

# **Figuring Out This Thing Called Femininity: Young Women Speak**

*by*

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# Figuring Out This Thing Called Femininity: Young Women Speak

Angela Barns \*

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## ABSTRACT

### *‘Mirror Mirror On The Wall Who Is The Fairest Of Them All?’*

*From wicked stepmother to feminist theorist, from fairy tale to dominant discourse, the question of ‘the feminine’ continues to inspire, perplex and arouse debate. For centuries, storytellers, philosophers, scientific investigators even economists have sought to ponder, theorize and diagnose the ‘true nature’ of the feminine; the essence of ‘woman’. The following article reveals the findings of a feminist interpretive research inquiry undertaken with six, fifteen year old young women and their perceptions, experiences and expressions of femininity. Beginning with my own story of feminine adolescence, through the exploration of the young women’s stories of femininity, a kaleidoscope of meaning and representation is revealed. With a particular focus on the discourse of difference and its intersection with and perpetuation through the family, the media, peer groups, fashion and beauty, the young women’s experiences alert the reader to the many ways young women negotiate, construct and resist a feminine subjectivity.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Pete and I had always played together.  
He was my constant childhood companion.  
He was my brother and my world.  
Performing acrobatic leaps from the big old tree in the backyard,  
narrowly escaping from the evil clutches of aliens,  
administering to war casualties in our old army tent,  
‘hotting’ up our bikes in dragster style,  
building go-carts which we raced with no abandon down the middle of the street.  
I loved my hand-me-down mission brown corduroys, my canary yellow skivy and  
my old desert boots.  
Mr. Heath in the health food shop thought I was a boy – I never bothered to correct him.  
But then one day, at age twelve all this came to a crashing halt.  
When visiting Mr. Fellow one Saturday afternoon  
he told me that building things was not a job for a young lady.*

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***‘This was man’s work’.***

*It felt that overnight my world changed.*

*Up to this point I had never really noticed that Pete and I were that different.*

*We were just kids. We were the same.*

*Somehow the fun and freedom which had always accompanied our childhood adventures was supplanted by a feeling of watchfulness.*

***Of being watched and watching myself.***

*I was reproached for eating more than a girl should;  
for talking too loudly, for talking at all.*

*I was taught to be responsible for men’s behaviour;  
question their authority, answer them back and*

*I would be openly inviting their retribution and discipline.*

*And so I was re-created.*

*I shaved my legs; dieted on Ryvita biscuits.*

*I gossiped and giggled with girls about boys;*

*I lost sleep over what to wear.*

*I pored over Dolly magazines in a desperate search for the miracle  
which would transform me into the popular pretty girl I dreamed of;  
blond and blue-eyed perfection.*

*I was a girl and later I would become a lady”.*

## **THE ECONOMICS OF GENDER OR THE GENDER OF ECONOMICS?**

In the context of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the issue of gender, of what it is to ‘be woman’ and to ‘be man’, remains one of the most controversial and ambivalent debates within the global context. From economists to scientists, from politicians to theologians, the why’s, what’s and how’s of this fundamental (sic) question of life remains unanswered. In this age of economic rationalism in which the market assumes the position of the prime mediator, the means through which all life is negotiated, the question of gender is both pervasive and insidious. It dictates the movements of transnational companies, the World Bank, Wall Street, the Nasdaq Index, the Yen and the Stirling. It even influences the price of gold. Whilst such responsibility may seem extreme, the gender of the players in each of these spaces, in the negotiations between companies and countries, between the moneylenders and the borrowers, between the developers, the developing and the soon to be developed, is of key importance. ‘Clinching the deal’ rarely depends on money, finance or assets alone. Rather it depends upon gender; the gender of the lenders and the CEO’s, of the developers and the developed. The presence of specific biological organs and physiology in combination with ways of ‘doing gender’ which have developed over time and in various contexts, has become one of the most lucrative and powerful signifiers of status and wealth that this world has ever known.

Yet, whilst the dominant western patriarchal heterosexist discourse, with its decree of essentialist notions and its promulgation of the seemingly inextricable link between identity and biology, authoritatively claims that femininity is a taken-for-granted reality (Birke 1992, 72), many feminist readings and interpretations of femininity suggest a different understanding of the feminine; versions which entail multiple positionings, multiple realities and multiple plays of power. An understanding that is reflected in

Simone de Beauvoir's (1972) famous declaration written in the late 1940's; 'One is not born a woman, one becomes one'. This revisionist account of gender construction rebukes the 'victim' status implied through deterministic and essentialist explanations of femininity, which declare that by virtue of a woman's reproductive capabilities, the adoption and internalization of biologically pre-determined feminine traits, is natural, normal, desirable, and inevitable. Rather than exemplifying the persona of the passive actor, or the 'blank slate', women, both young and older, actively create an evolving understanding of what it means to be 'woman' in society (Duke and Kreshel 1998).

Whilst the construction of a feminine identity is not limited to the domain of young girls but continues to be negotiated throughout the life span, it is the adolescent years which bear the stringency of it's dictates. A time during which socially promoted definitions and culturally inscribed expressions of femininity and masculinity are incorporated as the main contingencies of self-identification (Paludi 1998; Whitney and Hoffman 1998).

Yet despite the said criticalness of this period, the voices of young women themselves, their experiences of femininity in the 'here and now', are noticeably absent from feminist literature, youth research and mainstream psychological and sociological discussions (McRobbie 1991; Walkerdine 1993). Hence, in an effort to re-orient the traditional, 'expert' and authoritative accounts of adolescent gender identity and to prioritize localized knowledges, I undertook a feminist interpretive inquiry. Grounded in a commitment to understanding femininity as heterogeneous and fragmented, the inquiry facilitated the creation of a space in which to explore and to understand what, from my own and that of other women's experiences, is a critical period in the negotiation of not only our identity as females but our consequent position in the social, economic and political world. The inquiry also endeavored to release young women from the notion of femininity as a singular, unitary experience, by highlighting the interplay between subjectivity and identity and the multiple ways in which young women both create and are created by their perceptions of femininity (McDonald 1999, 12; van Duin, te Poel and de Waal 1993, 148).

I conducted the inquiry with six young women, Zena, Ruby, Shelley, Rachel, Andre and Annie<sup>1</sup> enrolled in Year 10 at a state government senior high school in a south metropolitan suburb of Perth, Western Australia. Through the utilization of questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the young women were asked for their perceptions, experiences and expressions in relation to two main themes:

- being a female adolescent and the position that femininity holds within this experience
- definitions of femininity: encompassing its expressions and meanings and the young women's descriptions of their own femininity, how it is constructed, expressed and experienced, in the past, present and future.

In keeping with the feminist, interpretive and poststructuralist framing guiding the inquiry, rather than employing any specific scale of measurement/analysis, the information gathered was collated according to the themes, categories and terms, with a respect for the "descriptive nuances, differences, and paradoxes" in the young women's

stories (Kvale 1996, 226). The young women's quotes have been used verbatim in an attempt to give priority to their voices, their individual expression and use of language. Hence, what follows is a snapshot of these patterns and themes, descriptions and experiences of the feminine, as told through our journey of *'figuring out this thing called femininity'*.

### **UNRAVELLING THE FEMININE**

In exploring the young women's versions and conceptualizations of femininity as a definition, the young women clearly articulated a "constellation of adjectival phrases" which they defined as the internalized dominant perception of femininity (Smith 1990a, 172).

**Pretty pink dresses**  
**Little Hair ribbons**  
**Frilly socks**  
**Shiny shoes**  
**Not being able to do anything! (Zena).**

Zena's definition of femininity, in its colourful characterisation of the feminine, as equated with 'girlishness', was a common theme amongst the meanings made by each of the young women in relation to the word 'femininity'. Whilst each of the young women agreed that it was doubtful that many (if any) women wear 'pink frilly dresses with white lacy socks', the intimation that such clothes evoke is clear and discernable; femininity is seemingly ageless in its perpetual promotion of the innocence and sweetness enshrined in images of the distinctive guise and behaviour of the girl-child (Browne and France 1985, 154); "sweet, cute, pretty".

The young women's emphasis on girl-as-woman-as-feminine is also indicative of the congruence between femininity and what Ussher (1997, 356) refers to as the "living doll" fantasy. In exploring the notion of an idealised femininity, Zena offered the following description in which the 'female as doll' assumes the identity of an unanimated, puppet-like entity, a passive and subordinate toy, subject to the direction and control, both in character and physical movement, by the male puppeteer.

**Really feminine? like dolls running around everywhere not challenging (men) on anything...men could do whatever they wanted they could walk all over us...women would just have to stand back and watch (Zena).**

Integral to this idealized notion of femininity was the widespread assertion amongst the young women that 'being nice' was a key tenet in femininity; a feminine woman was 'inherently' 'nice'.

**Being feminine you act nice and not being a bitch all the time (Shelley).**

Whilst the young women's definitions of 'nice' were somewhat vague and fragmented, its usage encompassed a vast array of specific behavioural expectations, inclusive of a

courteous manner and a sweet tempered nature as opposed to 'being a bitch' which was deemed aggressive, nasty and infinitely unfeminine!

The young women's descriptions of femininity as allusive of 'pink frilly dresses' and 'being real girly', are also reminiscent of past eras in which women knew their place and followed the dictates of an austere feminine diet. Although perceived as outdated and dehumanizing, such images remained apparent in current perceptions of femininity;

**Kind of old-fashioned things like having long hair and keeping your finger out while drinking a cup of tea or something.... I think feminine would be like Meg in 'Little Women' 'cos in the movie she's so old-fashioned and girlish and pretty and graceful (Ruby).**

Whilst clothes and physical appearance were dominant themes in the young women's descriptions of femininity, distinct patterns or ways of behaving were also articulated as markedly feminine. Of particular prominence was the issue of speech and specifically the restrictive limitations and conditions surrounding the 'when's, what's and how's' of speaking 'feminine'. Zena, who considered that femininity ensued a form of censorship, explored this focus on speech;

**Being feminine means...you can't say what you want...because at virtual risk of being socially unacceptable, inferior and femininity is also like...you can't stand up to men.... watching what you say at risk of being socially unaccepted.**

The issue of language is also central in understanding the way in which codes of femininity, such as those described by the young women, are created, perpetuated and internalised. In keeping with the deconstructionist view of language as "a set of complex evolved, evolving and open semiotic systems within which meanings are realized and constructed (Threadgold 1990, 5), the young women's use of words such as "**pretty, graceful, elegant, kind, loving, keeping one's self neat and tidy, polite, well-mannered, well groomed, sweet, cute, conservative, being real girly, being real ladylike**", construct, rather than simply describe the feminine. Through such words not only is the mutuality of girlish appearance and behavior with the feminine clearly articulated but, as is identified throughout this paper, such words require and behold an expectation of active suppression and manipulation of the female self (Corrigan and Meredyth 1997, 57). As Bordo (1988) so aptly depicts, to enact 'pretty, graceful and elegant' a woman is required to submit her body to social, economic and political manipulation.

Correspondingly, the use of particular words to create meanings about the feminine simply reinforce femininity as the binary opposite or the antithesis of masculinity; the 'other' or that which is different to and therefore inferior to the male (Crowley and Himmelweit 1992, 10). Not only are words used to depict the feminine rarely employed to describe the masculine, but the young women noted that the devalued position of femininity inherent in its difference to masculinity, was a dominant determinate in their understandings, negotiations and experiences of a feminine subjectivity. In particular, the

young women spoke of their experiences of 'otherness' in terms of the 'difference' between being an adolescent and a female adolescent, between the feminine and unfeminine and the 'unfeminine-as-non-female/masculine?' and the 'feminine-as-female'.

Whilst the young women emphasised adolescence as a period of change, of 'growing up', the sense of adventurousness which imbued their general definitions of adolescence, were less evident in their descriptions of being a female adolescent. As Annie declares, whilst adolescent males are encouraged and expected to risk-take, experiment and be self-reliant, young women's perceived innate vulnerability discourages such assertiveness and self-sufficiency;

**Female adolescents are a lot more vulnerable...easily persuaded by peer pressure...easily taken advantage of by males.**

Notions of difference such as that insinuated through the dichotomies of female/male were also distinctively enunciated through the young women's detailed depictions of 'the unfeminine' as that which was opposed to and different from being feminine (Threadgold 1990, 1). What is interesting in such diametrically opposed constructions is the way in which the young women's understandings of the 'unfeminine' are defined in distinctly masculine terms.

**Swearing, boxing, 'shooting up', footy, those chains around cargo pants these are masculinity things (Andre)**

**Like if you go and kick a footy or whatever...girls who are like that...some people like classify you as a tomboy...like not a girl thing (Annie).**

Whilst Annie's reference to a 'tomboy' as being all that which is "not a girl thing", would seem to emulate a close relationship with that which is masculine, as is evident from many of the young women's accounts, to be considered non-female, is still not to be considered by men/boys as therefore constituting 'male'. As Brook (1997, 107) concludes "the more you are perceived as Other, remote from true femininity, beyond even the dubious privilege of being the opposite to the masculine norm".

## **CONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE**

In keeping with the notion of femininity as a constructed subjective experience, the young women's stories reveal the multiplicity of sites, texts, subjects, objects, structures and agents, such as the media, the family, peers and fashion and beauty, which interweave in interdependent and mutually inclusive relationships, to form the fabric of the feminine (Cain 1993 cited Brooks 1997, 61).

### *Re-Presenting the Media*

The media, particularly in the medium of women's/young women's magazines were subject to much debate and strident criticism by the young women.

**I don't buy magazines I just read them...'cause you know...they try to make you be thin and pretty 24/7<sup>2</sup> (Zena).**

Zena's pertinent comment resonates with the critiques of feminists and critical theorists alike, who emphasise the strategic role that the media plays in promulgating the ideology or discourse of femininity within a patriarchal, capitalist context (Duke and Kreshel 1998, 50-51). Whilst the degree of influence may differ according to personal interpretation and experience, the young women were universally adamant in their view of the media as a dominant source and resource of 'feminine information' and a powerful instrument of persuasion;

**Looking at the stereotypical people looking all glamorous in magazines...models and actors in TV...when you see them looking perfect you try and do the same thing (Annie).**

In discussing the power of such representations, the young women spoke particularly, of the negative influence of the mainstream media's propagation of what Chernin (cited Bordo 1988, 88) defines as "the tyranny of slenderness".

**Just the way they portray girls...in their like really little stick figures and big rosy cheeks...it just shouldn't be like that.... it annoys me...it annoys me a lot (Zena).**

The young women's emphasis on body image as a distinctive symbol of and tool for the creation of femininity is indicative of Elizabeth Grosz's (1990, 62) declaration that the female body becomes "a writing surface...a page or material surface on which messages can be inscribed". The young women's accounts of the media's role in the femininity stakes is in keeping with the notion of the body as a 'page', and the media as "a writing instrument" or "tool of body-engraving" (Grosz, 1990, 62).

**Like there are some (women) who would change their whole look just to look like the 'perfect people' in the magazines...it has a fairly big influence...you know...if you were really worried about things like that like some girls are...like seeing that all the time makes you want to change (Annie).**

Such dominant mainstream representations of femininity were largely defined by the young women as fiction and each of the young women commented on the need for women's/girl's magazines to 'get real'. Specifically, the young women asserted the need for the creation of alternative media images, presenting more eclectic and diverse representations of women and femininity.

*Angela: So how should it be do you think...what should magazines do?*

**Zena: Normal...normal people**

*Angela: So what's normal?*



**Zena: Like everyone...everyday people...you know...full figures, not “I have no boobs and you can see my hip bones.**

Yet, despite the apparent authority which abounds in the popularised images of femininity, each of the young women considered that the media’s power was arbitrary and contextual. As Annie contends, although the images are influential it is possible to resist their domination;

**Sometimes when you see it coming at you all the time...you think...should you really be like that.... but then...you don’t have to listen to it if you don’t want to...they (the media) make it out to seem like you have to have a certain type of body...you don’t have to believe it!**

### *Familiarising Femininity*

Similar to the dominant and pervasive authority of the media, the young women each spoke of the family as a site in which their negotiations with femininity are assisted, encouraged, and resisted. Nancy Chodorow (1978, 196) concurs with the significant influence of the family on gender identity, asserting, “families create children gendered, heterosexual and ready to marry”. The roles of parents as protectors, mediators and disciplinarians, in particular, were noted by each of the young women as of significant influence in both the experience of being a female adolescent and their subsequent construction of a feminine subjectivity.

**I think female adolescents like...everyone is so cautious of them more than male adolescents...(they) worry more about females than males (Annie).**

Beginning with the differential treatment dispensed to boys and girls within the family, each of the young women perceived that their femaleness, and the ensuing feminine vulnerability, provided the impetus for restricted freedom, a singular emphasis on accountability and a relatively limited capacity for independence and self-sufficiency.

**Parents seem to favour their adolescent boys a lot more than girls because you know they want to protect their ‘little girls’ and they don’t realise that we can protect ourselves.... you know boys are allowed to do so much more than we are...parents see them (boys) as they can take care of themselves (Zena).**

Of particular importance in the young women’s accounts of femininity within the family, was the significant stimulus and impetus provided by mothers in relation to the construction of their daughter’s feminine subjectivity. For many of the young women, their mother’s influence was particularly pervasive and strident during their younger years. As Zena relates;

**My Mum used to make me wear those frilly socks the white ones with lace... and she’d stick me in these dresses...and I’d be like “oh Mum”...I didn’t**

**have much of a choice...you know...whatever Mum put me in was what I'd wear.**

As the young women began to mature, their stories of maternal influence diversified from a singular preoccupation with clothing and hair, to include an emphasis on makeup and 'good manners', with particular attention being paid to body posture.

**Like if you slouch and stuff mum always tells us to sit up straight and...just stuff like that (Rachel).**

**Like you'll be sitting there watching TV and she'll be like 'close your legs Annie'...'cause she's got people over (Annie).**

Haug (1987, 30) discuss the manipulation of the female body through an emphasis on body posture, as the means through which femininity is regulated; "our relationship to our bodies is the product of a careful self-ordering into a feminine position inimical to our happiness as women".

Whilst many of the young women's mother's played a dominant role in promoting stereotypical femininity, mother's also taught their daughters to assert themselves, to speak out;

**Mum always taught us to never back down if you believe in something...so I suppose I've just learned over time...just to stand up and not let anyone walk over me (Zena).**

Such stories were a familiar feature in many of the young women's accounts and are indicative of the double bind that many women, as mothers, experience, in their role as tutor in their daughters feminine education (Debold Wilson and Malavé 1993). To be successful in a patriarchal society a woman must be feminine, passive and subservient but in order to remain as her own person she must also learn to assert herself, to stand up and be counted (Pipher 1994, 20).

Although much attention has been paid to the prominent role played by mother's in the feminine education of their daughters, the influential role of the father, in what is typically defined as a female domain, must not be undermined or ignored (Debold, Wilson and Malavé 1993, 230-235). Shelley, Zena and Annie each spoke of the close relationship they held with their fathers and the apparent lack of interest that their fathers' held in relation to their daughter's femininity.

**My Dad just laughs he thinks it's funny...'cause like my Dad...he's never had a son...I'm more like a son to him and do things with him...me and my Dad do a lot together...like fish and stuff (Shelley).**

Zena's comments refer to what appears to be the masculinization of her role as a female in the family and further supports the position of father as unconcerned with femininity;

**Like ever since we were little...like Dad always wanted us to be a boy...like he's very big on masculinity... "If you're going to hit you hit hard and hit 'em once".**

In exploring this apparent obliviousness to their daughter's femininity, it appears that a father's seeming unconcern may be indicative of the traditional private/public divide or what within the family domain is considered to be the woman/mother's role (sic) and a man/father's role (sic) (Debold, Wilson and Malavé 1993). According to Debold, Wilson and Malavé (1993), such a divide affords men the luxury of remaining isolated, uninvolved or apparently unconcerned about the issue of femininity as related to their adolescent daughters; fathers are provided with the freedom to enjoy a relatively un-gendered relationship with their daughters.

Yet this apparent lack of concern or involvement is not universal, as Andre's experience illustrates.

**As soon as I started going through puberty pretty much...about year 7 - 12 year old...and like my Dad just...I know something hit him...like "you can only wear T-Shirts not tops...these are slutty...you're a whore" and all these things so there was a big ladylike thing going on at about that time (Andre).**

#### *Be-Friending Femininity*

Despite the seeming significant influence that parents hold in relation to the reproduction of femininity and female identity, their once impenetrable role as 'educators' rapidly becomes undermined by the expectations, opinions and influence of peers (Paludi 1998). As the young women's stories articulate, the power and influence of peers extended to the domain of the feminine. Rather than being undefined, the type and level of this influence was dependent on the peer's gender, with female and male friends and peers performed specific functions in the femininity stakes.

Female peers were described as the vanguards of femininity, ensuring that a level of the feminine was maintained. Similar to the influence of mothers, female friends were described as 'femininity monitors'; suggesting, prompting and at times directly intervening, in the creation of a feminine self.

**I was like a tomboy...and (then) I met a girl called Janelle and she introduced me to makeup and skinny tops and stuff like that (Andre).**

**I get my ideas from (my friends) sometimes if I want to be feminine...because I don't like shopping for clothes for myself...like I get bored really easily.... they usually like the clothes I like so...they help me out with shopping (Rachel).**

At times this monitoring role became both blatant and cruel as is apparent in the young women's depictions of 'being a bitch'. Yet, despite this 'bitchiness' each of the young

women also experienced a sense of safety in exploring their femininity (or perceived lack of) with their female friends. This exploration often took the form of exchanges in clothes, makeup and the habitual 'getting ready to go out' saga. Within the relative 'safety' of this group there was an apparent tolerance and acceptance of individual style.

**We've all got our own sense of style which evolves from our fashion anyway because different things you can take out of fashion and mix and match...and that's what I like about it...like you can still be individual...fitting into the feminine stereotype you can still have your own sense of style...that's what I love about it (Andre).**

Many of the young women's experiences of their male peers reflect the traditional positioning inherent in a patriarchal context in which the male, whether young or older, assumes the position of 'he who defines and surveys she who is both subject and object'. Despite the supposed progression and sophistication of the late techno-capitalist era, Zena asserts that young men are still being socialised with the authority to not only assume 'the gaze', but to continue to control and sanction it's subjects;

**I think that guys our age have been brought up to believe that girls are these little feminine things that aren't going to fight...you know...but it doesn't work...you know...we've gone past that.**

According to the young women's accounts of their relationships and interactions with their male counterparts, this subjection and accountability to the 'male gaze' is seemingly continuous; a predicament which seems to emulate Berger's (1972, 46) assertion that "men act and women appear". As Rachel reveals, whilst it is expected that women will listen to males, such consideration is not necessarily reciprocated;

**Like guys seem to be really talkative and they'll talk about lots of stuff and you just listen to them and when you want to say something it seems like they don't want to listen.**

The penetration of the 'male gaze' was noted by many of the young women as particularly influential in defining the protocol for women's conversations not only when in the presence of males but even amongst other females.

**Like if you're in a big group of guys you don't do stuff that you do around other people like girls for instance...when girls are together we tend to talk about silly things and just things that pop straight into our minds but when you're in a group of guys say anything like that and they'll all turn around and go "what?"...say what needs to be said and leave it alone (Andre).**

Yet, the perpetuation of the male gaze is not always as covert as such incidents may suggest. As is revealed by the young women's accounts of the confrontations that ensue when women dare to contravene feminine etiquette, the sanctioning power of the 'male gaze', enacted by both males and females enters the public domain.

**I got into a couple of fights but mostly with guys...I remember one guy he came to my birthday party and he wrecked it for me...I gave him a couple of punches in the head...and people were like “that’s wrong” and I said “I think I had the right to”...kind of thing...I know fighting’s not the way but that’s how I felt at the time...because he was hitting all my other friends (Shelley).**

The role of male peers in the perpetuation of femininity is perhaps most personalised in the ‘intimate’ heterosexual relationship between ‘girlfriend/boyfriend’. Andre spoke of the influence that her ex-boyfriend had (and continues to have) in relation to her expressions of femininity.

**Anything he sees about me that he doesn’t like he’ll just put it in the most bluntest hurtful terms like ‘you’ve got to do something about it otherwise...’...so anything he doesn’t like ‘wow get rid of that you fucking slut’...something that makes you hurt your feelings just so.... he gets his way.**

Yet despite what may appear as a rendition of the ‘woman-as-victim’ story, such directorates did not go unchallenged or un-resisted. In particular, the young women spoke of the many occasions during which the sexism orchestrated by their male counterparts was combated by the young women’s insistence on promoting multiple ways of being female;

**There was one guy who tried to say...’Oh girls shouldn’t swear’...and I just went...’Excuse ME!’...like walk up look him at him and he had no comeback. I had ten girls behind me and we were all screaming at him...and he was just like “Oops I’m sorry”...and I’m like “how dare you tell us what we can do and what we can’t” (Zena).**

### *Making Up To Be Feminine*

Whilst the above accounts tell us of the importance of relationships in the young women’s constructions of a feminine subjectivity, as their stories further revealed, femininity also depended largely on the use of props such as clothing and makeup, in the creation of the guise or the image of the feminine woman.

**In my wardrobe I’ve got about three different sections...I’ve got my party clothes...then my everyday clothes...then I’ve got another section with what I have to look like in modelling (Shelley).**

Shelley’s depiction of the de-compartmentalising of her clothes reveals the possibility of multiple ‘feminine’ subjectivities and the importance of makeup and clothing in the construction of these different ‘selves’. Both as young girls and in the process of becoming young women, clothes, makeup and hairstyles are revealed by the participants as significant tools in the feminine enculturation; the prime means through which they both create and express their femininity.

**Like when you get all dressed up to go to a party or something you wear a nice skirt or dress or something.... because...getting dressed up ....I feel a lot more feminine (Rachel).**

The young women further revealed that certain occasions dictated that 'feminine clothes' be worn. Ranging from a visit to a grandmother, a family dinner or a party, the young women held detailed knowledges as to what clothes were required for exactly what occasion.

**If I were going out to a dinner with the family...like Nana's there...you can't go round wearing...a little short top and skin-tight pants...I('d) wear a skirt (Annie).**

Common to each of the young women's material expressions of femininity was the inextricable link between clothes and behaviour; the type of clothing worn, whether it is considered feminine, unfeminine or seemingly neutral, engendered certain types of behaviour. For instance, the young women noted that the wearing of clothing which was deemed to be 'feminine' induced or required, similarly feminine behaviour;

**I try to act grown up not as a child and muck around and stuff like that...that's a bit immature...I wouldn't slouch...I would sit up straight (Rachel).**

Clothes were also an important tool in defining that which was deemed to be unfeminine. Casual or clothes worn for comfort were typically considered to be unfeminine and as a consequence the young woman's level or degree of femininity questioned;

**Like the way I dress I'd probably wouldn't say I'm feminine 'cause I like wearing casual stuff...(and) because I don't like getting dressed up a lot (Rachel).**

Similar to the promotion and utilisation of clothes as an integral tool in the construction and expression of their feminine subjectivity, the application of makeup was also an important accessory in achieving the 'feminine look'.

**I like looking pretty...like girlish and happy pretty not the loads of makeup pretty (Ruby).**

Whilst the young women noted numerous reasons for wearing makeup, particular to the age of adolescence, masking imperfections was the prime for their use of makeup;

**I don't wear it stacked on...just like covering pimples (Annie)**

**I do it to cover up freckles across my nose (Andre)**

Blemishes and freckles were regarded as personal flaws and in need of camouflage. Slaney (1997, 39) acknowledges the inextricable link between complexion and femininity; “a clear complexion was high on the list of feminine attributes which contributed to a young woman’s ‘desirability’”. The application of makeup was also considered by many of the young women as linked to creating a positive self-image, which in adolescence is an issue of critical importance.

**When I wear it...I can be different...like whatever...I can be who I want virtually when you put it on...I don’t know, it sounds weird but when you’re like ...different...from (who) you are normally...it gives you like a whole image thing (Zena).**

Despite the personal satisfaction gained through the application of makeup and the ensuing ‘new’ or ‘different’ look it created, Andre claimed that its usage was inherently political. According to Andre, its prime usage was to enhance the feminine image and consequently increase her attractiveness and appeal to the men/boys.

*Angela: So in expressing femininity...what about wearing makeup?*

**Andre: ...That’s like trying to take care of your appearance I guess that’s because...lots of girls feel like they’re going to be left alone...for the rest of their life...so they’ve got to do something about it at an early stage...and that’s just making yourself as attractive as possible so that you’ll find yourself a man...you can’t do yourself up and then go “I don’t need guys” you know...what was the point of that...why don’t you just let your hair down and wear whatever the hell you want.**

Andre’s comments are congruent with Naomi Wolf’s (1990) assertion that the emphasis on a woman’s appearance as the marker of a feminine image is significant not only on an aesthetic level, but as Corrigan and Meredyth (1997, 54) assert, is the “criterion by which her femininity, her sexuality and even her right to be considered a normal and acceptable human being are judged”.

### **CREATING A SPACE-IN-BETWEEN**

In keeping with the notion of femininity as a multi-faceted experience, the young women each alluded to the shifting and flexible nature of their feminine subjectivities. Rather than emulating an immutable force to which they were beholden, femininity was simply one amongst many ways of being and knowing. Described in terms of ‘maybe’, ‘kind of’, ‘sometimes’, being feminine was not an eternal condition but is contextually and relationally bound, determined by individual volition and social context (Corrigan and Meredyth, 1997, 62).

**Ruby: Kind of...I think I am and aren’t feminine. Like I’m more feminine and girlish than my other friends but I’m not as feminine as society portrays it...I like being feminine sometimes...but its not all the time sort of thing...I don’t think that you can live as a feminine sort of person all the time.**

**Shelley: I think I act in a way that is feminine and unfeminine.... yeah probably both of them...but I'm able to change...from both things.**

The eclecticism of feminine subjectivities assumed by the young women, included a vast range of options both from within and outside of, the traditional discourse of femininity. Denzin (1997, 86) refers to the creation of this seeming eclecticism as the space between which “surround(s) the hyphen”; the space between the feminine and the masculine. Rather than being the result of a particular institution or mechanism’s disciplinary and regulatory measure, the young women’s descriptions of feminine enculturation are “multiply structured through a diverse range of shifting, mutually mediating and conflicting discursive interpellations” (Rose 1995, 333), inclusive of the discourse of difference and its intersection with and permeation of ideological institutions, such as the family, peers, the media and the fashion and beauty industry. This “dialectic between the active and creative subject” (Smith 1990a, 161) infers that choice, agency, submission and resistance, rather than being viewed as contradictory ways of being, can and do exist side by side in a seemingly complementary relationship (Bordo 1988).

## **CONCLUSION**

The young women’s stories, their vitality, courage, strength, energy and resistance are a pertinent reminder that although we, as women have a long way to go, we have also come a long way. The young women are a fine example of the way in which women, both young and older have and always will, question the authority of a patriarchal world. Their stories emanate a sense of pride and dignity in being ‘woman’ and I thank them for the insight they provided me, in relation to both my identity as a woman and in my ‘role’ as a feminist researcher. Their personal struggles with the notion of femininity, their determination and power to resist the imposition of malestream notions of what it is to be female incite hope for the future; a future where women’s difference, our femaleness and femininity (whatever that may be), rather than being a source of ‘otherness’ is a celebrated source of liberation.

**This is just a statement!**

**I think femininity is highly overrated!**

**All these jumped up ideas of the perfect person (female)...it’s a pile<sup>3</sup>!! (Zena).**



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### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the young women pseudonyms were/are used in the text.

<sup>2</sup> 24/7 refers to 24 hours per day, seven days per week

<sup>3</sup> According to Zena a pile refers to a pile of 'crap' (sic).