

## THE BELGRADE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLGIRLS JUNIOR PROM \*

This paper casts a light on some aspects of the complex process of social maturing among teenage girls in Belgrade. In order to do so, paper traces the girls' attitudes toward school, boys, appearance, popularity as well as their future expectations. The paper discusses the ways in which girls today's adapt to the role of adult young women.

Key words: adolescence, peer group, popular girls, desirability, maturity.

The experience of growing into a womanhood starts with the physical transformation in puberty. The inevitable process of sexual development occurs practically in the same way in every generation. However, how the particular generation of girls will react to their changed bodies, how their experience of these biological events will be shaped, is determined by the world in which they live. "Every girl suffers some kind of adolescent angst about her body; it is the historical moment that defines how she reacts to her changing flesh. From the perspective of history, adolescent self — consciousness is quite persistent, but its level is raised or lowered, like the water level in a pool, by the cultural and social setting" (Brumberg 1997: XVIII). Just several generations ago, and not only in our, mostly agrarian cultural tradition, the first menstruation was the key sign not only of physical, but also of social maturity of girls. This biologic change was followed by the ritual, whose purpose was to recognize the acquirement of reproductive potential and to introduce a girl to the status of an adult woman, capable of being married and giving birth. Maternity, since the very point of reaching the reproductive age, meant the essence of female identity. At the same time, reaching sexual maturity represented a threat to a young girl's virtues. Therefore, society neutralized the dangers of woman's free sexuality by various kinds of protection and control of her sexual and reproductive life (Malešević 1986: 35–46).

The lives of contemporary girls, especially in the urban environment, are not burdened with these strict patriarchal rules. Sexual norms, marriage patterns, family relations, future expectations, practically everything that used to be the essence of traditional womanhood, experienced a radical transformation, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Today's generations of young girls have more personal

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freedom and greater possibilities of social choice than ever before. In spite of this, even nowadays passing through puberty represents a painful and complex experience for the majority of them. Psychological and anthropological research worldwide shows that adolescence is a time of crisis for contemporary girls. One of the most important manifestations of that crisis is the loss of self-confidence. The results of the most extensive research up to now on relations between gender and level of self-esteem, carried out in the U.S.A. ten years ago, revealed that in reaching puberty, girls begin to feel less competent, twice as often as boys, and to doubt they are “smart enough” or “good enough” to achieve their dreams (Orenstein 1995: XV–XVI). What causes that significant difference in the behavior of boys and girls?

Old claims concerning correlation of biology and behavior, stating that the generally greater passivity of girls is “the result of secretion of ovaries”, were long ago denied by classic anthropological studies which proved that expected sexual behavior is the result of cultural conditioning. However, the question remains: if society has such different expectations for girls and for boys, in what way are they communicated to them so that the girls become captives of these expectations?

In relation to this, another question is imposed: if decline of self-regard is the dominant characteristic of adolescent girls in a society where the feminist revolution was carried out almost completely, what can be expected in societies with a poorer basis for being proud of women’s achievements and acquired rights than the American? For instance, what does the beginning of transition to womanhood look like in a country of strong patriarchy such as Serbia? How do the circumstances in which those girls grow up reflect on their customs, values and the patterns of behavior they adopt? What does it mean to grow up as a female in our contemporary culture?

In this paper I will try to throw light on some aspects of the passage into adolescence among the students of elementary schools in Belgrade. Of course, it is not possible here to discuss the complete complex process in which, as socialization agents, parents, school, peers, popular culture, and so on, take significant part. On this occasion I shall try to demonstrate how the shaping of a future young women’s identities is influenced by a group of peers.

My research was carried out during the year 2000 in a New Belgrade elementary school.<sup>1</sup> The example consisted of 120 students of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades (ages 14 to 15) — 78 girls and 42 boys. The questionnaire posed a wide selection of queries — music, fashion, dating and free time, ambitions in school and plans for the future, and was supplemented with interviews in small groups of girls (twenty of them in total), willing to discuss issues they are deeply concerned with openly and in detail. The experience of these girls does not necessarily correspond in every aspect to the experience of all their peers in a large city, regardless of the fact that they all belong to the same community of adolescents and share many of the values of their sub — culture. So they are not a representative example; of the period in which they grow up, they speak from their point of view and personal situation.

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<sup>1</sup> It was “Radoje Domanović” Elementary School, located in Block 28 in New Belgrade (about three kilometres far from the city center). That school is a typical New Belgrade one. Its social picture shows children mainly from middle class families. The majority of their parents are civil servants, and majority have at least high school education. This means that their material and social standard does not differ greatly. There are mainly four family members with both parents working. The national composition was mixed but mainly Serbian.

That which is characteristic of entering adolescence in general is apparent also in my example: Mama is still an extremely important “closest friend” for almost 90% of girls, but here the institution of best girlfriend, group of peers, boys and romantic connections, begin to take over, or rather social sphere is becoming the dominant realm of their lives.

The significance of peer culture on the road to independence and search for identity is well known. A key condition for acceptance and affirmation within the group is conformity with its behavior standards. A gang has its own strict, if unwritten rules and is merciless in their rigorous observance (see: Rot 1983: 125 — 127). Adaptation is certainly not always easy, “the group can be a prison with iron regulations but as a member we have the biggest identity in town” (Friday 1978: 212). My research revealed that all relations (within a mixed group, girls’ group, romantic connections) were forcefully marked with patriarchal values and rules of behaviour; that the group supervises their consistent observance, rewards and punishes. Furthermore, in this period the stereotype rules of both gender roles are mastered more or less completely and young people become accustomed to them as to automatically acceptable laws, of themselves understandable. I shall attempt to illustrate now with a few examples how these rules function. Both boys and girls, without difference, stress that friendship is the value they respect most. In almost every answer being a “good friend” is at the top of the list of the best qualities. What exactly is needed for someone to be evaluated as a good friend by the peer group? The most important characteristics are that a person is “normal”, “unselfish”, “fun”, “knows how to keep secrets”. But above all comes wittiness: nutty behavior of every kind, so that it cheers the peers and makes the teachers mad, both genders quote as a top quality of the most popular friend. Reputation rises with the degree of lack of discipline in relation to teachers, open conflict with them, skipping classes, namely, behavior which is not approved by school regulations. In this situation success in school is of no consequence whatever. A girl of the seventh grade explained it in this way: “In junior grades there was the rule: the better student, the better friend. Now everything is the other way around: the worse — the better.” All of it belongs to the well-known behavior of adolescents. Road to independence leads through the phase of rebellion and denial of authorities (Rot 1983: 127). “The worse, the better” represents here a clear demonstration of rebellion against the subordinate position, child’s status which they have overcome but which is still considered implicit by school hierarchy. But, however much “nutty behaviour” is considered the most important condition for gaining popularity, it has its limits, which are different for boys than for girls. In short, examinees of both sexes agree that girls are less inclined to enter into conflict with authority, and tend to avoid open disobedience, therefore, “nutty behavior” is not their major characteristic. But, while almost all girls point out in their answers that this is because they are more mature, or that boys are by their “nature” more aggressive and still childish (that is have a high opinion of self and tolerant, full of understanding attitude towards male behaviour), boy’s attitudes are expressly macho. Explicit sexism (in more than 30% of their answers) describes girls as quieter and submissive “because they are incapable, and compensate by licking up to the teachers”. These boys claim to have more courage (“We have balls”, or “We do not fear punishment”). Another group of boys see in girls fragile creatures, also “naturally” disinclined to enter conflicts which are appreciated most among men. This “gentlemanly” attitude is expressed in the answers of about 40% of the boys (the rest of them left this question unanswered). By peer group standards “the worse — the better”

suits boys much better and practically has no limits. Does that mean that they are thus “better” or more popular friends than girls? What then are the limits imposed by the same standards on the girls’ behavior? Let us consider a few examples. All my examinees agree that girls generally learn more and have better results in school. But, as it was said, school success is of no importance. More precisely, it is valued only if successfully combined with disobedience and troublemaking. Hard workers (most often girls) thus very easily become objects of teasing and jokes. Extreme seriousness expressed through high academic ambition, desire for excellent marks and praise, joined with the behavior which is affirmed by school, willingness to cooperate with school authority and acceptance of this authority with no resistance, occupies the top position on the list of negative social characteristics, among members of both genders equally. This person, especially if she/he is openly proud of the teachers’ praise, is rejected with contempt by peers. Such an individual is undesirable simply because she/he agrees with the demands of the adults’ world with no resistance, thus breaking the rules of generation behavior. As the personification of undesirable characteristics, that individual bears the shameful epithet “čepulja”(derived from the verb “čepiti”, which means “spreading legs”), which alludes to immoral female sexual behavior (regardless of the person’s sex). This term is most often used for an ambitious, disciplined girl with the best grades. Her male analogy, who communicates with books more than with football, extremely rarely faces such humiliation. Usually, he would be nicknamed “intellectual” or Baltazar (a weird scientist character from cartoons), a name which does not save him from mockery completely, but still clearly shows that his distinction, unlike hers, inspires certain respect.

On the other hand, the extreme seriousness of “čepulja” is not contrasted, however, by the wild masculine “nutty behavior” of girls. Exaggeration in attempts to gain popularity by male means (if she gets drunk at parties, likes to fight, spits) is severely judged and laughed at. Such daring is not acceptable, a girl is rejected and both sides call her “slut” even if her behavior has no connection with sex. Both extremes: too ambitious as well as too tomboyish girls are equally unpopular. A girl aiming for a high place in the hierarchy of a mixed group must struggle with the help of other “female” wiles, which belong to the domain of physical appearance and suitable sexual behavior. Beautiful, attractive and well-built girls are at the top of the popularity list. All consider that modern fashions in dress and a sexy appearance are very important characteristics of a “cool” girl, but for popularity, at least among boys, a certain “soft”, coquetish, typical female behavior is essential. Popular girls do not argue with boys, don’t fend off their embraces, but giggle merrily, allow fingering and touching, dress provocatively; at parties and during the school break they are always surrounded by a mass of admirers. Acceptable “nutty behavior” without these qualities is not sufficient for a girl to acquire a high position in the group. To be popular with her peers she must also be submissive and co-operative, which means precisely as it is forbidden to behave towards the school authorities. In other words, according to the same formula but in respect of new power holders: instead of the teachers, now there are the peers, namely the boys, who judge and evaluate. Among boys they are regarded as “good chicks” and “partners”, while the majority of girls envy them because of the attention they receive, but in spite of that, condemn them “for behaving like some stupid geese”. However, more than 60% of the girls consider that such “co-operative” behavior is not suitable for a respectable girl. As noted in some answers, it brings with it popularity but in fact it is either “humiliating” or simply “destroys her reputation”(“Maybe they are not real sluts now, but one can clearly

see what is going to happen with them”, says one of the interviewed girls). On the other hand, girls who consider themselves popular find nothing bad in their behavior: “Attention is pleasant”, “I just like to provoke, nothing serious”, “We are simply more attractive than the others, boys like pretty girls”, but always add: “It is very important to know the limits”, or “I know how far I can go with boys”. From these answers it is clear that they are all familiar with the stereotype by which in the public eye women are described as “good” and “bad” according to their sexual experience, and that they are careful that their behavior, or more accurately their sexuality is accommodated to this stereotype. “A respectable girl must be guided by good sense, she must be able to control herself”, are explanations given with the answers.

The problem is how to harmonize the requirements of family upbringing and at the same time gain attention from the boys and establish a good position in the group's social hierarchy. How to be the center of attention and not overstep the thin line that separates a good girl from a bad one? The messages concerning sex implanted from birth into girls' experience do not leave them many possible choices. If female (open) sexuality is something indecent, then desirability (according to this formula) that stimulates male desire is something that can only improve her female position. As elsewhere, so also among these girls, thus physical appearance becomes the central theme of concern and interest: how to have sensual lips, emphasize long legs and shiny hair, how to turn into a beautiful, desirable doll so that boys will turn round and other girls envy. Among the girls from my example, body appearance takes first place with lists of the most beautiful personal features as well as flaws which they would like to hide or change. A beautiful face and good body are source of pride for over 60% of girls. Every eighth, on the other hand, is seriously worried about what they consider to be excess weight. (“Since I am very pretty and very desirable now, I would be great, maybe even the best, if I were thinner”, was written by one of those girls who are dissatisfied with their weight.)

While in their everyday clothing, the usual generation uniform (expensive sneakers, blue jeans, T-shirts) prevails, the garments they would like to cloth their lovely bodies on special occasions, suggest a clear need to appear not only grown-up and feminine, but above all sexy and provocative. For their Prom, for example, 76% of girls want to go dressed in “something black, long”, “transparent, tight”, “soft with low neck”, to have red lips and high heels. Namely, to look seductive, vamp and glamorous, like music or film stars with whom they identify, either from the world or local scene. The elementary school Proms, celebrated in recent years in the same way as at the end of high school (ceremonial dinner and dance in one of the city restaurants), supply the opportunity for a (fifteen year old) Beauty to appear in all her glamour. As in every transition ritual (this is by definition a transition to adolescence), the clothes here symbolize the main characteristics of the role assumed by the act of transition. It is enough to look at some Prom photo to realize that these young people are not just dressed suitably for the ceremony. In the hall of the school spoken of in this paper the photos from the last year's Prom are exhibited throughout the school year. On them we can see the best mathematicians, physicist and athletes with diplomas in their hands, winners of awards at various competitions, the elite of the generation. All of them are at their best, but with very different ideas how to present themselves. Boys have their hair smoothed down, they are in white shirts all buttoned up, and new sneakers, just a little more formal than every other day, in any case adequate to their age. Only one or two in the group photo wear a suit and tie, looking comically clumsy and more like a caricature

of an adult man than personification of the maturity of the role they are stepping into. And their girl-friends are besides them, in tight black dresses, high heels, net-designed stockings, plunging necklines, complicated hairstyles and heavy make-up. Dressed-up this way they do not look just like adult young women, at least ten years older than their male peers, but also (and primarily) like provocative, seductive young women. Clothes chosen for that ceremonial occasion doubtlessly speak of the essential difference of their future social presence: physical attraction for him will be of no consequence, while for her the way she is seen by others will be of main importance. According to the rules of the traditional female role they will also confirm their worth in the male eye, take care to be provocative and wait to be chosen. As stated by John Berger, in a patriarchal distribution of social power “men act and women appear” (Berger, 46–47).

Predominant dress styles, music taste, the most popular TV contents, places that are particularly “in” for outings, personalities from public life cited in answers as role models (mannequins, footballers), indicate that the taste of this generation of young people is considerably marked by a mixed pattern of western mass culture (glamour, luxurious life, consumer mentality) and hard core patriarchy, revived in Serbia at the time of economic crisis, wars and isolation from the world. The repertoire of male-female roles is limited by the rules of these cultural patterns: she is a desirable object, while he is macho-type, rich and successful. This is the order of values constantly appearing on TV, in the gutter press and local popular culture.

The same pattern is projected also on plans for life in the future, choices of profession and the roles they imagine they will fill when grown up. While boys see themselves most frequently as successful sportsmen or businessmen, girls are mainly oriented towards the world of fashion and art: design, photography, painting, owning modeling agencies. Both aspire to futures of wealth and luxury which is certainly to be connected with the exceedingly impoverished situation in society and lack of prospect, and the style of life which the above mentioned cultural models offer.

That which, at least on first sight, introduces confusion to the established order is the high academic aspirations expressed by the girls questioned. Close to 70% of the girls state in their answers that they feel capable of trying academic career and that they wish to achieve a university degree. That is contrary to the fact that for a respected place in a group success in school is quite irrelevant, and contrary to the extremely hostile attitude towards ambitious “cepulja”. Moreover it is also contrary to the negative, misogynic opinion of boys concerning the capabilities of their girl peers, which is that girls are less capable in every sphere (only eight of all the boys think that their capabilities are equal, and only one of them thinks that girls are superior in everything but physical strength). In spite of that, the majority of girls state that they feel equally capable or even better than boys (several girls exclude mathematics in that respect), and believe that they have enough talent and brains to become “somebody”.

However, almost every girl, as well as the successful personal career they wish to create, sees the realization of the dreams of their future beside a handsome, rich and successful husband (most usual combinations: “handsome and rich”, “rich and smart”, “rich and successful”). The boys, too, when they speak of their future prospects, see themselves primarily in their family, as fathers and husbands. But these future wives are not painted vividly in their imagination, they are not designated by any additional color and marking to show their tastes and preferences. With almost no exception boys will have some interesting profession in life, they will have careers, earn a lot of money and they will have a “wife and children” (as something which goes without saying, but with

no special function and meaning). Contrary to this, the greater majority of girls envision their future life beside men who will make it possible for them to have big houses, expensive cars, to travel, to fulfill their dreams. Even when they claim with self-confidence that they have great academic ambitions, they do not believe they could realize them without the guidance and support of someone smarter, stronger, richer and more reliable than themselves. Or, as one of them has put it: "I want to graduate at some university, I still do not know which. I am quite good at all the subjects, but still cannot decide. I am pretty enough, there will surely be a handsome and smart boy who will choose me. He will make it possible for me to have everything I want." According to the same patriarchal pattern, male identity is realized through money and social achievement and female through a good marriage.

These new components (woman with schooling, successful at work) in so far as they have obviously modernized their view of the world, introduce a hum to the existing communications, but structurally, it is clear that the pattern remains unchanged. University education, a good job, career of which the girls fantasize in their answers seem to be, together with that inevitable husband-realizer, rather something like a modern substitution for the previous gold coin necklace, an additional ornament which serves to attract and seduce successful and rich man of their dreams, than a component of the inner need for learning, knowledge or economic independence. Hard-core structure of "images in the head" is not easily broken by education, equal rights and possibilities: the mythical image of a poor (but beautiful) girl and a prince is not new, and it does not concern only the girls growing up in a devastated country, longing for luxury and easy money spending. A sponsor-prince as a solution is offered equally by Cosmo girl as well as by Serbian popular culture. He is, as we know, a planetary hero and a well-adapted girl will include him into her dreams in time.

Unlike the well adapted, the talented girl, ambitious and competitive, who wishes to achieve her potential to the full, faces almost impossible requirements. As Peggy Orenstein writes, such a girl "must negotiate between the independence necessary to fulfill her potential and the compliance which, although expected of her, is in direct conflict with standing out and shining bright" (Orenstein 1995: 36-37). With these contradictory tasks in prospect, one of them will certainly be obliged to retire. From what has been said above it is not difficult to conclude which one.

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Мирослава МАЛЕШЕВИЋ

## МАТУРСКО ВЕЧЕ УЧЕНИЦА БЕОГРАДСКИХ ОСНОВНИХ ШКОЛА

У раду се осветљавају неки социјални аспекти транзиције из детињства у девојаштво међу ученицама београдских основних школа. Прецизније, говори се о утицајима који група вршњака-школских другова, има на усвајање пожељних образаца понашања и обликовање идентитета и улоге адолесценткиње. Овде су изнети резултати истраживања спроведеног међу ученицама завршних разреда једне новобеоградске основне школе. Упитник и интервјуи на основу којих је рађено истраживање обухватили су широки распон тема: од односа према школи, услова за стицање престижне позиције у групи, пожељног понашања у односу према супротном полу, односа према сопственом телу и сексуалности, до планова за будућност. Добијени одговори показују да су све посматране релације битно обележене патријархалним вредностима и правилима. За стицање популарности међу вршњацима дечак и девојчица користе различита средства, према стандардима понашања која намеће добна скупина: дечак се за своју позицију бори агресивним отпором правилима која намеће школа и мачистичким односом према супротном полу, док је популарност девојчице условљена првенствено њеном физичком привлачношћу и „женственим“ понашањем. У раду се посебно посматрају начини на које се дечаци и девојчице одевају за церемонију матурске вечери као значајне ознаке пожељних мушко-женских улога, односно обрасци њиховог будућег социјалног присуства.