolescent* (London, 1926), p. 149.

This representation of adolescence as a period whose dangers were exacerbated by the cessation of schooling and consequent premature independence was widely shared. Burt suggested that 'adolescent trouble' might be attributed to the 'fact that the child is anticipating becoming an independent wage earner, quite as much as with the fact of newly emerging instincts'.<sup>65</sup> Psychologists, he argued, would therefore like to see 'the years of instruction and of school supervision prolonged so far as possible, in the hope of covering the critical period of adolescence'.<sup>66</sup> More forcefully, Morgan concluded that the 'only solution of almost every problem of adolescence' was to raise the school-leaving age to sixteen, and introduce a compulsory system of part-time continued education up to the age of eighteen.<sup>67</sup>

Discussion of adolescence in these terms clearly referred to working-class young people. Giving evidence to the National Birth-Rate Commission, L.C. Barker claimed that 'the most serious aspect of adolescence is that period in the life of the working-class child'.<sup>68</sup> Morgan explicitly excluded from his discussion the small proportion of fourteen to eighteen year olds who were still at school, since they were 'cared for by the educational services'; his study therefore focused on the 'great mass of boys and girls who are floating vaguely between tutelage and responsibility'.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike middle-class young people, working-class adolescents were seen to be unfairly exposed to a range of temptations at an early age. The NBRC concluded that 'modern societies have been conspicuously neglectful of their duty to

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<sup>65</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 301.

<sup>66</sup> Burt, 'The Contribution of Psychology to Present-Day Problems', p. 93.

<sup>67</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 224.

<sup>68</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 1.

adolescence'.<sup>70</sup> Except for a fortunate few, young people were 'suddenly thrown into ... industrial life, not only without protection, or experience, or sound advice, but with money to spend and the city to suggest all manner of unwise ways in which to spend it'.<sup>71</sup> Scharlieb contrasted the experience of girls of the 'educated classes' for whom school or college until the age of eighteen or nineteen prevented 'premature development of sex consciousness' with that of the vast majority of fourteen year olds who left school with undeveloped 'mental and moral natures'.<sup>72</sup>

The meaning of adolescence was therefore quite different for working-class and middle-class young people. The existence of an adolescent period had been defined by Hall and Slaughter as a feature of modern civilised societies. As Slaughter declared, 'civilisation and a prolongation of adolescence are found together'.<sup>73</sup> He therefore claimed that there was an inverse correlation between the level of civilisation and the speed of transition from adulthood to childhood.<sup>74</sup> Such a construction of racial progress could be readily translated in class terms. Working-class young people were perceived to pass rapidly from childhood to adulthood without an appropriate transition period. Social reformers therefore sought to create this period, to extend the dependency of working-class youth in line with that experienced by their more sheltered middle-class counterparts.<sup>75</sup> As Dr. C.J. Bond argued in his evidence to the NBRC, the state should 'concern itself *more and more*

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<sup>70</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Scharlieb, *How to Enlighten our Children: A Book for Parents* (London, 1921, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1918), pp. 47, 50.

<sup>73</sup> Slaughter, *The Adolescent*, p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Humphries' oral history of childhood and youth notes that few of his working-class interviewees recalled any personal crisis during adolescence, leading him to conclude that the 'adolescent theories of personal crisis' were irrelevant to working-class culture typified by a 'rapid transition from childhood to adulthood'. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels*, p. 18. Yet it was precisely this aspect of working-class culture that the conceptualisation of adolescence set out to change.

with the conduct and training of its young citizens. It must stand “in loco parentis” to those of them whose home surroundings are absent or hopelessly bad’.<sup>76</sup>

The characterisation of the years of adolescence as the time when young people’s lives could take a wrong turn, and conversely, when adult support and regulation could enable them to develop satisfactorily into adulthood, authorised a range of interventions into the lives of young people and their families. As Griffin has stressed, the ‘seeds of most twentieth-century adult-sponsored institutions for young people lie in the developing concept of adolescence’.<sup>77</sup> Approaches towards and provision for young people defined as delinquent and examples of youth work provision will be explored in later chapters. At this point I want to highlight how this characterisation of adolescence as a time at which young people were particularly unstable and open to both positive and negative influences was central to the development and expansion of a distinct juvenile justice system. Within this, adolescence provided a specific focus for designating girls as delinquent on the basis of their sexual activity.

### *Adolescence, juvenile justice and ‘sex-delinquency’*

While youth had long been associated with criminality,<sup>78</sup> young people who engaged in activities considered to be anti-social were increasingly defined and managed differently from adult offenders. Hall had described adolescence as

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<sup>76</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 215. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>77</sup> Griffin, *Representations of Youth*, p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> See Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (Basingstoke, 1983), for an account of the rediscovery and representation of (male) youthful crime and disorder from the nineteenth century onwards.



‘preeminently the criminal age,’<sup>79</sup> and during the inter-war years the problem of juvenile delinquency became increasingly defined as a consequence of the instability of adolescence, coupled with unsatisfactory home lives which failed to provide adequate moral training.<sup>80</sup> The Children Act of 1908 was intended to ensure that young offenders were treated differently from adults, and this separate provision was extended to young people up to and including the age of sixteen by the Children and Young Persons Act of 1933.<sup>81</sup> This distinction was underpinned by the representation of adolescence as a time of incomplete development during which young people were unstable and ‘plastic and impressionable’.<sup>82</sup> As a result, it was increasingly accepted that young offenders should be treated not as offenders, but as young people at a vulnerable stage of life.

Delinquency was increasingly associated with normal youthful behaviour; according to Burt, delinquency was merely an extreme example of ‘common childish naughtiness,’ so that no ‘sharp line of cleavage’ existed to separate the delinquent and non-delinquent’.<sup>83</sup> However, as will be discussed in chapter four, delinquency in girls was seen as symptomatic of a greater degree of individual disturbance than male delinquency. While girls came before the courts for similar reasons as boys, though in much smaller numbers,<sup>84</sup> their delinquency was increasingly linked with their sexual activity, and specific legislative changes were introduced to bring adolescent girls within the remit of the juvenile justice system on

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<sup>79</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 1, p. 325.

<sup>80</sup> See, for instance, *Report of the Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders* (London, Cmd 2831, 1927). p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report on the Work of the Children’s Branch* (London, 1938), pp. 1-2. This change was based on the recommendations of the departmental committee.

<sup>82</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 80. The committee unsuccessfully used these arguments to recommend that young people under the age of twenty-one should not be sent to prison.

<sup>83</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, pp. vii, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Cox, ‘Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency’, p. 186.

the basis of their sexual conduct. The work of Cyril Burt was particularly significant in providing a framework for discussing girls' sexual misconduct or, in Burt's term, 'sex-delinquency'. His influential paper on the causes of 'sex-delinquency' in girls restricted his discussion to those girls and young women who 'engaged in promiscuous sexual misconduct for mercenary motives – that is, to prostitutes or incipient prostitutes', explicitly excluding from his discussion the 'problem of illicit intercourse in general'.<sup>85</sup> However, the idea of 'sex-delinquency' gained wide currency with much less precision of definition. Burt himself contributed to this imprecision, through his attribution of sexual meanings to girls' misdemeanours. In his influential text *The Young Delinquent*, Burt claimed that 'among delinquent girls nearly half the offences are sexual, and a large proportion of the other offences develop on a sexual basis'.<sup>86</sup> Discussing 'sex delinquency', he identified a 'passion' for 'clothes or jewellery' as the single most common feature of the cases he studied.<sup>87</sup> As Annmarie Turnbull has noted, this link became a commonplace of discussion of girls' delinquency; by 1937 the Home Office was identifying the primary motive for crime by girls as a desire 'for personal display'.<sup>88</sup> Theft had therefore become associated with vanity, and by extension, with sexual activity.

Burt acknowledged that the specific association of sex and delinquency in girls was the result of social pre-occupation with policing female, rather than male,

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<sup>85</sup> Burt, 'Causes of Sex-Delinquency', p. 252.

<sup>86</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, p. 154. According to Burt's classification of 'offences' committed by the young people referred to him, 36.5 per cent of girls had committed 'offences with the opposite sex' of 'similar age and willing'; this compared to 11.4 per cent of boys, and a further 13.1 per cent had committed miscellaneous sexual 'offences' including 'masturbation (excessive)', obscenity and corrupting talk. Multiple offences in different categories were recorded. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>87</sup> Burt, 'Causes of Sex-Delinquency', p. 270.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted by Annmarie Turnbull, 'Giving Girls a Voice: Pearl Jephcott's Work for Young People', *Youth & Policy*, 66 (2000), p. 92.

sexuality. He admits, 'if we thought as seriously of sex delinquency in the male as we do in the female, sex offences would rank as the commonest of all'.<sup>89</sup> However, his analysis of the processes of adolescence offers a deterministic approach to female sexuality, through which the stresses of puberty, particularly menstruation and early sexual maturation, impel girls towards sexual experience.<sup>90</sup> What Burt saw as these biological imperatives were reinforced by the conditions experienced by working-class girls in which their independence was read in terms of sexual activity and their searches after entertainment and pleasure in an urban environment exposed them to sexual danger.<sup>91</sup> Burt therefore concluded that special measures were needed to deal with girl sex-delinquents, including 'lengthy removal' from their homes until their 'mind and character are sufficiently formed to supply strong internal resistances to whatever temptations may arise from within or without'.<sup>92</sup> The nature of these interventions will be explored in chapter four.

The discourses of adolescent instability and lack of self-control underpinned discussion of the management of sexually active girls. During the 1920s, government committees considering the issues of sexual offences against young people and the treatment of young offenders both highlighted the problem of the girl aged between fourteen and sixteen who, in the words of the latter committee, was 'entirely out of hand and in imminent risk of moral contamination'.<sup>93</sup> Parliamentary debates on measures to raise the age of consent to sixteen also focused attention on

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<sup>89</sup> Cyril Burt, 'Contribution of Psychology to Social Hygiene' *Health and Empire*, 1, 1 (1926), p. 25.

<sup>90</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, pp. 224-29. However, Burt also argued that under-development could have equally adverse effects, as in his case study of Maggie H., which illustrated the 'results of littleness'. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-14.

<sup>91</sup> Youth organisations were at the forefront of efforts to counter these attractions, and I shall explore the ways in which they adopted a dual strategy of modernising their provision in line with the girls' changing needs and interests and educating their membership in moral responsibility in a later chapter.

<sup>92</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, p. 245.

<sup>93</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 119.



the sexual behaviour of girls aged thirteen to sixteen.<sup>94</sup> Those seeking a higher age of consent increasingly called upon the notion of adolescent instability to strengthen their calls for greater protection of girls. To the traditional polarised depictions of sexually active young women as either the ‘prey of selfish and unscrupulous men’,<sup>95</sup> or as sexually precocious and responsible for enticing young men into having sex,<sup>96</sup> was added a further representation, in which girls were portrayed as needing to be protected from themselves during the unstable period of adolescence. Introducing the 1921 Bill in the Commons, Major Farquarson drew upon his medical expertise to claim that ‘there is no period during that time of childhood so urgently calling for protection as the period between 13 and 16 years of age’; since parental supervision was lessened during these years, the ‘State should step in to exert every form of protection it can’.<sup>97</sup> The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1922 raised the age of consent to sixteen, and restricted the defence that a man had ‘reasonable cause to believe’ to first offenders under twenty-three. In 1925, however, the committee on sexual offences against young persons returned to the issue. It called upon the discourses of adolescence to raise the age of consent to seventeen, since

the number of girls who begin to lead immoral lives at 16 is large. We consider this is due to the fact that the girl of 16 is often mentally and emotionally unstable. She has not finished growing and developing; and, though she may be excited and her passions awakened, yet she cannot really appreciate the nature and result of the act to which she consents ... If we

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<sup>94</sup> While the age of consent for sexual intercourse had been raised to sixteen through the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, the age of consent for ‘indecent assault’ had remained set at thirteen.

<sup>95</sup> *Shield*, 3 (July-August 1921), p. 155.

<sup>96</sup> Criminal Law Amendment Bills/Acts 1912-1951, Hansard extracts, 15 July 1921, col. 1661. 3/AMS Box 319, AMSH Papers.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1652.



visualise girls of 16 in all walks of life, as they appear when congregated, in schools, at play or in factories, we cannot fail to realise that they are growing girls and but little more than children, who, as such, require the protection of the law, and it is abhorrent to us that they should become the subject of illicit intercourse.<sup>98</sup>

Although many discussions about young women contrasted the precocious aspirations to adulthood of working-class girls with the girlishness of their more sheltered middle-class peers, discussion of the age of consent blurred this distinction; whatever their circumstances, adolescent girls were to be seen as incapable of understanding and therefore as ‘subject’ to others rather than agent of themselves. Any consent they gave was therefore to be seen as invalid. While those seeking sympathy for girls who had transgressed sexual morality had traditionally stressed their innocence, and, as will be seen, continued to represent them in these terms, the conceptualisation of adolescence allowed for all girls, even those who had willingly engaged in sex, to be represented as victims of their own inadequate understanding of the significance of their actions. As Walkowitz has noted, reformers seeking a higher age of consent rarely referred to the ‘actual sexual development of the girls they were seeking to protect’.<sup>99</sup> The extent to which discussions of the age of consent revealed power relations based on age and class is

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<sup>98</sup> *Report of the Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences against Young Persons* (London, Cmd 2561, 1925), p. 23. There was, however, a minority recommendation from three male members, which argued that most sixteen-year-old girls were ‘fully aware that carnal intercourse is morally wrong’, and were ‘well able to decide for themselves’ whether they would consent to sexual intercourse. *Ibid.*, p. 89. While many of the committee’s recommendations were included in legislation, this recommendation was not implemented.

<sup>99</sup> Walkowitz, ‘Male Vice and Feminist Virtue’, *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (1982), p. 91.

evident from the range of interpretations of the age at which consent was valid, with some reformers seeking to place it as high as twenty-one.<sup>100</sup>

## Shaping adolescent development

The management of adolescence, however, was not simply a matter of imposing external regulation on girls' behaviour. While the perceived unruliness of working-class girls and their exposure to a range of temptations informed efforts to regulate their behaviour, adolescence was also conceptualised as a process of internal regulation, in which girls of all classes were encouraged to develop a moral framework within which they would regulate their own behaviour. This was particularly true of middle-class girls. Just as working-class girls were subject to professional efforts to regulate their behaviour, middle-class girls were exposed to scrutiny concerning their successful adjustment to their future adult female role. This focused on two areas: the management of menstruation and the securing of their reproductive potential and, increasingly, the establishment of their heterosexual futures. As Giles has argued, middle-class women were to be offered 'an emerging cultural narrative of female sexual pleasure as a source of a satisfying private life'.<sup>101</sup> For adolescent girls, this narrative not only stressed the satisfactions to be

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<sup>100</sup> See, for instance, the evidence of Mary Gordon (HM Inspector of women's prisons) to the AMSH's enquiry into social morality, in which she argued for the raising of the age of consent to eighteen, based on her experience of young women prisoners who were all 'very young at 18 ... they are very childish in their minds'. She claimed that these young women all favoured a higher age of consent. Also giving evidence to the enquiry, rescue worker E.B. Wedmore argued that the age of consent should be fixed as high as twenty-one, because of the instability of girls under that age. Witnesses to Sexual Morality Enquiry, 13, 27 January 1919, 3/AMS, Box 49, AMSH Papers.

<sup>101</sup> Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life*, p. 125. Giles argues that working-class women were excluded from this narrative and offered instead 'stories of sexual danger or addressed as potential sexual predators'. While this is largely true, I shall argue that this polarisation by class was not quite so clear cut by the end of the 1930s.

offered by future heterosexual relations, but offered a specific framework in which alternative sexual practices such as masturbation and same-sex attachments could be identified, discussed and eliminated.

### *Securing girls' reproductive future*

Hall had represented adolescence for girls as the task of securing their reproductive future, in particular through developing a regular menstrual cycle. He condemned feminists for ignoring 'the prime importance of establishing normal periodicity in girls, to the needs of which everything else should for a few years be secondary'.<sup>102</sup> This concern with the management of menstruation – in the context of girls' future reproductive capacities - remained a central theme within discussion of girls' development. It was largely middle-class girls who were the focus of discussion; most research into girls' experience of menstruation was carried out in secondary schools and girls' colleges,<sup>103</sup> and menstrual pain and disturbance was associated with inactivity among middle-class girls.<sup>104</sup>

Introducing a BMA discussion on the 'hygiene of menstruation' in adolescents, R.W. Johnstone stressed the importance of managing a girl's life at adolescence in order to give 'the functions of her reproductive system a good start'; if this was mismanaged it could lead to 'suffering, unhappiness and disappointment,

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<sup>102</sup> Hall, *Adolescence*, 1, p. xiv.

<sup>103</sup> See, for instance, the results of research conducted in a large girls' school, in which most girls were boarders, undertaken by Dr. A Sanderson Clow (a leading authority on the subject) and reported in the *BMJ*, 2 October 1920, pp. 511-13.

<sup>104</sup> Professor Louisa McIlroy claimed that dysmenorrhoea was most frequent among girls 'without occupation', and was generally only found among working-class girls whose 'occupations necessitated sitting all day'. *BMJ*, 10 September 1927, p. 447-48.

which may throw a shadow over her whole subsequent life'.<sup>105</sup> The successful management of menstruation involved more than the biological functions; girls had to develop a positive attitude towards this aspect of their femininity. Mothers, in particular, were held responsible for ensuring that their daughters developed the correct attitude towards menstruation. Sloan Chesser told parents that a girl must 'regard menstruation, not as an infliction, but as a sign of her complete womanhood and capacity for motherhood';<sup>106</sup> in similar vein, Scharlieb argued that the monthly period was 'patiently tolerated' by the girl who knew it meant that she was 'developing normally and ... becoming fit for a woman's joys and a woman's duties'.<sup>107</sup>

Discussion of the management of menstruation in girls therefore not only provided a vehicle for expressing beliefs and assumptions about appropriate roles for women, but a platform for the promotion of competing interests – both of gender and of professional specialisms. The 1920s saw repeated discussions about menstruation and its effects, in which conflict emerged between mainly male gynaecologists, who stressed the extent to which menstruation incapacitated women and claimed that excessive physical or intellectual exertion could disrupt the menstrual cycle, and women working in welfare and preventive medicine.<sup>108</sup> The latter group argued that most young women were unaffected by menstruation, and that any difficulties were as likely to be caused by the lack of appropriate facilities, and by women's attitudes towards menstruation, as by the physical process itself.

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<sup>105</sup> R.W. Johnstone, 'Developmental Changes During Adolescence', *BMJ*, 10 September 1927, pp. 442-43.

<sup>106</sup> Chesser, *Seven Stages of Childhood*, pp. 181-82.

<sup>107</sup> Scharlieb, *How to Enlighten our Children*, p. 58.

<sup>108</sup> A 1923 leading article in the *Lancet* called attention to the divergent views concerning 'menstruation as a disability' expressed by the participants at the British Congress of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Medical Officers of Schools Association. *Lancet*, 16 June 1923, pp. 1219-20.



The Medical Women's Federation devoted considerable attention to this topic, in 1930 publishing the results of an investigation into the health of young women, with a particular emphasis on menstruation. In the words of one reviewer (herself a member of the MWF), its results reaffirmed that women 'may be regarded as normal, healthy, human individuals, fit to take their part in the work and also in the play of the world'.<sup>109</sup> Clearly, such arguments - which gained increasing support amongst the medical profession<sup>110</sup> - served to counter the biological determinism about women's capacities evident in Hall's theory of female development. However, the extent to which these medical women located responsibility for perpetuating myths about menstruation with the mothers of adolescent girls – and indeed with girls themselves – suggests that we should interpret these conflicting views in terms of professional self-interest as much as gender, in which the management of girls' development offered the opportunity to further specific professional interests.

### *Safeguarding heterosexual development*

During the inter-war period, discussion of girls' adolescent development increasingly embraced the concept of their heterosexual, as well as reproductive futures. Sexologists promoted an increasingly influential discourse which represented heterosexual intimacy within marriage as rewarding for women as well

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<sup>109</sup> C.M. Murrell, 'Normal Adolescence in Girls: a Summary of Recent Research', *Health and Empire*, 5, 4 (1930), p. 318.

<sup>110</sup> Although the *Lancet* article referred to above expressed some reservations about the argument that girls only experienced menstrual pain because they were encouraged to expect it, it concluded that the perception of menstruation as a natural process was gaining acceptance among the medical profession. *Lancet*, 16 June 1923, pp. 1219-20.

as men, and which privileged ‘conjugal sexuality as the core of identity’.<sup>111</sup> This discourse was popularised in an increasingly explicit genre of marriage manuals which emerged from the 1920s onwards. These manuals, aimed at engaged and married couples, stressed the need for both partners to experience sexual satisfaction within marriage. In particular, couples were urged to work together to ensure that sex was satisfying for women, whose sexuality was presented as more problematic than that of men. The language used is frequently that of duty and difficulty; Helena Wright claimed that a successful sexual relationship was available to every married couple who will ‘take enough trouble about it’, and urged them to use the ‘weapons’ of ‘knowledge, sympathy, courage and persistence’.<sup>112</sup>

This discourse of female sexual pleasure within marriage, and its influence on what knowledge about sex was considered appropriate for adolescents will be explored further in the next chapter. The specific aspect I wish to examine here is its implications for the way in which girls’ development towards sexual maturity was represented and managed. In particular I will look at the way in which masturbation and same-sex attachments became accommodated within a framework of heterosexual development, and the limits to that accommodation.

Writing for young people themselves, Helena Wright equates adolescence with the attainment of a healthy heterosexual identity. She declares that ‘the task that every well-balanced boy and girl of thirteen has to accomplish is to change from a more or less sex-unconscious child into an adult who feels a frank and healthily developed attraction for the opposite sex’.<sup>113</sup> This formulation is interesting in its

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<sup>111</sup> Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life*, p. 123.

<sup>112</sup> Helena Wright, *The Sex Factor in Marriage: a Book for Those Who Are or Are About to be Married* (London, rev. ed., 1937), p. 29.

<sup>113</sup> Helena Wright, *What is Sex? an Outline for Young People* (London, 1932), p. 136.

identification of young people as conscious agents in the development of their heterosexuality. While the detailed advice of marriage manuals is reserved for those couples who are either married or have made their commitment to the institution of marriage through engagement, the requirement for women to take on responsibility for their sexual development was extended to adolescent girls. Discussions of masturbation and lesbianism reveal the extent to which girls were expected to understand and manage their own development towards heterosexual maturity. Both were increasingly represented as normal stages within girls' development, but stages which needed careful management to ensure that they did not become more than temporary interruptions.

Early sex education materials had stressed the evils of masturbation, particularly for boys. Some historians have asserted that masturbation among girls did not become a focus of public anxiety. Lesley Hall, for instance, in a brief overview of sex education materials, states that there was no female equivalent of the widespread materials warning boys of the dangers of masturbation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>114</sup> While material was predominantly directed at boys, some attention was paid to girls. Hall cites the well-known condemnation of the dangers of 'self-abuse' contained in Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*.<sup>115</sup> However, the 1912 Girl Guides handbook also contained a rather less explicit denunciation of "secret bad habits" as 'evil and dangerous', leading to 'hysteria and lunatic asylums ... blindness, paralysis and loss of memory'.<sup>116</sup> The existence of warnings specifically directed at girls is also indicated by Chadwick's

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<sup>114</sup> Lesley A. Hall, 'Sex Education in Britain 1870-1995', *History Review*, 23 (1995), p. 49.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Agnes Baden-Powell and Robert Baden-Powell, *The Handbook for Girl Guides or How Girls Can Help Build the Empire* (London, 1993, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1912), p. 340.

comment in her 1930s text on adolescent girlhood. Girls who masturbate, she says, should be reassured that 'the practice is neither the sign of moral degeneracy nor a symptom of sexual disease, the forerunner of incipient insanity or any other of the alarming alternatives suggested in the little books upon purity and the like'.<sup>117</sup>

While it does not belong to the purity genre, a pamphlet entitled 'Private Words to Women' provides an example of the kind of warnings against masturbation that were directed at women. Claiming a print-run of 250,000, this pamphlet asserted that unmarried young women aged sixteen or older were more likely to masturbate than their male counterparts, who could obtain sexual relief by recourse to prostitutes. It claimed that masturbation by young women was a major source of vaginal infection, and despite acknowledging the danger that young men might contract VD from sex with prostitutes, warned that 'his vice, so far as the mental and bodily health is concerned, is the safer'.<sup>118</sup>

Sensationalist warnings about the supposed dangers of masturbation clearly persisted into the inter-war period. In 1929 the *Lancet* condemned a set of booklets for fourteen year-old boys which perpetuated the 'terrifying method'. However its criticism was issued in the context of an editorial on 'Masturbation and the Child', which stressed that 'modern medical opinion' offered no evidence of disastrous results from masturbation in either sex, and that it was recognised that 'a masturbatory phase occurs commonly in the development of boys and girls'.<sup>119</sup>

Masturbation was increasingly discussed in the context of a developmental

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<sup>117</sup> Chadwick, *Adolescent Girlhood*, p. 166.

<sup>118</sup> D.R. Payne, *Private Words to Women: Containing Wisdom for Wives and Hygiene for Ladies* (London, 1927), pp. 8-9. Priced at 3d, this pamphlet is presumably an example of the populist publishing condemned by professionals, combining sensationalism while purporting to give medical information with marketing specific products. It includes advertisements for 'Dr Patterson's Famous Pills', obtainable only from the Hygienic Stores (p. 5) and vaginal syringes (p. 10). The supposed author's name - D.R. Payne - was presumably intended to suggest 'Dr. Payne'.

<sup>119</sup> *Lancet*, 8 June 1929, pp. 1202-03.



framework which characterised it as an undesirable, though common habit, and argued that the real harm lay in exaggerated warnings about its dangers. Young people who masturbated were now to be dissuaded from the habit by being brought to see it as representing immaturity and selfishness, rather than as wicked or leading to long-term physical and mental damage. Writing for parents, Sloan Chesser reassured them that masturbation was normal among both boys and girls and did not result in 'serious evils' developing.<sup>120</sup> Despite this reassurance, parents should not ignore self-abuse, but should treat adolescents with 'positive robust sympathy'.<sup>121</sup> Young people should be given 'helpful advice on physical and psychological lines', so that they understood that masturbation was a 'childish method of seeking satisfaction, which the normally happy adolescent should outgrow'.<sup>122</sup> Similar views were expressed in a handbook on sex education published for an audience of parents and teachers in 1934, in which the authors concede that masturbation was common among adolescents of both sexes and could not therefore 'rightly be termed abnormal'.<sup>123</sup> However, they call upon modern theories of sexual and psychological development to argue that masturbation by adolescents could still have serious effects, since it turned the sex impulse 'inwards to oneself', thereby limiting the 'development of the personality'.<sup>124</sup>

While most discussion focused on boys, or on young people in general (usually in effect boys), some medical commentators drew upon the new discourses of future female heterosexual pleasure to identify particular dangers of masturbation

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<sup>120</sup> Chesser, *Seven Stages of Childhood*, pp. 184-85.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 213.

<sup>123</sup> Theodore F. Tucker and Muriel Pout, *Awkward Questions of Childhood: A Practical Handbook on Sex Education for Parents and Teachers* (London, 1934), p. 134. The authors were joint secretaries of the Welsh branch of the social purity movement, the Alliance of Honour.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

for girls. These dangers stemmed from the characterisation of women's heterosexuality as unawakened. As Kenneth Walker put it, 'desire in women is more dependent on education, stimulation and experience than it is in the case of men. Adolescence does not necessarily bring to her sexual maturity as it does to a man.'<sup>125</sup> Women's heterosexual responses were therefore believed to need training during the early days of marriage, particularly to enable them to achieve the desired goal of vaginal orgasm. This would be more difficult, however, if girls masturbated, since they would be accustomed to obtaining sexual pleasure through clitoral stimulation. While sex educationalists such as Griffith and Helena Wright acknowledged the role of the clitoris in sexual pleasure, they viewed orgasm through clitoral stimulation as less complex, and therefore inferior, to vaginal orgasm. According to Wright, a woman 'has not attained full sex maturity until she is able to feel pleasure as acutely in the vagina as in the region of the clitoris'.<sup>126</sup>

Wright therefore explicitly voiced concern about the effects of masturbation by young unmarried women, since 'enjoyment of the normal sex-act may become difficult to establish' for young women used to clitoral stimulation.<sup>127</sup> Journalist and novelist Leonora Eyles, who set out to offer a 'commonsense' approach to sex, makes a similar point, arguing that masturbation should be discouraged, since it might make 'a boy or girl unfit for marriage'. This was a particular danger for girls, since their use of clitoral stimulation during masturbation might result in disappointment on marriage when they find 'no sensation at all in normal connection'.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Kenneth Walker, *Sex and a Changing Civilisation* (London, 1935), p. 90. Walker was associated with the BSHC, editing on their behalf a manual on 'preparation for marriage'.

<sup>126</sup> Wright, *Sex Factor in Marriage*, p. 72.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>128</sup> Leonora Eyles, *Commonsense about Sex* (London, 1933), p. 38.

The extent to which masturbation by girls was seen as jeopardising the attainment of full heterosexual maturity is evident from a *Lancet* article on masturbation among young women, part of a series outlining ‘modern techniques of treatment’.<sup>129</sup> The author, Dr. Alice Hutchinson, identifies masturbation as a sign of retarded development, rather than of sin. She advocates a two-pronged approach to treatment, psychological and environmental. The first aspect involves helping the patient understand the ‘true significance’ of her habit, and accept personal responsibility for change; the second focuses on attaining a healthy lifestyle, both physical and moral.<sup>130</sup> The ‘true significance’ of masturbation, Hutchinson makes clear, lies in its relationship to girls’ heterosexual future. In contrast to earlier representations of masturbation as encouraging young people to engage in sexual intercourse,<sup>131</sup> Hutchinson fears that masturbation may displace sexual intercourse. She is explicit about the damage masturbation may inflict on heterosexual relationships and hence social structures, arguing that the ‘social ideal to be aimed at is an increasing inter-dependence of the sexes, whereas masturbation renders a woman sexually independent of men’.<sup>132</sup> Masturbation by girls therefore had clear personal and social consequences. While it could be accommodated as a stage within normal development, it was potentially threatening not only to heterosexuality but, in the longer term, to the family relationships upon which society depended.

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<sup>129</sup> Alice M. Hutchinson, ‘Modern Technique in Treatment, Masturbation in Young Women’, *Lancet*, 26 December 1925, pp. 1350-51. Hutchinson was associated with the Tavistock Clinic and with the BSHC.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1350.

<sup>131</sup> See, for instance, Mary Scharlieb, *The Psychology of Childhood: Normal and Abnormal* (London, 1927), p. 82. Although Scharlieb is writing later than Hutchinson, her framework is an older feminist social purity concern to limit indulgence in sex within as well as outside marriage.

<sup>132</sup> *Lancet*, 26 December 1925, pp. 1350-51. This identification of social stability with heterosexual relationships supports Kent’s argument that, following the First World War, peace in the social,

Hutchinson's article makes it clear that she is operating within a middle-class framework, in which girls live in sheltered homes, lead (or should lead) regulated lives, and expect to have individual relationships with medical practitioners. They also understand, and identify with, the heterosexual ideal, leading them to work with experts to overcome their 'problem'. Concerns about lesbianism were also linked to the specific circumstances of middle-class girls, particularly the single-sex school or college, which were believed to encourage intense relationships between girls, variously described as 'attachments', 'crushes' or 'pashes'. The language is significant. The term 'lesbian' is rarely used when young women are being discussed; one reason may be that its denotation of a formed sexual identity conflicts with the representation of girls as malleable towards heterosexuality.

As with masturbation, same-sex relationships were portrayed as a common, and transitory, phase of adolescence. Helena Wright, for instance, tells her young readership that both boys and girls 'pass through a hero-worshipping stage for people of their own sex' between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. This, she claims, is a 'right and natural phase, and much good *can* come of it'.<sup>133</sup> However, she places these friendships within a normative framework through which the 'normal boy or girl' is making 'steady progress' towards the adult condition of 'strong attraction towards the opposite sex'.<sup>134</sup> According to Edward Bennet, a physician at the Institute of Medical Psychology, a homosexual 'hero-worship' phase' was 'a quite normal happening, and we avoid condemning it as unhealthy,

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economic and political spheres was seen to depend on the imposition of 'peace and order on the private sphere of sexual relations'. Kent, *Making Peace*, p. 107.

<sup>133</sup> Wright, *What is Sex?*, p. 136. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.



but seek rather to direct it'.<sup>135</sup> It is clear that young people themselves, as well as those caring for them, are expected to locate same-sex attachments within the framework of adolescence in order to understand them as normal but transitory.

The issue of lesbianism entered public debate at two key points during the 1920s: the attempt to introduce an amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill which would criminalise 'gross indecency' between females, and the publicity surrounding the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. In the 1930s Lord Dawson also made an unsuccessful attempt to have lesbianism included in the provisions of the 1937 Divorce Bill. As Doan has noted in her examination of the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill, these discussions offered a range of often contradictory messages about lesbianism.<sup>136</sup> Debate shifted between protestations that the vast majority of women did not know that lesbian sexual activity was possible (and the consequent danger of public discussion bringing it to their attention) and assertions of the prevalence of female sexual 'malpractices'.<sup>137</sup> Doan also reveals that the amendment reflected specific concerns to protect girls under sixteen from sexual abuse rather than the criminalisation of adult lesbian relationships. All the cases presented to the committee by London magistrate Cecil Chapman, the originator of the amendment, thus offered examples of predatory older women corrupting young girls.<sup>138</sup> However, his failure to define exactly what he sought to protect girls from

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<sup>135</sup> Edward A. Bennet, 'Sex in Relation to Adolescent Development', *Health and Empire*, 7, 2 (1932), p. 130.

<sup>136</sup> Laura Doan, "'Acts of Female Indecency': Sexology's Intervention in Legislating Lesbianism" in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 199-213. The Bill was intended to protect girls under sixteen from indecent assault. Doan's analysis supports contemporary feminist assertions that the amendment represented the determination of opponents to the Bill to protect male sexual privilege by introducing this controversial clause into an 'agreed' Bill, rather than from any real concern about lesbianism.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201-2.

resulted in general condemnation of sexual relationships between women, most commonly referred to as an undefined 'it'.<sup>139</sup>

A number of women sex educationalists highlighted the supposed threat of the older woman to vulnerable adolescent girls, particularly in the women-only environments of school or college. Marie Stopes was particularly vociferous about the dangers of the 'homo-sexual teacher', citing the example of a girls' school teacher who had 'injured a number of adolescent girls'.<sup>140</sup> Neville-Rolfe argued that although many unmarried women developed healthy friendships, an 'unnatural and perverted form of sex expression between women' had become more common.<sup>141</sup> She illustrates this claim with a lurid anecdote, in which only a woman's medical training alerts her to the danger to which her niece is exposed in her friendship with a 'perverted' older woman.<sup>142</sup> However, she stressed that girls could be rescued from these 'unnatural' relationships, once they understood their significance. After the niece had been given a full explanation of the 'usual course of development from girlhood to womanhood', she was able to appreciate that 'the position was unnatural, and as bad for her friend as for herself'.<sup>143</sup> Even when girls had 'drifted into physical practices' with other girls through ignorance, it was still possible to avoid 'psychological difficulties' through downplaying the emotional importance of these

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203-4.

<sup>140</sup> Stopes, *Sex and the Young*, pp. 53-55. She also argued that co-education was more 'wholesome' for boys and girls alike, and would counter girls' tendency to 'become too romantic', while schools should employ a high proportion of married staff, so that marriage should be 'a legitimate anticipation' of girls. *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 110. While Stopes's hostility to lesbians is evident, the role of such arguments in countering inter-war bans on married women's employment should be noted. See Alison Oram, 'Serving Two Masters? The Introduction of a Marriage Bar in Teaching in the 1920s', in The London Feminist History Group, *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Powers, Women's Resistance* (London, 1983), pp. 134-48 for a discussion of this issue. For a discussion of the role of co-education in reinforcing anti-lesbianism, see Faraday 'Lessoning Lesbians'.

<sup>141</sup> Sybil Neville-Rolfe, *Why Marry?* (London, 1935), p. 95.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-106.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-04.

relationships.<sup>144</sup> Such dilemmas could, however, be avoided completely by providing girls with a proper understanding of what is 'normal in sex development and behaviour throughout youth'.<sup>145</sup> Those advising middle-class girls thus called upon sex education to gain their support in actively seeking to establish heterosexuality and to devalue other kinds of relationship.

Neville-Rolfe claimed that the most common cause of lesbianism was women's failure to 'grow out of the adolescent stage in their emotional life'.<sup>146</sup> She argued that lesbians should be viewed as 'sick persons', many of whom 'can be and are cured'.<sup>147</sup> This representation of lesbianism as a disease, and its consequent susceptibility to the 'cure' of rechanneling towards heterosexuality was echoed by Lord Dawson in his unsuccessful attempt to get 'female homosexuality' recognised as grounds for divorce in the 1937 Divorce Bill.<sup>148</sup> His argument that homosexuality should not be viewed as a crime was rejected by Lord Atkin, a judge and president of the Medical Legal Society, who claimed that such cases were 'the result of wicked impulses, capable of being controlled'.<sup>149</sup> However, the understandings of science could also be used to condemn same-sex relationships as resulting from moral failure. This is evident from a report on a case of hermaphroditism reported by Harold Chapple, a senior gynaecologist at Guy's Hospital, in which he described his discovery that an apparently beautiful and feminine young woman, who was sexually active with men, not only lacked a uterus but had developed testicles.<sup>150</sup> The case is reported in the context of new developments in endocrinology in the

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-03.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>148</sup> The current law only recognised male homosexuality - 'sodomy' - as grounds for divorce.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>150</sup> Harold Chapple, 'An Unusual Case of Hermaphroditism', *BMJ*, 17 April 1937, pp. 802-04.

1930s, which resulted in increasing uncertainty about the basis for categorisation of individuals as male or female. Medical journals reported cases where the sex of individuals could not be unequivocally established despite outward appearances, and instances of women becoming masculinised as a result of glandular imbalance.<sup>151</sup>

Yet while the *BMJ* case study offers a telling example of sexual uncertainty, Chapple uses it to reinforce heterosexual social structures. He rejects the argument that homosexuality should be treated sympathetically since it was a ‘glandular problem’; on the contrary, he claims, his case study demonstrates that an individual may have ‘a very considerable mix-up of elements and yet confine “her” sexual activities entirely and successfully to the “opposite” sex’.<sup>152</sup> He argues that homosexual men and women should ‘learn and cultivate an adequate control’; if not, they deserved to be ‘dealt with drastically by the law’.<sup>153</sup> It is not clear whether the ‘control’ involves abstention from all sexual activity, or redirection to heterosexual relationships. Either way, however, it seems that as the physiology of sex difference becomes more fluid or uncertain, the maintenance of the social order of heterosexuality is all the more important.

Stress on the threat of lesbianism to the family and social order is also evident in other discussions. MPs debating the Criminal Law Amendment Bill claimed that lesbianism must be suppressed since it undermined the institution of marriage, thereby leading to the decline of the race.<sup>154</sup> Neville-Rolfe, while prepared to view sympathetically the young girl who had merely been led astray,

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<sup>151</sup> See, for instance, the *Lancet*, 2 December 1933, pp. 1252-55; 21 April 1934, pp. 830-34. Interestingly this second case study provided reassurance about the innate qualities of femininity, since following operative treatment to correct the imbalance, the woman once again developed the ‘finer points of feminine interest’. *Ibid.*, p. 831.

<sup>152</sup> *BMJ*, 17 April 1937, p. 804.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Doan, “‘Acts of Female Indecency’”, p. 209.



was emphatic that the ‘abnormality’ of physical attraction to the same sex was ‘socially and racially very undesirable’.<sup>155</sup> The publication of *The Well of Loneliness* evoked similar reactions. A *Lancet* review described it as ‘an honest attempt’ to portray the difficulties and dilemmas facing the ‘homosexual woman’, but criticised its failure to recognise that ‘strong attachments between members of the same sex occur as a phase of normal development’. The reviewer concluded by stressing that the ‘race’ was bound to erect barriers to ‘discourage the development of affinities dangerous to its existence’.<sup>156</sup> Such formulations support McLaren’s assertion that sexual panics focused on ‘the *social* rather than the strictly sexual threat posed by the “deviant”’.<sup>157</sup>

## Conclusion

By the inter-war years, the existence of adolescence as a critical period of life marked by change and instability had permeated both professional and lay understandings of individual development. This chapter has argued that despite this consensus concerning the importance of adolescence, there was little agreement as to its precise definition, with adolescence being defined differently according to gender and class. It was, however, this very imprecision which served to enhance the usefulness of adolescence as a means of defining what constituted normal development and regulating the progress of young people towards adulthood. While adolescence had originated as a male construction, the perception of adolescence as

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<sup>155</sup> Neville-Rolfe, *Why Marry?*, p. 104.

<sup>156</sup> *Lancet*, 1 September 1928, p. 484. In what appears to be a wilful misreading, however, the reviewer claims that there is no evidence that the author is claiming ‘social toleration’ for lesbians.

<sup>157</sup> McLaren, *Twentieth-century Sexuality*, p. 6.

a time of great difficulty for girls allowed women in a range of professions to represent themselves as having a particularly important role to play in shaping young women's development. Their understanding of female adolescence challenged aspects of the standard accounts, particularly deterministic representations of women's role.

The instability of adolescence was called upon to justify a range of interventions into girls' lives. The nature of these interventions was largely determined by class. This chapter has explored the ways in which theories of heterosexual development, embodied in the discourses of both sexology and adolescence, informed specific concerns about the development of middle-class girls towards sexual maturity. The representation of masturbation and same-sex attachments as normal stages within girls' development served to reinforce heterosexuality through its ability to accommodate and marginalise these practices during adolescence. However, the terms of discussion may also be seen to reflect fears about the fragility of heterosexual development in girls and the relative ease with which this may be impeded by particular circumstances. They therefore provide an interesting counterpoint to discussions of the behaviour of working-class girls, which assumed the inevitability of heterosexuality and therefore sought to regulate its expression. Such concerns about the heterosexual development of middle-class girls, while recurrent, remained secondary to the more urgent and practical anxieties about the consequences of the premature and unregulated sexual activity of working-class girls explored elsewhere in this dissertation. Girls of all classes, however, were subject to discourses which argued that the moral education of young people must develop their capacity to regulate their own behaviour and their understanding of why such regulation was vital to both individual and national

welfare. By the inter-war years the provision of knowledge about sex was allocated a central role in this process of moral education, in contrast to earlier approaches which had sought to protect girls from sexual risk by keeping them in ignorance. Despite this consensus on the need for sex education, its development and delivery remained fraught with difficulty throughout the inter-war years (and beyond), as organisations and individuals working with young people disagreed about what sort of information should be provided, how it should be provided and by whom, and perhaps most importantly, how to regulate responses to sex education.

### **Chapter Three: Sexual Knowledge as Protection: Issues in Sex Education**

By the inter-war period, sex education was seen as an integral part of the training of the adolescent. The previous chapter explored the ways in which the conceptualisation of adolescence, determined both by gender and class, served to shape and regulate young people's development towards adulthood. This chapter will examine the role of sex education within this process. It identifies the ways in which sex education for adolescents incorporated discourses of citizenship and moral agency, as well as reflecting anxieties about the dangers facing the adolescent, particularly working-class young people in the urban environment. It also considers how gender and class affected the information offered to adolescents, despite assertions that sex education should inculcate sexual self-restraint in young men and women of all classes. There was widespread agreement on the need for sex education. However, regulating young people's access to information about sexual matters and the precise ways in which this knowledge should be provided remained a contested area throughout the inter-war years. In this context, the report of the National Birth-Rate Commission on adolescent sex education, and the work of the British Social Hygiene Council (the body responsible for public education about VD) will be considered in some detail. The NBRC report indicates the main lines of argument concerning sex education for adolescents evident throughout the inter-war years, while the work of the BSHC reveals the ambiguities and anxieties which surrounded the subject. As will become evident, sex education also offered an important arena through which different professional groupings sought to secure



legitimacy for their work with young people. Despite assertions that parents should be responsible for educating young people about sex, this was increasingly accepted – in theory if not in practice - as an appropriate function for schools. The need to reach young people who had left school, however, offered youth organisations an opportunity to claim an enhanced role in the sexual and moral education of young people, within the framework of heterosexual development discussed in the last chapter.

### **Developing the moral adolescent**

The characterisation of adolescence as a period in which young people were particularly susceptible to influence provided a rationale for public concern with the moral education of young people. In addition to the representation of adolescence as a time of vulnerability and danger, adolescence was also identified in more positive terms as the period during which young people should develop the capacity for moral choice in order to prepare themselves for the responsibilities of citizenship. The ‘chief business’ of adolescence, Slaughter claimed, was the ‘formation and projection of ideals’,<sup>1</sup> while Burt described the ‘development of a sound and independent moral character’ as one of the two major problems facing school-leavers.<sup>2</sup> The provision of knowledge about sex to adolescents was increasingly accepted as a central part of this process of moral development.

The perceptions of World War One as having created or accelerated social

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<sup>1</sup> Slaughter, *The Adolescent*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Burt, ‘Contribution of Psychology to Present-Day Problems’, p. 94. The other challenge was the ‘adoption of a suitable vocation’.

change, which were explored in chapter one, brought a new urgency to discussions of sexual morality. As highlighted in the introduction, a number of bodies investigated specific aspects of social and sexual morality in the years following the war.<sup>3</sup> These widely reported enquiries provided a focus for public discussion about the moral 'state of the nation', and in particular sexual morality and behaviour. The inquisitorial approach they adopted, in which 'expert' witnesses (the basis on which they were chosen was rarely made explicit) gave 'evidence' to a committee itself comprised of experts was intended to enhance their authority and to indicate the thoroughness of their approach. It also served to bring the views of and information provided by these experts within the public domain.<sup>4</sup> While historians have considered some of these enquiries individually, their significance has not been fully recognised.<sup>5</sup> Collectively, they reveal contemporary perceptions of a society in moral crisis, in which new ways to express and reinforce traditional moral values at a time of change were urgently needed. Although they were not solely concerned with young people, much of their discussion focused on the importance of developing new approaches to reach young people who were both experiencing greater freedom and questioning conventional values. As a result, they argued that young people needed to be brought to a positive understanding of the personal and social value of self-restraint, rather than simply accepting external constraints. The COPEC report, for instance, argued that the promotion of responsible sexual behaviour among young people in the post-war world must be based on education,

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<sup>3</sup> See pp. 3-4 for full details of these enquiries

<sup>4</sup> Reviewing the impact of the NBRC's work in 1923 its chairman, James Marchant, stressed that its reports amounted to over 2,000 pages, based on the evidence of 170 witnesses, and had been widely disseminated in Britain and abroad. NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Roy Porter, and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 224-46.

rather than repression, fear or punishment, since, it declared, continence ‘must be founded on the assent and the will of the individual’.<sup>6</sup> AMSH secretary Alison Neilans called for a restatement of the ‘basis of the sex ethic, so that the question, “Why should I be moral?” can be answered in a way which will appeal to the intelligence, to the loyalty, and to the spirituality of our young people’.<sup>7</sup> Such formulations illustrate what Mort has described as the replacement of ‘older, negative moralisms’ by positive education focusing on training the ‘sexual instinct’.<sup>8</sup>

This stress on promoting young people’s moral development through education was underpinned by an increasingly influential discourse which identified individual and informed choice as the foundation of citizenship. This approach had a powerful champion in George Newman, first chief medical officer at the newly formed Ministry of Health, who argued that social progress depended on individuals accepting their obligation to understand and apply scientific knowledge in order to develop their own ‘health and capacity’.<sup>9</sup> Health was defined as dependent on all aspects of individual conduct. According to Newman, ‘It is by a multitude of small habits that the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy way of living is established’.<sup>10</sup> This approach was central to the representation of sex education as a means of enabling young people to understand and regulate their own sexual conduct.

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<sup>6</sup> COPEC, *The Relation of the Sexes*, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Discussion following Newsholme, ‘Some Aspects of Social Hygiene’, in NCCVD, *Proceedings of the Imperial Social Hygiene Congress*, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> MOH, *On the State of the Public Health. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer for the Year 1923* (London, 1924), p. 196. Newman was the chief medical officer of the Board of Education and served as Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health from 1919 to 1936. He had also worked in boys’ clubs.

<sup>10</sup> MOH, *On the State of the Public Health. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer for the Year 1921* (London, 1922), p. 20.

Public discussion of sexual morality and its relationship to the nation's health increasingly stressed the convergence between medicine and morality. As Bland notes, medical definitions incorporated moral values;<sup>11</sup> sexual irregularity was defined as offending not just against morality but against health, as in Newsholme's characterisation of 'promiscuity' as 'essentially an insanitary act'.<sup>12</sup> The enquiries identified above demonstrate this convergence, representing what Mort has described as a medico-moral coalition through which the medical profession formed new alliances with those from other strands of thought, including moralists, eugenicists, clerics and feminists.<sup>13</sup> Organisations and individuals making public pronouncements on social issues not only appealed to the common interests of medicine and morality, but sought further legitimacy by stressing the range of professions and perspectives endorsing or involved in their work. The manifesto produced by the National Council for Public Morals set the pattern; published in *The Times* in 1911, this was signed by 71 eminent figures from the fields of religion, medicine, government, the aristocracy and social welfare.<sup>14</sup> The NCPM's offshoot, the National Birth-Rate Commission, similarly stressed the breadth of the expertise it called upon.<sup>15</sup> Even the enquiries into sexual morality undertaken by AMSH and COPEC, which were grounded in the specific perspectives of feminist social purity and Christianity respectively, sought to enhance their credibility by emphasising that

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<sup>11</sup> Bland discusses the importance of self-regulation in the specific context of the anti-VD campaign. Lucy Bland, "'Cleansing the Portals of Life': the Venereal Disease Campaign in the Early Twentieth Century" in May Langan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *Crises in the British State 1880-1930* (London and Birmingham, 1985), pp. 192-208.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Arthur Newsholme, 'An Address on the Relative Roles of Compulsion and Education in Public Health Work', *Lancet*, 29 July 1922, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 153-209.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 31 May 1911.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance NRBC, *Youth and the Race*, p. xi.



they included medical and scientific perspectives.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to former oppositions between the medical professions and feminists and social purity campaigners, medicine and morality were now represented as serving the same ends.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to gauge the impact of these bodies. The NCPM was described by Havelock Ellis as a 'very influential body.'<sup>18</sup> The NRBC stressed that it received not only government but royal support,<sup>19</sup> and its secretary James Marchant claimed that its work had been recognised as offering 'original and permanent contributions' to solving social problems.<sup>20</sup> While Porter and Hall describe the NBRC as enjoying a 'certain official friendliness',<sup>21</sup> its lack of formal status may also have conveniently allowed governments to distance themselves from contentious issues of morality and sexual conduct. It is clear that these enquiries provided a voice for and served the interests of those who were already in influential public positions. However, as Linda Mahood argues, it is this that gives them their value as evidence, since they 'constitute "knowledge" in terms of which issues were targeted for discussion as part of public discourse and debate'.<sup>22</sup> In the context of this study, they provided an arena for discussion of adolescent sexuality and its shaping and regulation through sex education.

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<sup>16</sup> AMSH, *The State and Sexual Morality* (London, 1920) p. 12; COPEC, *The Relation of the Sexes*, pp. vi-x.

<sup>17</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 173-83.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*, p. 292.

<sup>19</sup> The preface to *Youth and the Race* quoted the King's 'encouraging message' to the Council. NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, pp. 184-85.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Mahood, *Policing Gender, Class and Family: Britain, 1850-1940* (London, 1995), p. 14.

## Sex education: the consensus

Historians have identified the 1880s and 1890s as the years in which sex education for young people first received professional support, in the guise of arguments about the need to warn young people about the sexual dangers facing them.<sup>23</sup> By the early twentieth century, the equation of young people's ignorance about sexual matters with innocence had given way to formulations which stressed the importance of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The representation of adolescence as a critical period, both for the shaping and regulation of sexuality, and for moral development, served to emphasise the importance of ensuring that young people were provided with the right kind of knowledge. Effective sex education, it was believed, would ensure that young people developed respect for their bodies, based upon understanding rather than mystery or embarrassment, and would regulate their own behaviour accordingly. Informed moral choice was depicted as one of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; according to Havelock Ellis, sexual conduct should be 'a matter for individual personal responsibility, deliberately exercised in the light of precise knowledge which every young man and woman has a right, or rather a duty, to possess'.<sup>25</sup> Sex education was thus allocated a central role in inculcating among young people the ability and willingness to take responsibility for their health required of the adult citizen.

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<sup>23</sup> Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, pp. 226-27. See also Claudia Nelson, "'Under the Guidance of a Wise Mother': British Sex Education at the *Fin de Siècle*" in Claudia Nelson and Anne Summer Holmes (eds.), *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875-1925* (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 98-121; Leslie Brewer, *The Good News: Some Sidelights on the Strange Story of Sex Education* (London, 1962), for an account focusing on the 'lighter side' of the history of sex education.

<sup>24</sup> Bland, 'Guardians of the Race', p. 374.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*, p. 267.

Even before the war the NCPM had identified sex education as a critical aspect of its efforts to regenerate the nation's morals. Its 1911 manifesto identified the moral education of the young and the effects of 'pernicious literature' on young people as two of its four major concerns, and it retained a major focus on adolescent sex education.<sup>26</sup> It was, however, the NBRC's enquiry into the moral education of the adolescent, running between 1920 and 1923, which provided the major arena for public discussion of sex education after the war. The Commission had identified the need to consider adolescent sex education during its earlier enquiry into 'population and parenthood', a decision welcomed by the Minister of Health, who stressed both the importance and the difficulty of adolescent sex education.<sup>27</sup>

In accordance with the trends discussed above, the NRBC committee's membership included representation from medicine, the Christian and Jewish religions, schools, youth and welfare organisations. It received evidence from thirty-one 'witnesses of competence and authority, representing Psychology, Education, and Medicine'.<sup>28</sup> The NCCVD was represented in strength; at least eight committee members and six witnesses had links with the Council.<sup>29</sup> Eugenacists were well represented on the NBRC,<sup>30</sup> and on its parent body the NCPM, which Havelock Ellis described as having 'joined hands with the workers in the eugenic movement'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, 31 May 1911, 22 February 1919.

<sup>27</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. vi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>29</sup> NBRC enquiry members associated with the NCCVD were Mary Scharlieb, Dr. A.K. Chalmers, Dr. C.J. Bond, Dr. C.W. Kimmins, Dr. Charles Porter, Robert Baden-Powell (representing the Boy Scouts), Mrs John Clay (representing the Mothers' Union) and Miss Broome (representing the National Union of Teachers). Witnesses with NCCVD connections were Frank Fletcher (Headmaster of Charterhouse), Edith Cooper (National Union of Women Teachers), Rev. Edgar Rogers (Church Lads' Brigade) and Cyril Burt (psychologist, London County Council). Commission members Sir Robert Baden-Powell and Dr. C.J. Bond also gave evidence. Information from NCCVD *Annual Reports* and committee minutes.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the NBRC chairman Sir James Marchant, members with eugenic sympathies included leading EES member Dr. C.W. Saleeby, Dr. C.J. Bond, and Dr. Mary Scharlieb.

<sup>31</sup> Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*, p. 292.

Historians have disagreed about the impact of eugenic thought, and the influence of the Eugenics Education Society (later the Eugenics Society) on social policy.<sup>32</sup>

However, whatever the impact of eugenic thought on social policy in general, many of those concerned with sex education and the management of adolescence were eugenicists. Cyril Burt and Dr Slaughter were founder members of the EES, while Marie Stopes, Norah March and E.F. Griffith all joined the society. Greta Jones has explored the influence of eugenics on the prominent sex educationalists Mary Scharlieb and Elizabeth Sloan Chessser.<sup>33</sup> As Porter and Hall have noted, eugenic concepts of 'racial health' underpinned sex education within the early twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> This is indicated by the full title of the NBRC's report: *Youth and the Race: the Development and Education of Young Citizens for Worthy Parenthood*. This reveals a conceptual framework in which the individual and personal was conflated with the public and national, adulthood was conflated with parenthood, and sex education seen to serve the purposes of both citizenship and empire.

The Commission's report identifies many of the concerns which would inform discussion of sex and sex education throughout the inter-war years. Significantly, the inquiry addressed not only the need to educate the adolescent about sex, but to protect them from the dangers of unregulated leisure time. Sex education was thus seen as one element of a broader strategy for the protection of young

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<sup>32</sup> Jones, in particular, has argued that the Eugenic Society was an 'influential and active broker in the voluntary and semi-government sector in the spheres of education, mental deficiency, health, sexual regulation and population studies'. Greta Jones, 'Women and Eugenics in Britain: the Case of Mary Scharlieb, Elizabeth Sloan Chessser, and Stella Browne', *Annals of Science*, 52, 5 (1995), p. 483. See also Greta Jones, *Social Hygiene in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1986). Macnicol has, however, challenged this assessment on the grounds that her argument depends on the adoption of an excessively broad definition of eugenics. John Macnicol, 'Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization in Britain Between the Wars', *Social History of Medicine*, 2 (1989), p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, 'Women and Eugenics in Britain'.

<sup>34</sup> Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 228.



people, in which the self-protection that sex education was intended to provide was supplemented by external protection. This external regulation took different forms according to the perceived ability of the adolescent to regulate their own behaviour, and the next chapter will explore how young women who were defined as incapable of exercising judgement concerning their sexual behaviour and thus as needing external protection, were subject to a range of interventions into their lives.

*Youth and the Race* reveals both the increasing consensus on the importance of sex education, and the lack of agreement as to the form it should take. With one exception, its witnesses believed that young people should receive some kind of sex education, and the Commission declared itself convinced that ‘however difficult and delicate the task may be, it ... must be undertaken’.<sup>35</sup> While children should begin to understand about sex and reproduction from an early age, it was at adolescence, when young people experienced increased freedom at the time of maximum instability, that it became most critical.

The committee’s witnesses consistently argued that young people would seek – and had always sought – information about sex. Concerns about legitimate and illegitimate access to information recur throughout the Commission’s deliberations, since, in the words of Dr. C. J. Bond, while the absence of all knowledge was bad, ‘perverted knowledge ... is worse still’.<sup>36</sup> Edith Cooper (whose programme of instruction for Birmingham schools had particularly impressed the Commission<sup>37</sup>) argued that ‘Knowledge of some kind, from somebody, is obtained by children often

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<sup>35</sup> NRBC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 2. The single exception based his views on experience of work with boys under fourteen in private schools.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

coupled with lies and indecent rubbish'.<sup>38</sup> The need for regulated information was seen as most urgent for working-class young people, since, as discussed earlier, the conditions of urban life and their early entry into the workforce were believed to expose them prematurely to sexual information and experience.<sup>39</sup> Other witnesses, however, stressed that sex education was equally important for young people of the middle-classes, since they too were 'sure to get the knowledge in some way'.<sup>40</sup> Girls were seen as particularly endangered by their 'squalid familiarity' with sex, which caused sensitive girls 'untold pain', while their 'harder-minded sisters are coarsened and brutalised'.<sup>41</sup>

### **Sex education: the disagreements**

Despite this consensus as to the dangers both of ignorance and of haphazard exposure to sexual matters, the Commission revealed considerable ambivalence about the results of knowledge. The major area of disagreement was the respective merits of approaches which stressed the dangers of illicit sex with its possible outcomes of venereal disease or pregnancy, and those which focused on the positive individual and social benefits of sexual self-restraint. Allied to this was concern about whether offering adolescents information about sex would provoke sexual curiosity, even experimentation, an issue which became more significant with the

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the evidence of Miss L.C. Barker, head of the Young People's Department at the Ministry of Labour, p. 112, and the joint evidence of the Boys' and Girls' Life Brigades, p. 203. As discussed earlier, historians have offered different accounts of the level of freedom experienced by young people, and young women in particular. Contemporary discussions of working-class adolescence, however, overwhelmingly stressed their independence and lack of supervision.

<sup>40</sup> Evidence of the headmaster of the co-educational public school Bedales, *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

emergence of a discourse stressing sexual pleasure within marriage for women as well as men.

Historians have described sex education during this period as continuing to adopt a negative approach based on fear.<sup>42</sup> It is true that appeals to fear, and representations of sex as danger, did play an important part in sex education materials during the inter-war years. The concerns about VD highlighted earlier provided a direct stimulus for post-war sex education, since the NCCVD was explicitly funded to develop educational campaigns concerning VD.<sup>43</sup> The Royal Commission on VD had set the tone: while education should not be based purely on the ‘physical consequences of immoral conduct’,<sup>44</sup> it recommended that young people should be taught and warned about the ‘moral and physical dangers which may imperil them’.<sup>45</sup> In the words of Selina Dix, giving evidence to the NBRC on behalf of the National Union of Teachers, ‘My girls have been taught that you cannot do wrong without you suffer, and you will suffer a disease which will probably make you suffer all your life’.<sup>46</sup> Witnesses to another NBRC inquiry, its special committee on VD, also revealed their belief in the deterrent effect of fear of disease, and the consequent dangers of certain kinds of knowledge, summed up in venereologist Charles Gibb’s assertion that ‘if you teach the curability and prevention of it [VD], you diminish the fear,

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<sup>42</sup> See Bland, “Cleansing the Portals of Life, pp. 205-6; Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, p. 126-27, 147; Humphries, *A Secret World of Sex*, p. 58. While Porter and Hall do note that the sex education was becoming more positive as a result of the ‘growing eroticization of marriage’, they do not explore the implications of this for adolescent sex education. Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 239.

<sup>43</sup> The NCCVD’s efforts, in the 1920s, to disassociate sex education from a direct relationship with VD will be discussed later.

<sup>44</sup> Royal Commission on Venereal Disease, *Final Report*, p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 133.

and if you diminish the fear you have more promiscuous intercourse'.<sup>47</sup>

By the 1930s, however, materials stressing the adverse consequences of sex outside of marriage tended to focus on the risks of pregnancy, rather than VD. Leslie Weatherhead, for instance, illustrated the dangers of premarital sex with a lurid cautionary tale in which a 'robust and very highly sexed' girl ignores his warnings against sex with her fiancé. Her resulting fear of pregnancy led to her committing suicide.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, while Gladys Cox, writing directly for young people, warns them of the dangers of contracting VD, she places greater stress on the unreliability of contraception.<sup>49</sup> This must be seen in the context of discussions concerning the role of contraception in encouraging sexual immorality among women. Dr. Scharlieb, for instance, started a lengthy debate in the letters pages of the *BMJ* with her claim that some girls were more likely to 'indulge youthful passions' if they knew they could do so 'without any fear of disagreeable consequences', leading her to stress the value of fear in providing an 'outside conscience' for these young women.<sup>50</sup> Emphasis on the failure of contraception thus served to remind young women of what they might lose through sexual activity outside marriage.

Historians' assessments of sex education as purely negative, however, ignores contemporary critiques of sex education that appealed to fear rather than seeking to develop young people's understanding of the value of self-restraint. Eugenicist and sex educator Norah March told the NRBC that the 'pseudo-morality

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<sup>47</sup> NBRC, *Prevention of Venereal Disease*, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Mastery of Sex through Psychology and Religion* (London, 1931), pp. 63-65.

<sup>49</sup> Gladys M. Cox, *Youth, Sex and Life: A Companion Volume to 'The Woman's Book of Health'* (London, 1935), p. 211.

<sup>50</sup> *BMJ*, 16 July 1921, p. 93.



induced by the fear of disease is valueless from the point of view of character-formation and personal integrity'.<sup>51</sup> Supporting a motion on the need for training 'the youth of both sexes' in 'biological education and citizenship' at the Seventh International Congress for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, Katherine Furse deplored the tendency to introduce 'regulations for the removal of temptations' since, she claimed, morality based on fear 'can have but little lasting effect'.<sup>52</sup> The availability of contraception might be turned to positive use; the BSHC issued a 'statement of continence' which declared that it did not regret that 'extra-marital chastity must in future depend more and more upon basic ideals of life rather than upon fear of consequences'.<sup>53</sup>

The level of detail about sexual intercourse to be offered to young people also reflected disagreements about the effect of knowledge on young people's behaviour. Most witnesses giving evidence to the NBRC argued that young people should be given only limited information about the mechanics of sexual intercourse, and the Commission declared that it favoured this 'more reticent policy'.<sup>54</sup> The Catholic Monsignor Provost, W.F. Brown, made the danger of providing information explicit; detailed teaching about the 'actions of reproduction' might make young people experiment to discover its 'pleasureable sensation'.<sup>55</sup> This dilemma became more pronounced with increasing public discussion of the importance of sexual fulfilment for both partners in marriage. The tensions this

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<sup>51</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> Congress 1928 (Conference 1929): Biological Education. Box 98, S10A, NVA Papers. Furse was a member of both the BSHC and the NVA and, as will be discussed later, following a distinguished war career, was persuaded to join the Guides in a senior position.

<sup>53</sup> BSCH, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 34.

<sup>54</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

created for adolescent sex education are evident from Edith Cooper's comments on a draft of Helena Wright's sex education guide for young people; Cooper urged that all mention of 'the clitoris, & sensations of pleasure should be eliminated', since this would make 'the adolescent desire to seek the experience, as an adventure regardless of costs'.<sup>56</sup>

While the emergence of sexology had predated World War One, particularly through the work of Havelock Ellis, it was during the inter-war period that this discourse was developed and popularised, and a specific genre of widely available marital guidance manuals developed, in some cases providing a considerable amount of detail on sexual technique. While some accounts have stressed the dominance of sexology in the development of this genre,<sup>57</sup> these manuals may more accurately be seen in the context of the 'medico-moral' coalition discussed above. As Porter and Hall have noted,<sup>58</sup> many of these publications represented a collaboration between science and religion, in which medics and clerics endorsed each others' work.<sup>59</sup> They were intended for married and engaged couples, rather than adolescents. However, sex education materials for adolescents must be considered within the context of this new discourse of sexual pleasure, particularly since many authors of marital advice manuals also focused their attention on adolescent sex education.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from Cooper to Helena Wright, 19 February 1932. PP/HRW/B.5, Personal Papers of Helena Wright, CMAc, Wellcome Trust, London. [Hereafter Wright Papers.] Cooper was commenting on behalf of the National Union of Women Teachers.

<sup>57</sup> See Jeffreys, *Spinster and Her Enemies* and Jackson, *Real Facts of Life* for accounts which stress the negative impact of this genre upon feminism.

<sup>58</sup> Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 211.

<sup>59</sup> See Edward F. Griffith, *Modern Marriage and Birth Control* (London, 1935) which includes a foreword by Canon Pym; Helena Wright, *The Sex Factor in Marriage* (London, 1930), which has an introduction by the Rev. A. Herbert Gray; and Weatherhead, *Mastery of Sex*, which acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Marion Greaves.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, Marie Stopes, Helena Wright, and E.F. Griffith all addressed the issue of adolescent sex education as well as marital guidance.

This new discourse had a particular impact on sex education for girls, since it represented sexual satisfaction within marriage as the rightful expectation of women as well as men. Earlier assumptions about women's lack of sexual desire were attributed to ignorance or misinformation. Young couples were depicted as needing to be taught to develop mutually fulfilling sexual relationships; as the *BMJ* argued, just as 'good motherhood is not purely a matter of instinct ... so there is definite need, in many cases, for instruction in matters of sex and sexual relations'.<sup>61</sup> While both men and women were believed to need expert guidance, the nature of this guidance was based upon differentiated representations of sexuality, in which female sexuality was represented as potential, receptive and unawakened.<sup>62</sup> Even Helena Wright, who stressed the variations in both male and female sexuality, depicted the husband as the initiator whose 'magic touch' would 'awaken his wife's physical nature'.<sup>63</sup> This awakening depended, however, not only on male sexual self-control and skill,<sup>64</sup> but upon young women approaching marriage with an understanding of their own bodies and their heterosexuality. This is clearly demonstrated in the manuals' discussion of the 'problem' of the tough hymen, which, according to Helena Wright in 1930, could be stretched before the wedding; any 'woman doctor

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<sup>61</sup> *BMJ* 16 July 1932, p. 111.

<sup>62</sup> March, for instance, argued that 'sex emotions' were normally 'more direct and violent in the male than in the female', whose sexuality was 'diffused through various streams of expression in the female organism' particularly through her desire for motherhood. March, *Towards Racial Health*, pp. 36-37, 169. Hutton stressed that it was 'quite normal' for a woman not to experience any 'feelings of sexual excitement ... till some time after marriage has been consummated'. Isabel Emslie Hutton, *The Hygiene of Marriage* (London, 1923), p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Wright, *Sex Factor in Marriage*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>64</sup> The trauma experienced by women due to their new husband's impatience and insensitivity on their honeymoon, compounded by their own ignorance, was a recurrent theme in sex manuals; see for instance Hutton, *Hygiene of Marriage*, pp. 32-37. Hall has argued that sexology did not leave male sexual practice unchallenged, but made demands on men to change their behaviour within the marital relationship. Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 70-75.



would teach a girl how to do this herself with her fingers'.<sup>65</sup> This assumption that girls should be both familiar with their bodies and proactive in preparing themselves for sexual intercourse contrasts sharply with Florence Barrett's 1922 denunciation of contraception as involving 'an interference with her own internal organs, which is revolting to all decent women'.<sup>66</sup>

Sex education was therefore allocated a positive role in preparing young women for future sexual relationships. Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, for instance, identified 'the ignorance of the girl in sex matters' as a reason for 'failure in marriage',<sup>67</sup> while Griffith argued that schoolgirls aged fourteen to eighteen should be taught that 'the marriage relationship can only prove sexually satisfactory provided both parties have learnt about it, and willingly co-operate'.<sup>68</sup> Sex educationalists went as far as to identify a direct correlation between the sex education received by girls in childhood and adolescence, and their future sexual fulfilment in marriage.<sup>69</sup>

The extent to which publications intended for young people reflected this discourse of marital sexual pleasure was differentiated according to both gender and class. Although even at secondary school level, some young women were offered extremely limited information about sex,<sup>70</sup> middle-class pupils at secondary or private schools were more likely to be offered more detail about sex in the context of

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<sup>65</sup> Wright, *Sex Factor in Marriage*, p. 56.

<sup>66</sup> Florence E. Barrett, *Conception Control and Its Effects on the Individual and the Nation* (London, 1922) p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> Dr. Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, 'Parents' Problems' in BSHC, *Sex Education and the Parent* (London, 1933), pp. 80-81.

<sup>68</sup> Edward F. Griffith (ed.), *The Road to Maturity* (London, 1947, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1944), p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> See Weatherhead, *Mastery of Sex*, p. 19; Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 256.

<sup>70</sup> The BSHC criticised a pamphlet given to girls leaving a Nottingham secondary school for its omission of any reference to 'human mating'. Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 21 November 1932. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/4, British Social Hygiene Council Collection, CMAC, Wellcome Trust, London. [Hereafter BSHC Papers.]



expectations that they would take responsibility for their own heterosexual development. The syllabus developed by Griffith included precise information about male and female sexual organs, sexual intercourse, orgasm and contraception.<sup>71</sup> *What is Sex?*, Helena Wright's manual for young people, which included an introduction by public school headmaster George Turner, also offered its readers explicit information about sexual intercourse, including the role of the clitoris in 'conveying the sensation of pleasure during copulation'.<sup>72</sup> Medical journals were divided over the value of this detail. While a *Lancet* reviewer concluded that parents could safely give the book to their adolescent sons or daughters,<sup>73</sup> the *BMJ* considered that many people would find its information inappropriate or unnecessary.<sup>74</sup> Discussions of *What is Sex?* also raised concerns about young people having direct access to such information, an issue which I will return to later; even Turner admitted to some hesitation as to whether the book should be placed in the school library for senior boys to read.<sup>75</sup>

Girls had traditionally been offered less information about sex in order to preserve their modesty, and it is clear that this tendency continued during the inter-war years.<sup>76</sup> Headteacher Helena Powell deplored the dangers of violating girls' 'natural instinct of reserve' by calling 'attention to the physical facts of life more than is absolutely necessary'.<sup>77</sup> As late as 1936, a book on 'keeping fit' for senior girls omitted any reference to menstruation and covers puberty merely by telling its

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<sup>71</sup> Griffith, *Road to Maturity*, p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, *What is Sex?*, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Lancet*, 7 January 1933, p. 64.

<sup>74</sup> *BMJ*, 31 December 1932, p. 1195.

<sup>75</sup> Wright, *What is Sex?*, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> See Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*, pp. 246-7.

<sup>77</sup> Helena Powell, 'The Problem of the Adolescent Girl' in Scharlieb, *Sexual Problems of To-Day*, pp. 110-11.

readers not to be surprised at the changes taking place in their bodies.<sup>78</sup> The extent to which one sex should be informed about the sexual characteristics of the other was contested. The introduction to *What is Sex?*, for instance, addresses readers' misgivings as to whether it was 'desirable that a boy or girl should know so much about the physiology of the other sex?'.<sup>79</sup> In view of this, sex education programmes often compromised by beginning with common elements, and then offering gender-differentiated options, stressing motherhood for girls while warning boys about the dangers of masturbation and extra-marital sex.<sup>80</sup> Although Griffith's lectures for adolescent boys and girls offered them similar information, those for girls were adapted to give them 'an appreciation of the dangers of misusing their knowledge and gifts'.<sup>81</sup>

Historians who have highlighted the role of sexology in promoting 'compulsory heterosexuality'<sup>82</sup> have paid little attention to the way in which the discourse of future sexual pleasure was used to regulate the heterosexual behaviour of young women. The focus on marital sexual pleasure as something which had to be striven for, far from legitimising sexual activity among the unmarried, was called upon to strengthen the arguments for pre-marital restraint.<sup>83</sup> This is made explicit by H. Crichton-Miller in his discussion of the rationale for sex education: the 'demand

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<sup>78</sup> Edith E. Crosby, *Keeping Fit: A Health Book for Senior Girls* (London, 1936) p. 221.

<sup>79</sup> Wright, *What is Sex?*, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Memorandum recommended for adoption by conference of representatives of the Joint Council of the London J.O.C., the London Diocesan Council for Youth, and the British Social Hygiene Council for Commendation to their three respective organisations, 29 November 1928. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/3, BSHC Papers.

<sup>81</sup> Griffith, *Road to Maturity*, p. 33.

<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey's claim that sexology conscripted women into sexual intercourse with men. Jeffreys, *Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 188.

<sup>83</sup> Discussing the development of sex education in the USA, Moran identifies a similar trend towards deterring young people from premarital sex by stressing that the highest sexual satisfaction was only to be obtained within the marital relationship. See Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2000), pp. 92-93.

for self-restraint should be based on something positive, not negative', based on the 'the rewards of continence in the future fruition of sex'.<sup>84</sup>

These expectations of sexual self-control were in theory addressed to young men as much as to young women. Indeed, the central aim of many bodies concerned with sexual morality was the promotion of an equal moral standard for men and women, instead of a dual standard which accepted as inevitable male sexual irregularity. Despite this, sex education materials continued to reinforce the responsibility of women for determining male behaviour. These messages emerge strongly in materials written directly for girls, such as the pamphlets published by the BSHC.<sup>85</sup> Although they insisted that men as well as women should exercise sexual restraint, girls were told that men were 'very largely what women make them, what women expect them to be',<sup>86</sup> and were urged to refrain from flirtation, since this would make it harder for young men to 'keep to a high ideal of parenthood'.<sup>87</sup> Similar messages, however, were evident in the more sophisticated marriage guidance manuals; Griffith argued that sex education should ensure that young women understood that the powers they had over men meant that they were responsible for setting a 'limit to their love-making'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *BMJ*, 9 November 1929, p. 864. Crichton-Miller was a leading psychologist, founder of the pioneering Tavistock Clinic, which provided a model for child and adult psychiatric services, and a member of the BSHC.

<sup>85</sup> These included Douie, *How Girls Can Help Towards Sex Hygiene*; Vera Douie, *England's Girls and England's Future* (London, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1931); Violet D. Swaisland, *Sex in Life. Young Women* (London, 1933). The Council also published the text of talks to mothers on what they should tell their daughters. See Beatrice Webb, *The Teaching of Young Children and Girls as to Reproduction for Parents* (London, 1937, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1918). They appear to have had a large print run. In 1938 it was reported that 66,000 copies of *Sex in Life* remained in stock. Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 8 February 1938. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/5, BSHC Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Douie, *How Girls Can Help Towards Sex Hygiene* p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> Webb, *Teaching of Young Children and Girls*, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Griffith, *Modern Marriage*, p. 67. The same statement had appeared in the 1935 edition.

This familiar stress on women's responsibility for male sexual behaviour and the strength of male sexual urges, was, however, accompanied by a newer stress on the rewards of sex within marriage. Writing directly for young people, Gladys Cox warned them that if they engaged in premature sexual experience they would not only risk pregnancy and VD, but would develop a wrong attitude towards sex, thus losing 'one of the finest and most ennobling experiences that life can offer'.<sup>89</sup> A similar vision of future sexual rewards is hinted at in a BSHC pamphlet for girls, which declares that real love was 'too big a thing, too good a thing, to be spoiled by playing at it beforehand'.<sup>90</sup> However tentatively, girls were offered appeals to responsibility based not only upon fear of the consequences of sexual irregularity, but as future sexual partners within marriage.

Young women were also represented as more at risk of the consequences of premarital sex. Again, this called upon both traditional and newer arguments. The increasing trend to depicting pregnancy, rather than VD as the main risk of premarital sex stressed the risks for girls rather than their partners. In addition, the representation of female sexuality as needing to be 'awakened' by a man meant that this process was seen to be irreversible. Girls were represented as irrevocably changed by the experience of sexual intercourse.<sup>91</sup> According to Weatherhead, an unmarried girl who had been 'sexually awakened' would seek to satisfy this 'awakened instinct in any way that offers', whether through masturbation or

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<sup>89</sup> Cox, *Youth, Sex and Life*, p. 162.

<sup>90</sup> Douie, *How Girls Can Help Towards Sex Hygiene*, p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> See for instance the comment of Dr. Jeffries that 'a girl's attitude changed completely after experience of marital intercourse'. Sub-Committee on Preparation for Marriage Minutes, 13 July 1931. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.6, BSHC Papers.



promiscuity.<sup>92</sup> The discourse of marital sexual pleasure thus provided a further argument for deterring young women from premarital sex.

Sex education was thus represented as not only deterring young people from engaging in irregular sexual relationships, but as helping them, particularly young women, develop into sexually well-balanced adults. At least some sex education materials during the inter-war period, particularly those intended for middle-class young people, incorporated expectations of future sexual fulfilment within the messages they offered girls. Others, however, continued to stress the dangers of sex, varying from vague warnings about unnamed evils to more explicit denunciation of sexual malpractices. In many cases, writers shifted uneasily between assertions of future sexual pleasure and warnings about the continued threat of VD and the unreliability of contraception.<sup>93</sup>

## **Providing sexual knowledge**

### *The work of the BSHC*

Steve Humphries suggests that young people acquired sexual knowledge despite ‘strenuous efforts by adults to control their knowledge and keep them in ignorance’.<sup>94</sup> This judgement is, however, an over-simplification; as the previous

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<sup>92</sup> Weatherhead, *Mastery of Sex*, p. 117.

<sup>93</sup> Gillian Swanson has argued that following the Second World War, women and their ‘sexual self-management’ became a national concern. She bases her argument on the writings of Griffith and other sex educators which incorporated ‘the sexual into the agenda of modern citizenships’. However, as my discussion has indicated, this approach was already evident during the inter-years, not least in the writings of Griffith, for whom the war probably provided a sharper focus for reiterating previous expressed concerns. Swanson, “‘So Much Money and So Little to Spend It On’”, pp. 81-84.

<sup>94</sup> Humphries, *Secret World of Sex*, p. 35.

section has indicated, the ‘strenuous efforts’ were directed, not towards maintaining young people’s ignorance, but to ensuring that young people acquired the right kind of knowledge about sex, offered at the right time, by the right person, and in the right way.

The BSHC was the main official source of sex education in the 1920s and 1930s. Following the report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, the government had directly funded it (as the NCCVD) to co-ordinate public education ‘in regard to moral conduct as bearing upon sexual relations’.<sup>95</sup> By 1931 the BSHC had held some 24,000 meetings and had issued seventy-four pamphlets and leaflets. Over 4.5 million copies of free literature had been given away, and a further 800,000 titles sold. It calculated that its work had reached around eight million people (excluding its work with the military) out of a total population of nearly 40 million.<sup>96</sup> In its peak years of 1919-20 and 1928-29 it reported reaching 812,111 and 949,342 people respectively. A self-consciously propagandist organisation, its work was widely publicised; according to Neville-Rolfe, it received ‘21,000 inches of publicity’ in the national press between 1921 and 1931, in addition to signed articles and medical press coverage.<sup>97</sup>

In common with other organisations addressing issues of social and sexual morality, the BSHC stressed that its support came from a range of perspectives. The medical profession was strongly represented, since all but two of the members of the

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<sup>95</sup> David Evans, ‘Tackling the “Hideous Scourge”: The Creation of the Venereal Disease Treatment Centres in Early Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Social History of Medicine*, 5, 3 (1992), p. 419; Towers, ‘Health Education Policy 1916-1926’, pp. 77-78.

<sup>96</sup> Mrs C. Neville-Rolfe, ‘Propaganda Methods and Results: Great Britain’ in British Social Hygiene Council, *Proceedings of the Imperial Social Hygiene Congress, July 13-17 1931* (London, 1931), pp. 373-8.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

medically dominated Royal Commission on VD joined the new body.<sup>98</sup> By 1926, seventy-seven organisations were in membership, ranging across the fields of medicine, religion, formal education, youth work, welfare, and feminist and non-feminist women's organisations.<sup>99</sup> Eugenic influence was strong within the BSHC. Its secretary-general, Sybil Neville-Rolfe, had been (as Sybil Gotto) a founding member of the EES and its honorary secretary from 1907 to 1920.<sup>100</sup> The BSCH's promotion of sex education through biological education also increased eugenic influence within its work, since, according to Searle, almost the entire 'biological establishment' had joined the EES.<sup>101</sup> Such a diverse membership clearly offered potential for conflict, and, as I will discuss later, at various critical points the Council was forced either to refrain from engaging with specific issues or to abandon plans for development.

Discussions of the BSHC have tended to label it as a social purity organisation. Both Bristow and Davenport-Hines, who discuss its work in some detail, stress its origins in social purity, omitting any consideration of its

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<sup>98</sup> The Commission had been dominated by medical perspectives. Six of the fifteen members were doctors, and at least five more were from social hygiene or purity organisations broadly sympathetic to the medical members. Only three members were women, Mary Scharlieb, Louise Creighton (wife of the Bishop of London and a purity activist), and Elizabeth Burgwin (involved in provision for the 'feeble-minded'). Evans, 'Tackling the "Hideous Scourge"', p. 417; Richard Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain since the Renaissance* (London, 1990); pp. 215-16.

<sup>99</sup> Medical organisations included the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Surgeons and Royal Colleges of Physicians, the Society of Medical Officers of Health and even the Dental Association. Educational members included teaching unions, two headmasters' organisations, and various private school associations. Among youth work organisations, the Scouts, the Guides, the YMCA, the YWCA, and the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs were all members. Women's organisations included the National Council of Women, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and the Women's Institute, while members also active in the area of social hygiene included the Alliance of Honour, the AMSC, and the EES. Religious representation included Anglican, Catholic and Jewish organisations. BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1927, pp. 128-29.

<sup>100</sup> Sybil Neville-Rolfe, *Social Biology and Welfare* (London, 1949), pp. 17-19.

<sup>101</sup> G.R. Searle, *Eugenics and Politics in Britain 1900-1914* (Leyden, 1976), p. 11.



efforts to secure a wider constituency.<sup>102</sup> Other historians, while considering the BSHC only in passing, also emphasise its moral conservatism.<sup>103</sup> However, such characterisations assume a continued polarisation of medicine and morality. The BSHC was a more complex – and contradictory – body than these accounts allow. Particularly following its change of title to the British Social Hygiene Council, it represented itself as adopting a modern approach to social issues, in which morality was reinforced by scientific and medical expertise. In particular, it sought to demonstrate its credibility through the involvement of ‘prominent biologists, psychologists and educationalists’ in its work.<sup>104</sup> Its publications similarly demonstrated a merger between medical and purity traditions, leading the *Lancet* to describe its literature as ‘frequent and convincing’.<sup>105</sup> The extent to which the concerns of the Council and its members merged with ‘progressive’ thought may also be indicated by its association with the leftwing publishers Gollancz, which published its course of lectures on sex education for parents,<sup>106</sup> and which distributed 80,000 copies of BSHC member E.F. Griffith’s *Modern Marriage and Birth Control* through

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<sup>102</sup> Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, pp. 149-150; Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death and Punishment*: pp. 230-44.

<sup>103</sup> See Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 317-19. He inaccurately refers to the organisation as the National Council for the Control of Venereal Disease; Hall and Porter, *Facts of Life*, p. 232; Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 211. McLaren offers a contrasting perspective, claiming that the inter-war campaign against VD was marked by a swing from ‘moral purity rhetoric that centred on guilt and towards social hygiene programmes that stressed prevention’. McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, p. 20. His discussion of 1920s sex education surprisingly omits any reference to the BSHC. Lesley Hall, however, suggests that his description of the creation of the AMSH (p. 20) should in fact refer to the BSHC. Lesley A. Hall, Review of *Twentieth-Century Sexuality*, consulted at <http://homepages.nildram.co.uk/~lesleyah/mclaren.htm> [15 October 2000].

<sup>104</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 17. Its members included Cyril Burt, psychologist and founder of the Tavistock Clinic Dr. Crichton-Miller, and biologist Professor Julian Huxley.

<sup>105</sup> *Lancet*, 23 March 1935, p. 688.

<sup>106</sup> BSHC, *Sex Education and the Parent*. This publication originating in four lectures organised jointly by the BSHC and the National Council for Mental Hygiene provides a good example of the Council’s ability to draw in scientific expertise. The contributors are Sir J. Arthur Thomson, Regius



its 'Left Book Club'.<sup>107</sup>

While the BSHC had been founded to develop educational programmes on VD with people of all ages, its attention increasingly focused on reaching adolescents and young adults. Many local branches of the BSHC prioritised work with young people from their inception. The Leicester branch, for instance, ran a lecture programme, organised by gender and age, for young people attending continuation schools.<sup>108</sup> The Blackburn branch had developed a programme for girls over 16, since it believed that the prevention of VD depended on the 'definite teaching of the adolescent on health matters and on social hygiene'.<sup>109</sup> By the mid-1920s, the organisation was seeking to disassociate itself from a specific focus on VD. This led, in 1925, to its reconstitution as the British Social Hygiene Council, with the new title indicating the wider scope of its concerns. In part, this expanded focus reflected the perceived success of the campaign against VD, leading the Council to conclude that 'the time for intensive campaigns dealing with venereal disease alone has passed'.<sup>110</sup> More significantly for this study, however, the change focused its work on the education of the adolescent, in order to secure its long-term objective of strengthening and preserving the family unit.<sup>111</sup> Its original remit, it argued, had limited its teaching to providing information about the 'facts of life'. This new approach would allow it to develop

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Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen University, Winifred Cullis, professor of physiology at University of London, sex educator Dr Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, and Hugh Crichton-Miller.

<sup>107</sup> Edward F. Griffith, *The Pioneer Spirit* (Basingstoke, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1919, p. 12.

<sup>109</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 83.

<sup>110</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 16. The infection rate was in fact to rise again; see table 4.1, p. 140.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

effective sex education for adolescents, through offering them ‘positive teaching in sex-control and on the responsibilities of parenthood’.<sup>112</sup>

While the Council stressed the need to reach both men and women, it seems to have had more success with women, many of whom were young. In addition to the pamphlets for young women discussed earlier, it made specific attempts to reach girls working in factories through advertising in *Peg’s Paper*.<sup>113</sup> Its lecture programme appears to have been attended by far more women than men. Its statistics distinguish three main sources of audiences: workplaces; social organisations including schools and youth clubs; and mass meetings. Women were particularly targeted through social organisations; between 1923 and 1934, the Council organised 3,072 lectures for women in social organisations, including 281 specifically for young women, compared to only 1,423 lectures for men.<sup>114</sup> Local branch reports frequently admitted difficulties in reaching men, while in 1927 the BSHC’s propaganda committee reported that it was easier to arrange lectures for adolescent girls than for boys.<sup>115</sup> Whether a cause or effect of this focus on women, most of the Council’s registered speakers in its early years were female. In 1922-23 it had sixty-two registered women speakers (thirty-five medical, twenty-seven lay) compared to only thirty-four men (twenty-five medical, nine lay).<sup>116</sup> By the 1930s, the proportion of

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> Neville-Rolfe, ‘Propaganda Methods and Results’, p. 373.

<sup>114</sup> Figures contained in the Council’s *Annual Reports* 1923-24 to 1932-33. The figures for young women refer to 1926-34 only, since audiences were first classed by age in the 1926-27 report. However, it is clear that many of the lectures for women attracted girls in their late teens. See, for instance, reports from Blackburn, Huddersfield and Northampton in NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1922, pp. 83, 97, 112.

<sup>115</sup> See, for instance, reports from Northampton in 1922 and Birmingham in 1924: NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 112; 1924, p. 64; BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1927, p. 43.

<sup>116</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1923, p. 112.

male speakers had increased (fifty men compared to fifty-two women), reflecting the Council's introduction of a new category of 'Lecturer on Social Hygiene', most of whom were male. Whether male or female, the majority of these lecturers had medical or scientific qualifications, an indication of the Council's increasing focus on drawing upon professional expertise.<sup>117</sup>

### *The professionalisation of sex education*

The changing composition of the BSHC's lecturers reflects the trend towards the professionalisation of sex education.<sup>118</sup> Although most sex educators continued to stress the importance of parents teaching young children about sex, by the inter-war period the sexual education of the adolescent was increasingly seen as the function of professionals. However, this raised questions about the extent to which professionals, including teachers, youth workers and doctors, were competent and willing to educate young people about sex. From the mid-1920s, the BSHC focused on the development of biological education programmes as the most appropriate context for teaching about sex. It also sought to ensure that the training of teachers prepared them to take on this subject. However, while the provision of sex education within schools would, it was believed, promote sexual self-restraint among young people, the need to educate the adolescent school-leaver, particularly the working-class young person who entered the labour force at 14, was seen as particularly important, enabling youth organisations to claim an enhanced role in the

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<sup>117</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1934, pp. 124-5.

<sup>118</sup> Claudia Nelson identifies conflicting 'professionalist' and 'maternalist' approaches to sex education as emerging in the 1880s. Nelson, 'Under the Guidance of a Wise Mother', pp. 99-106.

management of adolescent development. Sex education thus offered an arena in which professionals of various kinds asserted their authority in shaping the development of young people, in the context of the more general trends towards official intervention into their lives which, as discussed earlier, was legitimised by the discourses of adolescent vulnerability.

Although it was commonly claimed that the responsibility for sex education lay with parents, they were generally perceived to be failing in their duty. The NBRC's enquiry into sex education was based on this premise; according to the Minister of Health, parents had 'either shirked or not felt confident, or were afraid to do their duty to the children'.<sup>119</sup> Witnesses to the Commission reiterated the belief that parents of all classes were incapable of educating their children about sex. Working-class parents, however, were believed to be particularly inadequate because of ignorance, embarrassment, or lack of an appropriate vocabulary. They were therefore depicted as welcoming expert intervention. According to Norah March, working-class mothers repeatedly told her, 'They should be taught, but the likes of us cannot do it. Why won't they help us in the schools?'<sup>120</sup> Reporting on the Alliance of Honour's introduction of a basic sex education programme into Welsh elementary schools in the 1920s, Tucker and Pout stressed that they had sought to reinforce, rather than usurp, parental responsibility for sex education, and recorded their disappointment that parents wanted to transfer this responsibility to schools.<sup>121</sup> Such reassurances that schools were not seeking to take over the role of parents, but rather were acting at their instigation, may, of course, have been a conscious tactic in

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<sup>119</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. vi.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>121</sup> Theodore F. Tucker and Muriel Pout, *Sex Education in Schools: an Experiment in Elementary Instruction* (London, 1933), pp. 21-23.



minimising parental opposition.<sup>122</sup> By the 1930s, however, professionals appear to be more confident in claiming their territory; the chief medical officer at the Ministry of Education explicitly stated that ‘sex education was not the province of the parent’ but belonged to health education in schools.<sup>123</sup>

Despite this depiction of sex education as part of the school curriculum, many local education authorities and teachers remained reluctant to engage with the subject. In the 1930s Winifred Richmond reported that the NUT had passed a motion that sex education in elementary schools was ‘undesirable’, leading her to comment that ‘while the parent casts the responsibility on the teacher, the teacher in turn refers it back to the parent’.<sup>124</sup> A range of arguments were marshalled against sex education in schools, including opposition to group teaching. Following the publication of *Youth and the Race*, the London County Council reiterated its ruling against class instruction in sex hygiene in elementary schools.<sup>125</sup> Its decision was based on two main concerns: the difficulty of teaching about sex in classes where pupils’ knowledge of sex varied widely; and the danger that it would result in ‘undesirable conversations’ between children.<sup>126</sup> The NBRC itself had concluded that while some introductory information on sex could be given to a class, sex education at puberty should be undertaken in small groups, and any personal warnings should be given individually.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Mort’s discussion of the 1913 Dronfield case, in which parents complained about a teacher giving basic sex education to senior girls, makes it clear that their objections arose both from the belief that the teacher had usurped their role, and her high-handed dismissal of their objections. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 153-63.

<sup>123</sup> *BMJ*, 2 December 1933, p. 1031.

<sup>124</sup> Winifred V. Richmond, *An Introduction to Sex Education* (London, 1936), p. 267.

<sup>125</sup> *The Times*, 19 November 1924. The 1914 discussions had been reported in detail in *The Times* (13, 14, 21, 27 May 1914), indicating the extent of interest in the topic.

<sup>126</sup> *The Times*, 13 May 1914.

<sup>127</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, pp. 8-9.

Class teaching, however, became increasingly accepted during these years. Tucker and Pout claimed that their experimental sex education programme in Welsh schools had gained the support of teachers involved, and had proved that ‘the common objections against sex-education to groups of young adolescents cannot be upheld’.<sup>128</sup> By 1943, the Board of Education reported that the ‘class method is increasingly felt to have advantages over individual instruction which inevitably becomes personalised’.<sup>129</sup> This may have resulted from a trend towards locating sex education within broader subjects such as hygiene, and, increasingly, biology. From the mid-1920s the BSHC had devoted considerable attention to securing a place for ‘biological education’ in schools, and developing an appropriate curriculum. Its work was offered official sanction through the Hadow report on the education of the adolescent, which recommended that all pupils should receive instruction in biology and elementary physiology, which ‘if properly carried out, might well provide the basis for a right attitude to many social problems’.<sup>130</sup> The wording of this recommendation is virtually identical to that of a BSHC memorandum, drawn up by a group which included Dr Crowley, senior medical officer at the Board of Education, acting in an ‘unofficial capacity’.<sup>131</sup> Providing sex education in the context of biological education, in particular, may have offered a language for discussing sex which did not focus on disease. However, despite this support, sex education was far from universal in schools by the Second World War, when a Board of Education survey found that only around half the LEAs in England (and

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<sup>128</sup> Tucker and Pout, *Sex Education in Schools*, p. 118.

<sup>129</sup> Board of Education, *Sex Education in Schools and Youth Organisations* (London, 1943), p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> Board of Education, *Report of Consultative Committee on the Education of the Adolescent*, p. 224.

<sup>131</sup> Memorandum and syllabus on elements of physiology and hygiene for inclusion in the curriculum of post primary schools other than secondary, Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 8 December 1925. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/1, BSHC Papers.

fewer in Wales) were offering ‘carefully planned instruction’ in at least some schools.<sup>132</sup> Griffith also noted local variations; while Aldershot borough council opposed sex education in schools, Guildford’s education committee was ‘very keen on the sex education lectures’.<sup>133</sup> As with the BSHC’s propaganda programme, sex education was likely to focus on girls; the Board found that three times as many girls’ schools as boys’ schools included sex instruction in their syllabuses.<sup>134</sup> In contrast, Griffith, writing during the Second World War, argued that sex education for girls was less satisfactory than for boys, since many girls’ schools either ignored the subject or dealt with it in a ‘wishy-washy sort of way’.<sup>135</sup> However, this appeared to be undermined by his own survey of pupils’ experience of sex education, which found that girls had received more information about sex than boys, from parents and teachers alike.<sup>136</sup>

### *Reaching older adolescents*

This uneven development of sex education programmes in school still left untouched the problem of the adolescent who had left school. According to the BSHC in 1929, more work was needed to ensure that young wage-earners received ‘adequate knowledge and enlightenment as to the dangers that may beset them, and wise guidance to assist them in the conduct of their lives’.<sup>137</sup> Its attempts to reach

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<sup>132</sup> Board of Education, *Sex Education*, p. 6. While the war no doubt prompted the development of more sex education programmes, it is clear that some of the examples described had originated before the outbreak of war.

<sup>133</sup> Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, p. 52.

<sup>134</sup> Board of Education, *Sex Education*, p. 6.

<sup>135</sup> Griffith, *Road to Maturity*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>136</sup> Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, p. 89. The date and type of school are unspecified, but it is likely that his survey was carried out in the late 1930s in secondary or private schools.

<sup>137</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 17.

this group, however, appear to have brought it into conflict with some youth organisations, who felt their role in working with adolescents was being usurped. I will discuss the way in which the Guides and the YWCA incorporated sex education in their work in chapter five. At this point, I want to consider youth organisations' attitudes to sex education generally, and their relationship with the BSHC.

The characterisation of adolescence as a time of moral development allowed youth organisations to claim a critical role in helping to shape the development of adolescents who were not in touch with other educational agencies.<sup>138</sup> Many youth workers, however, shared teachers' hesitancy about their own role in offering adolescents information about sex. *Youth and the Race* reported that youth organisations tended to focus on character training rather than direct instruction in sex matters, due to the fear that this might be misused 'owing to the power of suggestion in young minds'.<sup>139</sup> In 1933 Neville-Rolfe reported on a meeting with the Board of Education's Juvenile Organisation Committee (JOC) at which it had been agreed that while youth leaders should be 'equipped with accurate knowledge on matters of Social Hygiene' in order to better understand young people, they should 'not be asked personally to deal with this question'.<sup>140</sup> As late as 1938, Miss Swaisland stressed the need to recognise that some youth leaders had 'a certain amount of sincere hesitation' concerning sex education.<sup>141</sup> By 1943, however, the Board of Education found that most youth workers, either reluctantly or enthusiastically, accepted that giving sex instruction was 'a normal and important

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<sup>138</sup> Youth organisations were believed to engage around one-third of adolescents; reaching the remaining two-thirds therefore was a focus of much concern.

<sup>139</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 15.

<sup>140</sup> National Consultative Committee Minutes, 21 March 1933. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.4, BSHC Papers.

<sup>141</sup> Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 13 December 1938. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/5, BSHC Papers.



part of their work'.<sup>142</sup> The Board itself endorsed youth workers' important role in providing guidance on sexual conduct to 'working boys and girls faced with daily problems of adjustment'.<sup>143</sup>

As already noted, most major youth organisations were members of the BSHC, indicating their recognition of the need to engage with the issue of sex education. Chapter five will explore the relationship between the BSHC and the Guides and the YWCA, both of which were represented on BSHC committees, with Katharine Furse of the Guides being particularly active.<sup>144</sup> The BSHC also collaborated with these and other girls' organisations to develop sex education syllabuses for older adolescents. In 1929, the BSHC set up a national consultative committee of youth and welfare organisations, including the National Council of Girls' Clubs, to advise its Social Hygiene Committee on the education of young people on 'matters of social hygiene'.<sup>145</sup>

Despite this co-operation, however, the BSHC appears to have come into conflict with youth organisations at various points. Its relationship with London youth organisations appears to have been strained. In 1928 the BSHC met the Joint Council of London JOC and London Diocesan Council for Youth to consider their objections to some films used by the Council.<sup>146</sup> The issue appears to be the extent to which young people should be given information direct. Although the youth organisations agreed that youth leaders needed 'definite information', they believed that the films were 'actually doing positive harm' to the adolescents who watched

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<sup>142</sup> Board of Education, *Sex Education*, p. 17.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Furse was also a member of the NVA's sub-committee on sex education.

<sup>145</sup> National Consultative Committee Minutes 3 July 1929. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.4. BSHC Papers.

<sup>146</sup> Katharine Furse represented the BSHC at this meeting.

them.<sup>147</sup> These organisations eventually drew up a joint memorandum which provided the basis for the BSHC's relationship with London youth organisations. This allocated the BSHC responsibility for working with young people over sixteen who were not in contact with educational bodies. Its work with those under sixteen, however, was to be undertaken in collaboration with education and youth organisations. The memorandum also set out syllabuses of sex education for young people (in single-sex groups) under and over sixteen.<sup>148</sup>

The BSHC also reported other difficulties with youth organisations. The Middlesbrough branch reported it had been unable to persuade the local JOC to collaborate with it, since it believed it was 'not a suitable organisation for the inculcation of the correct idea of sex relations'.<sup>149</sup> Although the BSHC did work with the NCGC, it was reported that it wanted its own leaders trained to deal with the question of sex, rather than having outsiders in their clubs. However, the clubs' already over-crowded syllabus made it difficult to find room for lectures on social hygiene.<sup>150</sup>

### **Controlling the reception and use of sexual knowledge**

The surge of publications intended for married and engaged couples created new problems in regulating young people's access and reaction to knowledge about sex. Many of these publications reached large audiences, and remained in print for a

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<sup>147</sup> Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 17 January 1928. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/3, BSHC Papers.

<sup>148</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1929, pp. 25-29.

<sup>149</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1932, p. 77.

<sup>150</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, Youth Organisations: summary of interviews November 1937 and February 1938, loose sheets in minute book. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/5, BSHC Papers.

considerable time. The popularity of Marie Stopes' work is well-known: *Married Love* had sold 270,000 copies in the five years following its publication in 1918.<sup>151</sup> Introducing a new edition of *Modern Marriage* in 1955, Griffith noted that the number of editions it had passed through since it was first published in 1935, and the 'various foreign translations' that had been made indicated that it still 'seems to meet a certain public need'.<sup>152</sup> The existence of such publications, often relatively low-priced, created new difficulties in regulating access to information. Summing up at the Stopes vs. Sutherland libel action, the judge stressed that her work would be read by 'married and unmarried, young and old, persons of both sexes'. It is evident that the undifferentiated nature of the audience was as disturbing as the content.<sup>153</sup> In contrast, Eustace Chessier's *Love without Fear*, which was the subject of an unsuccessful obscenity case in 1942, claimed as part of its defence that it was priced at 12s 6d to 'keep it out of younger people's hands, such as typists and others'.<sup>154</sup> Publishers also sought to restrict themselves to limit sales to professionals, a move often deplored by the medical press.<sup>155</sup> By 1938, however, a *Lancet* review of Havelock Ellis's *Sex in Relation to Society* noted that material once restricted to medical readers could now be read by 'all serious persons'.<sup>156</sup> Specific attempts were made to forbid the sale of publications to young people, as in the

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<sup>151</sup> Stopes, *Married Love*, title page.

<sup>152</sup> Griffith, *Modern Marriage*, p. viii. The DNB entry for Wright notes that *The Sex Factor in Marriage* sold a total of over one million copies. DNB, 1981-85, p. 431. *What is Sex?* was still on sale in a revised edition in the 1970s. Alan Rushbridger, *A Concise History of the Sex Manual 1886-1986* (London, 1986), p. 26.

<sup>153</sup> *BMJ*, 10 March 1923, p. 448. Stopes had alleged that a passage in Sutherland's anti-birth control book accused her of conducting dangerous experiments on the poor through her birth control clinic. In a confusing verdict the jury found that the passage was both defamatory and true, resulting in counsels for the plaintiff and defendant both claiming victory; the judge found for Sutherland. Following a successful appeal by Stopes, the case ended up in the Lords, which reinstated the original judgement in Sutherland's favour. *BMJ*, 10 March 1923, pp. 445-48, 29 November 1924, p. 1028.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 262.

<sup>155</sup> See comments to this effect in the *Lancet*, 17 September 1921, p. 609; 27 July 1929, p. 177.

<sup>156</sup> *Lancet*, 5 February 1938, p. 325.

London Public Morality Council's efforts to secure legislation banning the sale of 'indecent literature' to young people.<sup>157</sup> During the 1930s there were unsuccessful attempts to introduce legislation forbidding the advertising (though not the sale) of contraceptives to young people under 18.<sup>158</sup>

Authors also sought to regulate their readers' responses. Leslie Weatherhead, for instance, claimed that *The Mastery of Sex* was written for those 'who will read it purely, reverently and sincerely'.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, sex educators stressed the importance of the tone in which sex education programmes were offered in determining the reception of information by young people. As *Youth and the Race* demonstrated, there was however no agreement on what this tone should be; while some advocated a 'reverential' approach, others rejected any stress on the 'sacred significance' of everything connected with birth and sex.<sup>160</sup>

Contemporary commentators offered conflicting accounts concerning young people's access to information about sex. Those reviewing publications on sex and sex education in the *Lancet* and the *BMJ* frequently referred to the increasing number of publications, and the poor quality of many of them. While in 1921 a *Lancet* reviewer approved of 'the present widespread overthrow' of the 'immoral attitude of silence as regards sexual matters in dealing with the young',<sup>161</sup> by 1933 another review commented on the 'torrent' of books on sex issued since the war.<sup>162</sup> A 1929 review of a biography of Havelock Ellis claimed that young people now

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<sup>157</sup> *Vigilance Record*, March-April 1929, pp. 20-22. The campaign was supported by a range of youth and educational organisations including the YWCA, the YMCA, the GFS and the NUT.

<sup>158</sup> These were the Contraceptives Bill of 1934, and the Contraceptives (Regulation) Bill of 1938. *Lancet*, 24 March 1934, p. 659; *BMJ*, 24 December 1938, p. 1346.

<sup>159</sup> Weatherhead, *Mastery of Sex*, noted before dedication.

<sup>160</sup> Evidence of Edith Cooper and A.G. Tansley respectively, NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, pp. 70, 147.

<sup>161</sup> *Lancet*, 5 February 1921, p. 279.

<sup>162</sup> *Lancet*, 7 January 1933, p. 63.



‘accept as ordinary knowledge information upon sex topics that in the last century would have been forbidden to them’.<sup>163</sup>

Working-class girls in particular were often represented as knowledgeable about sex. Labour MP and future education minister Ellen Wilkinson drew on her experience of organising girls in shops and factories to claim that the ‘girl of sixteen who could pass an examination in the works of Marie Stopes is no rarity’.<sup>164</sup> Those opposed to contraception claimed that information about it was widely circulated, to the detriment of moral standards, as in the Birmingham Medical Officer of Health’s condemnation of the circulation of ‘disgraceful pamphlets’ to young unmarried women in factories.<sup>165</sup> Others, however, stressed young people’s continued ignorance or partial, and hence dangerous, knowledge; Griffith, for instance, stressed young people’s continuing ignorance about sex, describing them as ‘pathetically eager for real instruction’.<sup>166</sup> A contrast was also drawn between the superficial knowingness of the ‘modern girl’ and her real understanding of sexuality; as late as 1938, Dr. Dorothy Dinton claimed that the ‘more sophisticated and made-up a young woman the more ignorant she seems to be of sex matters’.<sup>167</sup>

It is likely that access to information about sex was unequal, and that young women’s access to information would be mediated by various factors including age, class, religious background, and occupation. Using oral history sources, Diana Gittins found that women who had worked in factories before marriage had much greater knowledge about sex than young women in service, since they had not only

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<sup>163</sup> *Lancet*, 2 March 1929, p. 455.

<sup>164</sup> *John Bull*, 20 July 1935. Press Cuttings. CMAC.PP/EFG.A.40, Griffith Papers.

<sup>165</sup> Robertson, ‘Views of a Medical Officer of Health’, pp. 170-71.

<sup>166</sup> Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>167</sup> *Western Mail*, 28 October 1938. Press Cuttings. CMAC.PP/EFG/A.42, Griffith Papers.

gained information about sex from female workmates, but often discussed sex matters (and engaged in ‘sexual “messaging around”’) with their male peers.<sup>168</sup>

Oral history accounts often stress women’s ignorance concerning sexual matters. Maureen Sutton gave her account of women’s lives in Lincolnshire between 1930 and 1950 the title ‘We Didn’t Know Aught’ to reflect what she believes is the most striking feature of her study, the silence about sexual matters throughout this period.<sup>169</sup> However, women’s retrospective need to position their behaviour within prevailing discourses of respectability may influence their accounts of their sexual knowledge and activity when young.<sup>170</sup> Clearly there were specific interests to be served by maintaining that young people, in particular young women, were either well-informed or ignorant about sex. As I will explore in the next chapter, discussions of social problems such as unmarried motherhood or prostitution commonly identified girls’ ignorance about sex as an important factor contributing to their transgressions, and thus claimed that sex education would help avert such personal disasters. There is also the commercial argument that those writing books on sex were unlikely to admit that they were unnecessary.

The way in which young people responded to information was also constantly under scrutiny. Edith Cooper reflected the common belief that young people, when properly educated about sex, would no longer treat it with levity. She claimed that girls’ ‘complete absence of giggling, shame-facedness, etc., at the mention of bodily functions, babies, etc’ demonstrated the success of the teaching.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-1939* (London, 1982).

<sup>169</sup> Maureen Sutton, ‘We Didn’t Know Aught’: a Study of Sexuality, Superstition and Death in Women’s Lives in Lincolnshire During the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s (Stamford, 1992).

<sup>170</sup> See Giles, “Playing Hard to Get”, pp. 242-45.

<sup>171</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 149.

The increasing use of films in sex education intensified concern as to how young people's reception of information could be monitored and controlled. Annette Kuhn's study of the NCCVD's use of film in anti-VD campaigns explores the way in which the narratives of such films - with titles such as *Damaged Goods* or *The End of the Road*<sup>172</sup> - were constructed around polarisations of ignorance and knowledge, through which the only effective protection for young women was 'proper sex education and the lofty moral principles learned from her mother'.<sup>173</sup> While Kuhn's discussion stops in the mid-1920s, the BSHC's use of films as propaganda may have become more sophisticated; a 1929 article on its use of films with young people claimed that the audience did not realise that a 'lesson is being taught' until halfway through the film.<sup>174</sup>

The BSHC believed that these films were particularly effective in reaching young people in work (or unemployed) who were not members of youth organisations.<sup>175</sup> This was reflected in their marketing: *Damaged Lives* was billed as a film that should be seen 'by every young person on the threshold of virile manhood or glorious womanhood'.<sup>176</sup> Reports from local branches stressed the popularity of films, to the extent that people had to be turned away.<sup>177</sup> In Gateshead, for instance, between twenty-five and thirty thousand people saw *The End of the Road* during

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<sup>172</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London, 1988), chapter four and pp. 149-150. *Damaged Goods* was an adaptation of a French play about syphilis in a bourgeois family, in which a man about to marry is infected by a woman who embarks on a career as a prostitute after being raped and made pregnant by her employer. Her story is told at some length in the 1919 film. Aimed at female audiences, the American film *The End of the Road* (1918) follows the lives of two young women, one of whom leads a 'decent' life and becomes a nurse, while the other falls from grace and contracts VD.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>174</sup> *The Times*, 23 October 1929.

<sup>175</sup> BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 15.

<sup>176</sup> Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, illustration between p. 132 and p. 133.

<sup>177</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1920, p. 81. Report from Herefordshire branch.

1919-1920.<sup>178</sup> Between its British release in August 1933 and October 1934 the Canadian film *Damaged Lives* had been shown in 542 cinemas to audiences totalling four million.<sup>179</sup>

The film campaigns, however, experienced opposition on a number of grounds. Some local authorities were uncooperative. The BSHC complained without success about the LCC's policy forbidding the showing of propaganda or educational films to young people under 18,<sup>180</sup> while Dorset and Sheffield also banned propaganda films.<sup>181</sup> The films' content was also criticised, particularly the extent to which they continued to promote fear as a motive for sexual continence.<sup>182</sup> Feminists also criticised the films for perpetuation of the double standard. A review of *The End of the Road* in *The Shield* criticised it on various grounds including its portrayal of men as seemingly unaffected by their 'loose-living' while all the women except the heroine came to a 'bad end'.<sup>183</sup> Some years later, the *Lancet* was similarly critical of the fear-invoking approach of another film, *The Dangers of Ignorance*.<sup>184</sup>

Cinema's viewing arrangements also aroused concern about the messages they offered audiences. The *Lancet* condemned the arrangements for separate

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76

<sup>179</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 1 October 1934. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/15, BSHC Papers.

<sup>180</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 4 October 1922, 16 July 1923. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/7, BSHC Papers. The ban had originally been imposed in 1920; this discussion was prompted by the LCC having reminded the Council about this rule.

<sup>181</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1921, p. 78; *ibid.*, 1920, p. 109.

<sup>182</sup> See reviews of *The End of the Road* in the *Shield*, 2 (December 1919-January 1920), pp. 189-90; *The Dangers of Ignorance* in the *Lancet*, 4 February 1928, p. 248. As late as 1938, the BSHC discussed criticisms that its films focused too much on 'fear of consequences as a deterrent'. Social Hygiene Council Minutes, 14 June 1938. CMAC.SA/BSH.F.1/5, BSHC Papers. However, the difficulties of securing agreement on the role of fear as a deterrent is evident from another member's comment that the films implied that 'there was nothing wrong in promiscuous intercourse provided venereal disease was avoided'.

<sup>183</sup> *Shield*, 2 (December 1919-January 1920), p. 189. Bland notes the way in which BSHC leaflets for men adopted a chattily reassuring tone. Bland, 'Guardians of the Race', p. 385.

<sup>184</sup> *Lancet*, 4 February 1928, pp. 247-48.



showings to men and women as a 'needless sop to sentiment'.<sup>185</sup> The BSHC similarly deplored the decision of Cardiff Watch Committee that *Damaged Lives* should only be shown to segregated audiences, since this would give the idea that 'the film is of a pornographic character'.<sup>186</sup> Reports of film showings repeatedly reveal concern about the motivation of the audience; the West Yorkshire branch, for instance, admits that some people came to see *The End of the Road* out of curiosity, but claimed that most revealed 'a real desire for information'.<sup>187</sup> The difficulty of responding to an increasingly sophisticated audience is suggested by the BSHC's decision in 1927 to cease using *The End of the Road* since it 'induced a tendency to laughter'.<sup>188</sup> Responding to a Public Morality Council questionnaire on sex education and the role of youth organisations, the White Cross League made the dilemma explicit; when adolescents were shown a sex education film, there was 'no method of ensuring that the right impression is left'.<sup>189</sup> As Kuhn concludes, 'it is clear that, as far as social purity organisations were concerned, the instability of propaganda films as bearers of meaning was a major drawback'.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>186</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 6 December 1933. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/14, BSHC Papers.

<sup>187</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1920, p. 124.

<sup>188</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 7 November 1927. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/9, BSHC Papers.

<sup>189</sup> Sex Hygiene: Board of Education Questionnaire (Juvenile Organisation Committee) 1931, Draft replies as from the Committee of the White Cross League circulated in confidence. NVA, Box 98, file S10D, NVA Papers.

<sup>190</sup> Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*, p. 71. The 'sexual prudery' of the British Board of Film Censors during the inter-war period, which led to it censoring anything that might possibly cause offence, may have added to the attraction of these propaganda films. See McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 419-26.

## The impact of the BSHC

Despite the consensus on the need for sex education, and the scale of the BSHC's work during the inter-war years, the government transferred responsibility for the sex education of young people to the Council for Health Education during the Second World War.<sup>191</sup> Neville-Rolfe implies that this was because it had antagonised the MOH by its public criticism of its inadequate support for health education programmes.<sup>192</sup> Whatever the truth of this assertion, it is clear that the BSHC encountered opposition to its activities from different quarters. Various causes can be identified, including local authorities' reluctance to grapple with the problem of VD, the ambiguous status of the Council as an instrument delivering government policy, professional disagreements and rivalries and, perhaps not least, the character of Sybil Neville-Rolfe. She clearly provoked strong reactions. Her obituary in *The Times* reveals her as a forceful and manipulative character, although it claims that her commitment to her work meant that any irritation about her tactics 'soon gave way at least to amused tolerance, often to keen collaboration'.<sup>193</sup>

The Council never gained complete support from local authorities. Early reports of its work stressed the difficulty – for speakers and audience alike - of bringing discussion of VD into the public domain. Scharlieb's memoirs stressed the problems faced by lecturers, speaking on 'repulsive' matters to 'audiences that were at heart unwilling to be taught'.<sup>194</sup> In 1920 the Manchester and Salford branch

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<sup>191</sup> Neville-Rolfe, *Social Biology and Welfare*, pp. 46-47. Set up in the 1920s, this body had remained relatively inactive because of lack of funding. *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, page 46.

<sup>193</sup> *Obituaries from The Times 1951-60* (Reading, 1979), p. 530.

<sup>194</sup> Mary Scharlieb, *Reminiscences* (London, 1925), p. 212.

reported ‘much prejudice, if not antipathy, shown to any discussion on the subject of venereal diseases’.<sup>195</sup> Conversely, some local branches suspended activities on the grounds that constant discussion of VD was ‘showing a tendency towards obsession’.<sup>196</sup> The Local Government Act 1929 adversely affected the BSHC’s financial position, by replacing its central government grant with local authority funding. Despite a MOH circular urging local authorities to support the Council, only 117 of the 146 authorities in England and Wales did so, contributing a total of around £6,800 during 1930-31. This represented less than half its highest annual grant from central government, which had ranged between £18,000 and £9,000 a year.<sup>197</sup> Support fell further during the 1930s, and in 1935 the Council was forced to issue a public fundraising appeal.<sup>198</sup> Local activities also declined; in 1933 Neville-Rolfe claimed that many local authorities were reducing their educational work for financial reasons.<sup>199</sup>

Despite the extent of medical involvement in the BSHC, some of its activities aroused professional opposition. In 1919 a group of mainly male doctors formed the Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease, in order to promote self-disinfection immediately before or after sexual intercourse, a practice to which the BSHC was opposed for various reasons, including its effect on the morals of young people (and its claimed ineffectiveness for women). However, despite the SPVD’s attempts to secure government funding, the government continued to support the

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<sup>195</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1920, p. 98.

<sup>196</sup> NCCVD, *Annual Report*, 1921, p. 101.

<sup>197</sup> Neville-Rolfe, ‘Propaganda Methods and Results’, p. 372; MOH, *Annual Report of the Ministry of Health 1930-31*, 1931, p. 72.

<sup>198</sup> *Lancet*, 25 May 1935, p. 1227. By 1937-38 it received only £2,568 from 71 local authorities. MOH, *Annual Report of the Ministry of Health*, 1938, p. 27.

<sup>199</sup> Executive Committee Minutes 20 February 1933. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/14. BSHC Papers.

NCCVD, indicating, in Towers' view, the extent to which moral conditions prevailed in approaches to controlling VD.<sup>200</sup> In the 1930s, the BSHC was forced to abandon its plans to set up a 'personal problems bureau', whose functions would include advising girls intending marriage.<sup>201</sup> This project was opposed by the BMA; as is clear from the correspondence columns of the *BMJ* and (to a lesser extent) the *Lancet*, it was seen to pose a threat to professional interests, particularly those of general practitioners.<sup>202</sup> While the BSHC agreed not to proceed, it sought to retain some ground, since its letter to the BMA withdrawing the proposal stressed that 'education in matters of sex-relationships of a non-medical character' was already included within the Council's scope.<sup>203</sup>

The proposed bureau was also opposed on the grounds that it would involve the BSHC in providing information on contraception. This opposition was the more significant since it emerged within the organisation, with its former vice-president Sir Arthur Newsholme publicly disapproving of the Council taking any action which would 'imply approval of artificial birth control'.<sup>204</sup> Griffith maintained that the BSHC was unable to discuss contraception because of its funding from Catholic sources.<sup>205</sup> The evidence for this assertion is unclear, but its 1927 membership certainly included three Catholic organisations,<sup>206</sup> as well as other organisations either hostile to or embarrassed by the topic, and its reticence may have been

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<sup>200</sup> Towers, 'Health Education Policy 1916-1926'. Towers argues that the SPVD gained a considerable following among the medical profession and educated lay public.

<sup>201</sup> *Lancet*, 9 April 1932, p. 803.

<sup>202</sup> *Lancet*, 26 March, p. 700, 9 April, pp. 803-4, 30 April 1932, p. 957. *BMJ*, 9 April, p. 687, 16 April, pp. 727-8, 30 April, p. 819, 7 May, p. 864, 14 May, pp. 912-3, 28 May 1932, p. 1010,

<sup>203</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 26 May 1932. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/14, BSHC Papers.

<sup>204</sup> *BMJ*, 9 April 1932, p. 687. This letter was also published in the *Lancet* and *The Medical Officer*.

<sup>205</sup> Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, p. 76.

<sup>206</sup> These were the Catholic Education Society, Catholic Social Guild and the Catholic Women's League. BSHC, *Annual Report*, 1927, pp. 128.



necessary to avoid splitting the membership. However, the BSHC's attempts to expand its remit from a restricted focus on VD to a concern with adolescent sex education and, in the 1930s, to education for marriage, may have made its inability to address the issues of contraception increasingly untenable if it was to be seen to offer credible information and guidance on sex. There is evidence that at least the Birmingham branch discussed contraception.<sup>207</sup> At national level, the BSHC's own marriage sub-committee was forced to disband since it concluded that it 'was exceedingly and increasingly difficult to address those about to marry without some reference to contraception'.<sup>208</sup>

The BSHC's increasing focus on biological education also appears to have put it at odds with the National Vigilance Association. Although, during the early 1920s the NVA had repeatedly called for sex education in schools,<sup>209</sup> by 1930 its journal was condemning the 'recent alarming tendency' to promote sex education through biological education, arguing instead that the ideal of 'modesty' should be promoted among girls.<sup>210</sup> While this jibe appears to be directed at the BSHC, the NVA's withdrawal of approval for sex education may also have arisen from internal tensions concerning the issue. Although a sub-committee on sex education recommended that it should address the issue, in 1932 the NVA's executive board came to the conclusion that in view of the sensitivity of the issue and the difficulty of obtaining consensus among its membership, it would be wiser to leave the subject

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<sup>207</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, 9 May 1938. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/17, BSHC Papers.

<sup>208</sup> Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 12 May 1936. CMAC.SA/BSH/F.1/5, BSHC Papers. Most of the members of this sub-committee joined the newly formed Marriage Guidance Council, in a parting described as 'entirely amicable' by Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, p. 76.

<sup>209</sup> See, for instance, *Vigilance Record*, September 1920, pp. 1-2; February 1922, p. 22; April 1922, p. 27; February 1923, pp. 9-10.

<sup>210</sup> *Vigilance Record* (July 1930), pp. 42-43.

alone.<sup>211</sup> Its decision illustrates that despite the increasing consensus on the importance of sex education for young people during the inter-war period, its discussion and implementation continued to be fraught with tension.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the ways in which sex education was conceptualised as an essential component of the training of adolescents. In the context of discourses which stressed the need for individuals to develop the capacity to regulate their own behaviour, commentators focused on the necessity of inculcating in young people an understanding of sex which would encourage them to exercise self-restraint.

Attention therefore focused on directing and controlling the way in which young people gained sexual knowledge, with the BSHC, the body with official responsibility for educating the public about VD, increasingly focusing its efforts on educating the adolescent about sex. This change of emphasis was reinforced by the impact of the discourse of sexual satisfaction within marriage promoted through marital advice manuals. While many sex education materials continued to offer young people, particularly young women, gender-differentiated material which stressed the dangers of sex, some materials and programmes, particularly those intended for a young middle-class audience, incorporated expectations of future sexual satisfaction within the messages they offered young people. More urgently, however, sex education was believed to play a critical role in diverting girls from

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<sup>211</sup> Extract from Minutes of Executive Committee held on 23 February 1932. Sex Education (NVA Sub-Committee) 1931-33. Box 98, S10E, NVA Papers.

sexual activity; discussions of social problems such as unmarried motherhood or prostitution commonly located these in the context of the management of adolescence, in which girls' ignorance about sex - conceptualised to include knowledge acquired in the wrong way – was seen as a critical factor contributing to their transgression. The next chapter will explore the consequences of the mismanagement of female adolescence, and the institutional response to such transgressions.

## Chapter Four: Managing the Problem Girl

Despite the characterisation of adolescence as a time of stress and difficulty for girls, most young women were believed to pass through the years of adolescence unharmed. For a minority of young women, however, their behaviour during their teenage years led to them being identified as ‘problem girls’, in need of active intervention to protect themselves and others. This ‘problem’ behaviour was primarily, though not exclusively, associated with sexual transgression, and this chapter will explore the ways in which representation of girls’ sexual activity drew upon a range of discourses to determine their level of responsibility for their actions. While the previous chapter examined the role of sex education in the moral training of the adolescent, this chapter focuses on more active forms of intervention into the lives of adolescents. Girls’ sexual activity often brought them within the remit of a range of different institutions, where their treatment depended upon their perceived levels of responsibility and culpability, and their consequent potential for reform.

These interventions drew upon discourses of adolescence as both a time of danger and of opportunity. Sexually active adolescents were represented as victims, whether of their own character and actions, their circumstances, or their ignorance or inadequate understandings about sex. Social problems such as unmarried motherhood, ‘sex-delinquency’ and mental deficiency were, in part at least, conceptualised as problems of the management of adolescence, legitimising an extension of state powers to regulate adolescent behaviour. However, institutions catering for adolescent girls also drew upon the discourses of adolescence as a



critical time of moral development to stress their role in developing girls' capacity for moral choice and responsibility.

While only a small minority of girls entered institutions, these institutions are significant because they offer an extreme approach to reshaping the totality of girls' lives. Studies of reform institutions have tended to stress their punitive approaches, but I will explore the extent to which, by the inter-war period, these organisations represented their approach to problem girls as informed by discourses of adolescence, moral choice and citizenship. While the extent to which this influenced provision was variable, and no doubt limited by inadequate resources and individual interpretations, my discussion of reform institutions will indicate the significance of the language of reformability, even among the most extreme cases.

### **Representing the sexually active adolescent**

As already discussed, the First World War focused public attention on girls' sexual activity, through discussion of venereal disease, promiscuity and pregnancy outside marriage. This section will explore the contrasting and often contradictory ways in which different sexual transgressions were represented, and the extent to which they represented sexually active girls as irresponsible or culpable.

### *Young women and VD*

As discussed in the first chapter, World War One had focused attention on the perceived sexual promiscuity of adolescent girls, particularly in the context of VD, which was believed to be widespread. Although unable to obtain accurate

statistics, the Royal Commission on VD had estimated that at least ten per cent of the urban population was infected with VD.<sup>1</sup> After the war, VD continued to provide a focus and justification for public discussion of sexual matters, with the statistics provided by the new treatment centres offering evidence of the scale of the problem. As Table 4.1 shows, the rate of new cases of VD seen at treatment centres rose between 1918 and 1920, peaking at over eighty thousand in 1919 and 1920. Although the annual rate then fell, it rose again in the late 1920s, remaining at between sixty and seventy thousand new cases per year until 1938.

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<sup>1</sup> Porter and Hall, *Facts of Life*, p. 232.

**Table 4.1: Cases of Venereal Disease dealt with for the first time at treatment centres in England and Wales.<sup>2</sup>**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Syphilis</u>	<u>Soft chancre</u>	<u>Gonorrhoea</u>	<u>Total</u>
1918	26,912	806	17,635	45,353
1919	42,134	2,164	38,499	82,797
1920	42,805	2,442	40,284	85,531
1921	32,733	1,654	32,433	66,820
1922	25,762	1,108	29,477	56,347
1923	23,927	1,110	30,908	55,945
1924	22,010	1,098	31,272	54,380
1925	22,588	1,106	33,463	57,157
1926	22,550	1,150	35,052	58,752
1927	23,395	1,063	38,242	62,700
1928	22,761	1,138	42,032	65,931
1929	22,019	1,298	44,166	67,483
1930	23,120	1,324	45,001	69,445
1931	22,934	1,163	42,460	66,557
1932	22,215	952	41,251	64,418
1933	21,525	926	43,226	65,677
1934	20,692	960	43,391	65,043
1935	19,335	1,112	41,332	61,779
1936	18,609	1,000	42,230	61,839
1937	19,185	941	43,802	63,928
1938	18,034	1,007	41,759	60,800

Source: *On the State of the Public Health: Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health for the Year 1938* (London, 1939) p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> These figures do not include cases which proved not to be VD, which amounted to over forty thousand in 1938. As Lesley Hall has noted, this may indicate the 'unprecedented anxieties' VD propaganda created among the general public. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 104. An alternative interpretation, however, might be that the public found attendance at the clinics for embarrassing symptoms less unattractive than other options.

This focus on young women was compounded by both medical and lay discourses concerning VD. Despite the Royal Commission's stress on providing non-stigmatising treatment of VD, much discussion focused on determining who was responsible for the transmission of infection. Sexually active young women, described as 'amateur prostitutes' or simply, the 'amateur', were increasingly represented as taking over from the professional prostitute as the major site of infection.<sup>3</sup> *The Times* reported the findings of research into VD commissioned by the NCPM which claimed that 708 out of 981 cases of gonorrhoea were the result of 'amateur' infection.<sup>4</sup> The majority of witnesses giving evidence to the NBRC's enquiry on VD, most of whom were medical men specialising in venereology, agreed that 'young amateurs' were largely responsible for the spread of infection.<sup>5</sup> Witnesses also emphasised these girls' youth, and the frivolity with which they regarded VD. Charles Gibbs, surgeon at London Lock Hospitals (which dealt specifically with VD), deplored the 'bare-faced manner in which young girls of sixteen and seventeen would ... say, "My boy has given me the clap".'<sup>6</sup>

As discussed in the last chapter, semi-official bodies such as the NCPM and NBRC played an important role in directing public discussion of sexual matters. There was, however, little evidence to support their construction of the sexually active adolescent as primarily responsible for the spread of disease. In 1924, the Ministry of Health provided separate figures on VD among those aged under

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<sup>3</sup> Bland, 'Guardians of the Race', p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 22 February 1919. The headline was 'Menace of the "Amateur" Prostitute'.

<sup>5</sup> NBRC, *Prevention of Venereal Disease*, p.189. Three women gave evidence: Dr Mona Rawlins of the Lock Hospital, Mrs Hornibrook (a New Zealand official reporter and war worker who had written about VD) and gynaecologist Lady Barrett. Mary Scharlieb was a member of the committee.



nineteen. During that year a total of 610 young women aged fourteen to eighteen had been treated for VD (excluding congenital syphilis), compared to 764 young men.<sup>7</sup> While the ratio of infection for young women compared to their male counterparts was higher than the adult female to male ratio<sup>8</sup> (and indeed rates of infection for girls aged fourteen to seventeen were higher than for boys<sup>9</sup>), the figures do not justify the location of infection with very young women. Research carried out by Dr White also failed to support the contention that the 'amateur' was the main source of infection. His study of VD patients treated at a London hospital led him to conclude that young men were most likely to become infected at the age of twenty or twenty-one, compared to nineteen for women.<sup>10</sup> However, while infection rates were higher among unmarried men, the reverse was true for women. The disparity was particularly great for young women under twenty-five, leading him to conclude that they had been infected by their husbands soon after (or before) marriage.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this, the 'amateur' continued to be identified as responsible for spreading infection. Anxieties about sexually active young women were compounded by the difficulty in diagnosing VD in women; according to one NBRC witness, medical officers commonly told him that young girls in their area had VD but 'were not being treated, and quite possibly were unaware that they had anything the matter with them'.<sup>12</sup> A language of contagion and hidden disease was used to

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> MOH, *On the State of the Public Health: Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health for the Year 1924* (London, 1925), p. 110. The figures cover gonorrhoea, acquired syphilis and soft chancre.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* There were 11,593 female and 38,451 male cases for the adult (over 19) population.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* The total for 14-17 year old girls was 275, compared to 228 for boys.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Douglas White, 'Venereal Diseases in Men and Women: a Study of the Age-Incidence', *Lancet*, 10 January 1925, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>12</sup> NBRC, *Prevention of Venereal Disease*, p. 158.

describe girls who had, or who might have, VD. In 1917, for instance, *The Times* published a letter describing sexually active young women as 'sexual freelances' who 'stalked through the land, 'vampires upon the nation's health.'<sup>13</sup> Medical discussion equally appealed to images of contagion, as in a *Lancet* editorial on the 'extinction of venereal diseases' in which the 'clandestine prostitute' is described as creating a 'great silent reservoir of untreated or ignored sources of contagion'.<sup>14</sup> This dehumanising language was reinforced by the portrayal of the 'amateur' as 'feeble-minded' and thus incapable of acting responsibly; I shall discuss the relationship between girls' sexual activity and their diagnosis as mental defective later.

### *The unmarried mother*

In contrast to the representation of girls with VD as posing a hidden danger, unmarried mothers offered tangible evidence of sexual transgression. Despite this, however, they were represented in a more sympathetic manner than girls with (or at risk of) VD. This was of course an artificial distinction, ignoring the fact that the unmarried mother might also be the girl with VD. But in contrast to the medicalised discourses which dominated representation of VD, in which sexually active girls were portrayed as threatening the nation's health,<sup>15</sup> discussion of unmarried mothers drew upon more positive discourses of motherhood as regenerating the nation. At

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Bland, 'Guardians of the Race', p. 373.

<sup>14</sup> *Lancet*, 30 November 1935, pp. 1243-44. Davidson has also noted the use of the term 'infective material' to describe young women with VD. Roger Davidson, 'Venereal Disease, Sexual Morality, and Public Health in Interwar Scotland', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5, 2 (1994), p. 283.

<sup>15</sup> Those working with girls with VD portrayed them in more sympathetic ways, but it was the concern with sexually active girls as vectors of disease that dominated public discussion.

an individual level, organisations concerned with unmarried mothers increasingly sought to keep them together with their children, allowing these young women to be portrayed as responsible, in contrast to the representation of the sexual irresponsibility of girls with VD.

The war had focused attention on unmarried mothers. Despite the expectation that the illegitimate birth rate would increase, this rise did not occur until 1918. Between 1911 and 1917 illegitimate births had accounted for under four per cent of all births;<sup>16</sup> in 1918 and 1919 they rose to 6.21 per cent and 6.05 respectively before falling to 4.62 per cent in 1920. The illegitimacy rate remained at between 4 and 4.6 per cent until World War 2.<sup>17</sup> Discussion of 'war babies' during the First World War had increased public concern about the welfare of illegitimate children and, to a lesser extent, their mothers.<sup>18</sup> During the 1920s, attention continued to focus on the high mortality rate of illegitimate babies, which was around double that of those born within marriage.<sup>19</sup> As the NBRC declared,

The necessity for action is clear. The law, in its defence of marriage and of national existence, has hitherto treated the unmarried mother as an outcast, has penalised the bastard through the mother and allowed the father to escape almost scot-free.<sup>20</sup>

Discussion of the unmarried mother also drew upon fears about population decline,<sup>21</sup> and the belief, heard increasingly frequently during the 1930s, that publicity about

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<sup>16</sup> MOH, *First Report of the Ministry of Health 1919-1920* (London, 1920), p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> NCUMC, *Annual Report*, 1939, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> See Susan R. Grayzel, "'The Mothers of Our Soldiers' Children": Motherhood, Immorality, and the War Baby Scandal, 1914-18' in Claudia Nelson and Ann Sumner Holmes (eds.), *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875-1925* (Basingstoke, 1997), pp.122-39.

<sup>19</sup> MOH, *First Report*, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Lancet*, 26 June 1920, pp. 1365-66. For an overview of policy and provision concerning motherhood (but which specifically excludes discussion of the unmarried mother), see Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*.

<sup>21</sup> See Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 194.

the continued high maternal death rate was deterring married women from having children.<sup>22</sup> These factors served to focus attention on the innocence of children born outside marriage, rather than the culpability of their mothers. The establishment of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child in 1918, which campaigned for the removal of the legal and social disadvantages unmarried mothers experienced, offered a focus for the construction of a more sympathetic approach to unmarried mothers, through which they were depicted as unfortunate rather than immoral, and their similarity to, rather than their difference from, other girls was stressed.<sup>23</sup> According to E.F. Griffith, half the pregnant girls he saw had 'got into difficulties through pure ignorance, curiosity and the assurance of the man that everything will be all right'.<sup>24</sup> In the context of concerns about young women's access to contraception, pregnancy itself could be seen as an indication of a girl's relative sexual inexperience, since her more experienced counterpart would know how to avoid pregnancy. Specific groups of young women were perceived to be at greater risk of pregnancy outside marriage (and, if not prevented, a subsequent drift into prostitution). All commentators agreed that girls in domestic service were a particularly vulnerable group.<sup>25</sup> The NVA repeatedly claimed that girls who moved to London from Ireland, Wales and parts of England hard hit by unemployment were

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis discusses the ways in which the government, the medical profession and the women's press sought to reassure young women that childbirth was safe during the 1930s. Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>23</sup> In contrast, by the 1950s unmarried mothers were depicted as psychologically disturbed. See Martine Spensky, 'Producers of Legitimacy: Homes for Unmarried Mothers in the 1950s' in Carol Smart (ed.), *Regulating Womanhood, Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* (London, 1992), pp. 100-18.

<sup>24</sup> Griffith, *Pioneer Spirit*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance NBRC, *Problems of Population and Parenthood*, p. lxiii.



at risk of sexual exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Birmingham's medical officer of health offered a similar explanation for the city's apparently high illegitimacy rate in 1938.<sup>27</sup>

Unmarried mothers were also represented as seeking motherhood rather than sex, so that their sexual experimentation stemmed from their maternal instincts; both Burt and the influential American commentator Judge Lindsey depicted some adolescent girls' sexual activities as displaced maternal instincts.<sup>28</sup> Tinkler has noted that by the 1930s the unmarried mother received sympathetic treatment in young women's magazines, providing it was clear that she had not 'sought sex for itself' but had either been misled by a man or was consciously or unconsciously seeking to fulfil her maternal instinct.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the depiction of girls as sanguine about the dangers of VD, reformers stressed the anguish experienced by young women who became pregnant outside marriage. The eminent doctor Sir Robert Jones Armstrong claimed that unmarried mothers were more vulnerable to puerperal insanity, because of their sense of 'shame, disgrace and being wronged'.<sup>30</sup> Sympathy could even be extended to the extreme act of infanticide. Lords discussing the Preservation of Infant Life Bill in 1928 created a composite picture of a woman who committed infanticide: an unmarried girl, pregnant for the first time, undergoing a difficult labour after months of 'mental care, anxiety and shame'.<sup>31</sup> Such women, they concluded, could not be held 'as wholly responsible as ordinary mortals for their action'.<sup>32</sup> While this representation of these young women as victims is compassionate, it also demands that they exhibit their despair in a

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<sup>26</sup> NVA, *1885-1935: A Brief Record of 50 Years' Work of the National Vigilance Association* (London, 1935), pp. 9-12.

<sup>27</sup> *BMJ*, 19 August 1939, p. 420.

<sup>28</sup> Burt, *Young Delinquent*, pp. 481-82; Lindsey and Evans, *Revolt of Modern Youth*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>29</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 169.

<sup>30</sup> *Lancet*, 26 June 1923, p. 1297.

<sup>31</sup> *Lancet*, 1 December 1928, p. 1156.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1157.

particular way. Professor Louisa McIlroy identifies the case of a young waitress who killed her illegitimate child because, in her own words, “I had nobody to mind him and no money”, as falling outside the infanticide laws.<sup>33</sup> By framing her action in the context of her material circumstances, rather than emotional turmoil, this young woman appears to have excluded herself from this category of victimhood.

This stress on young women’s confusion and despair clearly depended on its contrast with their previous situation and behaviour. Those for whom pregnancy outside marriage was not a matter of severe shame needed a different approach. Springer’s account of rescue work contrasts the majority of unmarried mothers - piteous figures, ‘betrayed through little or no fault of their own’<sup>34</sup> - with the minority who ‘regard their plight far too casually’, who needed a ‘firmer and less sympathetic attitude’ and could not be allowed to infect other girls with their ‘irresponsible outlook’.<sup>35</sup> As I will discuss later, rescue and reform provision sought to categorise girls according to their level of sexual experience or knowledge, in order to protect more ‘innocent’ girls from corruption.

The issue of the ‘second fall’ posed particular difficulties for a sympathetic representation of unmarried motherhood. Mary Scharlieb believed that factory girls had their own moral code, in which a first pregnancy out of marriage was viewed sympathetically, but any subsequent ‘lapse’ was condemned.<sup>36</sup> Many rescue homes excluded girls who were pregnant outside marriage for a second or subsequent time (and as will be seen, more than one extra-marital pregnancy was often seen as an

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<sup>33</sup> A. Louise Mcilroy, ‘The Influence of Parturition Upon Insanity and Crime’, *Lancet*, 25 February 1928, p. 380. The Infanticide Act allowed a woman who had killed her newly born child to avoid a charge of murder if she was shown to be mentally unbalanced as a result of giving birth.

<sup>34</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil in London*, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Scharlieb, *How to Enlighten our Children*, p. 53.

indication of mental deficiency). Ada Chesterton's assertion that a young unmarried mother she had met while going 'undercover' among London lodging houses would 'remain the same brave, kindly and hard-working woman should she have twenty illegitimate children' appears to be exceptional.<sup>37</sup> However, sympathy could be extended in some circumstances to a girl who became pregnant for a second time; the NCUMC, whose policy was to keep mother and child together, argued that a second pregnancy was more likely among young women who had been separated from their first child, since this resulted in them becoming 'reckless and callous'.<sup>38</sup> This group thus still offered a 'hopeful field for rehabilitation'.<sup>39</sup> Such girls were therefore brought back into the remit of sympathy, since their subsequent pregnancy was the result of thwarted maternal instinct.

Those working with, or seeking to improve the conditions of, unmarried mothers were thus constructing a specific image of unmarried motherhood to secure both sympathy for girls' predicament, and support for their work. The reality may have been different, as indicated by a study of Salvation Army work with unmarried mothers, which identifies significant differences between its published accounts and its unpublished records.<sup>40</sup> While its official reports created a composite picture of the rescued unmarried mother as under nineteen, lacking friends and family, and often the victim of seduction by a man from a superior class, the records revealed a

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<sup>37</sup> Mrs Cecil Chesterton, *In Darkest London* (London, 1926), p. 39. Dove discusses the practice of women reformers adopting disguise in order to live among the poor. Iris Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance? The Development of Working Girls' Clubs in London 1880-1939' (PhD thesis, University of Greenwich, 1996), pp. 66-75. Neville-Rolfe spent a week pretending to be a prostitute in 1918, in order to investigate prostitutes' low attendance at VD treatment centres. Neville-Rolfe, *Social Biology and Welfare*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>38</sup> H. P. Newsholme, *The Illegitimate Child: A Challenge to Society* (London, 1935), p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Musson, *The Unmarried Mother: a Few Notes for Student Health Visitors* (London, 1936), p. 2. Musson was the general secretary of the NCUMC.

<sup>40</sup> Ann R. Higginbotham, 'Respectable Sinners: Salvation Army Rescue Work with Unmarried Mothers, 1884-1914', in Gail Malgreem (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (Beckenham, 1986), pp. 216-33.



rather different reality, in which pregnancy was the result of ‘failed courtships with men of their own class rather than seductions along class lines’.<sup>41</sup> A similar picture of young women becoming pregnant as a result of relationships with their male peers emerges from the National Birthday Trust’s 1938 survey into abortion,<sup>42</sup> which included details of sixty unmarried women aged between fifteen and twenty-five who had had illegal abortions.<sup>43</sup> Abortion, however, far from being seen as a solution to the problem of pregnancy outside marriage, offered an opportunity to enhance the status of young women who went ahead with their pregnancies. As a *Lancet* writer argued, once pregnancy had occurred, it was ‘morally the more courageous, as it is hygienically the more fitting, for the unmarried mother to take the risk of bearing a child’.<sup>44</sup>

Concerns about the incidence of abortion increased during the 1930s, resulting in the appointment of a government committee (known as the Birkett committee, after its chairman) to investigate the problem.<sup>45</sup> Although most abortions (when they came to light) occurred among married women, the committee found evidence that the ‘proportion of abortions to pregnancies is higher among

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<sup>41</sup> Higginbotham, ‘Respectable Sinners’, p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> The survey collected information from medical staff about a total of 2,912 mainly working-class women hospitalised for abortion (spontaneous or procured). Analysis of its data was abandoned because of its methodological failings. See James Thomas and A. Susan Williams, ‘Women and Abortion in 1930s Britain: A Survey and its Data’, *Social History of Medicine*, 11, 2 (1998), pp. 283-309.

<sup>43</sup> Most of these young women worked in domestic service, shops or factories, and, when information was available about their partners’ occupation, it appears that they were employed in similar or slightly higher status occupations. Only a minority of returns contained no information about the women’s partners. Joint Council of Midwifery Enquiry into Abortion, 1938: induced illegally; unmarried; no previous abortion. CMAC.SA/NBT/S9/7, National Birthday Trust Collection, CMAC, Wellcome Trust, London.

<sup>44</sup> *Lancet*, 23 February 1918, p. 303.

<sup>45</sup> The level of concern is indicated by the existence of three separate enquiries into the topic during the 1930s. In addition to the NBT and government investigations, the BMA had set up its own committee on abortion in 1935. For a full discussion see Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England, 1900-1967* (London, 1988).



unmarried than married women'.<sup>46</sup> Despite this, abortion was represented as a problem of excessive motherhood within marriage. The committee was sympathetic to the problems facing unmarried mothers, calling for a more 'humane and enlightened attitude' towards them.<sup>47</sup> It was, however, even more alert to the dangers of being seen to encourage sexual immorality, and thus opposed a recommendation permitting abortion for girls under sixteen as a 'direct temptation to loose conduct among young girls'.<sup>48</sup> The Abortion Law Reform Association, founded in 1936, was similarly concerned to avoid being seen as condoning sexual irresponsibility, representing its work as seeking to strengthen the institution of marriage by improving its conditions.<sup>49</sup> While its evidence to the Birkett Committee argued that abortion should be available to unmarried as well as married women,<sup>50</sup> founding member Janet Chance sought to allay fears that reform of the abortion laws would condone irresponsible behaviour among young girls by stressing that a 'young girl' should not be allowed to 'compel a doctor to give her an abortion whenever she wants'.<sup>51</sup>

Abortion for young women could only be condoned in exceptional circumstances of conception, for instance as a result of rape or incest.<sup>52</sup> Even then, the 1938 Bourne case, in which an eminent gynaecologist was tried for carrying out an abortion on a fourteen-year-old girl pregnant as the result of rape, reveals that girls still had to meet other criteria of respectability. Bourne reported that before

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<sup>46</sup> *BMJ*, 17 June 1939, p. 1248.

<sup>47</sup> *Lancet*, 10 June 1939, p. 1361.

<sup>48</sup> *BMJ*, 17 June 1939, p. 1250.

<sup>49</sup> J. Chance, 'The Case for Reform of the Abortion Laws'. CMAC.SA/ALR/B.1, Abortion Law Reform Collection, CMAC, Wellcome Trust, London. [Hereafter ALRA Papers.]

<sup>50</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> Janet Chance's scrapbooks, press cutting from *Liverpool Daily Post*, 3 December 1936. CMAC.SA/ALR/B.1, ALRA Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 8.

carrying out the abortion, he had satisfied himself that she was 'not mentally deficient, not of the prostitute type, and not infected' (with VD).<sup>53</sup> Her behaviour after the rape was also monitored to see if it conformed to expectations; while a Crown witness criticised the girl's lack of visible distress,<sup>54</sup> Bourne concluded that her 'apparent nonchalance' was a 'spurious form of courage'.<sup>55</sup> As in the depiction of young women who commit infanticide, it is clear that a sympathetic portrayal of girls who become pregnant outside marriage depended on them conforming to a specific set of expectations.

### *Promiscuity and prostitution*

During and after the First World War, renewed interest was paid to the problem of prostitution,<sup>56</sup> to which both the problems of VD and unmarried motherhood were seen to be closely linked. Social reformers argued that improving the position of unmarried mothers would prevent them becoming trapped in a cycle of decline ending in prostitution, while the terms of the discourse around the 'amateur', in which the sexually irresponsible young girl was seen to pose a greater threat to public health than the professional prostitute, resulted in a focus on the management of adolescent sexuality.

Discussions of prostitution stressed the young age at which girls became prostitutes. *Downward Paths* concluded that seventeen was the peak age for

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<sup>53</sup> *Lancet*, 23 July 1938, p. 222.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>55</sup> Rex v. Bourne 1938, statement of Dr. A.W. Bourne [unpublished]. CMAC.GC/150/4, Aleck Bourne Case, CMAC, Wellcome Trust, London.

<sup>56</sup> Most historical discussion of prostitution has focused on the nineteenth century; for a recent overview see Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London, 2000).

entering prostitution,<sup>57</sup> while the BSHC claimed that many young girls drifted into prostitution due to the 'lack of social care during the adolescent period'.<sup>58</sup>

Conversely, it was believed that with rare exceptions, women did not become prostitutes after the age of twenty-one.<sup>59</sup> While prostitutes might be women of all ages, reducing prostitution was thus conceptualised as the problem of managing young women's sexuality, and identifying those young women who might be diverted or rescued from prostitution by early intervention. As *Downward Paths* concluded, 'so far as prostitution is not an economic problem, it is mainly a problem of the management of adolescence'.<sup>60</sup>

Commentators sought to identify the factors which led girls to become prostitutes. According to *Downward Paths*, a combination of environmental and individual factors led a girl towards prostitution. These included bad home environment, adolescent restlessness, love of pleasure and luxuries, loneliness, getting into bad company, employment and the conditions relating to particular occupations, particularly domestic service. For working-class girls, selling sex was often the only way to pay for the amusements they desired; moreover, the life of the prostitute might seem glamorous and 'worthy of imitation'.<sup>61</sup> While it claimed that few girls became prostitutes because of their 'strong sexual appetites', such appetites were strongest at puberty, reinforcing the importance of the management of adolescence.<sup>62</sup> Cyril Burt, however, challenged this conclusion. While he agreed that environmental factors were important, he believed that previous commentators

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<sup>57</sup> *Downward Paths*, p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> BSHC, *A Brief Survey of the Conditions Obtaining in Great Britain and the Colonial Empire with Regard to Venereal Disease and Prostitution* (London, 1927), p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Psychologist H.B. Brackenbury, for instance, stated that a woman 'who is not a prostitute by the time she is 20 rarely becomes one'. *BMJ*, 30 July 1921, p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> *Downward Paths*, p. 37.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

had failed to recognise that the 'chief psychological characteristic' of the prostitute was 'not so much a deficiency of intelligence as an excess of emotionality.'<sup>63</sup> He therefore claimed that the single most important cause of prostitution was 'the excessive and precocious sexual nature of the girl herself'.<sup>64</sup>

Despite their differences, both *Downward Paths* and Burt represent young prostitutes as victims, whether of circumstances or their own temperaments, and stress their lack of agency. Burt's account stresses the prostitute's lack of self-control; she is a 'gay, wilful, self-indulgent creature, singularly restless and strangely inconsistent'.<sup>65</sup> *Downward Paths* represents the young prostitute as a victim of a combination of circumstances, unable to offer 'a clear account of what has happened to her'.<sup>66</sup> While sympathetic to the plight of the prostitute, this characterisation denies her both choice and insight into her own circumstances. Even when girls are described as having chosen a life of prostitution, they are unable to understand the 'real meaning' of prostitution.<sup>67</sup> Sympathy is thus contingent on girls being represented as ignorant of the consequences of their apparent choices.

This issue of agency is central to two purportedly autobiographical accounts of prostitution published in Britain during the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> While their authenticity may be highly questionable, they are of interest because of their contrasting accounts of the causes and consequences of prostitution, particularly the extent to which the

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<sup>63</sup> Burt, 'Contribution of Psychology to Social Hygiene', p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* This stress on girls' emotional volatility is also significant in discussion of girls defined as mentally defective and as delinquent.

<sup>66</sup> *Downward Paths*, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> O. W., *No Bed of Roses: the Diary of a Lost Soul* (London, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1935). This was in fact an account of American experience, but its publishing history indicates considerable interest in Britain. The second purported autobiography is British: Sheila Cousins, *To Beg I am Ashamed* (London, 1938).



authors represent their engagement in prostitution as a conscious and rational act.

Perhaps because of this, they appear to have been received very differently.

Both accounts embody factors identified by contemporary social commentators as making girls vulnerable to prostitution: an unhappy home life, unfulfilling work, isolation and vulnerability in a strange city, love of clothes and amusements, being led astray by friends, and, in Cousins' case, the death of her illegitimate baby. The narrative of *No Bed of Roses* stresses both the protagonist's lack of agency in her sexual career – her first sexual experience occurs when she is drunk and she becomes a prostitute after being arrested through police entrapment – and the overwhelmingly destructive effect of prostitution, which results in her addiction to drugs. In contrast, Cousins represents her life of prostitution as a rational economic choice, in which she retains her self-respect. While she makes it clear that she dislikes some aspects of her work as a prostitute, she locates her work in the context of other choices open to women: 'what I am doing is a job like any other, a way of keeping alive. It is neither much more nor much less secure than most women's jobs.'<sup>69</sup>

In contrast to the publishing success (whether for reform or voyeuristic reasons) of *No Bed of Roses*, which was reprinted four times between 1931 and 1935, the publishers of *To Beg I Am Ashamed* withdrew it following negative publicity in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*. The AMSH deplored this action, describing the book as an honest account of the 'sordid business of prostitution' which was unlikely to tempt 'any decent girl' into that life.<sup>70</sup> Such a defence rejects Cousins' own construction of her life, leaving the prostitute with no greater

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<sup>69</sup> Cousins, *To Beg I am Ashamed*, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Shield*, 6 (May 1938), pp. 12-13.

autonomy than does Burt's biological determinism. Despite the different interpretations offered for girls' entry into prostitution, there is agreement on the representation of prostitutes as victims, even if they themselves seek to offer alternative versions of their lives.

### **Preventive and rescue homes: policing at the margins**

An extensive network of mainly faith-based preventive and rescue homes catered for girls who had contracted VD, become pregnant or were engaged in prostitution, as well as those whose home environment was believed to endanger them. This provision was differentiated by girls' levels of sexual experience, age and class. No equivalent provision existed for boys. While some social reformers believed that gender-specific provision for young men guilty of sexual misbehaviour was desirable, pragmatically they agreed that the priority was to make provision for girls.<sup>71</sup>

Two mid-1920s surveys of rescue work provide an overview of the voluntary home system.<sup>72</sup> And it was a system, as Springer's description of the different stages of reclamation of the 'complete machinery' of rescue work illustrates: rescue, medical treatment if needed, training, placing in employment, and in many cases, 'long years of after-care watchfulness'.<sup>73</sup> Springer identified 151 rescue and

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<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, the evidence submitted by Sir Willoughby Dickinson (the MP who had originated the proposals in the 1917 Criminal Law Amendment Bill) to the AMSH's Committee of Inquiry into Social Morality. Although, he said, he had intended 'compulsory rescue' to apply equally to young men and young women, he would not withdraw his support from a Bill that only targeted girls. Typescript paper, p. 22, 17 November 1919, 3/AMS. Box 49: Sexual Morality Inquiry 1918-1919, AMSH Papers. Dickinson also cites a memorandum from Dr. Helen Wilson of the AMSH, in which she agreed that homes were probably needed for boys, but 'the need is more urgent for girls'. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Hubert, *Moral Evil in London*; Edward C. Trenholme, *Rescue Work* (London, 1927).

<sup>73</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 156.

preventive homes within the London Metropolitan area, offering a total of 4,195 beds to girls and women.<sup>74</sup> These included sixty-six homes for unmarried mothers, thirty-five long-stay homes, of which twenty-one were preventive, and thirty-two short-stay homes, mostly for girls 'already given to wrongdoing'. Twenty-four homes accommodated girls and women with VD.<sup>75</sup> Trenholme also identified an extensive network of Church of England provision, including forty two-year homes providing for a total of 1,550 'penitents', thirty maternity homes, twenty-five mother and baby homes, eight homes for residents with VD and five for mentally defective women.<sup>76</sup> By the 1930s, just over three thousand beds were available in London preventive or rescue homes.<sup>77</sup>

This itemisation of provision indicates the importance of categorisation within preventive and rescue work, a practice which Neville-Rolfe claimed had greatly increased between 1900 and 1930.<sup>78</sup> The primary division was of course between rescue and prevention work, defined by whether girls were sexually experienced. Sexually experienced young women were, however, subject to further categorisation, to determine, in Springer's words, whether she had 'done wrong but is not a prostitute' or was an 'occasional or habitual prostitute'.<sup>79</sup> Homes also sought to exclude 'mental', 'second-fall' or venereal cases (unless specifically designated for such cases).<sup>80</sup> Even with this level of categorisation, homes were still

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter three. There is some overlap between the categorisations. This information was based on a survey undertaken by the Central Council for Rescue and Preventive Work in London, published in 1923.

<sup>76</sup> Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>77</sup> Neville Rolfe, 'Sex-Delinquency', p. 329. Although it is not clear how far the two survey of London provision are comparable, this apparent decline in provision is supported by welfare workers' comments about girls' increasing unwillingness to enter homes. See, for instance, NCUMC, *Annual Reports*, 1934, p. 23, 1938, p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> Neville Rolfe, 'Sex-Delinquency', p. 329.

<sup>79</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 96.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

alert to the dangers of girls' corrupting each other, and therefore sought to prevent girls from talking about their past, unsuccessfully according to Pailthorpe, who believed that girls would 'inevitably pool their knowledge in the ways and means of asocial behaviour'.<sup>81</sup>

A range of additional criteria was adopted to categorise girls and women, the most important of which was age. Springer reported that over three-quarters of the residents of the long-term and preventive homes were under nineteen, while most maternity home residents were between nineteen and twenty-two.<sup>82</sup> Trenholme's account also stresses the youth of those in prevention or rescue homes.<sup>83</sup> Girls were also categorised by class. Springer's survey found that most of the girls in rescue homes came from, and returned to, domestic service. There was also an 'appreciable proportion' of factory workers, waitresses, shop assistants, clerks and business girls.<sup>84</sup> Servants continued to form the main client group for the homes into the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> However, special provision was made for the minority of 'the daughters of the middle classes' for whom a shorter length of stay was considered appropriate.<sup>86</sup> Such girls could be portrayed as vulnerable precisely because of their more privileged backgrounds; the Fellowship of St Michael and All Saints asked *Lancet* readers to support its work with 'girls of the professional classes' who had gone 'out into the world unfriended and alone', where they had become 'victims

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<sup>81</sup> G. W. Pailthorpe, *What We Put in Prison and in Preventive and Rescue Homes* (London, 1932), p. 149. A more academic account of this Medical Research Council funded research was published as Grace Pailthorpe, *Studies in the Psychology of Delinquency* (London, 1932). See Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 101 and Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, p. 74 for descriptions of homes' attempts to prevent girls talking about their past.

<sup>82</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 93.

<sup>83</sup> Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, p. 79.

<sup>84</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 111.

<sup>85</sup> Neville Rolfe, 'Sex-Delinquency', p. 304.

<sup>86</sup> Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, p. 86.



to unregulated passion under conditions sometimes more pitiable than blameworthy'.<sup>87</sup>

### *Entering the homes: choice or coercion*

Although some rescue homes received funding from the Home Office in order to cater for girls referred by the courts, most preventive and rescue homes remained outside the formal juvenile justice system. Girls' entry into these rescue homes was therefore unregulated.<sup>88</sup> However, the juvenile justice and rescue systems overlapped at various points, raising questions about the nature of consent within this ostensibly voluntary system.<sup>89</sup>

Girls entered the rescue system through a range of agencies.

Reviewing the records of just over three thousand girls, Springer found that around half had been referred from other rescue agencies, and that the main sources for new entrants to the rescue system were the police and the separately organised women police. Other sources included the courts, hospitals, poor law authorities and prisons, families and friends, professionals such as doctors and clergy, and a small number of self-referrals.<sup>90</sup> Grace Pailthorpe's study of one hundred young women aged between fourteen

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<sup>87</sup> *Lancet*, 21 May 1938, p. 1189.

<sup>88</sup> As Cox notes, this separation of the systems meant that girls were not reflected in official statistics. Cox, 'Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency', p. 186.

<sup>89</sup> Cox discusses the relationship between the formal juvenile justice system and the voluntary rescue home system. Cox, 'Rescue and Reform', pp. 22-49. Focusing on the nineteenth century, Bartley suggests that reform institutions may, in some respects, be seen as 'an informal extension of the prison system'. See Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 35. Mahood explores the social control functions of reform institutions for prostitutes in Scotland. Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1990).

<sup>90</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, pp. 117-18.

and twenty-seven in rescue homes found a similar mix of sources of referral.<sup>91</sup>

At least some of these sources of referral would be informed by class-based differences concerning appropriate behaviour for young women. The women police, for instance, operated patrols to monitor and intervene in relations between men and women, underpinned by middle-class assumptions about acceptable public behaviour. The extent to which their work (and rescue work in general) was pervaded by racism is evident from Springer's praise for their prevention of 'the evil' of white girls associating with 'coloured men'.<sup>92</sup> NVA workers at railway stations also identified young women arriving in London whom they believed to be in difficulties. While their reports suggest that they may indeed have helped stranded young women, their disapproval of casually developed relationships between young men and women is clear.<sup>93</sup> Pailthorpe's study also highlights the range of behaviour resulting in girls' entry to homes, related both to girls' sexuality and their employment prospects. These girls, aged between 14 and 27, were 'unmanageable or under bad influence, had pilfered, or had become pregnant or prostitutes'.<sup>94</sup> The looseness with which such transgressions were defined, however, is revealed by her description of girls' 'sexual irregularities' as including not only prostitution and promiscuity, but 'obscene conversation'.<sup>95</sup>

Critics such as Pailthorpe and Gordon stressed the coercive nature of the 'voluntary' home system, claiming that girls regarded them as 'nothing but

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<sup>91</sup> Pailthorpe, *Studies*, p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 153. Concerns about white girls consorting with black or Chinese men were widely reported in the press; see, for instance, *The Times*, 14, 19 June, 1 July 1919 and the *Daily Mail*, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11 October, 1920. For a discussion of the moral panic concerning inter-racial sexual relations and drug use between 1916 and the mid-1920s, see Kohn, *Dope Girls*.

<sup>93</sup> See *Vigilance Record* (June 1919), p. 47, for an account of a station worker's rapid intervention to separate an Irish girl from the young naval officer with whom she had struck up an acquaintance on her journey from London.

<sup>94</sup> Pailthorpe, *Studies*, p. 25.

<sup>95</sup> Pailthorpe, *What We Put in Prison*, p. 133.

prison'.<sup>96</sup> Even advocates of rescue work had some doubts about girls' entry into homes; Trenholme admitted that some social workers were guilty of 'almost forcing an unwilling girl into a long home'.<sup>97</sup> The issues surrounding girls' consent to entering rescue homes were highlighted by the 1917 Criminal Law Amendment Bill, Clause 3 of which would allow courts to send girls under eighteen convicted under solicitation, vagrancy or incest laws to homes until they reached the age of nineteen. These proposals, often referred to as the 'compulsory rescue of girls', were, according to the Home Secretary, needed because girls leading 'bad lives' would not voluntarily enter homes, and powers were therefore needed to 'compel a girl to submit herself to this process of reformation'.<sup>98</sup> Discussion of Clause 3 shared the assumption underpinning debates on the age of consent that adolescent girls were not able to make valid choices, and therefore needed to be saved from the consequences of their own actions. Helen Wilson of the AMSH made this issue explicit: a 'girl of seventeen should not be allowed to choose a career of prostitution', but should be 'saved from herself'.<sup>99</sup> Despite her initial support, however, the AMSH opposed Clause 3,<sup>100</sup> as did the NCCVD.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, the NVA continued to be 'quite unrepentant advocates of domiciliary treatment' for young girls who were a danger to themselves, to men, and to other girls.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16. See also Mary Gordon, *Penal Discipline* (London, 1922), p. 128. Gordon was a doctor and former HM inspector of women's prisons.

<sup>97</sup> Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, p. 52.

<sup>98</sup> *Vigilance Record* (December 1929), p. 78.

<sup>99</sup> Memoranda from Helen Wilson, quoted by Sir Willoughby Dickinson, evidence to Committee of Inquiry into Sexual Morality, 17 November 1919. Box 49, 3/AMS, AMSH Papers.

<sup>100</sup> The AMSH argued that the measure treated men and women unequally, branded young girls as prostitutes, and would be no less damaging than prison. *Shield*, 2 (July 1918), p. 21.

<sup>101</sup> The NCCVD's parliamentary committee decided that it would be 'inadvisable for the Council to take any concerted action' on the clause, apparently because of threats by Mrs Ogilvie Gordon (representing the National Council of Women) that women's organisations would withdraw from the NCCVD if it supported Clause 3. Executive Committee Minutes, 7 February 1921, report of the Parliamentary Committee. CMAC.SA/BSH/A.2/3, BSHC Papers.

<sup>102</sup> *Vigilance Record* (October 1929), p. 59.



These calls for ‘compulsory rescue’ came to nothing. However, probation orders could already be used to compel girls to enter rescue homes. The Criminal Justice Administration Act 1914 allowed courts to impose a condition of residence as part of a probation order, and during the mid-1920s between five and six hundred probationers were sent to voluntary homes and institutions each year.<sup>103</sup> This provision was disproportionately used for older young women: between 1925 and 1927, nineteen per cent of probation orders given to young women aged 16 to 21 included a condition of residence, compared to just 3.4 per cent for men of the same age.<sup>104</sup> While the Children’s Branch acknowledged that these residence orders had some value, it expressed concerns that girls were being sent to uninspected, and therefore possibly unsatisfactory, homes for up to three years, and identified a further disadvantage to this practice: young women often opted for imprisonment rather than going to a training home.<sup>105</sup> Similar doubts were expressed by the departmental committee on young offenders.<sup>106</sup> Despite the Home Office issuing a circular to regulate this practice in 1928,<sup>107</sup> concerns continued to be expressed into the late 1930s, when a social services committee reiterated the need for courts to exercise caution in ‘making orders which may turn out to be virtually orders for detention’.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Cox attributes this in part to the lack of female probation officers. Although the probation regulations required girls to be supervised by women, by 1929 there were still only 78 full-time women probation officers in England and Wales. Rescue homes therefore provided a cheap alternative. Cox, ‘Rescue and Reform’, p. 42.

<sup>104</sup> Calculated from tables: Number, age and sex of probationers sent to Homes as a condition of the probation order for the last three years, in Home Office, *Fourth Report on the Work of the Children’s Branch* (London, 1928), p. 20; Probation – Sex and age of persons in respect of whom probation orders were made. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>105</sup> Home Office, *Second Report on the Work of the Children’s Branch* (London, 1924), pp. 15-16.

<sup>106</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 54.

<sup>107</sup> Home Office, *Fourth Report*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>108</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report on the Work of the Children’s Branch* (London, 1938), p. 36.



## Girls in the juvenile justice system

While the status of girls entering rescue homes might be ambiguous, during the inter-war years the juvenile justice system took on an increasingly explicit role in controlling the sexual behaviour of adolescent girls. In contrast to the courts' increasing reluctance to remove young offenders from their homes, concerns about sexually active adolescent girls led to new legislation allowing for their incarceration without them having committed a crime. This trend was underpinned by the perceived need both to remove these girls from (often self-imposed) danger, and to provide an environment in which their characters could be remoulded during the impressionable period of adolescence.

Following the 1908 Children Act, children under fourteen who were neglected or in moral danger, or had committed offences could be sent to industrial schools. Reformatory schools catered for young offenders aged between twelve and sixteen, who could be detained up to the age of nineteen. Collectively known as 'certified schools', most of these institutions were run by voluntary bodies, overseen by the Children's Branch of the Home Office.<sup>109</sup> Borstal institutions for young offenders aged between 16 and 21 were also introduced in 1908.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Cox, 'Rescue and Reform', pp. 1-2.

<sup>110</sup> Introduced in the Prevention of Crime Act 1908, these provided up to three years' training under penal discipline for young offenders who were thought to need this because of their 'criminal habits or tendencies or association with persons of bad character'. Bailey, *Delinquency and Citizenship*, pp. 186-87. Aylesbury was the only female borstal.

**Table 4.2: number of children and young persons sent by order of court resident in the schools on December 31 in each year (excluding day industrial and special schools)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Reformatories - boys</b>	<b>Reformatories - girls</b>	<b>Industrial schools – boys</b>	<b>Industrial schools - girls</b>
1920	3,702	356	8,374	2,035
1921	3,076	259	6,868	1,788
1922	2,423	184	5,420	1,480
1923	2,160	144	4,523	1,313
1924	1,952	138	3,871	1,177
1925	1,876	124	3,667	1,091
1926	1,946	168	3,451	990
1927	1,861	163	3,332	904
1928	1,881	156	3,219	847
1929	1,870	169	3,149	798
1930	1,911	177	3,098	760
1931	2,067	175	3,166	732
1932	2,070	179	3,327	701
1933	2,101	150	3,354	644

<b>Year</b>	<b>Senior schools - boys</b>	<b>Senior schools - girls</b>	<b>Intermediate - boys<sup>111</sup></b>	<b>Junior - boys</b>	<b>Junior - girls</b>
1934	1,742	247	1,506	2,559	706
1935	2,055	336	1,647	2,518	780
1936	2,258	429	1,733	2,761	850

Source: Home Office, *Fifth Report on the Work of the Children's Branch*, 1938 Table X, p. 140.

<sup>111</sup> Girls' schools were divided into senior and junior only.

As table 4.2 shows, girls comprised only a minority of the inmates of these certified schools, with most being sent to industrial schools under the neglect or moral danger provisions. Girls accounted for only around five per cent of juvenile court appearances each year, where they faced a similar range of charges as boys, with theft by far the most common charge, followed by street and bicycle-related offences, vagrancy, and offences against the Education Acts.<sup>112</sup> Discussing an apparent rise in juvenile delinquency during the 1930s, the Children's Branch declared that the number of girl offenders was 'so small as to call for no comment'.<sup>113</sup>

Despite this, girls' entry into and management within the juvenile justice system was acknowledged as posing particular problems; the young offenders committee reported general agreement that delinquent girls and young women were much more difficult to deal with satisfactorily than their male counterparts.<sup>114</sup> In part, this was because delinquency in girls was believed to demonstrate greater individual disturbance. Giving evidence to the NRBC, leading London magistrate W. Clarke-Hall claimed that while boys often committed crimes through 'high spirits', girls who committed crimes were 'the extremely unhappy, friendless sort of girls who become despairing of everything'.<sup>115</sup> Such a statement reflected a common view. A 1960s review of early literature on delinquency in girls concluded that where girls could be compared with boys, they had 'far the more serious handicaps, worse homes, lower intelligence ratings, more mental abnormality'.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cox, 'Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency', p. 186.

<sup>113</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 50.

<sup>115</sup> NRBC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 176.

<sup>116</sup> John Cowie, Valerie Cowie and Eliot Slater, *Delinquency in Girls* (London, 1968), p. 24.

Discussion of the difficulty of managing girls, however, focused specifically on the association between delinquency and sexuality, or, in Burt's telling self-fulfilling phrase, 'sex-delinquency'. Following World War One, when the Children's Branch claimed that many girls appearing before the juvenile courts had 'dipped deeply and tragically into the life of the streets',<sup>117</sup> new schools were opened for girls with VD and the 'difficult problem of the immoral girl'.<sup>118</sup> In 1928, the Children's Branch described the 're-education of girls whose precocious sex development has led them astray' as the most difficult problem facing the schools.<sup>119</sup> Young women's sexual activity also determined their entry into borstal; after examining the records of young men and women sent to borstal, Mannheim concluded that 'the relations with the opposite sex seem to play a vastly greater part with the girls than with the boys' in causing delinquency.<sup>120</sup>

The difficulties schools experienced in dealing with sexually experienced girls were exacerbated by the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, which allowed courts to send young people up to seventeen to the renamed approved schools for three years (with the possibility of release on licence during this time) if they were believed to be in need of 'care or protection' or 'beyond control'.<sup>121</sup> As indicated by Table 4.2, the number of young people in the certified schools declined during the 1920s. The Children's Branch believed this was because courts increasingly viewed a young offender as a child, rather than an offender, and were thus reluctant to remove them from their homes unless they believed this was absolutely necessary.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Home Office, *Report on the Work of the Children's Branch* (London, 1923), p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>119</sup> Home Office, *Fourth Report*, p.31.

<sup>120</sup> Hermann Mannheim, *Social Aspects of Crime in England between the Wars* (London, 1940), p. 328. 50-51.

<sup>121</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 2. Similar provision in the Children Act 1908 applied only to children up to fourteen.

<sup>122</sup> Home Office, *Report*, p.14.



In contrast to this general trend, however, the number of adolescent girls sent to schools after the 1933 Act increased. Two main principles – both recommended by the young offenders committee – underpinned this Act. These were the abolition of any distinction between the categories of delinquency and neglect, and a stress on ‘reformation rather than punishment’, resulting in the substitution of a ‘longer period of detention under skilled instruction for a short term of penal discipline’.<sup>123</sup> As I will discuss later, these principles were believed to offer a basis for effecting the reform of young people along lines which stressed the development of individual responsibility and self-discipline. However, the legislation served to bring adolescent girls within the juvenile justice system simply because of their wayward behaviour.

The belief that poor family conditions were a more significant factor in creating delinquency among girls than boys was used to justify the detention of girls whose home circumstances were seen as inadequate.<sup>124</sup> Birmingham medical examiner W.A. Potts, for instance, reported a case in which the courts had accepted his recommendation that a ‘dull and backward girl’ who had been convicted of stealing should be sent to a reformatory for three years rather than returning to her undisciplined home in a bad neighbourhood.<sup>125</sup> More specifically, however, the new legislation offered a means of dealing with sexually active adolescent girls; according to the Children’s Branch, the extension of the ‘care or protection’ clauses were primarily intended to ‘meet the need of the young girl whose manner of living

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<sup>123</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 48.

<sup>124</sup> Burt, Mannheim and the Children’s Branch all shared the view that girls suffered more than boys from bad home circumstances. See Burt, *Young Delinquent*, p. 92; Mannheim, *Social Aspects of Crime*, p. 328; Home Office, *Fifth Report*, 1938, p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> *BMJ*, 3 April 1920, p. 474.

was almost certain to end in moral disaster'.<sup>126</sup> The sexual offences committee had urged that new powers were needed to control girls of fifteen and sixteen who were 'staying out late at night, and defying every measure taken to restrain them'.<sup>127</sup> The young offenders committee similarly called for measures to deal with girls who were 'entirely out of hand and in imminent risk of moral contamination'.<sup>128</sup>

Following the 1933 Act, the Children's Branch reported that more older girls than boys had been sent to schools for 'care or protection' or as 'beyond control'; it believed that this was to be expected since 'more older girls than boys were in a state of 'emotional adolescent instability'.<sup>129</sup> While the Children's Branch acknowledged some potential for misuse of the legislation by parents seeking to exercise unreasonable discipline over their daughters,<sup>130</sup> it argued that its need was demonstrated by the number of cases of VD among older girls sent to the schools.<sup>131</sup> Between 1934 and 1936, two hundred and thirty four girls had been treated for VD, compared to only seventeen in 1933. Over one-third of the girls admitted to senior schools in 1934 had needed treatment (sixty-one girls out of a total of 172 admissions), of whom only six had committed offences for which they could have been sent to the schools before the 1933 Act. Provision for girls with VD therefore increased from two to six schools (including one junior school).<sup>132</sup>

This influx of intractable older girls (who, we may surmise, resented being sent to an approved school without having committed a crime) resulted in the management of the 'girl of 15-17 years of age' as being defined as, 'without

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<sup>126</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>127</sup> *Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences*, p. 73.

<sup>128</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 119.

<sup>129</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 39-40. This was in marked contrast to the figures for actual offences, in which boys outnumbered girls by about sixteen to one.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

question', the most difficult problem facing the schools.<sup>133</sup> These girls were described as being in a state of 'emotional, adolescent disturbance, impatient of control and used to a large measure of liberty and licence',<sup>134</sup> with their tendency to abscond causing a 'constant state of unrest'.<sup>135</sup> Aylesbury Borstal experienced particularly severe disciplinary problems, and its critics argued that its regime placed intolerable stress on older adolescent girls. Mary Gordon highlighted the despair experienced by girls who faced three years in borstal for minor crimes for which they might have received a three-month prison sentence.<sup>136</sup> She also criticised the disproportionately high rate of punishment at Aylesbury, compared either to boys' borstals or adult women prisoners. Sir Wemyss Grant Wilson of the Borstal Association, while disputing her claims, argued that firm disciplinary measures were needed because Aylesbury's inmates were 'frequently in a highly excitable condition' as a result of their previous 'irregular lives'.<sup>137</sup> The problems experienced at Aylesbury served to compound the approved schools' problems, since, according to the Children's Branch, magistrates were reluctant to transfer girls from schools to borstal, even in cases of severe misconduct.<sup>138</sup>

The problems of dealing with adolescent girls in these reform institutions led many commentators to conclude that girls were unsuited to institutional life. The young offenders committee speculated that it might be necessary to treat girls differently from boys, and reported that some social workers advocated the greater

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99. The next chapter will explore the way in which Guiding in reform schools was intended both to contribute to girls' development, and to supplement the formal disciplinary regime.

<sup>136</sup> Gordon, *Penal Discipline*, p. 167-87. McCall also stressed the damaging effect of long borstal sentences, and magistrates' tendency to give girls the misleading impression that they would only remain in borstal for six months. Cicely McCall, *They Always Come Back* (London, 1938), p. 177.

<sup>137</sup> *BMJ*, 16 December 1922, p. 1191. They continued the argument in the *BMJ*: 3 February 1923, p. 212; 17 February 1923, p. 305; 3 March 1923, p. 399.

<sup>138</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 101.



use of hostels for girls.<sup>139</sup> Despite these views, legislation increased, rather than decreased, the numbers of girls who entered residential provision within the juvenile justice system. While John Clarke has argued that 'regulation within, rather than removal from the community was constructed as the dominant strategy for the delinquent' during the inter-war period,<sup>140</sup> this policy appears to have been reversed for a specific group, sexually active young women who had not committed any crime. In the case of these young women, concerns that residential schools were inappropriate were outweighed by the need to control their sexual activity.

### **Mental deficiency**

Both the rescue and the juvenile justice systems served to bring girls into institutions on the basis of their sexual behaviour. It was, however, the mental deficiency system which offered the most extreme approach to intervention in girls' lives. There has been considerable disagreement among historians about both the motivations underlying mental deficiency legislation and its impact.<sup>141</sup> My

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<sup>139</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 50. By 'hostels' it meant residential homes where girls would live under supervision but go out to work.

<sup>140</sup> John Clarke, 'Managing the Delinquent: the Children's Branch of the Home Office, 1913-30' in *Crises in the British State 1880-1930* (London, 1985), p. 251.

<sup>141</sup> Some accounts have represented the legislation as a triumph for the eugenics movement: see for instance Harvey G. Simmons, 'Explaining Social Policy: the English Mental Deficiency Act of 1913', *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1977-78), pp. 387-403 and Jayne Woodhouse, 'Eugenics and the Feeble-Minded: the Parliamentary Debates of 1912-14', *History of Education*, 11, 2 (1982), p. 127. Other interpretations have ascribed much less influence to eugenic views. Larson argues that the parliamentary debates reveal considerable distrust of eugenics. Edward J. Larson, 'The Rhetoric of Eugenics: Expert Authority and the Mental Deficiency Bill', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 24 (1991), pp. 45-60; while Barker's examination of policies on the feeble-minded prior to the Act concludes that they were often determined on moral, rather than eugenic grounds. David Barker, 'How to Curb the Fertility of the Unfit: the Feeble-Minded in Edwardian Britain', *Oxford Review of Education*, 9, 3 (1983), pp. 197-211. For a comprehensive study of the MDA and its implementation, which stresses the persistence of humanitarian and philanthropic approaches alongside newer eugenic concerns see Mathew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c.1870-1959* (Oxford, 1998).



discussion will focus on two specific aspects of mental deficiency provision: the identification and management of defectives at the critical period of adolescence, and the relationship between young women's sexual activity and their diagnosis as defective.<sup>142</sup>

### *Identifying the defectives*

During the early twentieth century, mental deficiency was believed to constitute a major social problem. In particular, concern focused on those people believed to be mentally defective who were living unrecognised and unsupervised in the wider community. These individuals were thought to cause a wide variety of social problems and, through having children who were at best neglected and 'dull' and at worst inherited their parents' mental defects, to be responsible for a deterioration in the quality of the population.<sup>143</sup> The 1908 Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded had reported that nearly half of the estimated 149,628 mentally defective people in England and Wales (0.46 per cent of the total population), were living unsupervised in the community and thus 'urgently in need of provision'.<sup>144</sup> In response to these concerns the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 significantly expanded the numbers of people brought within mental deficiency legislation through its creation of the new categories of 'feeble-minded persons' and 'moral imbecile', in addition to the more severe (and more visible)

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<sup>142</sup> The terms 'mental deficiency', 'defective' and 'feeble-minded' were used to cover a wide range of conditions, including some which would not now be defined as constituting learning disabilities. Although such terms would now be considered both socially unacceptable and medically inaccurate, I have retained the contemporary usage. See Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>143</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of the 'social problem group' in Board of Education and Board of Control, *Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee* (London, 1929), pp. 79-83; Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, p. 65-66.

<sup>144</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 37. This estimate was arrived at by multiplying up from local investigations.

levels of mental defect defined as idiocy and imbecility.<sup>145</sup> Under the Act, local mental deficiency committees were responsible for identifying (termed 'ascertaining') mental defectives, and making appropriate provision through a mix of institutional and community care.<sup>146</sup> The newly created Board of Control (BOC) oversaw their work.

Despite a steady rise in certification rates during the inter-war years,<sup>147</sup> the BOC repeatedly voiced concerns that the legislation was not being fully implemented. Not only were financial constraints resulting in a shortage of provision, but the Board believed that the wide variations in levels of ascertainment and certification between local authorities indicated that many were not taking their responsibilities seriously.<sup>148</sup> The findings of a government committee on mental deficiency appeared to confirm fears that many defectives remained outside the system; this concluded that the incidence of mental defect was 'considerably higher' than had previously been thought, estimating a total of approximately 300,000 mental defectives in England and Wales.<sup>149</sup> According to BOC commissioner Ruth Darwin in 1934, only just over half this number were known to local authorities.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> 'Feeble-minded persons' were defined as those who needed 'care, supervision, and control for their own protection or for the protection of others', or, in the case of children, as incapable of benefiting from ordinary schooling, while 'moral imbeciles' were persons who from an early age display some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment has little or no deterrent effect'. R.A. Leach, *The Mental Deficiency Act, 1913, Together with the Regulations and Rules Made Under that Act, the Departmental Circulars, the Elementary (Defective and Epileptic Children) Acts, 1899 and 1914 and Introduction and Annotations* (London, 1914) pp. 6-7. This category was renamed 'moral defectives' in the Mental Deficiency (Amendment) Act 1927, and redefined as 'persons in whose case there exists mental defectiveness coupled with strongly vicious or criminal propensities, and who require care, supervision and control for the protection of others'.

<sup>146</sup> Types of provision included certified institutions, state institutions for dangerous male and female defectives, certified Poor Law institutions, certified houses, approved homes, guardianship, and statutory or voluntary supervision.

<sup>147</sup> 10,129 people were certified as mentally defective in 1920, rising to 125,859 people by 1938, including nearly 40,000 under statutory supervision in the community. Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, p. 306.

<sup>148</sup> See for instance, BOC, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 45.

<sup>149</sup> Board of Education and Board of Control, *Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, p. 31.

<sup>150</sup> NCUMC, *The Mental Deficiency Problem and Maternity and Child Welfare* (London, 1934), p. 2.

Much discussion therefore focused on bringing the 'feeble-minded' or 'high-grade' defective, estimated to comprise around 75 per cent of the mentally defective population,<sup>151</sup> within the reach of the system. Adolescence was identified as a critical period for the identification of these mental defectives. While the legislation identified young people as a priority group,<sup>152</sup> it was believed that many went unrecognised as defective until they reached adolescence, when their behaviour deteriorated because of the combination of greater independence and the stress and instability of adolescence. As the BOC argued, it was at adolescence that

young defectives begin to resent interference, because they fail to realize that they cannot manage themselves or their affairs... It is during the stress and strain of adolescence that sympathetic help and guidance is pre-eminently necessary ... the training period must be prolonged.<sup>153</sup>

The problems of dealing with the mentally defective adolescent were exacerbated by the divisions of responsibility between the Board and LEAs, which meant that large numbers of mentally defective adolescents left school without notification under the MDA until some 'disaster brings them within its provisions'.<sup>154</sup> This concern was reiterated by Evelyn Fox, honorary secretary of the Central Association of Mental Welfare, who believed that the weakest point of the MDA was its failure to provide

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<sup>151</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1928, p. 51.

<sup>152</sup> Although local authorities were required to identify all mental defectives in the areas, they only became 'subject to be dealt with' if they fulfilled specific criteria. These criteria included youth; defectives aged under twenty-one were 'subject to be dealt with' at the request of their parents, as were those of any age who were neglected, found guilty of a criminal offence, or sent to industrial schools, reformatories or prison. Leach, *The Mental Deficiency Act*, pp. 7-9. The BOC also issued guidance as to the most urgent cases; these included mentally defective young men or women leaving institutions and those already in the community whose home circumstances placed them at risk. BOC, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 65. In view of historians' disagreement about the role of the Act in controlling the sexual behaviour of young women, which I shall discuss later, it should be noted that this category had previously included young women only.

<sup>153</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 60-61.

<sup>154</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 40. Children aged seven to sixteen were the responsibility of the Board of Education, after which age those needing further care could be dealt with by the Board of



for the 'control and protection of the high-grade adolescent from the moment he leaves school'.<sup>155</sup>

The identification of the 'high-grade defective' was explicitly related to individuals' ability or willingness to conduct their lives according to social expectations. The diagnosis of individuals as 'feeble-minded' or 'moral imbecile' relied upon expert, and often contested judgements, in which judgements were made based on interpretations of individuals' circumstances and behaviour.<sup>156</sup>

In particular, the category of 'moral imbecile' was controversial; as Tredgold summarised, at one extreme anyone guilty of 'persistent wrongdoing' was defined as a moral imbecile, while, at the other, professionals denied the existence of such a condition.<sup>157</sup> Tredgold acknowledged the difficulty of identifying the 'high-grade feeble-minded', since these young men and women approached 'so closely to the normal in many ways', but argued that without supervision and support they were 'incapable of managing their affairs, and often themselves, with the prudence, discrimination, intelligence and general adaptiveness needed for an independent life'.<sup>158</sup> For women, evaluation of their ability to

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Control. Although only around half the estimated total 31,000 mentally defective children were in special education, LEAs had no powers of notification over children leaving ordinary schools.

<sup>155</sup> Evelyn Fox, 'Modern Developments in Mental Welfare Work', *Eugenics Review*, 29, 1 (1937), p. 169.

<sup>156</sup> This is evident from Shrubsall and Williams' sample forms for certifying children and young people, which contain statements such as 'the home is in a rough district and the mother is weak', while another girl (found not to be defective) was described as having a 'refined manner' of speech. F.C. Shrubsall and A.C. Williams, *Mental Deficiency Practice: the Procedure for the Ascertainment and Disposal of the Mentally Defective* (London, 1932), pp. 300, 302.

<sup>157</sup> A.F. Tredgold, 'The Definition and Diagnosis of Moral Imbecility (1)', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 6 (1926) p. 1. This was the first contribution to a symposium arranged by the education and medical sections of the BMA. Tredgold (1870-1952) has been described as one of most influential mental deficiency specialists during the period. He acted as medical expert to the Royal Commission, was a member of the 1929 Mental Deficiency Committee and of the Committee of Enquiry into Sterilisation in the 1930s (known as the Brock Committee). He was also a leading member of the Eugenics Society. Patricia Potts, 'Medicine, Morals and Mental Deficiency: the Contribution of Doctors to the Development of Special Education in England', *Oxford Review of Education*, 9, 3 (1983), pp. 183-84.

<sup>158</sup> A.F. Tredgold, *A Text-book of Mental Deficiency (Amentia)* (London, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 1937, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1907), pp. 192-93. All references are to the 1937 edition. An earlier edition was described in the *BMJ* as



manage their lives was closely associated with judgements about their behaviour in relation to sex and employment. This emerges strongly from an examination of the case studies Tredgold uses to illustrate his classifications of mental defect.<sup>159</sup>

Patricia Potts has noted the way in which Tredgold's descriptions combine 'portentious technical terms and critical character judgments'.<sup>160</sup> Further examination indicates the extent to which these judgements are grounded in gender and class-based assumptions about appropriate behaviour. In particular, his emphasis on 'mental stability' as being more significant than intellectual ability<sup>161</sup> pathologises emotionally volatile young women, as in a description of the 'high-grade unstable feeble-minded', in which an initially ungendered description becomes a portrait of female emotional instability: the individual is 'suddenly overwhelmed with a storm of rage in which she, or he, will rave up and down, using the foulest language, wrecking everything within her reach, and assaulting everyone who comes across her path'.<sup>162</sup>

Tredgold's case studies of working-class young women highlight the intersection of gender and class. Three case studies of young women defined as 'unstable feeble-minded defectives' make clear links between sexuality, employability and deficiency.<sup>163</sup> One example not only demonstrates this association, but reveals the way in which the claimed difficulty of identifying high-

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'excellent in every respect ... generally accepted as a standard work'. *BMJ*, 17 February 1923, p. 291. The textbook, under the title *Tredgold's Mental Deficiency*, was still published in the 1960s.

<sup>159</sup> In addition to the four legal categories of idiocy, imbecility, feeble-mindedness and moral imbecility, Tredgold subdivides the two latter categories into high, middle and low grades, and by level of stability.

<sup>160</sup> Potts, 'Medicine, Morals and Mental Deficiency', p. 186.

<sup>161</sup> Tredgold, *Mental Deficiency* p. 189.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200-06. Cox's research into girls' industrial schools also explores how girls whose behaviour made them unsuitable for domestic service were categorised as mentally defective. Cox, 'Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency', p. 297-200.

grade defectives served to enhance the status of medical professionals, whose skills and insight allowed them to identify as defective individuals whose incapacity would otherwise have gone unrecognised. The case concerns a 'well-developed, pleasant-looking young woman' who had lost a large number of positions as a servant, since, she said, she disliked the work and preferred needlework. Tredgold, however, does not consider her needlework good enough to provide her with a livelihood. In addition to these employment difficulties, she was sexually active, had had an illegitimate child and had contracted gonorrhoea. She was able to read and write and to converse intelligently, and had a reasonable grasp of general knowledge, and Tredgold concedes that most people would consider her as 'rather easy-going' and unlucky, but 'certainly not mentally deficient'. However, in his judgement, the combination of her sexual activity, her inability to conform to the requirements of domestic service, and her unrealistically high estimate of her needlework skills meant that she was unable to manage her own affairs and thus certifiable as defective.<sup>164</sup> Although Tredgold elsewhere acknowledges that young men and women in uncongenial employment may express their unhappiness through misconduct, such considerations appear not to apply to working-class girls who dislike domestic service.<sup>165</sup>

Tredgold's discussion of 'moral defectives' also focuses on the behaviour of young women. Six out of seven case studies concern women aged sixteen to twenty-two.<sup>166</sup> Three of these young women had repeatedly lost positions as servants due to insolence, temper, theft or misconduct, and in five cases their sexual

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<sup>164</sup> Tredgold, *Mental Deficiency*, pp. 204-06.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348-60. The seventh, a boy of 14, turns out not to be defective after all (as does the last female case).

activity appears to have been the trigger for intervention. Their sexual indiscretions and unemployability therefore combined to provide evidence of their failure to manage their own lives satisfactorily. While most examples focus on working-class girls, one case offers an example of a prosperous family resorting to the mental deficiency system to control their wayward daughter who, following a history of theft and deceit since childhood, had contracted gonorrhoea. Tredgold concludes that, although intelligent, she demonstrated a 'pronounced deficiency of wisdom', a judgement that seems to be based not simply on her behaviour, but on her indifference to the 'shame and disgrace' she had brought upon herself and her family, through which she had sacrificed her chances of making a good marriage and a 'high social position'.<sup>167</sup> No less than the working-class young women who fail as servants, this young woman has violated both gender and class expectations, resulting in a diagnosis of mental deficiency.

### *Controlling female sexual behaviour*

Tredgold's case studies indicate a clear relationship between women's sexual activity and their diagnosis as mentally deficient. The extent to which mental deficiency legislation and provision was intended to control female sexual activity was a focus of contemporary discussion, and has been extensively debated by historians. Simmons has argued that fears of female sexual activity played a major role in the construction of the 'feeble-minded' as a major social problem of the early twentieth century.<sup>168</sup> Other historians have stressed the role of mental deficiency

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>168</sup> Simmons, 'Explaining Social Policy', pp. 393-95.



legislation in punishing young women who became pregnant outside marriage.<sup>169</sup>

However, while it is undoubtedly true that mentally deficiency legislation was intended to regulate the sexual behaviour of mainly working-class women, and was used for this purpose, the evidence supports Thomson's criticism of recent historiography for misrepresenting the MDA as purely a 'tool to control young women with illegitimate children'.<sup>170</sup> The implementation of the legislation was neither as single-minded, nor was the association between pregnancy outside marriage and mental deficiency as uncontested, as some accounts imply.<sup>171</sup>

Both supporters and opponents of the mental deficiency bills of 1912-13 made explicit links between mental deficiency and women's sexual behaviour. One supporter of the legislation claimed that 'half the girls in our rescue homes are feeble-minded', while Josiah Wedgwood, its main opponent, argued that it targeted 'those unfortunate women' who went into workhouses to have children.<sup>172</sup> Mentally defective women who became pregnant or gave birth while receiving poor relief were identified as a specific category 'subject to be dealt with', and described by the BOC as urgent cases, particularly if they had VD.<sup>173</sup> The Act thus made an explicit link between gender, class and sexual activity. The effects of this on individual

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<sup>169</sup> Humphries and Zedner offer examples of such overstatements. Humphries describes the MDA as 'a pernicious piece of legislation' under which 'countless thousands' of young women who had illegitimate children were incarcerated. Humphries, *Secret World of Sex*, pp. 63-64. Zedner inaccurately claims that under the MDA, 'any unmarried woman in receipt of poor relief when pregnant or at the time of giving birth was automatically classified as feeble-minded'. Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1991), p. 7. Bartley also discusses the relationship between prostitution and the 'feeble-minded', but does not engage with the debate about the extent to which legislation targeted young women with illegitimate babies. Bartley, *Prostitution*, pp. 119-52.

<sup>170</sup> Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, p. 299.

<sup>171</sup> It is worth noting that statistics issued in 1949, the first to provide information by age and gender, revealed that men outnumbered women in mental deficiency institutions, with the male majority greatest in the 16-25 age group. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-48.

<sup>172</sup> Quoted by Simmons, 'Explaining Social Policy', pp. 397-98.

<sup>173</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 65.



women have been revealed by oral historians, who have uncovered instances of women incarcerated for long periods following pregnancy during adolescence or early adulthood.<sup>174</sup> In 1922, the inmates of a Somerset institution certified for twenty-five female defectives were described as consisting ‘almost entirely of young women who have given birth to illegitimate children’.<sup>175</sup> The 1957 Royal Commission on mental deficiency and lunacy laws also acknowledged that feeble-minded women had been put in institutions because of fears that they would otherwise become pregnant or be sexually exploited.<sup>176</sup>

While this incarceration could extend throughout women’s fertile years and after (whether due to organisational indifference or individual institutionalisation), authorities directed their efforts towards identifying and segregating adolescent and young adult women, in order to prevent what was expected to be a cycle of repeated pregnancies and short-term recourse to the workhouse. This segregation, however, was represented as necessary not only to protect both girls and society, but to offer them training during the period in which they were particularly liable to sexual irresponsibility. According to Dr. Potts, who acted as medical officer to the Birmingham mental deficiency committee, a girl who received

good training and control in an institution for a sufficient length of time (seven to twelve years) during the plastic and dangerous years of adolescence and early adult life often develops such capacity to behave

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<sup>174</sup> See the stories of Elizabeth in Maggie Potts and Rebecca Fido, *“A Fit Person to Be Removed”*: *Personal Accounts of Life in a Mental Deficiency Institution* (Plymouth, 1991), pp. 13-14, and that of Rose in Humphries, *Secret World of Sex*, p. 63-64.

<sup>175</sup> Quoted by Dorothy Atkinson, ‘Learning from Local History: Evidence from Somerset’, in Dorothy Atkinson, Mark Jackson, and Jan Walmsley, *Forgotten Lives: Exploring the History of Learning Disability* (Kidderminster, 1997), p.116.

<sup>176</sup> *Royal Commission on the Law Relating to Mental Illness and Mental Deficiency 1954-57, Report Presented to Parliament by Command of Her Majesty May 1957* (London, 1957), p. 132.

properly ... Many high-grade defective girls, who must be segregated at 17

for the good of the race, behave well on discharge at 30 or a little later.<sup>177</sup>

This portrayal of young defective women as still subject to the instability of adolescence during their twenties reminds us of the extent to which the precise confines of adolescence remain undefined. In the case of young mental defectives, the conditions of adolescence were in effect extended to take account of their limited mental capacities.

Young defective women were represented as simultaneously victims and as corrupting agents. The NCUMC, although rejecting the argument that 'every girl or women who becomes an unmarried mother is mentally abnormal', conceded that some 'mentally unstable' unmarried mothers were both vulnerable to unscrupulous men and a danger to the community.<sup>178</sup> Many commentators believed that defective women had stronger sex urges than 'normal' women and were incapable of sexual restraint; Tredgold claimed that many feeble-minded girls had 'pronounced erotic tendencies',<sup>179</sup> while Burt, who noted an association between sex-delinquency and mental dullness, rather than actual mental deficiency, described young prostitutes as having a 'capacity for intense animal pleasures of every sort'.<sup>180</sup> Although proposals for the sterilisation of mental defectives were directed at both men and women, a gendered representation of the sexuality of mental defectives focused attention on women.<sup>181</sup> According to a report on the 'California Experiment' (in

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<sup>177</sup> *BMJ*, 11 August 1923, p. 219.

<sup>178</sup> NCUMC, *Annual Report*, 1932, p. 28.

<sup>179</sup> Tredgold, *Mental Deficiency*, p. 292, quoted by Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 132.

<sup>180</sup> Burt, 'Causes of Sex-Delinquency', p. 262-64.

<sup>181</sup> Macnicol argues that the failure of eugenicists to secure their major policy objective between the wars, the sterilisation of mental defectives, was the result of opposition from within the medical profession, the Catholic church, and most importantly, the labour movement. However, he notes that labour women tended to support sterilisation (as did other women's groups). He attributes this to their 'intuitive but confused connection between voluntary sterilization and broader issues of maternity'. Macnicol, 'Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization', p. 164. Another

which feeble-minded young people were sterilised) while the young women were 'highly sexed', the men were 'undersexed and lacking in attraction'.<sup>182</sup> A 1930s British textbook on mental deficiency similarly claimed that defective men were 'unattractive to the opposite sex'.<sup>183</sup> Young men's sexual activity could even be interpreted as evidence of their normality; the medical superintendent of one mental deficiency institution believed that if a man was 'presentable enough and persuasive enough to get a normal girl into trouble', he was unlikely to be certifiable.<sup>184</sup>

My discussion so far reveals a clear association between young women's sexual activity and their identification as mentally defective. The BOC's concerns, however, were not limited to unmarried women. Indeed, it argued that it was more dangerous for mentally defective married women to have children, since they were more likely to bring up these children themselves.<sup>185</sup> It therefore expressed strong disapproval of what it saw as the sentimentality of local authorities and parents who encouraged pregnant defective girls to marry.<sup>186</sup> The Board's preoccupation with male sex offenders should also be considered as a counter-balance to its concern with pregnancy among women.<sup>187</sup> Thomson's examination of LCC records reveals that while the MDA legislation was undoubtedly used to control the sexual behaviour of young women, boys were also brought into the system for

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reading might locate their support within the context of 'respectable' - often older - women's willingness to police the sexuality of feckless - often younger - women, evident in the rescue and reform movement.

<sup>182</sup> *Lancet*, 2 June 1934, p. 1176.

<sup>183</sup> Shrubsall and Williams, *Mental Deficiency Practice*, p. 30.

<sup>184</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1927, p. 45.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>186</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 42.

<sup>187</sup> See Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, p. 252.



gender-specific reasons: the control of disruptive adolescents without recourse to the adult penal system.<sup>188</sup>

Much of the BOC's discussion of sexual activity among defectives provides evidence not of the draconian effect of mental deficiency legislation in policing female sexuality, but on what the Board perceived as its failure to protect not just the wider community but individual women from the damaging consequences of sexual activity.<sup>189</sup> It repeatedly criticised local authorities and workhouse medical officers for failing to certify mentally defective women, with the result that these women had a succession of pregnancies that should have been avoided.<sup>190</sup> It also reported instances in which it believed sexually active girls had been wrongly discharged as not certifiable.<sup>191</sup> Both areas of complaint offer evidence that the association between young women's sexual activity and diagnosis as mentally defective remained contested. This was also evident from other discussions of the relationship between pregnancy outside marriage and mental deficiency. While Eugenics Society propaganda declared that 'the authorities' generally believed that a woman who had more than two illegitimate children was 'feeble-minded and ... the victim of

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<sup>188</sup> While boys tended to be certified between the ages of ten and seventeen, for young women the peak age of certification was later, at between eighteen and twenty-five. In the cases of eleven of the thirteen young women certified at this age, sexual activity provided a reason for certification, even though five of them had been able to support themselves in the community. Thomson notes that these gender-specific concerns resulted in longer periods of incarceration for women. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-51.

<sup>189</sup> This was part of its broader concern about the failure of local authorities to implement the acts effectively, by failure to either ascertain or make provision for mental defectives in their areas, and the different interpretations that could be put on the legislation by courts and medical professionals considering whether to certify people as defective, or release (by licence or discharge) those already certified.

<sup>190</sup> See, for instance, BOC, *Annual Reports*, 1922, pp. 41-42, 1924, pp. 67-68. Both reports stressed the importance of certifying women at a young age, with the 1922 report highlighting the young age at which mentally defective women first became pregnant.

<sup>191</sup> See, for instance, BOC, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 83, in which it reported a case of a girl being discharged against the local authority's advice because her medical officers and visitors believed although she had 'some laxity of moral outlook', she was 'of sound mind' and could not be detained. She was subsequently recertified two years later.



men',<sup>192</sup> a speaker at a NCUMC pointed out that the 'fact of sexual obsession implied in having several illegitimate children did not of itself constitute certifiable mental deficiency'.<sup>193</sup> The BMA's Mental Deficiency Committee urged that 'particular care' should be taken in diagnosing as mentally defective women who had illegitimate children or who had been charged with offences such as soliciting, since 'prejudice and inadequate knowledge of the causal factors involved' often resulted in unfounded allegations of moral deficiency.<sup>194</sup>

The extent to which the rescue and criminal justice systems contained girls who should have been within the deficiency system was much debated. In the first decades of the century medical professionals often claimed a strong link between deficiency and criminality. By the inter-war years, however, this association was commonly believed to have been exaggerated.<sup>195</sup> However, rescue workers in particular argued that many girls in rescue homes were mentally inadequate, even if not certifiable under the MDA.<sup>196</sup> Both Springer and Trenholme believed that many girls in homes suffered from some kind of 'mental abnormality' or 'had very poor brains and little sense'.<sup>197</sup> Although Pailthorpe criticised the tendency of staff to assume that girls who were not amenable to discipline were mentally defective,<sup>198</sup> she herself claimed that approximately one-third of the one hundred girls and women she studied were lacking in intelligence, including fifteen who she defined

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<sup>192</sup> H.L. Pocock, MS draft of leaflet on 'Heridity', 1928. CMAC.SA/EUG/D.176, Eugenics Society collection, Wellcome Trust, London.

<sup>193</sup> *Lancet*, 27 June 1925, p. 1381.

<sup>194</sup> *BMJ Supplement*, 25 February 1932, p. 323.

<sup>195</sup> See, for instance, Shrubsall and Williams, *Mental Deficiency Practice*, p. 6.

<sup>196</sup> Burt noted that 'lay observers' tended to use the term 'mentally deficient' in an 'extremely loose sense'. Burt, 'Causes of Sex-Delinquency', pp. 261-62. Bartley argues that by the late nineteenth century, the association of prostitution with 'feeble-mindedness' offered a means of securing sympathy for them, since this enabled reformers to claim that these sexually active women could not be held responsible for their immoral activities. Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 149.

<sup>197</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 105; Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, p. 20.

<sup>198</sup> Pailthorpe, *What We Put in Prison*, p. 153.

as mentally defective.<sup>199</sup> Neville Rolfe provided an extensive list of ‘abnormalities’ that still fell outside the ‘certifiable group’, in her call for protection for the ‘mentally unstable adolescent, the sub-normal, the psychopathic, the dull and backward, the simple and suggestible, the psychologically over-sexed’.<sup>200</sup>

There was also concern that mentally defective young people, especially girls, were found within the juvenile justice system. By the late 1930s, the Guides, whose role in reform schools and homes I will discuss in the next chapter, was repeatedly claiming that its work in these institutions was being hindered by the increasing number of mentally defective girls in them.<sup>201</sup> Between 1934 and 1936 a total of forty-two girls and thirty-three boys in approved schools were certified as mentally defective. The Children’s Branch highlighted that these figures represented a much higher percentage of girl inmates, arguing that this focus on girls was due to the recognition of the ‘special need for care and protection of feeble-minded girls after leaving the schools’.<sup>202</sup> The extent to which girls might move between systems is illustrated by the case of a sixteen-year-old girl sent to an approved school as being out of control (and in the habit of ‘frequenting the company of sailors’) who, over a fifteen-month period was ‘seen by fifteen doctors, was in three Home Office schools, three mental hospitals, and two prisons’. She was eventually certified as mentally defective.<sup>203</sup> This last history, suggests that, far

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<sup>199</sup> Pailthorpe, *Studies*, p. 16. The *BMJ*, however, suggested that her definition of mental deficiency was too narrow. *BMJ*, 29 October 1932, p. 801.

<sup>200</sup> Neville Rolfe, ‘Sex-Delinquency’, p. 309.

<sup>201</sup> See, for instance, GGA, *Annual Report*, 1938, pp. 33-34.

<sup>202</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 89.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42. The description of her as ‘telling other girls to make themselves such nuisances that no one would keep them’ suggests, however that her misbehaviour may have been a calculated form of rebellion against incarceration, supporting Cox’s argument concerning the use of mental deficiency provision to remove intractable girls from Home Office schools. Cox, ‘Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency’, pp. 193-96.

from authorities swiftly intervening to certify sexually active girls, the behaviour of wayward girls aroused considerable perplexity and hesitation.

### **The nature of institutional provision**

Although there are a number of studies of institutional provision for problem girls in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, few cover the inter-war period.<sup>204</sup> Those which do, as part of a longer timespan, devote relatively little attention to these years,<sup>205</sup> but tend to depict provision as adopting a punitive approach in which inmates were isolated from normal life and subjected to a regime of hard and repetitive labour. While there is evidence concerning the repressive regimes of some institutions, I will consider the extent to which institutions catering for young women drew upon the discourses of citizenship and moral agency discussed earlier. Although girls entered reform and rescue institutions on a compulsory or quasi-compulsory basis, institutional regimes were represented as encouraging girls to develop individual responsibility and self-control, and consciously sought to disassociate their approaches and regimes from those of the 'old-fashioned penitentiary'. The extent to which this was translated into the practice of individual institutions is of course questionable; Cox argues that despite new psychological

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<sup>204</sup> See, for instance, Bartley, *Prostitution*; Michelle Cale, 'Girls and the Perception of Sexual Danger in the Victorian Reformatory System', *History*, 78, 253 (1993), pp. 201-17; Higginbotham, 'Respectable Sinners'; Mahood, *The Magdalenes*; Susan Mumm, "'Not Worse Than Other Girls': The Convent-Based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain', *Journal of Social History*, 29 (Spring 1996), pp. 527-46.

<sup>205</sup> See, for instance, Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land, and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford, 1998); Jane Lewis and John Welshman, 'The Issue of Never-Married Motherhood in Britain, 1920-70', *Social History of Medicine*, 10, 3 (1997), pp. 401-18; Lara Marks, "'The Luckless Waifs and Strays of Humanity": Irish and Jewish Immigrant Unwed Mothers in London, 1870-1939', *Twentieth Century British History*, 3, 2 (1992), pp. 113-37.



discourses on delinquency and reform, institutional regimes changed little before the Second World War.<sup>206</sup>

The early reports of the Children's Branch certainly contain both explicit and implicit criticism of school regimes. In 1925 it concluded that there was still 'much in the Schools which calls for improvement, still some want of confidence in the material to be moulded, and a want of proportion in judging the acts of mischief of high-spirited boys and girls'.<sup>207</sup> These failings appear to have been more frequent in girls' schools. The Board's 1923 report identifies specific areas where girls were subject to more restrictions, including uniform and home leave.<sup>208</sup> Its most trenchant criticisms, however, concerned domestic work and training in girls' schools. Despite the Home Office having issued a circular in 1919 to restrict the amount of domestic work to 'reasonable limits' to allow adequate time for education and 'progressive training',<sup>209</sup> the Children's Branch repeatedly expressed concern that most schools focused on training girls for domestic service, regardless of the fact that many girls were 'quite unfit for domestic service and have no wish to enter it'.<sup>210</sup> It also criticised schools for placing girls in positions with poor conditions,<sup>211</sup> encouraging the practice of employers' paying girls' wages to the school rather than to girls themselves,<sup>212</sup> and the inadequate and old-fashioned nature of domestic training offered to girls in the schools.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Cox, 'Rescue and Reform', p. 75-104. Despite this, she provides evidence of changes of practice in individual institutions, particularly within the rescue system. Her study also appears to pay more attention to the Children's Branch's criticisms of institutional provision than to its more positive comments.

<sup>207</sup> Home Office, *Third Report*, p. 32.

<sup>208</sup> Home Office, *Report*, pp. 18, 38.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>210</sup> Home Office, *Second Report*, p. 30.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>213</sup> Home Office, *Fourth Report*, p. 42.



However, the overall tenor of its reports depict schools as increasingly encouraging inmates to develop an understanding of the duties of citizenship and to develop a 'self-respect which will make them hesitate to commit any act which will lower themselves' in their own and others' estimation.<sup>214</sup> Reports stressed the way in which "institutionalism" had been replaced by an approach which regarded each young person as an individual.<sup>215</sup> By 1928 the 'old conditions of isolation and self sufficiency' had given way to a 'wide range of outside interests' including Scouts and Guides, games, choral singing, and camps, while 'the managers of all but one or two girls' schools have mustered sufficient courage' to offer pupils home leave.<sup>216</sup> By 1938 the Children's Branch concluded that 'even the least enterprising schools' had learned that a 'reasonable amount of liberty and a less rigid supervision develops more self control than a continual playing for safety'.<sup>217</sup> It also praised the relationships developed between staff and former inmates: 'boys and girls have told us how they appreciate visits and letters from those who have trained them'.<sup>218</sup> Even Aylesbury Borstal, which Mary Gordon had criticised for its rigid discipline which allowed girls no scope for self-direction,<sup>219</sup> appears at times to have engaged inmates in a more active process of reform. Following the appointment of Lillian Barker as governor, one inmate recalled, 'we started as prisoners living in a prison and we ended as citizens living in a community. Miss Barker gave us responsibility and made us feel we had something to contribute'.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 61.

<sup>215</sup> Home Office, *Report*, p. 17.

<sup>216</sup> Home Office, *Fourth Report*, p. 51.

<sup>217</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 100.

<sup>218</sup> Home Office, *Fourth Report*, p. 53.

<sup>219</sup> Gordon, *Penal Discipline*, p. 158.

<sup>220</sup> Quoted by W.J. Forsythe, *Penal Discipline, Reformatory Projects and the English Prison Commission 1895-1939* (Exeter, 1990), pp. 202. The DNB entry for Dame Lillian Barker stresses her personal influence on her charges: nightly talks to girls over a cigarette, her design of imaginative punishments to fit the crime, and sums up her approach as an 'iron hand in a velvet glove'. She was

The Children's Branch was, however, critical of voluntary rescue homes, which it believed had 'remained outside the trend of educational development', unlike the certified schools.<sup>221</sup> Other groups and individuals made similar criticisms. The committee on sexual offences recorded concerns that although many homes offered 'up-to-date schemes for education and training', others were still 'managed on the lines of an old-fashioned penitentiary', stressing domestic service (with some depending on providing a laundry service for income) at the expense of education.<sup>222</sup> The young offenders committee expressed similar views.<sup>223</sup> Even Springer, an advocate of rescue work, acknowledged that some homes provided too sheltered an environment,<sup>224</sup> and criticised homes' focus on domestic training, particularly the employment of girls on commercial laundrywork, since this served to deter girls from entering homes.<sup>225</sup>

Following the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, which required homes to register and be inspected, the Children's Branch reported a 'marked improvement' in preventive and rescue homes. These homes, it claimed, now recognised that their inmates could be trained to be 'decent, hard-working girls' if they were provided with a 'natural and happy atmosphere'.<sup>226</sup> However, it found that some homes still operated on the basis of two years' seclusion, with 'much exercise of religion',<sup>227</sup> and regretted the continued focus on domestic training of

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made the first woman assistant commissioner of prisons in 1935. However McCall, in the late 1930s, criticised Aylesbury's impersonal regime, suggesting that any changes were reliant on Barker's leadership rather than structural. McCall, *'They Always Come Back'*, pp. 46-58.

<sup>221</sup> Home Office, *Second Report*, 1924, pp. 22-23.

<sup>222</sup> *Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences*, p. 79.

<sup>223</sup> *Departmental Committee on the Treatment of Young Offenders*, p. 55.

<sup>224</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 145.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80. In contrast, Trenholme defends laundrywork as a way of working off the 'superfluous energy of lively young people'. *Rescue Work*, p. 100.

<sup>226</sup> Home Office, *Fifth Report*, p. 104.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

many homes, although some 'more enlightened homes' organised classes or allowed girls to attend outside classes.<sup>228</sup> It also highlighted practices which endangered girls' safety, such as locking them into their cubicle at night, and poor conditions such as inadequate toilets and lack of lighting in bedrooms.<sup>229</sup>

Despite these criticisms, both Trenholme and Springer represent rescue work as adopting a modern approach offering reasonable freedom to girls.<sup>230</sup> The relationships between staff and girls, which replicated a mother-daughter relationship, in many instances replacing what was seen as the inadequacy of the real family, were central to such provision.<sup>231</sup> According to Springer, matrons encouraged former residents to remain in touch and to regard the home as 'a true *home* where real friends at all times await them'.<sup>232</sup> However, his description of the homes' aftercare provision as 'surveillance' – sometimes for as long as twenty years – reminds us of the ambiguous nature of such relationships.<sup>233</sup> Trenholme consciously sets out to depict a liberal regime in the homes. He describes one large home as being run on the lines of self-government, with the result that girls not only willingly stayed for two years, but many remained for a third year.<sup>234</sup> In another home, girls were allowed to follow current fashions, and were rewarded with treats such as cinema or theatre visits, for good behaviour.<sup>235</sup> However, it is clear from his account that many homes focused on training girls for domestic service, and some

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> See, for instance, Springer's comment on the now rare "penitentiary" type of rescue home in *Moral Evil*, p. 42, and Trenholme's description of the 'new spirit in rescue work'. *Rescue Work*, p. 78.

<sup>231</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, pp. 46-47. See Cale, 'Girls and the Perception of Sexual Danger', for a discussion of the way in which nineteenth-century reformatory superintendents formed the emotional focus of schools, while friendships between girls were mistrusted.

<sup>232</sup> Springer, *Moral Evil*, p. 136.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>234</sup> Trenholme, *Rescue Work*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.



followed a practice particularly criticised by the Children's Branch, that of requiring girls to get up at 5.30 am to light the laundry fire.<sup>236</sup>

In contrast to the Children's Branch's unfavourable comparisons of rescue homes with the certified schools, Cox argues that some 'radicals' within the rescue system succeeded in introducing non-stigmatising provision.<sup>237</sup> She quotes a 1921 series of interviews with 'lady managers' of rescue homes which demonstrated their awareness of the need to adopt new methods to reach the 'modern girl'; one manager stressed the need to help the modern girl in '*her way ... not our*', and the importance of offering 'freedom of movement' and 'liberty of thought'.<sup>238</sup> Such assertions of modernisation are evident throughout descriptions of all kinds of rescue provision. Writing in 1928, the Reverent Mother of the Community of St. Peter (which ran rescue provision approved by the Home Office) contrasted the 'desultory and inefficient training' the home had provided in the past with the thorough vocational training the girls now received, stressing that the home's abandonment of its commercial laundry – and consequent loss of income – proved that it now put girls' interests before financial considerations.<sup>239</sup> Macalpine Maternity Home argued that the number of 'old girls' who remained in touch with the home demonstrated that it met 'the needs of the girls of to-day'.<sup>240</sup> A hostel for girls with VD described its aim as educating girls to 'think for themselves how they can best fulfil their responsibilities as citizens'; it therefore avoided 'uniformity' as far as possible.<sup>241</sup> In contrast to the Children's Branch criticism of homes'

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. The Children's Branch report noted acidly that the inspectors were asked to believe that girls liked to get up at 5.30 a.m. Home Office, *Second Report*, p. 31.

<sup>237</sup> Cox, 'Rescue and Reform', p.150-51.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

<sup>239</sup> *Vigilance Record* (October 1928), p. 69.

<sup>240</sup> NCUMC, *Annual Report* (London, 1931), p.26. These included women who had been at the home as much as forty years previously.

<sup>241</sup> *Vigilance Record* (June 1920), p. 48.



continued focus on domestic service, almoners' descriptions of their work with girls with VD stressed the importance of harnessing girls' own interests in training them for an occupation, rather than following the 'old ideas regarding domestic work being the one occupation for women'.<sup>242</sup> The NCUMC summed up the changes: while it admitted that some homes were 'behind the times', it claimed that most modern homes offered conditions in which 'wretched, unhappy and often half starved expectant mothers' developed not only into 'healthy mothers of healthy and well-cared for babies, but into more or less competent workers with a changed moral standard, a new sense of self-respect and a new view of citizenship'.<sup>243</sup>

It is, of course, possible to read these assertions of improved conditions as simply defensive responses to criticism. But the extent to which institutions working with girls framed their work within discourses of choice and responsibility is indicated by the presence of such discourses within the mental deficiency system, which offered the most extreme instance of intervention into individuals' lives.

Cox argues that girls who were transferred from industrial schools to mental deficiency institutions because of their behaviour were not simply moving from one institution to another, but were 'crossing a line of reformability, becoming "unreformable" and "unimprovable"'.<sup>244</sup> This was no doubt the reality for most people entering mental deficiency institutions, but the increasing reach of the system meant that, even for those within it, a range of possibilities might exist. The BOC

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<sup>242</sup> M.D. Hearn, 'Social Work in Regard to Mothers and Children Suffering from Venereal Diseases', excerpt from *The Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute*, 56, 4 (1935). See also Hospital Almoners Association, *The Hospital Almoner: A Brief Study of Hospital Social Services in Great Britain* (London, 1935), pp. 98-99 for a similar stress on the importance of broadening girls' outlook in their choice of career. These accounts suggest that Davidson, although focusing specifically on Scotland, may be inaccurate in his stress on the repressive nature of such provision. Davidson, 'Venereal Disease, Sexual Morality and Public Health', pp. 279-84.

<sup>243</sup> Fisher, *Twenty-One Years and After*, pp.13-14.

<sup>244</sup> Cox, 'Girls, Deficiency and Delinquency', p. 201.

therefore represented provision, particularly through the planned development of the Colony system, as focusing on ‘training and preparing patients for a protected life outside’.<sup>245</sup> Mental defectives, particularly the young, would progress through a range of options allowing increasing opportunities for choice and supervised independence, and the Board stressed the importance of local committees making full use of community-based provision such as statutory supervision and licensing procedures.<sup>246</sup> It also recommended the setting up of hostels for inmates able to go out to daily work, particularly for ‘higher grade girls’.<sup>247</sup>

The language of training and improvement is most evident in reports from Warwick Institution, opened in 1923 to allow the transfer of the ‘more hopeful cases’ of younger girls and women committed to Rampton State Institution for defectives with ‘dangerous or violent propensities’.<sup>248</sup> Girls at Warwick, while a tiny minority of those within the deficiency system, were encouraged to exercise choice and develop their own interests. They had their own bedrooms, were able to choose their daily work from a range of domestic options and gardening, and had formed their own committee to organise a weekly entertainments programme. For expeditions outside the institution – which included cinema visits, shopping, concerts and invitations to tea in private houses – neither patients nor nurses wore uniform.<sup>249</sup> The regime also sought to offer girls work that appealed to them, since its medical superintendent believed that ‘defectives cannot be trained by forcing

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<sup>245</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 61. These aspirations, however, were not achieved. Thomson has documented the failure to develop the Colony system. Thomson, *Problem of Mental Deficiency*, chapter three.

<sup>246</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1934, p. 55. Thomson has stressed the importance of ‘care in the community’ within inter-war development of mental deficiency provision.

<sup>247</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1935, p. 9.

<sup>248</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1923, p. 64.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

them into monotonous, uninteresting work'.<sup>250</sup> Girls who were employed on lace-making, described as 'tedious', thus spent half their time on garden work.<sup>251</sup>

According to Warwick's medical superintendent, this approach offered opportunities for 'training in self control and responsibility, whereby alone these patients can be fitted for return to ordinary life in the community'.<sup>252</sup> By 1925 the Chaplain's house had been converted to a hostel for girls employed outside the institution, run as far as possible 'on the lines of a normal hostel, with some additional restrictions and supervision';<sup>253</sup> this development was said to have resulted in a marked decrease of inmates' feelings of 'hopelessness and distrust of those in authority', since they now had a 'goal to work for'.<sup>254</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which adolescent girls' sexual behaviour resulted in their detention in a range of institutions. While the First World War focused attention on adolescent female sexuality, the way in which it was interpreted varied according to the social context offered. At one extreme, discussion of girls with VD represented the sexuality of adolescent girls as posing a threat to the nation's health and very future; at the other, discussion of unmarried girls could call upon discourses of motherhood and reconstruction to offer a much more sympathetic portrayal. Increasingly, however, the discourse of adolescence was used to represent all sexually active adolescents as victims, in which even freely

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<sup>250</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 77.

<sup>251</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 90.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 89.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

chosen sexual activity was based upon ignorance or inaccurate understanding of the consequences of their choices. New legislation served to reinforce this, allowing the incarceration of adolescent girls on the basis of their sexual activity, while an extensive network of voluntary homes sought to rescue girls from the consequences of their sexual activity, often in circumstances in which girls' ability to refuse entry seems highly constrained. At the most extreme levels of intervention, young women were identified as mentally defective and incarcerated because of their sexual activity.

These institutions used varying levels of compulsion to bring young women within their scope, but they recognised that once inside, girls could not be compelled to reform. Discussing provision for unmarried mothers, Jane Lewis has argued that most voluntary organisations sought to 'inculcate a proper sense of shame in their charges'.<sup>255</sup> A rather more complex interpretation is needed, however; by the inter-war period many of those engaged in the reform of girls represented themselves as responding to the changing needs of modern girls, and as seeking to engage girls in active co-operation in the process of reform. They distanced themselves from earlier regimes which had relied on girls being secluded and protected from temptation, instead describing institutions as allowing girls increasing freedom and testing out their capacity for responsibility and self-control. The extent to which this representation reflected the reality of practice is, of course, questionable. However, the ways in which the discourses of adolescence and moral choice informed work with girls which was, in the main, based on compulsion, indicates the strength of these discourses. In the next chapter, I will explore the way in which youth work,

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<sup>254</sup> BOC, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 61.

<sup>255</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 65.



which is based on the principle of young people's voluntary involvement, similarly drew upon the discourses of adolescence, citizenship and the role of sex education in its work with adolescent girls. In particular I will focus on the work of the Girl Guides Association and the YWCA, both of which developed specific programmes for adolescent girls, including sexually active and 'problem girls'.

## **Chapter Five: Youth Work and Girls' Development: a case study of the Girl**

### **Guides and the YWCA**

The discourses and concerns discussed in earlier chapters influenced and were reflected in the work of two youth organisations, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Girl Guides Association. Critically, young people chose to become involved in these (and other) youth organisations, and the debates concerning the changing circumstances and expectations of young women therefore took on particular relevance. Both the Guides and the YWCA represented themselves as being able to respond to the needs of girls, including the most difficult girls, without compromising their basic principles. These organisations drew upon the discourses of adolescence and moral agency to claim an enhanced role in shaping the development of young women, a role that took on greater importance because of the increased social importance accorded to girls following the First World War. This resulted not only from the circumstances of girls' lives, particularly the conditions of their work and leisure time, which were believed to make intervention into their lives more urgent, but from the expanded role offered to women and girls through the discourses of post-war reconstruction and citizenship. These new discourses accompanied a continuing concern to regulate girls' sexuality through youth work. The nature of this regulation, however, must be seen in the context of the increasing importance ascribed to sex education in enabling girls to exercise sexual self-restraint and the emerging discourse of female sexual pleasure. The

YWCA and the Guides, rather than simply seeking to deter girls from sexual activity, set out to manage their heterosexual development.

I have chosen to focus on the GGA and the YWCA for several reasons. Despite having widely differing origins, the two organisations shared a number of features. While both had religious orientations, neither defined this narrowly. Although the YWCA was explicitly Christian it was interdenominational.<sup>1</sup> The Guides asked girls to serve God, and could therefore operate in the context of religions other than Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Both organisations adopted an internationalist approach, during the inter-war period promoting a rhetoric of peace and co-operation.<sup>3</sup> While they represented their work as crossing the boundaries of class (and nation), they were alert to the need to reach specific groups of girls, in particular working-class adolescents, and developed programmes specifically for this group. Significantly, both organisations continued to work with girls who had transgressed social expectations, including those whose sexual activity identified them as ‘problem girls’, and I shall consider this aspect of their work in the context of wider organisational practices. Their commitment to working with these young women contrasted with the practice of some other organisations. The Girls’ Friendly Society, for example, did not abandon until the 1930s its ruling that girl members should be ‘chaste’, despite the issue first having being raised in the 1890s. The failure of the GFS’s leadership to secure changes to this ‘purity’ rule in 1918,

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, organisations such as the Girls’ Friendly Society (GFS) and the Church Girls’ Brigade were linked to the Church of England.

<sup>2</sup> A 1935 survey of girls’ youth organisations stressed that Guiding could be associated with a synagogue as easily as with the various Christian denominations. Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Proctor, however, explores the limitations of the internationalism of the Guides in practice, given its fundamental assumptions about the superiority of the white races and ambivalence about the ‘mixing of the races’. Tammy Marie Proctor, ‘Gender, Generation, and the Politics of Guiding and Scouting in Interwar Britain’ (PhD thesis, University of Rutgers, 1995), pp. 168-236.

according to one historian, resulted in a significant loss of membership between 1913 and 1919.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Guides expanded its membership rapidly until the mid-1930s; while it is more difficult to estimate the extent to which the YWCA reached adolescent girls, it devoted increasing attention to this age group during the inter-war period.

## Origins and membership

The YWCA was established in 1877, in order to provide educational and recreational activities for young working women, bringing them together in ‘prayer, mutual help, sympathy and Bible study’.<sup>5</sup> By 1900 there were 1,700 branches in Britain, with a membership of some 94,000 women. Most of its members were young factory workers or domestic servants, and the Association rapidly became involved in promoting better terms and conditions for women workers, collaborating with trade unions and women’s organisations to this end. World War One offered it opportunities to expand its work in new directions. Together with the NUWW, it set

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Harrison, ‘For Church, Queen and Family: the Girls’ Friendly Society 1874-1920’, *Past and Present*, 61 (1973), pp. 137-38. The GFS operated a two-tier structure, bringing upper-class ‘associates’ together with working girl members. It was stronger in rural areas, and many of its members were servants. Although membership of the GFS remained higher than that of the YWCA, even by the inter-war period, I have chosen to focus on the YWCA because of the GFS’s relatively limited social base, narrow religious focus, and reluctance to modify its rules to work with ‘problem’ girls. However, while Harrison is no doubt right to stress the conservative nature of the GFS, he may under-estimate the extent to which the society did make some attempts to meet the needs of the ‘modern girl’. Its official history depicts it as being responsive to the changes affecting the lives of women and girls. Mary Heath-Stubbs, *Friendship’s Highway: Being the History of the Girls’ Friendly Society, 1875-1935* (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1935), p. vii. Clearly the organisation would represent itself in a favourable light, but some corroboration is offered by Roof and Morgan’s surveys of youth work in the 1930s, in which the GFS is described as attempting to attract ‘difficult girls’ by organising dancing, and by encouraging girls to bring their boyfriends to clubs. Roof, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 161; Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 338.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Caitriona Beaumont, ‘Citizens Not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women’s Organisations in England, 1928-39’, *Women’s History Review*, 9, 2 (2000), p. 416.



up Women Patrols to safeguard the moral welfare of young women working in munitions factories.<sup>6</sup> The role of these patrols in regulating young women's behaviour in accord with middle-class expectations has been discussed by a number of historians.<sup>7</sup> However, the YWCA's desire to reach munitions and other factory workers - girls described as 'swayed by excitement or beset with temptation' - meant that it adapted its provision to meet young women's expressed interests. It also reversed its policy of not undertaking rescue work, since it argued that it was no longer possible to draw clear boundaries between preventive and rescue work.<sup>8</sup>

Following the war, however, some members challenged what they saw as the increasing 'worldliness' of the organisation.<sup>9</sup> In particular they considered it inappropriate for Christian girls to 'smoke, to dance, to play cards or to go to the theatre', and argued that the YWCA, by allowing such activities, was making it easier for girls to 'drift into perilous surroundings'.<sup>10</sup> Following an unsuccessful attempt to re-impose stricter religious teaching and ban 'questionable and unwise' forms of recreation,<sup>11</sup> the protestors left to form the Christian Alliance of Women and Girls.<sup>12</sup> Speaking at the YWCA's conference, the Bishop of Norwich highlighted the significance of this split by contrasting the YWCA's willingness to 'touch the needs of a new age' with the

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<sup>6</sup> Beaumont, 'Women and Citizenship', pp. 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend* (Berkeley, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> [To] *Fathers and Mothers of Happy Girls*, undated leaflet, c1919?. MSS.243/56, YWCA Papers, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. [Hereafter YWCA Papers].

<sup>9</sup> Protest from branches [to president] for consideration at the National Council, 30 October 1918. Referendum Movement 1918-20, MSS.243/14/23/9, YWCA Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, 25 September 1918. Referendum Movement 1918-20, MSS.243/14/23/7, YWCA Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Y.W.C.A. Referendum 1919. Referendum Movement 1918-20, MSS.243/14/23/12, YWCA Papers.

<sup>12</sup> The CAWG continued into the 1930s, when Morgan noted that it had a total membership of 12,416, including around three thousand girls aged 14 to 18. However, this represented a fall of

CAWG's determination to 'stand still on the old and tried paths'.<sup>13</sup>

The Guide movement was formally established in 1910, following the earlier founding of the Scouts by Robert Baden-Powell. The Guides' official history claims that Baden-Powell had not originally been keen on Scouting for girls, but their enthusiastic and undisciplined adoption of his ideas forced his hand, prompting him to develop a programme which would turn this enthusiasm into 'channels which would benefit both the girls themselves and their country'.<sup>14</sup> This programme was explicitly linked to the need for the new organisation to respect traditional social roles for girls, with those promoting the movement in its early years offering repeated reassurances that Guiding would not undermine girls' femininity. The extent to which Guiding had to negotiate between the girls' desire for excitement and adventure and understandings of acceptable female behaviour is indicated by reactions to the programme outlined in its first official handbook, published in 1912. As a Guiding history recalled, while the girls thought this was 'rather too lady-like', parents feared it would 'encourage their daughters to become suffragettes'.<sup>15</sup> According to another history of Guiding, the visibly feminine character of Agnes Baden-Powell, revealed through her interest in 'in all womanly arts' and her love of nature, served to counter fears that Guiding would turn girls into tomboys lacking in

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fifteen per cent during the previous five years. Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 333. There were also splits with the Irish and Scottish branches of the YWCA.

<sup>13</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 1, 11 (1921), Supplement, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> R. Kerr, *The Story of the Girl Guides* (London, 1932), p. 35; GGA, *Annual Report*, 1921, p. 11. Jeal challenges this account, arguing that Baden-Powell had recognised the value of Scouting in training girls as early as 1907, but that his enthusiasm cooled as 'establishment fears that he would coarsen young ladies became apparent'. See Tim Jeal, *Baden-Powell* (London, 1989), pp. 469-70.

<sup>15</sup> Alix Liddell, *The First Fifty Years* (London, 1960), p. 15. Liddell was Kerr's daughter. Proctor argues that the early developments of Guiding must be seen in the context of the suffrage movement and the 'social, political and cultural struggle taking place in the press, in Parliament and in the streets over the meaning of "woman".' Proctor, 'Gender, Generation and the Politics of Guiding', p. 29.

‘maidenly modesty’.<sup>16</sup> Agnes Baden-Powell herself appears to have veered between offering reassurances that girls would not engage in unfeminine behaviour, and challenging the definition of certain types of behaviour as inherently unfeminine, claiming, for instance, that a girl is ‘no more unwomanly because she can swim in her skirt and boots, or signal in the Morse code’.<sup>17</sup> This statement reminds us that although Baden-Powell’s scheme for Guiding introduced badges specifically for girls in areas such as nursing and childcare, it retained many badges on the same lines as those for boys, covering activities such as signalling, cycling, lifesaving and carpentry.<sup>18</sup> Despite the assurances about the movement’s fostering of femininity, Guiding offered girls an opportunity of engaging in a wide range of previously out-of-bounds activities in which resilience and self-sufficiency were at a premium. The First World War allowed the Guides to demonstrate the effectiveness of its programme in enabling girls to contribute to the war effort, while changing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable behaviour for girls outside the home, thus rendering former criticisms irrelevant.<sup>19</sup> According to Liddell, by 1918 the Guides had won widespread acceptance as part of the new post-war way of life.<sup>20</sup>

The two organisations thus had very different origins. The YWCA emerged from the tradition of ‘social motherhood’, in which leisured middle and upper-class

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<sup>16</sup> Kerr, *Story of the Girl Guides*, p. 37. Agnes Baden-Powell’s hobbies included ballooning and bicycle-polo, but highlighting these rather more strenuous pursuits may not have had the desired result. Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, p. 475.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Proctor, ‘Gender, Generation, and the Politics of Guiding’, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Baden-Powell, ‘The Scheme for “Girl Guides”’, quoted by Kerr, *Story of the Girl Guides*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> See Allen Warren, “‘Mothers for the Empire’? The Girl Guides Association in Britain, 1909-1939’, in J.A. Mangan (ed.), *Making Imperial Mentalities: Socialisation and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 96-109; Richard A. Voeltz, ‘The Antidote to “Khaki Fever”? The Expansion of the British Girl Guides During the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27 (1992), pp. 627-38.

<sup>20</sup> Liddell, *First Fifty Years*, p. 20.



women developed an acceptable public role through offering their services to the poor and needy, particularly working-class women and children.<sup>21</sup> Guiding, in contrast, was depicted as a grassroots movement, in which girls took the initiative in defiance of their elders and of prescribed gender roles, although the movement immediately became managed by adults. Guiding was also adopted by other organisations, including the YWCA; by 1914 forty-two YWCA Guide companies had been set up, and the two organisations continued to collaborate during the inter-war period.<sup>22</sup>

By the inter-war period the Guides had become by far the largest youth organisation for girls. As table 5.1 shows, its membership increased rapidly until the early 1930s, when it started to decline.<sup>23</sup> The possible extent of its influence is indicated by Springhall, who claims that sixty per cent of British women have been Guides at some point in their lives.<sup>24</sup> Proctor found that ten per cent of London girls aged 11 to 16 were members of the Girl Guides in 1921, rising to thirteen per cent in 1931.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence about the reach of the YWCA is less clear. Although it was a membership organisation, most of its provision was open to non-members and

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<sup>21</sup> See Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science, 1850-1950', *Women's History Review*, 1, 1 (1992), pp. 63-87. She argues that the practice of social motherhood, which consisted of three recurring archetypes of an empowering, protecting and disciplining mother, undermined these women's efforts to create sisterhood with working-class women. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> *The Y.W.C.A. of Great Britain: Four Studies* (London, 1955), p. 59-61. This collaboration appears to have had its tensions however, as indicated by a 1932 reference to the virtual disappearance of 'feelings of rivalry' between the two organisations. *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 11, 6 (1932), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> This decline (which was shared by the Boy Scouts) was to prompt anxious discussion of the ability of the movement to continue to appeal to girls, which I shall discuss later.

<sup>24</sup> John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883-1940* (London, 1977), p. 131. His source for this assertion is, however, unclear.

<sup>25</sup> Tammy M. Proctor, '(Uni)Forming Youth: Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in Britain, 1908-39', *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1998), p. 107. Membership was however lower in Yorkshire, at four and ten per cent respectively.



membership figures thus do not provide an accurate picture. Its British membership in fact declined immediately after World War One, falling from 80,000 in 1918 to 40,000 by 1924.<sup>26</sup> In 1939 the Association asserted that its British membership, currently 42,000, was increasing.<sup>27</sup> However, its work involved much larger numbers of girls. In 1921, for instance, it claimed that 60,000 girls attended its clubs each week, it had provided temporary or permanent accommodation for 7,000 girls, and had given 6,000 girls 'a much-needed holiday' during the previous year.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jan Rutter, 'The Young Women's Christian Association of Great Britain, 1900-1925 – An Organisation of Change' (MA dissertation, University of Warwick, 1986), p. 124. Rutter attributes this decline to the effect of secessions, the lack of recruitment during the war, and activities being open to non-members.

<sup>27</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1939, p. 5. However, Morgan's survey, also published in 1939, reported a membership of 34,000, including 12,000 girls aged fourteen to eighteen. Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1921, back cover.

**Table 5.1: Girl Guides membership in British Isles, 1918-1938 (selected categories)<sup>29</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Brownies (under 11)</b>	<b>Guides (aged 11- 16)</b>	<b>Rangers (over 16)<sup>30</sup></b>	<b>Guides and Rangers total</b>
<b>1918</b>	16,919	72,519	4,207	76,726
<b>1919</b>	24,891	93,782	4,931	98,713
<b>1920</b>	42,234	121,348	6,296	127,644
<b>1921</b>	59,352	151,090	6,807	157,897
<b>1922</b>	74,218	173,124	9,799	182,923
<b>1923</b>	86,368	188,955	13,198	202,153
<b>1924</b>	97,080	201,238	16,305	202,873
<b>1925</b>	103,837	212,575	20,883	233,458
<b>1926</b>	113,510	228,351	24,946	253,297
<b>1927</b>	128,618	233,361	30,700	264,061
<b>1928</b>	143,316	253,147	35,794	288,941
<b>1929</b>	167,065	262,383	41,335	303,718
<b>1930</b>	189,708	269,724	48,963	318,687
<b>1931</b>	197,295	280,537	52,656	333,193
<b>1932</b>	199,815	294,408	56,623	351,031
<b>1933</b>	200,120	301,390	55,082	356,672
<b>1934</b>	197,029	288,779	49,559	338,338
<b>1935</b>	193,841	275,806	44,606	320,412
<b>1936</b>	186,404	254,245	39,179	263,424
<b>1937</b>	183,844	244,311	34,732	279,043
<b>1938</b>	190,168	246,202	31,801	278,112

Source: Annual membership census contained in GGA *Annual Reports*, 1918-1939.

<sup>29</sup> No census was taken in 1939 because of the war. I have not included the Cadet and Sea Cadet branches, which together reached a maximum of around 4,800 members in the early 1930s.

<sup>30</sup> Known as 'Senior Guides' in 1918 and 1919.

## Preparing girls for motherhood and citizenship

The historiography of early youth work has tended to stress its function as a form of social control.<sup>31</sup> Discussions of uniformed movements and youth clubs have emphasised their role in promoting deference and obedience among working-class young men in the context of concerns about national and social decline.<sup>32</sup> The ideas informing Scouting, and the character and beliefs of its founder Sir Robert Baden-Powell, have received particular attention.<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1989, biographer Tim Jeal reported that five out of six recent studies of early Scouting had concluded that 'Baden-Powell's overriding aim was to make efficient future soldiers', and that his interest in citizenship was 'secondary and cosmetic', a judgement which Jeal disputes.<sup>34</sup> Proctor has also argued that historians of British youth have misrepresented Scouting as a social control movement, and have wrongly assumed that the 'experience of Scouting corresponded with the intentions of its leaders'.<sup>35</sup> As my discussion will show, this assumption is particularly misleading for Guiding; not only might the experience of girls differ from the intentions of their leaders, as Proctor discusses, but the intentions of the women leading the movement appear to have differed from those of its founder.

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<sup>31</sup> For discussion of the concept of social control see Stanley Cohen and Andrew Scull (eds.), *Social Control and the State: Historical and Comparative Essays* (Oxford, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> Gillis, *Youth and History*; Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society*; Hendrick, *Images of Youth*; Paul Wilkinson, 'English Youth Movements, 1908-1930', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 4, 2 (1969), pp. 3-23. All these works focus exclusively or primarily on youth work with boys, even where the title does not indicate this.

<sup>33</sup> For more recent biographies see Jeal, *Baden-Powell*; Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (London, 1986). Jeal includes a full bibliography of the often uncritical accounts of the life and work of Baden-Powell, pp. 592-96.

<sup>34</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, p. 409. He argues that Baden-Powell valued the character traits of intelligence and individuality as much as (or even more than) the more militaristic ones of loyalty and self-discipline. In particular, he dismisses Rosenthal's claim that social repression was the principal aim of Scouting. *Ibid.*, pp. 412-13.

<sup>35</sup> Proctor, '(Uni)Forming Youth', p. 103.

Most accounts of Baden-Powell's work have ignored the development of the Guide movement, or simply treated it as a mirror image of Scouting.<sup>36</sup> Girl Guides merit a single indexed reference in Rosenthal's biography of Baden-Powell,<sup>37</sup> while Springhall's examination of British youth movements relegates girls' organisations to an appendix, where he describes them as 'imitations' of boys' organisations.<sup>38</sup> Jeal's biography of Baden-Powell includes a chapter on the Guides but his main interest lies in the early struggles for leadership within the movement.<sup>39</sup>

Those studies that have considered Guiding (mostly briefly or in passing) have tended to portray it as a conservative movement intent on socialising girls into their future role as wives and mothers.<sup>40</sup> Carol Dyhouse argues that despite Guide leaders' assertions that the movement aimed to develop self-reliance and independence in young girls, it actually served to 'teach about femininity'.<sup>41</sup> Her judgement has been repeated by other historians of youth work.<sup>42</sup> Some more recent

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<sup>36</sup> Warren expresses surprise that the expansion of women's studies has left unexamined the agencies concerned with 'the informal education and socialisation of girls and young women'. Warren, "Mothers for the Empire"?, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Rosenthal, *Character Factory*, p. 11. It seems fair to assume however, that he would extend his characterisation of Scouting as intended to produce unthinking obedience and acceptance of the *status quo* to its sister organisation.

<sup>38</sup> Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society*, p. 130.

<sup>39</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, pp. 469-487. These include the personal rivalry between Baden-Powell's sister Agnes, the first president of the Guides, and his wife Olave, who became Chief Guide in 1918. Jeal also discusses the intense friendships between Olave and other senior figures in Guiding.

<sup>40</sup> This is true of histories of youth work with girls in general, which have focused on its role in controlling girls' sexuality and preparing them for marriage and motherhood. See Joyce Goodman, 'Leisure for Girls: Girls' Clubs in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester', *History of Education Society Bulletin*, 60 (1997), pp. 4-13; Harrison, 'For Church, Queen and Family'; Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance?'.

<sup>41</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, pp. 112, 114.

<sup>42</sup> Nava and Smith both cite Dyhouse as their source for similar assertions. Mica Nava, 'Youth Service Provision, Social Order and the Question of Girls' in Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (eds.), *Gender and Generation* (Basingstoke, 1984), p. 21; Mark Smith, *Developing Youth Work: Informal Education, Mutual Aid and Popular Practice* (Milton Keynes, 1988), p. 18.



studies of Guiding have however modified this characterisation, particularly in the light of the changes facing women during and after the First World War.<sup>43</sup>

It is true that the writings of both the Guides (especially of Baden-Powell himself) and the YWCA extol the importance of women's domestic role and the need to educate girls for motherhood. Baden-Powell was explicit in his vision of Guiding as teaching both 'refined girls' and the 'slum-girl' to be 'better mothers and Guides to the next generation'.<sup>44</sup> The 1918 Guiding handbook stressed the importance of teaching girls to bring up healthy babies and children,<sup>45</sup> and Baden-Powell repeatedly returned to this theme, in 1936 describing Guiding as the more important branch of 'our two Movements', since 'these are the future mothers of the nation'.<sup>46</sup> Articles within the YWCA's magazines also represented domesticity and motherhood as girls' vocation.<sup>47</sup> As discussed in chapter one, domestic service was seen to offer girls valuable preparation for their future domestic role, and the YWCA ran a domestic service training scheme for girls.<sup>48</sup> The YWCA and the Guides were both represented on the committee managing the League of Skilled Housecraft, for

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<sup>43</sup> Voeltz argues that during the war, Guiding offered girls (and leaders) the 'prospect of liberation' while posing as a 'middle-class agent of social control'. Voeltz, 'The Antidote to "Khaki Fever"?', p. 635. Warren further argues that during the inter-war years, Guiding's original emphasis on motherhood was modified in favour of greater stress on developing citizenship in girls. Warren, "'Mothers for the Empire'". In what seems to be an unrealistic expectation concerning the role of youth organisations in effecting social change, Warren and Voeltz have been criticised for failing to make it clear that these changes did not amount to 'a fundamental redefinition of gender power relations'. Emma Latham, 'The Liverpool Boys' Association and the Liverpool Union of Youth Clubs: Youth Organizations and Gender, 1940-70', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, 3 (2000), p. 428.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted by Kerr, *Story of the Girl Guides*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> GGA, *Girl Guiding: The Official Handbook* (London, 1918), p. 177. This statement appeared unchanged until the Second World War: see Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell, *Girl Guiding: A Handbook for Brownies, Guides, Rangers and Guiders* (London, 14<sup>th</sup> ed., 1941), p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1936, pp. 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, *Our Own Gazette*, 38, 10 (1920), p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> In 1930, for instance, it reported triumphantly that it had persuaded a 'herring girl' to train for domestic service. *Blue Triangle Gazette*, 48, 4 (1930), p. 9.

which the GFS had overall responsibility, which aimed to improve the conditions and raise the status of domestic service.<sup>49</sup>

This stress on girls as future mothers reflected widely expressed anxieties about the level and fitness of the population, which persisted into the 1930s, and which led to greater importance being attached to the health and training of girls. Writing in 1920 the Master of Balliol declared that ‘the training of girls remains *the* important thing. Nations depend on the mothers of the race’,<sup>50</sup> while some ten years later, the chief medical officer stressed the ‘necessity of the physical care of girlhood if we would rear a race of healthy mothers’.<sup>51</sup> Youth organisations’ promotion of motherhood also drew on concepts of eugenic motherhood, developed by eugenicists such as Ellis and Saleeby, which accorded women a central role in social and racial regeneration.<sup>52</sup>

However, the characterisation of Guiding (and other girls’ organisations) as primarily intended to inculcate domesticity in its members ignores the complexities of such organisations and the experience and aspirations of those women in positions of influence within it. As already indicated, early leaders explicitly sought to counter criticisms that Guiding encouraged unfeminine behaviour in girls. The extent to which Guiding succeeded in representing itself as enhancing, rather than undermining girls’ femininity was critical to its development. However, the vision of femininity it offered was not limited to the domestic sphere. The stress on the conservative nature of Guiding – and of girls’ organisations in general – needs to be

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<sup>49</sup> Heath-Stubbs, *Friendship’s Highway*, p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by St John, ‘Educate or Domesticate?’, p. 213. Stress in the original.

<sup>51</sup> MOH, *On the State of the Public Health: Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer for the Ministry of Health for the year 1931* (London, 1932), p. 213.

<sup>52</sup> See for instance Caleb Williams Saleeby, *Parenthood and Race Culture: an Outline of Eugenics* (London, 1909); Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*.

modified in the context of changes affecting women during the inter-war period. As discussed in chapter one, employment outside the home had become the normal experience or expectation for young women of all classes. Women were allocated a central role in the language of post-war reconstruction, which according to the YWCA offered a 'new age, new possibilities for women'.<sup>53</sup> The two-stage acquisition of the vote further highlighted women's public role. Jeal argues that Scouting sought to 'produce self-assertive independent young men who would nevertheless remain loyal supporters of the *status quo*'.<sup>54</sup> This description could be extended to both the Guides and the YWCA. But for women, critically, the *status quo* was itself changing, and leaders of both the Guides and the YWCA were committed to furthering change by equipping girls to meet their new responsibilities.

While undoubtedly valuing marriage and motherhood highly, the Guides and the YWCA prepared girls for a public, as well as a domestic, role. An article on Ranger work claimed that it had three aims: creating 'Wives and mothers morally strong, workers keenly efficient, citizens unselfishly loyal'.<sup>55</sup> Baden-Powell himself acknowledged that woman would face the 'risks and responsibilities of public and commercial life'.<sup>56</sup> In 1928 he stressed the importance of women developing 'sound sense and minds of their own', since 'the fortunes of the country are now in their hands as voters'.<sup>57</sup> Some women leaders of Guiding offered more forceful messages that domesticity was not the only calling for women; speaking at an international

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<sup>53</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 38, 6 (1920), p.15.

<sup>54</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, p. 381.

<sup>55</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 11, 132 (1924), p. 341.

<sup>56</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1932, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> *Guider*, 15, 177 (1928), p. 284. The context of his discussion is the dangers posed by Communists and 'agitators'; Baden-Powell's assumption that thinking women would reject such views is typical of the inconsistencies highlighted by Jeal.



conference in 1920, Guide Commissioner Fflorens Roch argued that Guiding should not 'let a girl think that to be a good wife and mother is the sole aim of women's existence'.<sup>58</sup>

Roch believed that girls should not be made to feel a 'failure' if they did not marry and have a family.<sup>59</sup> The much-discussed issue of the 'surplus women' provided a context for representing girls' future in terms other than motherhood.<sup>60</sup> While the Guides and the YWCA assumed that most girls would want to marry and have children (and, as I will discuss later, actively intervened to encourage them to develop appropriate heterosexual relationships) they also believed they should prepare girls to lead fulfilling lives should they remain unmarried. As Dr. Mary MacNicol told a YWCA conference, since many girls would not be able to 'use their sex powers in the ordinary channels of marriage and motherhood', the organisation should encourage them to devote their 'powers of womanhood, of creating and cherishing something' to their work, club or vocation.<sup>61</sup> While this formulation called upon the concept of social motherhood developed in the nineteenth century,<sup>62</sup> its acknowledgement of the validity of girls' sexual impulses drew upon the discourses of female sexuality discussed earlier.

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted by Proctor, 'Gender, Generation, and the Politics of Guiding', p. 60. Roch was herself married to Liberal MP Walter Roch.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> This phrase was used to encapsulate fears about the post-war demographic imbalance between women and men, and its impact on women's behaviour. The chief medical officer, for instance, highlighted the excess of women over men in the 15 to 35 age range in his report for 1923. MOH, *On the State of the Public Health: Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health for the Year 1923* (London, 1924), p. 7. When discussed in the popular press, the issue of 'surplus women' often served to warn young women of the dangers of abandoning traditional feminine behaviour and aspirations. See, for instance, the *Daily Mail*, 16 February, 13, 21 October 1920. As Tinkler has noted, although girls' magazines might offer a sympathetic portrayal of women who had no chance of marriage, this was balanced by cautionary tales about 'overly-independent young women' who scorned marriage. Tinkler, 'Women and Popular Literature', p. 146.

<sup>61</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 10, 9 (1930), p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> See Yeo, 'Social Motherhood', pp. 75-82.



The way in which youth organisations sought to shape girls' development should also be considered in the wider context of feminism and women's organisations during the inter-war period. Historians have devoted considerable attention to the perceived decline of, and divisions within, feminism during these years.<sup>63</sup> Some recent studies have modified this stress by considering a wider range of women's organisations. Cheryl Law has highlighted the diversity of organisations which promoted women's rights between 1918 and 1928, and the complexity of their relationships with each other, arguing that women's organisations not identified as feminist have suffered from a 'tendency to dismiss, misinterpret or undervalue' their work.<sup>64</sup> Beaumont argues that non-feminist women's organisations during the 1930s and 1940s both accepted the ideology of domesticity and encouraged their members to engage with the rights and duties of citizenship.<sup>65</sup> Both studies pay attention to the role of the YWCA in this context.<sup>66</sup>

Some of those involved in the Guides and YWCA explicitly located their work in the context of women's rights.<sup>67</sup> According to Fflorens Roch, girls'

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<sup>63</sup> See for instance Lewis, 'Beyond Suffrage'; *idem.*, 'In Search of a Real Equality'; Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain*; Kent, *Making Peace*. Walby summarises three main lines of argument for the demise of 'first-wave' feminism and two versions of the argument that it did not in fact end. Sylvia Walby, "Backlash" in Historical Context, in Mary Kennedy, Cathy Lubelska and Val Walsh (eds.), *Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives* (London, 1993), pp. 79-89.

<sup>64</sup> Law, *Suffrage and Power*, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Beaumont, 'Women and Citizenship'.

<sup>66</sup> The YWCA is one of the six organisations studied in depth by Beaumont, while Law, although not considering the YWCA in any detail, describes it as promoting women's rights and supported by prominent women activists. Law, *Suffrage and Power*, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Alberti has highlighted the extent to which early twentieth-century feminists were active in girls' clubs, arguing that this exposure to the lives of working-class girls was an important factor in their commitment to working for social change. Feminists who had been involved in girls' clubs included Helena Swanson, Kathleen Courtney, Maude Royden and Emmeline Pethwick Lawrence. Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-28* (Basingstoke and London, 1989), pp. 14, 15, 28.

adoption of Scouting was ‘youth’s contribution to the great Woman’s Movement’.<sup>68</sup> The male author of a ‘personal and private tribute’ to the YWCA, although keen to disassociate it from feminism in the ‘angrier sense of the word’, stressed its role as a pioneer in the fight for women’s rights.<sup>69</sup> Articles in both organisations’ publications welcomed the new-found equality between the sexes and consequent challenges facing women. According to feminist Miss Corbett Ashby, writing for the YWCA on a ‘Woman’s Movement’, it was a ‘wonderful thing to be a woman to-day’, since ‘at last we have sex equality’.<sup>70</sup> Writing in the Guides’ 1925 annual report, the principal of Birmingham University, C. Grant Robertson, concluded that the girl was now ‘broadly on terms of equality with the boy’.<sup>71</sup>

The experiences and character of the women leaders of both movements also make it unlikely that they would have propounded a purely domestic future for girls. While Jeal interprets the early struggle for leadership within the Guides in terms of Olave Baden-Powell’s personal ambition, Proctor argues that her behaviour arose from her determination to create a professional women-led organisation, despite her public representation of herself as merely her husband’s helper.<sup>72</sup> She therefore recruited women who had risen to prominence during the war, including Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan,<sup>73</sup> chief controller of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps,

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<sup>68</sup> GGA, Committee for the Extension of Guide Training to Mentally, Morally and Physically Defective Girls, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions* (London, 1921), p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Julian Duguid, *The Blue Triangle* (London, 1955), pp. v, 140.

<sup>70</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 8, 9 (1928), p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 24. His discussion covers education and employment as well as the vote, which he notes the girl will ‘in time’ obtain on equal terms.

<sup>72</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, pp. 472-76; Proctor, ‘Gender, Generation and the Politics of Guiding’, pp. 139-41.

<sup>73</sup> Gwynne-Vaughan, an eminent biologist, had worked in girls’ clubs before the war, and had founded a London University suffrage society, although disapproving of militancy. She had been awarded a CBE for her war work in 1918, followed by a DBE in 1919. After the war she stood unsuccessfully as a Conservative candidate in three general elections. *DNB 1961-70*, pp. 467-69.

who became vice-chairman of the Guides Committee, and Katharine Furse,<sup>74</sup> director of the Women's Royal Naval Service and founder of the Voluntary Aid Detachments, who became Assistant Chief Commissioner in 1922.<sup>75</sup>

The leadership of the YWCA similarly contained women who were active in public life and in women's organisations. Edith Picton-Turbervill, its vice-president during the 1920s, was involved in a wide range of women's organisations, and was elected as the Labour member for Telford in 1929.<sup>76</sup> Trade unionist Gertrude Tuckwell was vice president of the YWCA's Industrial Law Bureau, a former president of the Women's Trade Union League, and the honorary secretary of the Maternal Mortality Committee.<sup>77</sup> The YWCA could call upon cross-party political support from women MPs; Nancy Astor, Margaret Wintringham and Margaret Bondfield (Conservative, Liberal and Labour respectively), were all members of its 1924 fundraising committee.<sup>78</sup>

Both organisations were thus supported by women who had risen to prominent public positions themselves, some of whom had been active in the suffrage struggle. Such women stressed that girls were facing new demands. Maude Royden discussed the role of Guiding in training girls to meet the new expectations that they should be 'really clever and efficient and public-spirited', contrasting this

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<sup>74</sup> Furse had become assistant chief commissioner of the Guides in 1922 and became chairman of the World Council of Guides and the first director of the Girl Guide World Bureau. Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, pp. 480-85. As indicated earlier, she was also a member of the NVA's subcommittee on sex education.

<sup>75</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, pp. 479-480. Proctor notes that this tactic of co-opting important female military figures allowed the Guides to memorialize 'women's heroic hour of World War 1 in the postwar movement'. Proctor, 'Gender, Generation and the Politics of Guiding', p. 61.

<sup>76</sup> Organisations she was active in included the National Council of Women, National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, the Women's Freedom League, the Women's Sanitary Inspectors, and the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. Beaumont, 'Women and Citizenship', p. 30, Law, *Suffrage and Power*, p. 7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



with earlier assumptions that women should be 'unselfish and gentle and devoted'.<sup>79</sup> According to Labour MP Margaret Bondfield, addressing the YWCA, 'Most of the problems of to-day may have to be settled by women'.<sup>80</sup>

Youth organisations were represented as offering unique opportunities for girls to develop their capacities to fulfil this expanded role because of their stress on members' self-management and co-operation; indeed discussion of youth work frequently highlighted their role as miniature democracies.<sup>81</sup> The structures of Guiding, in particular, were explicitly designed to give members progressively greater opportunities for leadership and decision-making, thus offering an experience of citizenship in practice. Discussion of Ranger activities stressed the extent to which they were self-governing, as in a report on a Ranger conference 'run entirely by the girls'.<sup>82</sup> Fflorens Roch argued that Guiding offered a means of teaching girls 'to *act* Citizenship in a small community', and was thus far more effective than merely lecturing girls on the 'duties of citizens'.<sup>83</sup> Girls' experience of Guiding, it was claimed, would give them an almost automatic lead among the 'many young people now searching for knowledge in the political field'.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to this training for citizenship through the experience of self-organisation, the Guides and the YWCA included discussion of political and social issues within their programmes, particularly after the passing of the Equal Suffrage Act of 1928. Labour MP Margaret Bondfield argued that the work of the YWCA

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<sup>79</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 20. Royden was listed as a member of the GGA council in both its 1919 and 1936 *Annual Reports*. She was also a supporter of the BSHC.

<sup>80</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 44, 6 (1926), p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Morgan, for instance, argued that girls, as well as boys, should have opportunities to 'practise the art of democracy' in youth clubs. Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 323.

<sup>82</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 47.

<sup>83</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 8. Stress in the original.

<sup>84</sup> *Guider*, 26, 5 (1939), p. 165.



was of great value in helping the ‘girl of to-day’ develop into the ‘freeborn citizen of to-morrow’,<sup>85</sup> and the Association explicitly claimed a role in educating women and girls to ‘take an intelligent interest and play their part in public affairs’, since they were now ‘in possession of the full political rights’ of citizenship.<sup>86</sup> The recreational programme at its London homes during 1928, for instance, included ‘votes for women’ among its topics.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Guiding magazines carried articles on the importance of women using their vote.<sup>88</sup> Both organisations also sought to interest girls in wider social issues. In 1928, Rangers were described as ‘taking an increasing interest in public matters’,<sup>89</sup> and by 1929 a ‘World Citizen’s badge’ had been introduced, at the request of the Rangers themselves.<sup>90</sup> In 1931 the YWCA claimed that seven conferences, intended to promote girls’ and women’s industrial and economic education, had been ‘well attended by both girls and leaders’.<sup>91</sup> It also reported adopting innovative methods to educate its members on topics such as trade unionism and employment, including mounting a ‘tableaux of scenes from English Industry’.<sup>92</sup>

Both organisations thus sought to develop girls’ interest in and ability to engage with social and political issues, without undermining the importance of motherhood. Many women supporting the two organisations drew on earlier suffrage arguments concerning the need for women to bring their distinctive experience and values into public life.<sup>93</sup> Girls, it would appear, were being offered a

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<sup>85</sup> *Blue Triangle Gazette*, 54, 12 (1936), p. 197.

<sup>86</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1931, pp. 12-13.

<sup>87</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1928, p. 29.

<sup>88</sup> *Guider*, 16, 182 (1929), p. 38; *Guider*, 16, 183 (1929), p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1928, p. 59.

<sup>90</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 56.

<sup>91</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1931, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997).

vision of 'sexed citizenship';<sup>94</sup> as elaborated by Robertson, that would be 'equally shared by men and women. But there will be *men* citizens and *women* citizens.'<sup>95</sup>

## Responding to the modern girl

### *The role of youth work*

While the discourses of citizenship provided a context for shaping the aspirations and competencies of girls as future citizens, the circumstances of their lives and the discourse of adolescence prompted more immediate interventions into directing girls' development. The Guides and YWCA portrayed themselves as responsive to social change, and willing to adapt to meet the needs of contemporary young women. The Guides believed that 'We now live in new times, and the Guide Movement must adopt new methods',<sup>96</sup> while the YWCA described itself as seeking to 'encourage new experiments and to present old truths in new ways'.<sup>97</sup> The changes affecting young women were seen as both negative and positive. Both organisations shared the concerns discussed earlier that the war in particular, and girls' increasing independence in general, had encouraged sexual immorality.<sup>98</sup> As I will discuss later, the Guides and the YWCA addressed the regulation of girls' sexual behaviour not simply through deterring them from sexual activity, as many

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>95</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 24. Stress in the original.

<sup>96</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 7, 73 (1920), p. 14.

<sup>97</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> The Guides, for instance, cited the prevalence of 'khaki fever' among older girls as evidence of the need for Guiding, in its annual reports for 1918 to 1921. The YWCA highlighted the dangers posed by 'the general independence of the very young'. YWCA, *Annual Report* 1923, p. 3.

historians have argued, but through providing regulated information about sex and encouraging appropriate heterosexual relationships. However, critically for youth organisations, the discourses of adolescence and citizenship enabled them to claim a central role in the management of girls' behaviour and their development into responsible, self-disciplined, adults. According to the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs, there could currently 'hardly be a more important group of people than those who are in close touch with working girls in their clubs'.<sup>99</sup>

Youth work had, from its origins, stressed the importance of the voluntary relationships developed between youth workers and young people.<sup>100</sup> Discussions of the importance of understanding adolescent psychology now offered youth organisations a scientific discourse to underpin the value of these relationships, and led to greater emphasis on their role in promoting the development of individual identity during adolescence. Training and publications for leaders in both organisations stressed the need for friendship and empathy with girls to be informed by an understanding of psychology, which would enable them to approach each girl as an individual during the difficult period of adolescence. YWCA leaders were advised to read Slaughter's *The Adolescent*,<sup>101</sup> while such an eminent figure as Hugh Crichton-Miller addressed Guide leaders on the importance of understanding the

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<sup>99</sup> Reported in *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 1, 5 (1921), p. 2. The NOGC (to become the National Council of Girls' Clubs in 1926) was set up in 1909 to co-ordinate the activities of youth organisations working to promote girls' physical, mental, social and spiritual welfare. In the mid-1930s five national societies were affiliated: the Federation of Working Girls' Clubs, the GFS, Girls' Guildry, Girls' Life Brigade and the YWCA. The GGA was represented on its executive council. Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> As a recent discussion notes, since 'compulsion was never an option for youth work', youth workers recognised that they had to distance their work from formal education by stressing 'friendship between the adults and young people, self-discipline rather than imposed order, activities rather than passive instruction'. Tony Jeffs and Sarah Banks, 'Youth Workers as Controllers', in Sarah Banks (ed.), *Ethical Issues in Youth Work* (London, 1999), p. 95.

<sup>101</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 6, 2 (1926), p. 7.



psychology of the adolescent girl.<sup>102</sup> Chapter three explored the way in which organisations concerned with social and sexual morality identified adolescence as the critical period in the formation of individual identity and moral agency. Youth work organisations used similar formulations to describe and emphasise the importance of their work with adolescents. According to Rooff, adolescence was the 'crucial period' when 'standards of judgment are being formed which will affect the whole of adult life'.<sup>103</sup> The Guides and the YWCA both identified adolescence as the time at which girls would no longer accept externally imposed authority; as YWCA workers were warned, the 'coming of physical maturity' was when a girl began 'to feel her reasoning powers and she really definitely wants to know "why"'.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, a Guiding discussion of the 'needs of the girl of to-day' described adolescence as a time when girls had to 'throw over the habit of conforming to standards laid down by adults in order consciously to reject or accept them'.<sup>105</sup> Youth organisations represented themselves as uniquely placed to respond to this adolescent questioning, through programmes which offered young people opportunities to develop and test out their moral values, to 'seek and to find'.<sup>106</sup> Rooff stressed the role of girls' organisations in cultivating members' 'independence of spirit',<sup>107</sup> while Guiding stressed that its programme was based on developing

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<sup>102</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1926, pp. 15-18. This probably drew on family connections: Hugh Crichton-Miller was married to Eleanor Crichton Miller – described as 'formidable' by one of her children, and whose work in developing the Guide's work with 'problem' girls will be described later. *Hugh Crichton Miller, 1877-59; A Personal Memoir by His Friends and Family* (Dorchester, 1961), p. 66. Confusingly, while Hugh Crichton-Miller used a hyphen in his name, Mrs Crichton Miller did not.

<sup>103</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 8, 9 (1928), p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> GGA, Report of Committee on the Drop in Numbers in the Girl Guides (unpublished report, 1937), p. 13. Guide Association Archive, London. [Hereafter GGA Papers.]

<sup>106</sup> National Association of Youth Clubs, 'Girls' Clubs News 1911-1981: A Personal Selection of Articles, Anecdotes and Pictures from Club Magazines of the last 70 Years', unpaginated supplement in *Youth Clubs*, 14 (1981).

<sup>107</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 3.



‘individual enthusiasm from within’, rather than imposing ‘collective dogmatic instructions from without’.<sup>108</sup>

### *Reaching the post-school adolescent*

Youth work organisations, however, had first to reach the adolescent, in order to substantiate these claims. As discussed earlier, for many educationalists and social reformers, the critical aspect of adolescence was its relationship to the lives of working-class young people. In common with other youth organisations, the Guides and the YWCA found it difficult to reach and retain young people over fourteen or sixteen.<sup>109</sup> It was, however, their ability to reach adolescents untouched by other educational influences that legitimised youth organisations’ claim to a unique role in the management of adolescence. While the Guides and the YWCA both stressed the relevance of their work to girls of all backgrounds, they developed specific programmes for girls aged from fourteen upwards, in particular the working girl whose precocious independence and monotonous work was seen to foster a desire for amusement and pleasure. My discussion will focus on their work with this age group.

Their programmes for adolescent working girls brought into sharp focus the ability of both organisations to adapt to change. The Guides described its Ranger programme, for girls aged sixteen and over, as both the most difficult and the ‘most

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<sup>108</sup> *Guider*, 23, 271 (1936), p. 267.

<sup>109</sup> A 1938 study found that around 30 per cent of young people aged 14 to 18 were members of youth organisations. A.P. Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up* (London, 1942), p.152. Morgan estimated that this age group accounted for 16 per cent of the total GGA membership. Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 325.

necessary' aspect of Guiding.<sup>110</sup> It claimed that the expansion of Rangers demonstrated that it could meet the needs of different groups of young women, since each company catered for the particular needs of girls in its neighbourhood.<sup>111</sup> Discussions of the qualities needed by Rangers leaders stressed that they must be able to understand 'the point of view of the modern girl',<sup>112</sup> and be prepared to 'stand aside and watch the girl make her own mistakes'.<sup>113</sup> From the mid-1920s the YWCA also targeted adolescent girls, developing a 'Pioneer' scheme in order to prevent girls aged fourteen to seventeen from 'falling away from educational influences'.<sup>114</sup> By 1939, Morgan described the YWCA as making an 'important contribution' to the 'adolescent problem', with over two hundred centres paying 'special attention' to work with adolescents.<sup>115</sup>

Historians have disagreed about the class composition of Guide (and Scout) membership. Warren claims that the Guides drew its membership predominantly from the middle or lower-middle classes in the suburbs.<sup>116</sup> Proctor, however, concludes that particularly in London, Guiding reached girls in respectable working-class areas.<sup>117</sup> Agnes and Robert Baden-Powell explicitly set out to reach the 'girls of the factories and of the alleys of our great cities, who, after they leave school, get no kind of restraining influence'.<sup>118</sup> A specialist branch was therefore set up to develop Guiding in factories. By 1922 there were Guide or Ranger companies in

<sup>110</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1933, p. 56.

<sup>111</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 25.

<sup>112</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 30.

<sup>113</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1926, p. 48.

<sup>114</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 332. This focus on work with adolescents appears to have created some tensions, since some members did not believe that the Association should work with girls under

16. *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 12, 9 (1934), p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> Warren, 'Mothers for the Empire', p. 107.

<sup>117</sup> Proctor, '(Uni)Forming Youth', p. 113.

<sup>118</sup> Baden-Powell, *Handbook for Girl Guides*, p. vii.

twenty-four factories, in addition to the 'great number of factory hands' who were members of open companies.<sup>119</sup>

The Baden-Powells' comment clearly indicates the role of Guiding in compensating for the perceived deficiencies of the lives of working-class girls and their families. In less censorious terms, Guiding was also depicted as widening girls' horizons and providing them with new experiences, offering 'ideas and ideals they otherwise would never have had', according to a welfare worker in a glass works.<sup>120</sup> Membership was also said to improve girls' performance both as employees and as daughters; the 1921 annual report included tributes to the helpfulness and self-reliance of Guides from a factory forewoman, and a mother's praise for her daughter's behaviour after returning from Guide camp.<sup>121</sup> Guiding with factory girls was thus clearly intended to shape their behaviour and values in accordance with middle-class expectations.

However, as its rapid expansion until the 1930s indicated, girls themselves wanted to join the Guides. There is evidence that, as Proctor argues, they were able to attribute their own meanings to their involvement.<sup>122</sup> Despite the parental approval of Guiding cited above, Roch argued that many working-class girls became Guides in defiance of their parents, in order to assert their independence from their families.<sup>123</sup> Two examples cited by Rooff indicate the value attached to Guiding by

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<sup>119</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 23.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>121</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1921, pp. 18-19.

<sup>122</sup> Dove's study of London girls' clubs also argues that girls did not uncritically accept the values and programmes offered by clubs, but rather 'consented or negotiated' with the 'ladies' since they enjoyed having their horizons widened. Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance', p. 13.

<sup>123</sup> *Girl Guides Gazette*, 5, 59 (1918), p. 153. Proctor cites the example of a girl who joined the Guides in the (only partially fulfilled) hope of escaping the restrictions of home. Proctor, '(Uni)Forming Youth', p118. More generally, she argues that Guiding and Scouting represented 'social mobility, education and travel, but often also a betrayal of community mores, political principles, and family life'. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

working-class girls. A study of fifteen and sixteen-year-old girls working in a factory with a Guide company found that Guiding was the most popular topic of conversation connected with outside activities.<sup>124</sup> A girl who had left her home in Wales to work in an English factory offers a touching tribute to its importance in her life: 'I am very happy in my place. It is very beautiful here and I have joined the Girl Guides, so my happiness is complete'.<sup>125</sup>

The YWCA also sought to reach working-class girls. Between 1918 and 1925, it described its membership as mainly drawn from industrial and domestic workers.<sup>126</sup> It made specific provision for girls living in particularly difficult circumstances, such as 'herring girls' in Wales, whose working hours were unpredictable and often long. While its provision of a 'rest-house' was intended to stop these girls from spending their spare time in pubs or on the streets, its attention to the realities of girls' lives is evident from the popularity of the washing facilities it provided.<sup>127</sup> While Rooff suspected that the 'rougher type of girl' might not feel at home in YWCA clubs she noted that clubs in poor areas with low membership fees did attract the 'high-spirited manual worker'.<sup>128</sup> During the 1930s, the YWCA paid particular attention to work with unemployed girls, employing organisers to develop work with unemployed girls and women in around thirty centres throughout the country.<sup>129</sup> The ideals of the movement, it claimed, demanded that it should play an active part in 'service' to the unemployed and should collaborate with other bodies

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<sup>124</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 78. Guiding was reported as having 16 mentions (compared to 42 for the 'opposite sex' and 37 on conditions of work)

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>126</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 3. Beaumont describes its membership by 1938 as consisting of a 'majority of young working-class women with a smaller number of middle-class women working as local and national officials'. Beaumont, 'Citizens Not Feminists', p. 416.

<sup>127</sup> *Blue Triangle Gazette*, 48, 4 (1930), pp. 8-9.

<sup>128</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 12-13.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.



making provision for unemployed girls.<sup>130</sup> In line with its other provision, however, this work was intended to promote girls' development through a 'constructive programme' rather than simply providing them with somewhere to go during the day.<sup>131</sup>

As indicated earlier, youth work with adolescent girls stressed the need for an individual approach. Discussing work with girls transferred to Yorkshire mills, a YWCA worker admitted that 'I used to think I knew a lot about girls, but now I feel that any sentence beginning with the words "all girls" is a lie.'<sup>132</sup> Yet despite this stress on individuality, the YWCA and the Guides both universalised the experience of girls, claiming that their activities appealed to girls across the boundaries of class, race and time. Writing in 1920, the British president of the YWCA stressed her belief that, despite the increased independence and more varied occupations experienced by girls, their 'hearts and needs and longings are just the same all the world over and in all times'.<sup>133</sup> Nearly twenty years' later, readers of the YWCA's annual report were assured that that the apparently sophisticated adolescent working girl shared with her middle-class high school counterpart the 'eagerness and perplexity of immature minds in need of guidance'.<sup>134</sup>

This stress on the common experience of girlhood enabled both organisations to promote themselves as agents of social cohesion, bringing girls and women together across class divides. While both organisations stressed work with working-class adolescents, they were also keen to promote their work with middle-class girls.

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<sup>130</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 12, 2 (1933), pp. 1-2.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 12, 9 (1934), p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 38, 11 (1920), p. 4.

<sup>134</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1939, p. 2.

Indeed, the YWCA expressed concern about its failure to appeal to the ‘professional and business girl’, due to their mistaken belief that the movement was ‘limited in scope and outlook’.<sup>135</sup> The Guides similarly claimed that it attracted ‘a large number of well-educated girls’;<sup>136</sup> indeed, by 1937 princesses Elizabeth and Margaret had become Guides and Brownies respectively, providing valuable publicity for the movement.<sup>137</sup> Despite disagreements about the extent to which youth organisations could bring together girls from different classes,<sup>138</sup> both the Guides and YWCA stressed the way in which their work encouraged girls from different backgrounds to work together. The Guides addressed the issue explicitly; its fourth law declared that a Guide was ‘a sister to every other Guide, no matter to what social class the other belongs’.<sup>139</sup> Guiding was seen as particularly successful in overcoming class differences because of the structured nature of its programme; according to the principal of Birmingham University, Guiding aimed to ‘delete class-consciousness’.<sup>140</sup> The *New Survey of London Life and Labour* also found that the Guiding programme meant that distinctions between different groups of girl workers were less significant than in open clubs.<sup>141</sup> Despite this, the YWCA also stressed its success in bringing together girls from different classes, citing instances in which clubs attracting ‘professional girls’ adopted poorer clubs, so that ‘side by side the

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<sup>135</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 4, 11 (1924), p. 2. By 1930, however, it was reporting greater success.

<sup>136</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 210.

<sup>138</sup> Proctor, ‘(Uni)Forming Youth’, p. 129.

<sup>139</sup> See Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 80.

<sup>140</sup> Baden-Powell, *Handbook for Girl Guides*, p. 39. The Guiding programme was based on a set of ten laws, covering areas such as honesty, courtesy, thrift, loyalty and purity, which girls promised to obey when they joined the movement.

<sup>141</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 25.

<sup>142</sup> Isabel Jacobs, ‘Social Organisations for Adolescent Girls’ in H. Llewellyn Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour Vol IX* (London, 1935), p. 235.

girls are working for their mutual development.’<sup>142</sup> Morgan also found that ‘those who might regard themselves as socially different’ mixed well at some YWCA centres.<sup>143</sup>

### *The limits to change*

Despite the Guides and YWCA’s representation of their success in adapting their practices to meet the needs of girls of all backgrounds, there is also evidence of their failure to do so, even in their public writings. As I will discuss later, the Guides’ work with ‘problem girls’ prompted criticism of the quality of much mainstream work. This was brought into sharp focus in the mid-1930s, when the decline in Guide membership resulted in a re-evaluation as to whether the movement still met the needs of girls. A committee set up to consider this decline offered some fairly trenchant criticism of the practice of Guiding, although it concluded that the aims and ideals of the movement remained valid and relevant. While it considered that some factors, including changes in formal education system, the transfer of families to housing estates, and competition for girls’ spare time, were outside its control, it found that much practice was unadventurous, inward-looking, and dependent on learning by rote rather than exploring ideas and values.<sup>144</sup> Specific criticisms included the unsuitability of many leaders and the consequent poor quality experiences for girls, badges which stressed theoretical knowledge rather than ‘learning by doing’, an ‘over-insistence on matters of secondary importance’ such as

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<sup>142</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1922, p. 7.

<sup>143</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 331. He commented that the YWCA made ‘every attempt’ to ‘break down the barriers of snobbery’.

<sup>144</sup> GGA, Report of Committee on the Drop in Numbers, GGA Papers.

uniform, parades, drill etc, and an atmosphere of ‘unfriendliness, snobbery, smugness and gossip’ in many companies.<sup>145</sup> All these were seen as a fundamental betrayal of the ideals of the movement, and a series of recommendations was made to address these problems. It is unclear, however, how far its conclusions resulted in any changes. The GGA’s executive committee accepted the report ‘subject to certain minor alterations’<sup>146</sup> and there is no further discussion recorded in the minutes. It also appears to have gone undiscussed in Guiding journals. The imminence of the Second World War was likely to have distracted attention from the review.<sup>147</sup>

The YWCA’s hostel provision for girls working in London also indicates the limitations of the organisations’ ability to adapt to girls’ changing expectations. The significance of hostels as a site of inter-generational conflict was recognised in a 1927 article on the YWCA’s hostel work, which claimed that

nowhere more quickly than in hostels does one feel the pulse of young life and the pressure of the public opinion of the present generation. Hence arise the complaints ...of the more conservative among us ... that the modern girl is impossible; that she is selfish, careless and lax in her ideas!<sup>148</sup>

The YWCA itself claimed that its hostel provision had responded to the changing needs of girls, for instance by abandoning hostels’ earlier stress on bible classes and self-improvement.<sup>149</sup> Despite this, some historians have argued that by the 1920s

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 11, 12, 18.

<sup>146</sup> GGA, Minute Book VIII, 1934-39, 17 May 1938, GGA Papers.

<sup>147</sup> In issuing the report, the Executive Committee also offered the disclaimer that it did not ‘take responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report’. GGA, Report of Committee on the Drop in Numbers, p. 3, GGA Papers.

<sup>148</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 7, 7 (1927), p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> YWCA, *Our Eighty Years: Historical Sketches of the YWCA of Great Britain* (London, 1935), p. 30



hostels were increasingly unappealing to girls because of their restrictive regulations.<sup>150</sup> The YWCA's own reports demonstrate its awareness of a stigma being attached to hostel accommodation. In 1932, for instance the YWCA's London hostels complained that magazines and books were ridiculing hostel regimes.<sup>151</sup> However, it appears that demand exceeded supply throughout the 1920s at least; in both 1921 and 1929 the YWCA reported having been forced to turn girls away.<sup>152</sup>

The first London hostels had opened in 1878 to provide accommodation for the 'respectable working girl or young woman' under 25, employed in workrooms, shops and offices. They offered practical assistance to young women on low incomes, charging them on a sliding scale according to wages, and tiding over residents who lost their jobs or were put on short time.<sup>153</sup> In any one year they provided accommodation for between 700 and one thousand-plus young women.<sup>154</sup>

Between 1916 and 1937 the annual reports on the work of the London hostels appear to be written by one woman. Adopting a discursive style, they represent young women as subjected to constant sexual danger from the temptations of the city – described as a 'whirlpool of sin (seductive and alluring sin)' - to which low or irregular pay and loneliness make them vulnerable.<sup>155</sup> The homes themselves

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<sup>150</sup> See Rutter, 'The Young Women's Christian Association of Great Britain', p. 123; Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London, 1985), p. 296; Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance?', pp. 121-22.

<sup>151</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1932, p. 8. Each of these reports had a subtitle – such as 'loneliness', 'friendships' and 'incalculable values' – indicating the theme of that year's report. Vicinus cites the negative depiction of hostel life in Jean Rhys's 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*. Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 361.

<sup>152</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1921, back cover; YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1929, pp. 16-17.

<sup>153</sup> See, for instance, the claim that many girls had been 'tided over' periods of unemployment. YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1933, p. 7.

<sup>154</sup> In 1928, for instance, the homes had received 1,103 young women. YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1928, p.6.

<sup>155</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1922, p. 17. Similar images recur in subsequent years.

provided a strongly Christian environment mimicking a middle-class home. They claimed to operate without restrictive rules, requiring only a minimum set of “‘conditions of residence” ... consistent with the good order of the house’.<sup>156</sup> However, it is clear from the reports that conflict existed between residents and staff. There are repeated denunciations of the excessive freedom experienced and expected by the ‘modern, independent girl’, and the dangers of the ‘desire for pleasure for pleasure’s sake’.<sup>157</sup> Specific habits criticised included girls’ smoking and card-playing.<sup>158</sup> The 1922 report declared its lack of sympathy with ‘the tendency to-day to concede more freedom as regards late hours of closing, the habit of smoking, or the suggestion that residents should have a latch-key’.<sup>159</sup> The confrontational language used at times reveals the challenge some girls posed to the regime; one girl was described as having left because ‘I would not allow her out every night till midnight ... She took a room rather than submit’.<sup>160</sup>

There are also indications that residents accepted the religious rituals of the homes with at best resignation; the 1930 report admits that if homes were administered according to residents’ views ‘we could omit practically all religious observances’, yet goes on to claim, with no apparent sense of contradiction, that most girls ‘voluntarily support’ the hostels’ daily prayers and other religious ceremonies.<sup>161</sup> Other problems highlighted included theft,<sup>162</sup> the unexpectedly high proportion of residents described as religious or political ‘cranks’;<sup>163</sup> and girls’

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<sup>156</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1931, pp. 8-9.

<sup>157</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1919, p. 13.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. This suggests that the writer shared the views of those members who believed the YWCA was becoming too worldly.

<sup>159</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1922, p.18.

<sup>160</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1924, pp. 21-22.

<sup>161</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1930, pp. 21-23.

<sup>162</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1918, p. 33.

<sup>163</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1919, p. 30.

general selfishness and lack of consideration for others.<sup>164</sup> In 1923, it was even reported that some girls had been sent to asylums, including one who attacked the hostel supervisor.<sup>165</sup>

Overall, the reports combine praise for the behaviour of hostel residents with laments concerning the declining standard of morality in young women in general. The reports stress that most residents resisted the temptations facing them; the description of residents as ‘putting up a brave fight against tremendous odds and fierce temptations’ is typical.<sup>166</sup> Yet, far more than other YWCA literature, they repeatedly criticised modern girls as rebellious, too independent, and obsessed with ‘having a good time’.<sup>167</sup> Similar ambivalence is revealed about the culpability of girls engaged in sexual irregularity. On one hand, they are portrayed as victims of loneliness, poverty, and the overwhelming lure of the city, rather than as having ‘deliberately taken the “road of shame”’.<sup>168</sup> On the other, those girls who have wilfully courted danger by rejecting the protection of the YWCA for lodgings are described in extremely hostile terms. Such girls are described as selfish, callous, and as having an exaggerated sense of their right to ‘do just as they please, when and how they please’.<sup>169</sup> Their desire for independence and pleasure is represented as leading to irretrievable disaster. Young women who reject the protection of the London hostels seem to be excluded from the rhetoric of moral reclamation; as will be seen, this is in marked contrast to the YWCA’s account of its rescue work with girls.

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<sup>164</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1935, p. 11.

<sup>165</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1923, p. 11.

<sup>166</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London: these fifty years, 1878-1928*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>167</sup> See, for instance, YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1936, p. 9.

<sup>168</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1923, p. 7.

<sup>169</sup> YWCA, *Homes for Working Girls in London, Annual Report*, 1932, p. 9.



## Providing sex education

As discussed earlier, despite considerable ambivalence among youth organisations about engaging in sex education, by the Second World War they had increasingly accepted responsibility for providing their members with information about sex and guiding their progress towards responsible heterosexual relationships. The importance of this role with post-school adolescents was explicitly acknowledged by the Board of Education.<sup>170</sup> Both the Guides and the YWCA allocated a specific role to sex education in their work with adolescent girls, in recognition of the need to engage with the realities of girls' lives through offering regulated access to sexual knowledge. Both organisations worked with the BSHC to develop and deliver sex education programmes for leaders and for girls. Despite this, however, it seems likely that many leaders continued to approach the subject with trepidation.

Warren argues that during the inter-war years, Guiding continued to exercise 'reticence in all matters of sexuality'.<sup>171</sup> However, the need for sex education was consistently promoted by Mrs Crichton Miller, who drew on her experience as head of the Auxiliary Branch to identify a clear role for sex education for both Guides and Guide leaders.<sup>172</sup> Leaders needed to be able to 'discuss frankly and unemotionally with their older girls the many questions involved in the relationship of boys and girls and men and women'.<sup>173</sup> She continued to argue that Guiding needed to pay

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<sup>170</sup> Board of Education, *Sex Education*, p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> Warren, "Mothers for the Empire"?, p. 108.

<sup>172</sup> The auxiliary branch was set up to work with girls in reform and rescue homes; I will discuss its work in the next section.

<sup>173</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 11, 130 (1924), p. 275.



more attention to sex education, and identified a specific role for Auxiliary Guiding in helping Guide leaders understand the 'many sex problems' experienced by older girls.<sup>174</sup> While there is no reason to believe that her concern for better sex education was not sincere, it also offered an opportunity for this relatively small branch of Guiding to increase its influence within the movement. However, the executive committee appears to have remained hesitant about sex education, in 1927 deciding against developing a 'definite policy on this subject'.<sup>175</sup> It did, however, publish a pamphlet 'on the problems of sex' in 1928.<sup>176</sup>

Members of the YWCA also sought to gain more organisational support for sex education. Delegates to the 1928 annual conference agreed that the Association had not given enough thought to education in 'Moral Hygiene', and urged the education committee to consider the issue.<sup>177</sup> By 1931, the committee was reported to be developing 'new methods' of promoting 'moral and sex hygiene' for both leaders and girls.<sup>178</sup> In 1937 the YWCA established a Health and Physical Education Committee, which defined its remit as covering health and physical education in its 'widest sense', including sex education.<sup>179</sup> Its survey of current

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<sup>174</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1933, p. 72. By 1934 Crichton Miller was reporting that they tried to meet this need by 'arranging talks or discussions, by recommending suitable literature, and by a periodic conference upon our special line of work'. *Annual Report*, 1934, p. 67.

<sup>175</sup> GGA Executive Committee, Minute Book V, 1926-28, 20 July 1927, GGA Papers

<sup>176</sup> GGA Executive Committee, Minute Book VI, 1928-31, 25 September 1928, GGA Papers. The minutes identify Mrs Mark Kerr as the author of the pamphlet, entitled *The Transmission of Life* (London, 1928). The text had been approved by Mrs Crichton Miller (as well as the Baden-Powells), suggesting that she was recognised as having expertise in this area.

<sup>177</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 8, 8 (1928), p. 6.

<sup>178</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1931, p. 4.

<sup>179</sup> Health and Physical Education Minute Book, 27 November 1937. MSS 243/146, YWCA Papers. Sitting until June 1939, this must be seen in the context of increasing concern about the level of physical fitness among Britain's young people, leading to an enhanced stress on youth organisations' roles in promoting fitness. See Roof, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 91; Turnbull, 'Gendering Young People', pp. 103-04. While these concerns focused on the national importance of promoting fitness among young women, Matthews explores the reasons why women themselves were attracted to organisations promoting physical fitness and exercise. Jill Julius Matthews, 'They had Such a Lot of

practice revealed the need for more 'systematic' sex education throughout the Association, although work was well developed in some areas.<sup>180</sup> Much of the committee's discussions focused on who was best placed to undertake sex education, concluding that such education should be provided by an 'expert outside speaker', complemented by better training for club leaders to follow up these talks.<sup>181</sup>

The YWCA and the Guides both contributed to and made use of the work of the BSHC on sex education. Both organisations were represented on its Social Hygiene Committee,<sup>182</sup> with Katharine Furse of the Guides apparently particularly active during the 1920s. In 1924 she was invited to draft a syllabus for sex education for adolescent girls,<sup>183</sup> and subsequently agreed to work with Miss Swaisland (the BSHC's extension officer for women's work) and another committee member to develop programmes for three different groups of girls: those in higher secondary schools, girls in industrial life, and girls in rural areas.<sup>184</sup>

Both organisations also drew on the services of the BSHC, particularly Miss Swaisland, to develop sex education within their organisations. Following a presentation at a YWCA Pioneer conference, participants reported greater 'understanding of the whole content of sex and the part it plays in the world', and called for the topic to be included in future conferences.<sup>185</sup> By 1936, Miss Swaisland had prepared a course of three lectures on 'social hygiene' for the

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Fun: The Women's League of Health and Beauty Between the Wars', *History Workshop*, 30 (1990), pp. 22-54.

<sup>180</sup> Health and Physical Education Minute Book, 5 December 1938, 20 January 1939. MSS 243/146, YWCA Papers.

<sup>181</sup> Health and Physical Education Minute Book, 24 October, 5 December 1938, YWCA Papers.

<sup>182</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, 29 September, 10 November 1925. SA/BSH/F.1/1, BSHC Papers.

<sup>183</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, 23 March, 29 April 1925. SA/BSH/F.1/1, BSHC Papers. She was unable to accept, as she was abroad.

<sup>184</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, 15 June 1926. SA/BSH/F.1/2, BSHC Papers.

<sup>185</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 11, 2 (1932) p. 2. The Pioneers was the section working with adolescent girls.

YWCA's organiser of work in distressed areas. These focused on personal relationships and the family, but included a 'clear explanation of the physiology of human reproduction'.<sup>186</sup> The BSHC also organised lectures at YWCA premises.<sup>187</sup> The Social Hygiene Committee developed a course of lectures for Guide or girls' clubs leaders (including young women over nineteen).<sup>188</sup> In 1931 the Auxiliary Branch reported that Miss Swaisland's talk on 'Sex Education on Positive Lines' had been so useful that a series of lectures open to all Guiders had been arranged and would be repeated on request.<sup>189</sup> Biologist Winifred Cullis also promoted the BSHC's work to Guide leaders. Her description of the 'panic and fear and doubt' experienced by those who 'are often forced to be the advisers of girls' suggests the extent to which many youth leaders felt unprepared to address issues relating to puberty and sexuality.<sup>190</sup> A similar point was made by a Guide delegate to a conference on sex education apparently organised by the NVA, who called for more training for Guide leaders, since many 'better class Guiders' were 'amazingly ignorant' on matters concerning sex.<sup>191</sup>

While both organisations focused on developing sex education programmes, their publications occasionally addressed the issue of sex directly with girls. These discussions incorporated the anxieties about regulating young people's access to sexual knowledge discussed in chapter three. An article in the YWCA's magazine for young women reassured its readers that it was natural for them to think about

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<sup>186</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, 12 May 1936. SA/BSH/F.1/5, BSHC Papers.

<sup>187</sup> Seven lectures were given at YWCA clubs and hostels between February 1938 and March 1939. National Consultative Committee, 24 April 1939. SA/BSH/F.4, BSHC Papers.

<sup>188</sup> Social Hygiene Committee, 8 March 1927. SA/BSH/F.1/2, BSHC Papers.

<sup>189</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1931, pp. 67-68.

<sup>190</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 15, 173 (1928), p. 138.

<sup>191</sup> Report of Informal Conference on Sex Education, Box 98, S10, sex education, NVA Papers. YWCA workers also attended this conference.

sex, since it was an important part of life, but highlighted the damage caused by some kinds of books.<sup>192</sup> Guiding publications offered girls advice on meeting the demands of the tenth law that a 'Guide keeps herself pure in thoughts, words, and deeds'.<sup>193</sup> A story illustrating the tenth law focused on the danger of books which could make girls think of 'nasty, ugly things',<sup>194</sup> while a group of Rangers argued that they should tell younger girls 'what they ought to know' about the 'facts of life', rather than letting them pick up information through 'horrid jokes, at the factory or workshop'.<sup>195</sup>

### **Regulating girls' sexual activity**

In addition to accepting responsibility for providing sex education, however limited this was in practice, both the Guides and YWCA actively sought to manage girls' heterosexual relationships. Some historians have argued that youth work among girls was primarily undertaken in order to deter them from sexual experimentation. Dyhouse, as discussed earlier, identified the desire to regulate female sexual conduct as central to the development of youth organisations for girls.<sup>196</sup> Dove similarly argues that the impetus for girls' clubs emerged from 'the desire to control/protect their sexuality'.<sup>197</sup> Discussing the development of a statutory youth service in World War Two, Tinkler claims that Cyril Burt's 'influential writings' on 'sex delinquency' provided the girls' club movement with

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<sup>192</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 47, 5 (1929), pp. 4-5.

<sup>193</sup> Baden-Powell, *Girl Guiding*, p. 67.

<sup>194</sup> *Guide*, 11, 52 (1923), p. 822-23.

<sup>195</sup> *Guider*, 16, 181 (1929), p. 13.

<sup>196</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up* pp. 104-14.

<sup>197</sup> Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance?', p. 12.



‘academic justification’ for their focus on regulating girls’ behaviour through ‘sexual supervision and guidance’.<sup>198</sup> This argument, however, appears to be based on a misreading of Burt’s work. His discussion of ‘sex delinquency’ does not make any explicit reference to the role of youth or voluntary bodies. In an earlier paper, however, he had argued that greater ‘sex control’ could be achieved through improved and constructive leisure provision, and by promoting ‘social intercourse’ between the two sexes as a substitute for ‘physical intercourse’.<sup>199</sup> The context of this statement, however, makes it clear that such strategies are directed at young men as much as at young women.<sup>200</sup>

This characterisation of youth work as primarily intended to control girls’ sexual behaviour also ignores contemporary representations of youth work as having progressed beyond an exclusive focus on sexuality. According to Roof, while girls’ clubs had originated in ‘social ambulance’ provision providing an ‘alternative to the streets’, by the 1930s it focused on preparing girls to take their place as ‘citizens of the community’.<sup>201</sup> Writing during the Second World War, Pearl Jephcott dismissed the views of those who believed that the ‘main function’ of youth organisations was to ‘stop the girls from having unwanted babies’ with the retort that ‘girls themselves look for a much more positive good in their societies’.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Tinkler, ‘Sexuality and Citizenship: the State and Girls’ Leisure Provision in England, 1939-45’, *Women’s History Review*, 4, 2 (1995), p. 198. Weeks offers a similar description of Burt’s work as defining the role of voluntary agencies as preventing sex delinquency in girls. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 223.

<sup>199</sup> Burt, ‘The Contribution of Psychology to Social Hygiene’, p. 33.

<sup>200</sup> Burt is discussing what he sees as the inevitable decline of prostitution resulting from the trend towards both sexes adopting similar patterns of sexual activity, whether this is to be women adopting sexual behaviour previously reserved for men, or men developing ‘a new sex control’. *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Roof, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 3. The *New Survey of London Life and Labour* similarly stressed the extent to which girls’ clubs had developed from their origins in rescue and prevention work. Isobel Jacobs, ‘Social Organisations for Adolescent Girls’, p. 195.

<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Turnbull, ‘Giving Girls a Voice’, p. 96. According to Turnbull, Pearl Jephcott had been appointed organising secretary of the Birmingham Union of Girls’ Clubs in 1927, and played an increasingly active role in the NOGC, becoming employed at its headquarters by the 1941. During

Despite this, youth organisations did address themselves to directing girls' sexual behaviour. A BSHC conference for women youth leaders acknowledged clubs' responsibility to make appropriate provision for the 'highly sexed girl'.<sup>203</sup> An account of Guiding for factory workers explicitly identifies it as providing girls with an alternative to 'picking up new boys and going to cinemas and dances',<sup>204</sup> while nearly twenty years later, the opening of a YWCA club was reported to have reduced the incidence of girls being 'picked up' by men in cars.<sup>205</sup> Increasingly, however, youth work with girls, even when delivered through single-sex organisations, focused not on deterring young women from consorting with young men, but on ensuring that they could meet men in a supervised environment promoting 'natural and healthy comradeship'.<sup>206</sup> Their acknowledgement of the legitimacy of girls' interest in relationships with young men was represented as an aspect of their modernisation in response to the needs of girls.

As early as 1920, a speaker at a YWCA's conference argued that the Association should provide properly organised opportunities for girls to meet and get to know men.<sup>207</sup> By the mid-1930s most YWCA town centre clubs were open to girls and their boyfriends on Sundays, and the organisation was experimenting with a holiday hostel for girls and their boyfriends.<sup>208</sup> However, there was a problem in

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the 1940s she published two books on the lives of girls: *Girls Growing Up* (London, 1942) and *Rising Twenty. Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London, 1948).

<sup>203</sup> Social Hygiene Committee Minutes, 11 June 1934. SA/BSH/F.1/4, BSHC Papers.

<sup>204</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 8, 85 (1921), p. 10.

<sup>205</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1939, p. 4.

<sup>206</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 93.

<sup>207</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 38, 9 (1920), p. 20-21. The Association was adamant, however, that such work should take place under its control, as revealed by its opposition to some local YMCA clubs developing work with women and girls. Its executive committee believed that such work 'particularly for adolescent girls, could not be satisfactorily carried on by those whose primary work was among men'. National Executive Committee Minutes, 2 March 1921. MSS.243.112/3, YWCA Papers.

<sup>208</sup> Rooff, *Youth and Leisure*, pp. 11-12.

ensuring that girls brought the 'the right type of boy' to its clubs,<sup>209</sup> and some branches intervened more actively. Morgan reports the example of a YWCA hostel for juvenile transferees, which arranged regular meetings between its residents and local boys' clubs, with the result that while most girls had boyfriends, 'all the friendships had been made in the hostel – none in the streets'.<sup>210</sup>

The Guides similarly accepted a role in promoting respectable relationships for their older members. Baden-Powell claimed that engagements between Rovers (the Scouts' branch for young men over seventeen) and Rangers were 'exactly what we want',<sup>211</sup> while annual reports stressed the value of joint ventures between Rangers and Rovers in fostering a 'healthy attitude of mind which takes the opposite sex for granted'.<sup>212</sup> Morgan also reported that the Guides had experimented successfully with mixed camping.<sup>213</sup> By the mid-1930s, when Guiding membership went into decline, the 'segregation of the sexes' was identified as a contributory factor, and an increase in joint activities between Rangers and Rovers was recommended.<sup>214</sup> Discussing youth organisations' difficulties in attracting leaders, Katharine Furse claimed that 'modern young men and women' did not want to become leaders of single-sex organisations because they saw mixed activities as 'natural'.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, p. 338.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>211</sup> NBRC, *Youth and the Race*, p. 207.

<sup>212</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1929, p. 60.

<sup>213</sup> Morgan, *Needs of Youth*, pp. 338-39.

<sup>214</sup> GGA, Report of Committee on the Drop in Numbers, p. 23, GGA Papers.

<sup>215</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1935, pp. 35-36. The development of the mixed club movement is outside the scope of this study; for a discussion of attitudes towards mixed provision see Sidney Bunt and Ron Gargrave, *The Politics of Youth Clubs* (Leicester, 1980). It is, however, worth noting that within the club movement, the strongest opposition to mixing came from boys' organisations.



While some historians<sup>216</sup> have argued that strict segregation of the sexes continued to be the norm during the inter-war period, it is evident that despite their single-sex status, both the Guides and YWCA saw it as within their remit to promote and manage heterosexual development. Through sex education and supervised heterosexual contact they aimed to ensure that young women developed the right kind of attitudes and relationships, rather than being exposed to the uncontrolled atmosphere of the streets and the unregulated sexual information available through peers and in workplaces.

Both organisations also appear to have addressed, very tentatively, the concerns that inappropriate friendships between girls, and between girls and leaders, might distort girls' heterosexual development. Although Dove's study of London working girls' clubs did not find any evidence of anxiety about female friendships,<sup>217</sup> the issue is occasionally addressed in the publications of the Guides and the YWCA. An article on friendship in YWCA's magazine for girls defends close friendships among girls, but warns of the dangers of girls becoming 'foolishly, sentimentally attached to each other'.<sup>218</sup> While, according to Jeal, 'romantic friendships' between senior Guide officials and ordinary Guiders were common, Furse deplored public displays of affection since 'the girls might follow their Guiders' example'.<sup>219</sup> Guiding literature reveals hints of unease about inappropriate friendships, as in a discussion of the problem of the 'company idol' who exercised excessive influence over other girls,<sup>220</sup> or the proud claim by the superintendent of a

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<sup>216</sup> Steve Humphries, for instance, describes youth organisations as imposing 'a rigid policy of sex segregation'. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* p. 135.

<sup>217</sup> Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance?', p. 164.

<sup>218</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 45, 3 (1927), p. 6.

<sup>219</sup> Jeal, *Baden-Powell*, pp. 478-81.

<sup>220</sup> *Guider*, 22, 257 (1935), p. 204.



girls' industrial school that her girls' 'affection and respect for their Captain' had never degenerated into 'sloppy sentimentality'.<sup>221</sup> However, the language of 'pashes' seems to be present in a fictional depiction of a young Guider; seen from the viewpoint of the Guides (probably aged around fifteen), she is described as 'looking sweet and attractive' and as having eyes which 'seemed to look deep down into you, and read your inmost thoughts'.<sup>222</sup>

### **Working with the problem girl**

As already discussed in the previous chapter, girls' sexual behaviour led to the most active intervention into their lives, through a range of compulsory or quasi-compulsory reform institutions. Both the Guides and the YWCA developed work specifically with girls in reform homes, testing their claims to respond to girls however demanding their behaviour.

Having previously avoided engaging in 'rescue' work, during World War One the YWCA had opened four hostels in London for girls described as being in 'dangerous surroundings' or 'already morally wounded'.<sup>223</sup> Two of these continued during the 1920s: a maternity home for unmarried girls, and an open-access hostel for any girl in difficulties.<sup>224</sup> Known as the 'moral care' hostels, these dealt with over 300 girls a year, of every type 'from a little slum-dweller to a well-connected

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<sup>221</sup> GGA, Report of the Extension Conference held on Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1925, from 11-6.30 at Denison House, Vauxhall Bridge Rd., London, S.W.1. (unpublished report, 1925), p. 22. GGA Papers.

<sup>222</sup> *Guide*, 3, 50 (1924), p. 1.

<sup>223</sup> YWCA, *A Review August 1914 to January 1920*, 1920, p. 11

<sup>224</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1921, p. 4.

young woman in temporary difficulties'.<sup>225</sup> It also undertook individual advisory work, which might involve 'scores of letters and visits to find or help one girl in difficulties'.<sup>226</sup>

The YWCA's description of its work with problem girls depicted it as drawing upon the principles of voluntarism and internalisation of moral values, and on the development of individual relationships between worker and girls. Summarising the history of the YWCA's moral care hostels, Picton-Turbervill stressed that girls were free to leave at any time, since the homes were run 'on modern lines, with few – if any – restrictions' in order to attract the girls they wanted to help.<sup>227</sup> Rather than enforcing rules, the hostels therefore sought to 'build up character and make bonds of friendship'.<sup>228</sup> These relationships persisted after girls had left the hostel; moral care and welfare secretary E.D. Smithett claimed that many girls who had been helped several years previously were 'keeping absolutely straight and correspond with us regularly'.<sup>229</sup> By 1932, when the hostel for unmarried mothers was closed (on the grounds that adequate provision was made by other agencies), it had catered for between four and five hundred lone mothers.<sup>230</sup>

It was, however, within the Guide movement that work with problem girls was most fully developed, so their work will be the main focus of this section. The Guides had operated companies in girls' industrial schools, reformatories and rescue homes since the war years. Specific conditions were set out as safeguards: girls had to undergo a probation period, and companies could initially only be started in

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<sup>225</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 11.

<sup>226</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 4, 7 (1924), p. 3.

<sup>227</sup> *Our Own Gazette*, 44, 6 (1926), p. 17.

<sup>228</sup> YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 12.

<sup>229</sup> *Shield*, 4 (August/September 1925), p. 273.

<sup>230</sup> *Y.W.C.A. Bulletin*, 11, 4 (1932), p. 3.

institutions where the length of stay was at least two years.<sup>231</sup> In 1924 an Auxiliary Branch, headed by Mrs Crichton Miller, was created to ensure that ‘the special problems and difficulties of this side of Guiding’ received more attention.<sup>232</sup> In 1924 there were twelve companies in institutions;<sup>233</sup> by 1936 this had increased to thirty-nine, comprising ten Ranger companies, twenty-seven Guide companies, and two Brownie packs.<sup>234</sup>

The introduction of Guiding (and Scouting) into institutions was welcomed by the Children’s Branch; according to chief inspector Arthur Norris, it improved the ‘general tone and standard’ of institutions.<sup>235</sup> However, it is apparent that Guiding faced difficulties within individual institutions. The involvement of outsiders appears to have been resented by some institutions, where the matrons demonstrated a ‘great lack of confidence in Captain and Guides’.<sup>236</sup> In one home the matron was described as being ‘not unnaturally jealous’ of girls’ affection for their ‘outside friend’.<sup>237</sup> Staff in some homes also appear to have had unrealistic expectations about Guiding’s effect on girls’ behaviour, expecting girls to turn into ‘saints’ once they became Guides.<sup>238</sup> Crichton Miller’s description of the ideal leader as someone with ‘experience of human nature, and a respect for institution life ‘ as well as ‘liveliness, humour, tact and infinite adaptability’<sup>239</sup> not only indicates the

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<sup>231</sup> *Girl Guides’ Gazette*, 11, 130 (1924), p. 275. According to this article, the Guides’ executive committee had considered whether girls who had broken the purity law should be excluded, but, ‘to the thankfulness of many’, had decided that there was no reason to single out a breach of this particular rule.

<sup>232</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 35.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1936, pp. 51-52. The majority of institutions were rescue or preventive homes for girls, run by organisations such as the Church Army and other voluntary organisations, or local dioceses.

<sup>235</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 29,

<sup>236</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1937, p. 34.

<sup>237</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 33,

<sup>238</sup> GGA, Report of the Extension Conference, p. 22, GGA Papers.

<sup>239</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1935, p. 72.

demanding nature of the work, but hints at the difficulties of accommodating the differing expectations of institution and girls.

Guiding also appears to have been perceived as disrupting normal regimes in some homes. In one case, a camp was reported as having been a great success, but ‘most unfortunately had the result of causing restlessness in the home afterwards’.<sup>240</sup> Some matrons were reluctant to allow girls to undertake activities outside the homes.<sup>241</sup> As late as 1930, Crichton Miller reported some matrons and committees were still suspicious of Guiding.<sup>242</sup> By 1937, however, she claimed that the obstructive matron had virtually disappeared.<sup>243</sup> Alongside this greater support for Guiding by institutions, the wider Guide movement was depicted as welcoming institutional Guides’ involvement in the full range of local and regional activities, through which they engaged in co-operation and friendly rivalry with other Guides.<sup>244</sup> Institutional Guides’ involvement major ceremonies, such as a rally to meet Princess Mary, led Crichton Miller to claim that “‘See that the Auxiliaries aren’t left out of anything” might almost have been adopted as the motto of the Guide world’.<sup>245</sup>

It is difficult to gauge how real was this acceptance of institutional Guides within the wider movement. The ‘normalisation’ of institutional Guiding drew upon the movement’s stress on the universal experience of girlhood and promotion of cross-class friendships discussed earlier. As Proctor notes, the Guiding uniform was

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<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74. Crichton Miller’s comment on this was ‘Alas, how understandable!’.

<sup>241</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1937, p. 34.

<sup>242</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 63.

<sup>243</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1937, p. 34.

<sup>244</sup> See, for instance, GGA, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 63.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.



represented as an important tool in bringing girls together across class divides.<sup>246</sup> In some instances, institutional Guides were given uniforms by ‘friendly outside Companies’, in an act intended to demonstrate the ‘sisterliness’ of the movement.<sup>247</sup> Proctor, however, argues convincingly that the availability of uniforms in different quality materials, together with a range of accessories, undermined the ‘uniform’s pretensions as a leveller of class difference’.<sup>248</sup> While poor or institutional Guides may have been grateful for the chance to take part in Guiding, their out-of-date or poorer quality uniforms did not guarantee equality in the eyes of other Guides. Proctor cites the experience of G.V. Holmes, an orphan living in a girls’ village home in the 1920s, who, together with other girls from the home, took part in Guide activities wearing home-made hats. Their expectations of equality were soon disappointed, as they learned that ‘There were “Village Guides” and “Outside Guides”, a subtle yet tremendous difference’.<sup>249</sup>

Discussions of Guiding in institutions stressed that girls’ involvement was voluntary, despite the compulsory or quasi-compulsory nature of girls’ detention. However, the introduction of Guiding into homes clearly played a role in promoting discipline and order within them. In one instance the Home Office introduced Guiding into an industrial school in order to improve its management.<sup>250</sup> The Association’s own discussions of the relationship of the movement to the disciplinary regime of an institution demonstrate some unease. While its regulations explicitly state that ‘Guiding must not be used by the Institution authorities as a

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<sup>246</sup> Proctor, ‘(Uni)Forming Youth’, p. 104.

<sup>247</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 37. Guide companies were also requested to donate ‘cast-off’ uniforms to Guides in poor areas; see, for instance, a letter in *Guider*, 16, 191 (1929), p. 368.

<sup>248</sup> Proctor, ‘(Uni)Forming Youth’, p. 121.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>250</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1933, p. 72.

means of enforcing discipline',<sup>251</sup> it also claimed that the 'responsibility and self-government' developed through Guiding had 'proved of great assistance in maintaining the discipline of the Home', provided this was not 'unduly forced' on the Guides.<sup>252</sup> Crichton Miller acknowledged that life in homes was bound to be monotonous; it therefore needed 'very little imagination' to see how much Guide membership might mean to the girl in a home, and 'what colour it may bring into her life'.<sup>253</sup> The removal of the privilege of Guiding from girls who misbehaved could therefore represent a powerful disciplinary sanction.

Whatever role Guiding might have in helping promote order within homes, its value to girls themselves was described in terms of their willing engagement. The principles of voluntarism and learning from within which underlay Guiding were represented as being particularly relevant to work with difficult girls. According to Crichton-Miller, Guiding aimed to 're-establish a girl's self-respect, to build up her confidence, to make her feel she is of value, to give her a new outlook on a world of interest, and above all, a new vision'.<sup>254</sup> These changes could not be imposed on girls; although a girl might be 'temporarily checked by the outer discipline of a force which, for a time, has her in its power', no lasting good would be achieved until 'she herself has seen something better, and voluntarily sets out to attain it'.<sup>255</sup> Crichton Miller argued that the 'difficult girl' could therefore be 'handled more effectually on Guide lines than on any others'.<sup>256</sup> Such claims were substantiated by individual company leaders; one, for instance, claimed with

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<sup>251</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 39.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>253</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1935, p. 72.

<sup>254</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1937, p. 34.

<sup>255</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 10.

<sup>256</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 11, 130 (1924), p. 275.

apparent satisfaction that her company was made up of the girls whom the ‘the matron thinks are mentally or psychologically unbalanced’.<sup>257</sup>

Institutional Guiding was also framed in the context of preparing girls for their re-entry into the outside world. After a girl completed her term in an institution, she was encouraged to transfer to an open company, to help her feel that ‘someone cares’,<sup>258</sup> to protect her from dangerous influences and to ensure she made the right kind of friends and used her leisure time constructively.<sup>259</sup> For those girls who were unable to join outside companies, continued contact with their former institution’s Guider could help protect them from ‘the down-dragging influence of old temptations’.<sup>260</sup> Welfare worker A.M. Maynard provided anecdotes illustrating the bonds developed between girls in a preventive home and their former Guider. In one instance, a girl had run away from her situation. Her employer had found her and locked her in her bedroom until Maynard came to take her back to the home.

Maynard

went to the house, and telling the girl to go straight to the Home, gave her ten shillings for her fare, any change to be given back to me on my return.

Needless to say, I received the exact change. A left-hand-shake, the secret

Guide sign, was all that was needed for her to recover her lost sense of honour.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> *Guider*, 22, 2 (1935), p. 69.

<sup>258</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 34.

<sup>259</sup> GGA, Report of the Extension Conference, p. 21, GGA Papers.

<sup>260</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1935, p. 75.

<sup>261</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 32. Proctor describes Maynard, who ran a home for problem girls in Wimbledon, as an ‘enthusiastic leader in her early thirties’ who encouraged her Guides to be resourceful and creative, and allowed them to make many of the decisions and rules. Her resourcefulness was acknowledged in early histories. Proctor, ‘Gender, Generation and the Politics of Guiding’, p. 22.

Guide leaders stressing the bonds between them and the girls were, of course, likely to underplay the divisions of age and class.<sup>262</sup> However, the contrast in the level of trust offered to this girl by employer and Guide leader is clear.

Despite the small numbers involved, Auxiliary Guiding offered a challenge to the movement as a whole concerning its ability to respond to the needs of modern girls. Significantly, both Baden-Powell and Crichton Miller drew upon a continuum of behaviour between the 'normal' girl and the girl who had 'gone wrong'. The tone was set by Baden-Powell himself, who declared that the 'worst girl has at least 5 per cent. of good in her somewhere. The work of the Guider is to find it. The first step is to treat the girl as a normal and responsible individual instead of as merely one of a tainted herd'.<sup>263</sup> Crichton Miller stressed that girls in reform institutions were not a 'type apart, a purely abnormal product' but were excitable and troublesome girls, who 'with half a chance and a little intelligent treatment would have been steered safely past the danger point'.<sup>264</sup>

Guiding's ability to reach difficult girls was also explored in a series of case-studies published in *The Guider* during 1934-35. The problems they highlighted included a 15-year-old girl found uncontrollable by her Guide leader, a 17-year old in service who stole from her (sympathetic) employer, and the admission of an unmarried mother into a Ranger company.<sup>265</sup> Most responses to these dilemmas

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<sup>262</sup> Historians have disagreed concerning the extent to which the Guiders and Guides came from different classes. Some have represented Guiding and Scouting as securing its leaders from the leisured classes. See W. Bruce Leslie, "'Time, the Subtle Thief of Youth': Historians and Youth", *Youth & Policy*, 11 (1984/85), p. 50. However, Proctor argues that in some areas at least, such as Sheffield, 'a group of working-class leaders rose through the ranks' of Guiding and Scouting. Proctor, '(Uni)Forming Youth', p. 109. While it is likely that there were considerable local variations, Proctor's argument would seem to be supported by a Newcastle Commissioner's claim that '98 per cent. of my Guiders are daily workers of some sort'. Roof, *Youth and Leisure*, p. 195.

<sup>263</sup> GGA, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 4.

<sup>264</sup> *Girl Guides' Gazette*, 11, 130 (1924) p. 275.

<sup>265</sup> *Guider*, 21, 251 (1934), pp. 422-23; 22, 257 (1935), pp. 204-06; 22, 263 (1935) p. 457.



stressed the importance of individual psychology, and the need for a 'constructive and compensating' approach, which neither condoned nor condemned the girl's wrong actions.<sup>266</sup> Although mainly hypothetical, these case studies were described as reflecting the reality of Guiding, showing 'that the Movement is not a collection of prigs, but can appeal to the lively youngster who has great potentialities for good or evil.'<sup>267</sup>

Significantly, the dilemma concerning the unmarried mother was not whether she should be allowed to join the company – 'Of course I agreed' - but whether the other Rangers - middle-class high school girls - should be told about her circumstances, and whether their parents would object.<sup>268</sup> Most responses argued that the other girls should be told and would respond well. Several endorsed the view expressed by Mrs Crichton Miller that if parents removed their daughters to prevent them being 'contaminated', it was 'better we should lose them than have to turn out the girl with the baby'.<sup>269</sup> This approach is in marked contrast to reform homes' practice of separating sexually experienced girls from their more 'innocent' peers discussed earlier. Crichton Miller also insisted that the company should 'take the girl as you would any other Ranger and do not *look out* for trouble'.<sup>270</sup>

Not all views were positive, however. One former Sea Ranger captain recalled her experience of admitting two unmarried mothers to her company; they had proved 'not reliable' and the company 'lost some of its good name through these two girls'.<sup>271</sup> Girls who joined open companies upon leaving reform homes appear

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<sup>266</sup> *Guider*, 22, 258 (1935), p. 245.

<sup>267</sup> *Guider*, 22, 260 (1935), p. 350.

<sup>268</sup> *Guider*, 22, 263 (1935), p. 457.

<sup>269</sup> *Guider*, 22, 264 (1935), p. 502.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

to have posed a considerable challenge, highlighted in one leader's comment that '*So few companies seem to be adventurous enough to hold this type of girl*'.<sup>272</sup> Crichton Miller herself believed that Guiding would only reach 'difficult' girls if it were sufficiently challenging and responsive to individual needs; while a 'dull Guide company run by an unenlightened Guider feeds the Auxiliary Branch', a company run by 'a "live wire" Captain with open eyes and some understanding of elementary psychology' would help 'prevent the disasters which our Branch exists to help in retrieving'.<sup>273</sup> Institutional Guiding, according to Crichton Miller, thus provided evidence both of the movement's potential to work effectively with the most difficult and challenging girls, and of the failure of much of its practice to fulfil this potential.

## Conclusion

The Guides and the YWCA both represented the inter-war years as a time of change for women and girls, to which both organisations were responding. While, they believed, motherhood would remain the critical role for most women, it would not be their only role, and they therefore sought to equip girls to exercise their future responsibilities as citizens. The discourses of adolescence and citizenship allowed the Guides and the YWCA, together with other youth organisations, to claim a new importance and expertise in managing the development of adolescent girls. Both organisations asserted their readiness to adapt to girls' changing experiences

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<sup>272</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1935, p.74. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>273</sup> GGA, *Annual Report*, 1933, p. 72. Similar statements appear in subsequent years.

and expectations. In particular, they acknowledged the importance and validity of young women's interest in heterosexual relationships, and sought, not only to divert girls from sexual activity, but to provide girls with the basis for regulating their own behaviour through sex education and opportunities to develop relationships with young men. Underlying all aspects of their work was a new focus on developing girls' moral agency. While earlier youth provision had focused on protecting girls through providing a safe environment, by the inter-war years the Guides and the YWCA stressed that girls could only fully be protected from within, through exercise of self-regulation based on informed choice.

## Conclusion

The old-fashioned idea of training was force or bribery. You might perhaps teach a girl to sew if you shut her up until her piece of work was done, or by promising a reward for a well-stitched sampler or finished garment. But the qualities needed to meet that new thing in women's future, "citizenship," could not be taught by such means, because good citizenship requires will and heart and mind; in other words it requires character, and this cannot be forced from without, but must be trained from within. Good citizenship, is then, the aim of the Girl Guide Movement.<sup>1</sup>

This 1921 description of Guiding by Florence Roch locates its aspirations firmly within the context of changes in women's opportunities and responsibilities represented by 'citizenship'. This study has argued that girls' youth organisations were more complex in their purposes, and more varied in their approaches, than the limited historiography generally allows. This historiography tends to portray girls' youth organisations as conservative organisations intent upon socialising girls into their future role as wives and mothers. Until recently, there has been little examination of the work of girls' youth organisations during the inter-war years, and even now, attention focuses mainly on the Girl Guides. Such discussion takes place in the shadow of the personality of Robert Baden-Powell (who continues to attract the attention of biographers), while mostly ignoring the experiences and aspirations of women in senior positions within the organisation. Yet despite the recognition

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<sup>1</sup> GGA Committee for the Extension of Guide Training, *Girl Guide Companies in Institutions*, p. 7.



paid to Baden-Powell as Guiding's founder, the Guides, as well as the YWCA was women-led. Many of the women in senior positions in both organisations had gained prominence in public life and were involved in a complex range of organisations, including those promoting women's rights. Both organisations were also supported by other eminent women active in politics and public life. The impact of the involvement of such women upon the messages these organisations offered to girls has not been sufficiently taken into account by histories of youth work.

The Guides and the YWCA, like other youth work organisations, were organisations that young people chose to engage with. Their ability to develop programmes and activities which responded to girls' needs and interests was therefore critical. This study has argued that contemporary perceptions of the years following the First World War represented them as a period of major social change, through which a wide range of individuals and organisations repeatedly expressed the need to find new ways of articulating and securing traditional morals. Young women were at the centre of these perceptions of change, in the context of what was seen as their greater social and economic independence, expressed in the image of the 'modern girl'. The YWCA and the Guides adopted a language of modernisation to promote their ability to respond to the changes affecting girls without losing sight of their fundamental values. Their work is therefore particularly significant in providing evidence of how these perceptions of social change impacted on practical work with girls. The Guides and the YWCA both paid particular attention to reaching working-class adolescents and, unlike some other organisations, did not exclude girls on the basis of their sexual activity. The Guides, in particular, represented its activities in reform and rescue institutions as an integral part of its

programme, through which its fundamental values and approaches were both vindicated and most severely tested.

Youth organisations also framed their work within the increasingly dominant concept of adolescence as a critical time of instability and change. By the inter-war years, this notion had become widely accepted, pervading medical, social hygiene and educational discourses. Yet, despite this consensus, there was no single definition of what was meant by adolescence. Adolescence was interpreted differently according to gender and class, and different age spans were ascribed to it in accordance with specific professional concerns and interests. Adolescence was seen as a distinctive stage of physical, mental and moral development, while adolescents were viewed as a group whose behaviour needed to be guided and managed. Youth organisations such as the Guides and the YWCA drew upon both these aspects. In the context of adolescence as a critical time of value formation, they stressed that their work expanded girls' horizons and allowed them to develop and test out values and their capacity for moral choice. They also drew upon understandings of adolescent psychology to claim greater scientific authority for youth workers' development of individual relationships with girls, while encouraging girls to work together collectively. In the context of the premature freedom that working-class adolescents were believed to experience, youth organisations' ability to reach girls who were not in contact with other educational influences allowed them to claim that their work fulfilled a vital social need in helping shape and manage the development of this potentially unruly and unregulated group.

Discussions of adolescence have tended to focus on its negative representation of young people as unstable, and thus needing a variety of forms of

guidance and intervention. As this study has demonstrated, this conception of adolescence certainly provided a powerful rationale for professional interventions into young people's lives determined by gender and class. In the case of young women, these were primarily based upon their sexual conduct, itself informed by class-based assumptions concerning appropriate female behaviour. Yet, such interventions also appealed to adolescence as the time at which young people became moral beings, and stressed the need to secure young people's acceptance of dominant social values - particularly those relating to sexual restraint outside marriage - based upon informed understanding rather than external restraints, fear or punishment. Sex education was thus allocated a critical role in the moral training of the adolescent, in the context of arguments that it was knowledge and understanding, rather than ignorance or restraint that would prevent girls from engaging in premature sexual activity. Despite a consensus concerning the importance of sex education, however, the actual nature of the information to be offered to young people, and the way it should be offered, remained a contentious issue. The work of the NRBC and the BSHC in this area has been considered in some detail. The deliberations of the NRBC concerning adolescent sex education identified areas of disagreement and uncertainty which recurred in discussion of sex education throughout the inter-war years and after. The change of direction adopted by the BSHC in the mid-1920s, in which it moved from a specific focus on VD to a broader social hygiene perspective, placed the sex education of the adolescent at the centre of its work. Most youth organisations were members of the BSHC, and the Guides and the YWCA were both represented on its committees. However, the BSHC also came into conflict with youth organisations on some aspects of its work, disputes which arose from disagreements about the nature of information to be

offered to adolescents and, it seems, perceptions that the BSHC was usurping the role of youth organisations.

Studies that have considered the work of the BSHC (often only in passing) have tended to label it as a morally conservative social purity organisation. Yet, as some historians have recognised, it called upon a broader constituency of support, particularly through its social hygiene sub-committee, which involved eminent scientists and sex reformers, and which not only sought to gain acceptance of sex education within biology teaching in schools, but developed sex education syllabuses differentiated by gender, age and class for use in youth organisations. Its education for marriage sub-committee attracted a similarly broad membership. The work of this committee, however, also highlighted the limitations of the BSHC's approach; while the Council had always refused to discuss contraception, as a contentious issue about which its membership disagreed, the committee decided that it was impossible to continue its work without addressing the use of contraception within marriage.

Those opposed to contraception explicitly linked it to the issue of young women's sexual behaviour. Access to contraception, they argued, by removing fear of pregnancy as a deterrent, would encourage young women to engage in sex. The extent to which sex education should stress the dangers of sex, particularly pregnancy and VD, remained disputed throughout the 1920s and 1930s. While discussions of sex education increasingly deplored the use of fear to deter young people from premarital sex, many sex education materials, particularly those aimed directly at girls, continued to offer warnings (of varying degrees of explicitness) concerning the damaging consequences of sex outside marriage. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, sexologists' constructions of sexual development, in which the



maturity and wellbeing of women was equated with heterosexual satisfaction within marriage, were widely popularised through a new genre of marriage guidance manual, which included explicit information on sex and sexual pleasure. While these manuals were intended for married and engaged couples, rather than the unattached adolescent, adolescent sex education was allocated a specific role in creating the sexually responsive woman. Middle-class girls in particular were provided with information about the 'normal' course of sexual development so that they could regulate their own progress towards heterosexual maturity. Through alerting girls to expectations of sexual pleasure within marriage, sex education served both to discourage girls from sexual practices such as masturbation and same-sex relationships which might threaten adult heterosexual development, and to dissuade them from premature sexual experimentation.

It was, however, the sexual activity of working-class girls that aroused more immediate concerns. The war was widely believed to have damaged female sexual morality. During and immediately after the war, concerns about the prevalence of VD legitimised and provided a framework for public discussion of sexual matters, in which individual sexual conduct was linked with national welfare. Through the construction of the 'amateur', sexually active young women were allocated specific responsibility for the transmission of disease. Girls' sexual activity (perceived or actual) continued to provide a focus of concern throughout the inter-war years, but became more linked to broader issues of work and leisure. Girls' sexual irregularities were increasingly discussed as problems of the management of adolescence, which served to legitimise greater levels of intervention (including new legislation) on the basis of their sexual conduct. Discussions about the age of consent cast girls as victims of adolescent instability and as incapable of

understanding the consequences of their actions. However, the perceived malleability of adolescents meant that interventions at this stage could succeed in 're-forming' girls over time, leading to girls being committed to a range of institutions (with varying degrees of coercion) for substantial periods, as a result of their sexual behaviour. While previous studies have tended to portray such provision as punitive, often assuming continuity between nineteenth and twentieth-century approaches, this study has argued that during the inter-war years, these institutions, in their rhetoric at least, represented themselves as modernising in order to respond to the changing needs of girls and to equip them to regulate their own behaviour once they were returned to the temptations of the outside world.

This study has contributed to our understanding in a number of areas. While new scholarship has emerged in recent years, histories of women and of youth have paid relatively little attention to the inter-war years or to the specific experience of girls. This study offers a sustained exploration of adolescence and its implications for the way in which the development of girls was shaped and managed during the inter-war years. These years, the study has argued, deserve attention because of the widespread perception of the First World War as having brought about dramatic social change, which focused attention on young women as a distinct group. The extent to which organisations' claims to have adapted their approaches in response to girls' changing needs was reflected in local practice requires further investigation, but the debates of the various enquiries and bodies active during these years collectively reveal a strong sense of change.

This study has also explored how the increasingly influential conception of adolescence as a period of instability served to legitimise greater levels of intervention into the lives of young women. In particular it offered scope for youth

organisations such as the Guides and the YWCA to promote the importance of the work they undertook with adolescent girls, while providing a new framework for their approach to shaping the heterosexual development of their members. The depiction of adolescence as a critical period of moral development led these youth organisations to stress their role in developing young women's responsibilities for their own actions, in the context both of the greater independence experienced by girls and the new demands placed on girls as future citizens. This study therefore also contributes to recent studies which have sought to reassess the way in which women's organisations, while accepting enthusiastically the ideology of domesticity, also sought to engage their members as active citizens.

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