

Sex, Silence, and Young Women: Reimagining Voice and Agency Through Participatory Praxis
Where Counselling Practice Meets Participatory Action for Social Transformation

A thesis submitted to
Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Health Science

by
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2025

Abstract

In the context of growing concern about the impact of pornified cultural norms and inadequate sex education on young people's wellbeing, this thesis explores how young women in a socioeconomically advantaged girls' school in Aotearoa New Zealand navigate contemporary norms of heterosexuality, femininity, and sexual agency. Grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, the study is methodologically informed by Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and employs reflexive thematic analysis to examine qualitative data. Twenty-five participants took part in a series of focus groups and workshops designed to elicit dialogue, reflection, and collective meaning-making. The research was shaped by the author's dual role as counsellor and researcher, with the counselling space positioned not merely as a site of individual therapeutic support but as a politically significant location for interrupting dominant narratives - particularly through participatory, small-group dialogue and meaning-making. The analysis investigates how silencing, cultural expectations, and resistance are experienced and negotiated. Young women's accounts reveal the powerful cultural scripts that shape their experiences of consent, embodiment, and relational practices. The findings highlight how social expectations of politeness, sexual availability, and emotional labour constrain agency, while also tracing the critical spaces where participants resist, reframe, and disrupt these norms. This thesis foregrounds young women's meaning-making as an inherently political act, demonstrating how collective dialogue fosters critical consciousness and opens possibilities for change. It argues that young women are not only shaped by dominant discourses but are active in challenging and reshaping them. The study calls for education, counselling, and policy practices that centre

young people's lived realities, amplify their voices, and support relational, structurally responsive approaches, to the forces influencing their lives.

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Acknowledgements

Throughout these last five years I have been reminded of the enormous privilege it is to be able to study. To have people paid to follow my thinking, engage with my meanderings and give me their sincere time and feedback has been incredibly humbling. This experience has been transformative in so many ways, and I am forever grateful to the many people who have assisted and supported me throughout this journey. To the friends I have neglected, thank you for your support despite my frequent absences. You are all inspirational beings.

I must begin by thanking my school, who made it possible for me to follow this path, the boards of trustees who were financially generous and always supportive of what this study meant in my workspace. To Rachel and the deans who so generously covered me on my study days, and bore the brunt of more emails, workload and the odd crisis, I owe you! You're a bright star Rachel, thank you for being you. And to Jackie – Principal, advocate, and unwavering supporter – thank you for championing this work with such heart. Your role as an agitator and activist for young women has inspired me throughout, and your presence in my corner has meant so much. Thank you for keeping these conversations alive, both within our school and far beyond.

I am of course, indebted to the 25 young women who so generously gave up their time to be part of my study, who brought so much openness and thoughtfulness to this research. Without you, this would not exist and because of you, so much has already been achieved. To all the young women who have contributed; my research advisors, as Aunties in Ask Aunty Hilda, the letter writers and young women who come to my counselling office every day – you are all exceptional and I thank you so much for allowing me to be part of your journey.

To my supervisors -I am not sure how to put into words how amazing you have been, how without you I simply would not be here writing my thanks. To Emma Green and Katie Palmer Du Preez, two incredible women who contributed so much to the beginning of my journey, I am grateful to you both for your wisdom, time and expertise. However, Gareth Terry, there from the very first breath and Nadia Charania, there from the crawling stages, I have you both to thank from the bottom of my heart. Your knowledge, expertise and attention to detail, have been overshadowed only by your kindness and care. Two extraordinary people doing incredible work and supporting me while I endeavor to create something; thank you, a thousand times.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks to my family - my study buddies, quiet companions, and encouragers – Mieke and Frieda – you kept my heart and feet warm. And Tilly, who was with me on the frontlines and through every word of reading and writing: my all-day, every-day friend and furry colleague.

To my mother, who taught me to see injustice and to speak up for what is right – thank you for your fierce belief in fairness, your loving cheerleading, and for instilling in me a perseverance that began in childhood and proved essential here. And to my wonderful Pa, who showed me what it is to think like a philosopher, see the world through the eyes of an artist and to always keep learning, discovering and listening - Ich danke dir von ganzem Herzen.

To Linus – my partner in all things great, steadfast believer in this work, and tireless co-dreamer – thank you. You are the very best x. And our daughters; the sun, moon and stars of my life, the

wisest, most full-hearted young women, whose absolute conviction in the value of this work has kept me going at the most challenging times. To Aria and Lisel, you are both my reason and the reason. With all my love, this is for you.

Ethics Application: 21/356, was approved by AUTEK on February the 8th, 2022.

I acknowledge Shoba Nayar for providing professional proofreading and formatting services for this thesis. ChatGPT was also used during the final editing stage to check for repetition across and between chapters.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or institution of higher learning.

Marcelle Nader-Turner

Chapter 1: Introduction

Invisible Ink: Drawing the Female Form Amid Societal Constructs

Investigating Young Women's Experiences and Agency

This thesis examines how young women experience their bodies and sexuality within the constraints of a heteronormative culture. It explores how students in a socioeconomically advantaged, integrated girls' school make sense of, articulate, and challenge restrictive gender constructs, developing strategies for critique, reflection, and transformation. While the Sexuality Education curriculum offers some guidance, this research identifies a critical need for participatory approaches that support young women to collectively question and reshape the cultural conditions that constrain them.

This study highlights the value of creating structured opportunities for young women to engage in consciousness-raising conversations – spaces where they can reframe dominant narratives of femininity, sexuality, and power. Using a critical participatory action research (CPAR) approach, this research demonstrates how facilitated group dialogue can enable young women to develop new understandings of body ownership and agency. It also considers how these processes might be embedded within a counselling framework, positioning the counsellor as a facilitator of both individual reflection and collective critique.

The Role of Participatory Approaches

Group therapy can foster connection, reflection, and personal growth (Sandahl et al., 2020); but, in high school settings, it may pose challenges around confidentiality, safety, and the risks of disclosure. For this reason, this thesis does not frame its approach as therapeutic group work.

Instead, it advocates for CPAR, a methodology grounded in social justice principles, collaborative inquiry, and collective action.

CPAR offers a framework for young people to convene, examine shared social and cultural issues, and develop responses together (Cornish et al., 2023). These participatory spaces promote peer support and resilience while achieving many of the same outcomes as traditional counselling through critical reflection and dialogue. While CPAR has gained momentum internationally, there remains limited research exploring its application within school-based counselling frameworks (Cook et al., 2020). The current study responds to this gap by examining how CPAR can be adapted to an Aotearoa New Zealand context, offering practical strategies for integrating participatory approaches into counselling practices. Through CPAR, this research addresses social justice concerns by creating safe, critically reflective spaces where young women can interrogate cultural expectations and reimagine their agency.

Background to the Research

The ways in which young women experience their bodies and sexuality have long been a focus of feminist and educational scholarship (e.g. Allen, 2018a, 2020; Bordo, 2020; Butler, 2002, 2011; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019; Daniels et al., 2020; Gavey, 2019). This body of work highlights the tensions between dominant cultural scripts of femininity and the lived realities of young women, whose everyday experiences often resist and complicate normative expectations (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Social media, advertising, and broader cultural discourses continue to reinforce representations of sexualised, yet contained, femininity (Bhana, 2023; Jackson & Vares, 2015), and these ideals are replicated within school environments – particularly within socioeconomically advantaged, integrated girls' schools.

Although heterosexual femininity may be touched on in the health curriculum, it is often deprioritised in favour of academic content. Further, its delivery is shaped by institutional values, staff expertise, and resource allocation (Cruickshank et al., 2021; Rothman et al., 2023; Thiessen et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2021) which results in significant variation in the quality and relevance of sex education across schools. In this vacuum, social media and peer culture fill the gap, often reinforcing narrow and unrealistic expectations. Within these contexts, young women navigate layered and contradictory demands. They often report feeling disconnected from their bodies, internalising standards shaped by peers, digital culture, and broader gender norms (Orenstein, 2016). This internalisation reinforces the idea that their worth is tied to the performance of idealised femininity – undermining both self-worth and sexual agency (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016b).

The influence of mutual surveillance – where peers enforce and monitor conformity to femininity – further complicates these dynamics (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). This regulation extends beyond appearance to include sexual conduct, reinforcing the expectation that young women behave in ways that are legible and acceptable within a heteronormative script (McRobbie, 2007). Yet, despite these pressures, many young women remain unfamiliar with their own anatomy or desires (Tolman, 2002, 2012). While concepts like consent are increasingly familiar, their application within heterosexual contexts – particularly those marked by alcohol use, peer coercion, or reputational risk – remains fraught (Farvid, 2015; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Wade, 2017).

As Fine (1988) famously noted, the absence of a discourse of desire continues to limit what young women are taught about sexuality. Pleasure and autonomy are often excluded from educational discourse, replaced by a focus on risk and control (Allen, L., 2008; Allen, 2018b; Cameron-Lewis

& Allen, 2013; Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Fine & McClelland, 2023). Despite decades of critique, significant gaps remain between what young women *want* and *need* to know, and what adults are willing to teach (Rothman et al., 2023; Waling et al., 2021). Creating opportunities for open discussion – beyond the confines of formal classrooms – can help address this disconnect. When supported by participatory, student-led approaches within counselling frameworks, these spaces can blend bodily literacy with socio-cultural critique. It represents a vital and underexplored avenue for research and practice, one that centres young women both as learners and meaning-makers and cultural commentators.

This study focuses specifically on young women attending socioeconomically advantaged, integrated girls' schools. These elite educational environments are often marked by conservative institutional values and narrowly defined expectations of femininity. Such contexts can impose particularly restrictive norms around sexuality and identity (Wardman et al., 2010). These same schools frequently have social ties with nearby boys schools, where dominant and limited masculinities are often reinforced (Jordan et al., 2022; Orenstein, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). Together, these dynamics produce the relational scripts within which young women must negotiate their social and sexual identities.

From a counselling perspective, institutional and cultural structures not only sustain normative heterosexuality, they also provide important sites for potential disruption. This research argues for the development of spaces within schools where young women can critically examine the forces shaping their experiences, reclaim bodily knowledge, and explore new possibilities for relational and sexual agency. When facilitated with care, intention, and criticality, these spaces offer more than reflection – they become a foundation for transformation.

Possible Implications of the Research

This study demonstrates how the counselling space – particularly through participatory, problem-posing methods – can become a site for social critique and collective meaning-making. Within small, self-selected groups, young women can engage in supported conversations that challenge dominant heterosexual scripts, interrogate internalised norms, and create space for alternative understandings. When rooted in a relational and critical approach, these discussions can support both personal insight and social transformation, offering young people validation and tools for action.

The potential significance of this research lies in its illumination of how young women interpret and respond to normative expectations around sexuality, femininity, and embodiment. It offers new ways to uncover and critique the often-unspoken assumptions that shape their social experiences (Fine & Torre, 2021). While sex education in health classrooms remains important, this study foregrounds the additional value of counsellor-facilitated, student-led approaches to contemporary heterosexual dynamics. These methods create space for curiosity, cultural critique, and connection – allowing young people to reflect on social pressures in ways that feel safe, relational, and responsive to their lived realities (Mattsson, 2015).

Through this process, young women begin to critically reflect on how awareness might shape behaviour, enable peer support, and cultivate shared resistance. Rather than remaining subject to male-serving narratives of desirability and performance, participants are invited to imagine – and enact – other ways of being. These alternative narratives emerge through critique and connection: by finding one another in solidarity, young women gain both the insight and the courage to push back.

Although this study centres young women, the implications extend beyond gender-specific work. Participatory approaches within a social justice counselling framework also hold promise for addressing a wide range of issues affecting diverse student populations. Schools have the opportunity to create intentional spaces for student-led dialogue, supported by trusted adults, where normative assumptions can be surfaced, questioned, and transformed.

Positioning the Researcher

My interest in this research is rooted in both personal and professional experience: as a counsellor in a socioeconomically advantaged, integrated girls' school; and as a woman and mother of two daughters. In my counselling role, I work with girls and young women aged 11 to 18 years, each navigating different stages of development and identity formation as they engage with parents, peers, partners, and broader cultural forces. Over time, this practice has offered insight into the emotional and relational worlds of young people, and the social structures that shape them.

The transition from childhood to adolescence, particularly for 11 to 13-year-olds, is marked by a growing awareness of being seen and evaluated by others (Aubrey et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2020). In the counselling room, fear of judgment is a recurring theme. Many young women describe the anxiety of 'getting it wrong' – whether in appearance, relationships, or behaviour. These worries are rarely abstract; they are deeply entwined with how femininity is constructed, policed, and performed in their daily lives (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

My role as a counsellor is to create spaces where young people feel safe enough to share their most vulnerable thoughts, questions, and experiences. While I draw on a range of modalities – acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), narrative therapy, dialectical behaviour therapy

(DBT), solution-focused approaches, and eye movement desensitisation reprocessing (EMDR) – my practice is grounded in a person-centred orientation that prioritises warmth, collaboration, validation, and consistency. Research suggests that the therapeutic alliance itself, rather than any single modality, is central to meaningful outcomes (Duff & Bedi, 2010; Farber et al., 2018; Mearns & Cooper, 2017).

What unfolds in the counselling room is not just personal – it is deeply political. Young people often feel a lack of agency in their lives, constrained by school rules, family expectations, and narrow definitions of success (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Their distress is frequently framed as individual struggle; yet, it reflects larger cultural forces: gendered scripts, peer surveillance, and neoliberal ideals of self-management.

This research emerges from a desire to locate those struggles within a wider context, and to offer a counter-practice that honours the structural dimensions of young people’s lives. While raising awareness among boys and addressing societal norms remain important goals, this thesis centres young women’s capacity to reflect on and challenge the conditions that shape their experience. Through facilitated dialogue, critical inquiry, and shared reflection, they are invited not only to speak – but to imagine and act.

This work is grounded in the belief that young women are already capable cultural analysts. By creating spaces where they can articulate their experiences and reframe dominant narratives, they can be supported to reclaim agency and co-create knowledge. Their insights – rooted in voice, relationship, and critique – highlight the transformative potential of participatory approaches, and the vital role counsellors can play in disrupting silencing and sustaining resistance.

Rationale for the Study

Counsellors often hold a unique vantage point within school communities. Through ongoing therapeutic relationships, counsellors gain a deep understanding of school culture and how it mirrors broader societal structures. As the sole counsellor in a socioeconomically advantaged girls' school, I work with 450 students, seeing between 50 and 70 percent of them each year. Over 14 years, this ongoing engagement has enabled me to observe trends within and across year levels and identify patterns in the challenges young women face.

This work informs collaboration with teachers, deans, and senior leadership, and extends to parent education through research-informed seminars. What becomes clear across these spaces is that many young women are grappling with issues that are not simply personal – they are shaped by cultural narratives, institutional norms, and societal expectations that reproduce silence, shame, and constraint. Yet within traditional counselling and psychological models, these issues are often individualised. Therapy is increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics that frame distress as personal mismanagement rather than a response to systemic inequity (Marecek & Gavey, 2013; Rimke, 2020). Individuals are encouraged to self-regulate, 'do the work', and take responsibility for improvement – often at financial and emotional cost – while the cultural forces causing the distress remain unchallenged.

This research resists that frame. It positions counselling both as a space of support, and a potential site of social critique and structural change. It advocates for practices that examine the conditions shaping young women's experiences and make space for resistance, voice, and collective meaning-making. It moves beyond 'helping girls cope' to critically ask what they are being asked to cope *with* – and how they might be supported in changing those conditions.

Just as feminist thinkers have long argued that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970), feminist and critical counselling models locate psychological well-being within social structures (Enns, 2000, 2004; Goodman et al., 2004). This research draws on those models to argue that counselling can – and should – interrogate the socio-cultural foundations of distress and disconnection, especially when working with young people. It also insists on placing young people at the centre of the conversation. Despite being highly attuned to the complexities they face, young people are often excluded from shaping the conversations and decisions that affect them most. Research consistently supports the value of participatory approaches that position young people as active agents in creating solutions (Cammara & Fine, 2010, ; Freire, 1972).

The urgency of including young people is heightened in the current mental health landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, where rates of distress and unmet need among young people have sharply increased (Sutcliffe et al., 2023). Ministry of Health (2023) data show that youth report the highest levels of unmet mental health needs, with service providers struggling to meet demand. Socioeconomic and ethnic disparities compound this inequity; but even those with relative privilege often face long waitlists or a lack of accessible support.

Gender-specific issues are central to this crisis. Young women continue to be evaluated through sexualised and misogynistic lenses – online and offline – which reduce their worth to appearance, compliance, or desirability (Gavey, 2021). Their interactions, fragmented across digital and physical worlds, mirror and reinforce narrow ideals of femininity. Classrooms, though crucial sites for learning, are not always safe spaces for questioning these ideals. Within peer hierarchies, dissent is risky, and silence is often self-protective (Ringrose & Renold, 2020).

Why this Study Matters

Too often, young women are left to navigate their social and sexual worlds alone – scrolling through curated images at night, worrying about reputations by day, and internalising the pressure to perform a version of femininity that serves others more than themselves. Despite decades of feminist scholarship, they are still being educated into silence and disconnection. This research matters because it creates an alternative. It shows how, through facilitated, participatory spaces within schools, young women can begin to voice, question, and reimagine. It reframes counselling as a site not only of care but of cultural critique, where transformation becomes possible – through personal insight and collective reflection, shared resistance, and a reclaiming of what it means to belong to oneself.

Without such spaces, counselling risks reinforcing the very structures it seeks to challenge. Traditional theories, often built on Eurocentric, patriarchal assumptions, remain insufficient for the complexities of young people’s lives today (Smith, 2015). Relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 2008; Miller, 2012), for example, offers a model for integrating social justice into counselling, valuing empathy, connection, and mutual growth over independence and control. These frameworks align closely with the participatory, feminist approach of this research, which sees counsellors as both healers and allies in systemic change. Feminist scholars have long argued that women’s distress is not simply personal – it is a response to structural inequality (Brown, 2018; Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 2009). This research affirms that view and contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to centre collective voice, name harmful systems, and build more expansive possibilities – starting with the young women most impacted, and with the spaces that already exist.

Aims of the Research

The central aim of this study is to explore how young women in socioeconomically advantaged girls' schools perceive and respond to the pressures of heterosexual culture. It investigates the ways in which these pressures shape expectations around their sexual behaviours, bodily presentation, and conformity to gendered norms. The research also considers how such expectations affect young women's sense of identity, agency, and relational experience.

In addition, this study examines what becomes possible when young women are given structured, supported opportunities for critical reflection and collective dialogue. It explores how they might begin to articulate counter-narratives, challenge limiting norms, and imagine alternative ways of being – both personally and socially. This inquiry aims to generate insights into the challenges young women face, and the conditions that support resistance, solidarity, and transformation.

The overarching research question guiding this study is: **How do young women in socioeconomically advantaged girls' schools collectively experience and reshape contemporary norms and expectations of heterosexual femininity?**

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured across seven chapters, each contributing to an evolving critical analysis of how young women navigate contemporary gendered expectations. Together, these chapters trace the arc from sociocultural critique to participatory response, building a layered account of structural inequities, cultural narratives, and possibilities for agency.

Chapter 1 – Introduction. *Invisible Ink: Drawing the Female Form Amid Societal Constructs* has provided the research background, aims, and rationale. It outlined the socio-cultural frameworks that shape young women’s experiences of sexuality and gender, and introduced the participatory approach that underpins the research design.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review. *Beyond Silence: Constructing Femininity through Power, Desire, and Resistance* explores the key theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study. It examines how heteronormativity, neoliberalism, and postfeminism shape gendered norms within a pornified culture. The review also highlights feminist critiques of rape myths, bodily silence, and the absence of a discourse of desire in sex education, identifying key gaps this research seeks to address.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and Methods. *“Talking and Sharing is Our Power”*: *Methods for Participatory Feminist Research*. Here, the methodological framework, drawing on CPAR as an approach rooted in feminist and social constructionist paradigms is outlined. Recruitment, ethical considerations, workshop processes, and the use of reflexive thematic analysis as a method of co-constructing meaning between participants and researcher are detailed.

Chapter 4 – Reflexivity. *The Shadow Knows: Reflexivity in Feminist Research* offers a critical reflection on the research process, attending to the political, ethical, and emotional dimensions of feminist inquiry. It explores my positioning as both cultural insider and outsider, and discusses how CPAR evolved through practice, highlighting its transformative, and at times confronting, nature.

Chapter 5 – Analysis. *Young Women and Their Ghost Bodies: Spectres of Sexuality* examines the absence of bodily knowledge and sexual awareness among young women, drawing on participant data to explore how sex education, adult attitudes, and pornography shape their understandings. It highlights how dominant discourses obscure pleasure, autonomy, and self-trust.

Chapter 6 – Analysis. *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Desire.* The second analytic chapter focuses on how silence, surveillance, and peer dynamics reinforce restrictive norms of heterosexual femininity. It also examines how, through dialogue and shared reflection, young women begin to construct counter-narratives that offer solidarity, hope, and glimpses of transformation.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion. *From Ghosts to Gutsy: New Narratives of Power and Possibility.* The final chapter reflects on the contributions of this research to feminist scholarship and school-based counselling practice. It outlines practical strategies for embedding participatory approaches in educational settings, considers the strengths and limitations of the study, and proposes future directions for research and systemic change.

Having established the rationale, aims, and structure of the thesis, the following chapter reviews the existing literature that informs this study. It critically engages with theoretical and empirical work on gender, sexuality, and power, and examines how these intersect to shape young women's experiences and expectations within a heteronormative framework.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Beyond Silence: Constructing Femininity through Power, Desire, and Resistance

This chapter reviews literature exploring how young women make sense of their bodies and sexualities within the constraints of socially prescribed norms. Using a thematic approach, the review analyses key patterns and insights from existing scholarship. Literature was selected for its theoretical relevance and contemporary significance, guided by a social constructionist framework.

Central to this exploration are the concepts of cloning culture and the neoliberal bind, both of which are examined in greater depth later in the chapter. Young women are presented with an illusion of limitless choice but face harsh moral judgments and responsabilising that constrain their autonomy. This dynamic fosters a culture of conformity, where socially safe identities are adopted to avoid censure – particularly within elite school environments where dominant norms are reproduced through peer regulation and institutional values (Allan & Charles, 2014; Charles, 2010; Samardzic et al., 2023; Weiler, 2023). Within this context, pornography emerges as a dominant influence, shaping both young men’s and young women’s expectations around sex, as well as young women’s perceptions of their bodies and sexual roles (Ashton et al., 2018, 2020; Crabbe & Flood, 2021). Together, these forces create conditions where young women can lack agency over their bodies.

This chapter examines the structures and institutions shaping these realities, focusing on how societal norms perpetuate systemic inequalities. Special attention is given to the additional constraints within elite school environments, which validate specific forms of femininity while

marginalising others (Allan & Charles, 2014; Charles, 2010; Samardzic et al., 2023; Weiler, 2023). Opportunities for resistance and counter-narratives are explored within a cultural landscape increasingly described as pornified in the literature (Ashton et al., 2018, 2020; Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

To trace how power, desire, and resistance shape contemporary femininity, this chapter begins by examining heteronormativity and its impact on expectations surrounding young women's bodies and sexualities. Neoliberalism and postfeminism further shape young women's experiences of heterosex, fostering a cultural tendency to pathologise and responsabilise them – particularly when they encounter negative sexual experiences or struggle with the complexities of relationships. Pornography, both as a cultural force and as a pervasive presence in adolescent environments, plays a pivotal role in shaping how young women perceive their bodies and what they believe should be done with or to them. These influences intersect with rape myths and consent culture, reinforcing social conditions that profoundly affect young women's sense of voice and agency. Such conditions shape their engagement with sexual identity, access to personal rights, and capacity for critical awareness. By analysing these dynamics, this chapter illuminates how young women navigate contemporary gendered expectations and explores pathways for fostering agency and self-determined sexual identities.

Heteronormativity

This section begins by examining how heteronormativity structures power, disciplines desire, and constrains resistance – shaping how young women are positioned and come to understand gender, sexuality, and relational norms. Gender, as a social construct shaped by political, social, and historical contexts, informs how young women are taught to express their sexuality. This stands in

contrast to ‘sex’, which refers to biological differences rooted in DNA and genitalia, often framed as ‘natural’ and ‘factual’ determinants (Riley et al., 2016). From birth, individuals are immersed in environments that teach gender norms, embedding expectations about how they should think, feel, and behave in alignment with socially accepted notions of femininity and masculinity. Heterosexuality is afforded the most social acceptance, particularly for feminine expression, making it the desirable standard for those seeking mainstream validation (Semlyen & Ellis, 2023).

Heterosexual norms rely on entrenched constructs of gender difference, defining and reinforcing masculine dominance and feminine submissiveness through media representations and cultural narratives. These constructs uphold traditional hierarchies within gender roles, perpetuating power imbalances between men and women. Hegemonic masculinity, as described by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), represents the culturally dominant form of masculinity that sustains patriarchal power structures. Within this framework, femininity plays a subordinate role, reinforcing male power both in public and private spheres (Robnett & Vierra, 2023). Connell’s (1987) concept of ‘emphasised femininity’ aligns with this dynamic, describing a form of femininity that complements and supports the dominance of masculinity by embodying traits such as nurturance, passivity, and compliance.

Connell’s (1987) framework positions gender within a system of power relations, highlighting how it shapes identities, strengthens inequalities, and marginalises nonconforming masculinities and femininities, as well as LGBTQIA+ identities. These power dynamics operate as a ‘regime of truth’, normalising and perpetuating certain views of the world. Drawing on Gramscian concepts of hegemony – where power is maintained not just through force but through the subtle securing of consent – Connell (2013), along with Kincaid et al. (2022) and Schippers (2007), argued that

emphasised femininity reflects a perceived ‘consent’ to subordination, whereby dominant groups frame their interests as mutually beneficial, making inequality seem natural and acceptable (Paechter, 2018).

In elite girls’ schools, emphasised femininity plays a central role in shaping social hierarchies and performances of gender (Allan & Charles, 2014; Charles, 2010). This form of femininity creates a binary framework that aligns with hegemonic masculinity, which is often seen as desirable by many young men (Semlyen & Ellis, 2023). Gender performances within these environments are rigidly defined, reflecting deeply entrenched norms of heterosexuality. McCann (2022) termed these ‘rigid femininities’, emphasising how inflexible gender expectations are upheld to conform to what hooks (2012) described as the ‘imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy’.

The elite school environment fosters a particular version of femininity that positions certain young women as socially privileged within female peer groups. This idealised femininity underpins heterosexual norms while maintaining a subordinate role in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Young women, exhibiting traits typically associated with masculinity – such as intellectualism, independence, or boldness – can jeopardise their social standing. To mitigate this, they may adopt traditional feminine traits of caring and compliance, reinforcing their subordinate status (Mattsson, 2015; Rogg, 2001). Furthermore, the expectations placed on young women in these elite settings are often tied to neoliberal ideologies, which intensify the pressure to conform. Neoliberalism encourages individual responsibility and success while ignoring the structural constraints young women face. This exacerbates the challenges of navigating the narrow confines of acceptable femininity and highlights the interplay between heteronormativity, privilege, and systemic inequality.

Neoliberalism

Building on the gendered hierarchies described above, this section explores how neoliberal ideologies shape young women's sense of choice, success, and self-regulation within elite school environments. Neoliberal ideologies suggest that women now 'have it all', framing sexism and gender inequality as relics of a bygone era (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014; McRobbie, 2008). The girl power rhetoric of the 1990s celebrated women as empowered, not through collective resistance but through individual choice, particularly in the realm of sexuality. This shift reframed sexual objectification as sexual subjectification, inviting women to claim agency by choosing to objectify themselves (Riley et al., 2023). Within this narrative, any lingering inequities were explained away as either natural biological differences or the result of women's own choices (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), thus positioning feminism as outdated and unnecessary.

This evolution of empowerment, where women's choices are framed as the ultimate marker of agency, obscures the structural constraints that continue to shape those choices. As Gill (2007) aptly noted, the 'look' of a woman who pleases herself is indistinguishable from the one who conforms to societal expectations. In both cases, the external appearance aligns with dominant norms of femininity, erasing distinctions between agency and compliance (Farvid & Braun, 2014).

For young women in elite school environments, these neoliberal ideals are tightly interwoven with notions of excellence and success (Charles & Allan, 2022). Mattsson (2015) described how economic, social, and cultural capital combine to form a woman's social positioning. In these contexts, economic capital often reflects parental wealth and the privileges it affords, while social capital is derived from the intricate networks and relationships within peer groups. Cultural capital, expressed through clothing, grooming, and adherence to specific aesthetic and behavioural

standards, becomes a critical measure of value. Together, these elements create a framework of 'excellence' that young women are expected to embody.

The emphasis on excellence fosters what Essed and Goldberg (2002) termed 'cloning culture', a process by which social structures systematically reproduce the positions of privileged groups. Within this framework, young women are encouraged to emulate narrowly defined models of femininity that feel both safe and familiar. This homogeneity provides social legitimacy within peer groups and helps maintain the hierarchical structures of privilege and power. In elite school settings, the cloning culture reinforces rigid norms of femininity, limiting diversity in how young women express themselves and interact with the world (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). By aligning with these prescribed ideals, young women gain access to a form of social currency that appears to offer strength and security. Yet, this comes at the cost of individual agency and diversity. The narrowly defined parameters of femininity create a tension between the appearance of choice and the reality of constraint, leaving little room for alternative ways of being or resisting the norms that shape their experiences.

Postfeminism

Building on neoliberal ideals, this section explores how postfeminist discourse constructs an illusion of agency that masks systemic inequality, reinforcing contradictory expectations around femininity, sexuality, and success. Cloning culture, with its emphasis on homogeneity in feminine expression and the perpetuation of existing social hierarchies, sets the stage for the emergence of what Rosalind Gill (2007) theorised as a postfeminist sensibility. This perspective reframes femininity within a neoliberal context, where rhetoric foregrounds individual agency and choice while structural inequities are obscured. Within this framework, young women are increasingly

conditioned to adopt traits such as positive thinking, resilience, and expectations of self-confidence – qualities deemed essential for navigating the neoliberal landscape, despite an often-concurrent diminution in bodily awareness. These psychological and cultural dispositions, when combined, act as powerful regulatory forces (Gill, 2017) that situate responsibility for success and failure firmly on the individual, detaching these outcomes from broader cultural conditions and systemic forces.

As a result, the ability to critically engage with structural inequities and cultural influences shaping young women's concepts of body, agency, and choice, is significantly muted, made alternative, if not entirely silenced. This has profound implications for how young women 'perform' sexually, engage in relationships, and pursue academic and professional achievements. Studies have demonstrated how young women are held to account for everything from maintaining 'effortless' perfect bodies to achieving 'effortless' academic success (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gonick et al., 2009; McRobbie, 2007, 2008, 2015; Riley et al., 2016; Ringrose & Renold, 2012); expectations that exemplify what Berlant (2011) termed 'cruel optimism': attachments to aspirational ideals that appear empowering but ultimately intensify self-surveillance and emotional strain. However, the promise of success through education and career advancement is often undercut by enduring postfeminist and neoliberal narratives that continue to define women's value through their relational roles – primarily as dutiful daughters, supportive partners, and future mothers. If success is promoted as an individualised pursuit without access to broader systemic change, then the very structures that limit young women's options remain intact. These often-unattainable standards reflect a femininity that presents women as simultaneously sexual and

available, yet innocent and passive, embedding contradictory expectations that constrain their personal and relational lives and also their access to self-determined professional futures.

Neoliberal postfeminism, viewed as an extension of neoliberalism, significantly shapes young women's relationships with their bodies and sexual autonomy. In this era, sexuality is not merely a personal aspect of life but has become a marketable commodity, portrayed through the lenses of pornography, pornified advertising, and media. These influences craft a narrative suggesting that managing one's sexuality appropriately can lead to success, independence, and desirability, reinforcing the ideals of capitalism. Within this framing, young women are portrayed as empowered and self-determined, capable of navigating their sexuality assertively. They are encouraged to believe they can make informed choices about their sexual relationships, leave unhealthy situations, and safeguard themselves in social settings (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

However, this narrative oversimplifies the complexities young women face in a society that delivers conflicting messages about sexuality and autonomy. They are expected to be sexy yet demure, embodying the contradictory roles of being sexually agentic while remaining socially compliant. The societal push for them to manage their sexuality 'correctly' in order to avoid negative outcomes subtly shifts blame onto individual women when they encounter unwanted advances or sexual violence (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; McCann, 2022; McRobbie, 2007). This narrative perpetuates a culture of victim-blaming, masking the systemic issues contributing to these experiences (Healy-Cullen et al., 2023a; Moran, 2017).

By portraying young women as fully in control, the discourse around neoliberal postfeminism fails to acknowledge the intricate ways in which power dynamics, societal expectations, and the

pervasive influence of a pornified culture complicate their experiences. This framing obscures the real challenges they face, suggesting that any distress they encounter is solely a result of their own choices rather than a reflection of broader societal problems (Gavey, 2019). As a result, young women's responses to their lived realities are often problematised, with their experiences measured against mainstream ideals of desirability, othering those who fail to conform to these standards (Rimke, 2020; Swartz, 2013).

A postfeminist sensibility, positions young women in a precarious bind, where their autonomy is celebrated only to the extent that it aligns with predetermined societal ideals. This chapter will continue to explore how these dynamics shape young women's identities, behaviours, and aspirations, particularly in elite school environments where ideals of effortless achievement and contradictory femininity are both aspirational and oppressive. These dynamics are particularly acute in elite school environments, where postfeminist ideals of effortless success are tightly woven into institutional values, shaping young women's sense of self and social legitimacy.

Elite Schools in a Neoliberal Postfeminist World

This section focuses on the specific dynamics at play within socioeconomically advantaged schools, where privilege, neoliberalism, and postfeminist ideals intersect to shape how young women experience and perform femininity (Charles & Allan 2022). Students from elite schools often face a unique dilemma in their (in)ability to critique their privilege. Encased in environments that claim to celebrate meritocracy, individual responsibility, and competitiveness, these young people are socialised to uphold and perpetuate the status quo, often without fully recognising the systemic forces that enable their success (Charles & Allan, 2022; Goodman, 2010; Swalwell, 2013). The elite school environment may disregard the structural inequalities that shape

opportunities, limiting students' ability to empathise with marginalised groups while creating a profound disconnection from societal realities faced by those outside their privileged bubble (DiAngelo, 2018).

In these settings, privilege is often invisible to those who benefit from it, reinforcing a narrative that equates individual merit with deserved success. Students, therefore, can become complicit in reproducing social hierarchies, even when engaging in seemingly altruistic activities like community service. These efforts, while often well-meaning, can perpetuate what (Freire, 1996) described as 'false generosity', where charitable acts soften the appearance of domination without disrupting the systemic inequalities that necessitate such acts in the first place. For example, service-learning projects in elite schools may frame engagement with marginalised communities as opportunities for students to 'give back', rather than encouraging critical reflection on the societal structures that uphold and produce inequity (Catlett & Proweller, 2011).

This dynamic extends to the ways feminist ideas are engaged with within these institutions. While feminist rhetoric is increasingly visible in elite school environments – through campaigns for equality, leadership programmes for young women, or discussions about consent – these initiatives often lack the depth needed to challenge entrenched systems of power. Instead, they risk becoming part of what Giraldi and Monk-Turner (2017) described as a 'palatable feminism', which highlights issues without addressing the deeper cultural and structural mechanisms that enable them. This can normalise inequities by bringing them into the open without disrupting the discourses and structures that sustain them. Such approaches often result in non-performativity, where institutional gestures towards equity fail to enact meaningful change (Ahmed, 2012).

Such environments reinforce a culture of conformity and homogeneity. Within these environments, students adopt a shared set of values and behaviours that ensure social safety and legitimacy within their peer groups. However, this can discourage critical thinking and resistance, as deviation from these norms can threaten one's social standing. As a result, young women from elite schools often face a double bind: they are expected to embody independence and empowerment while remaining complicit in maintaining structures of privilege and inequality. This dynamic is particularly evident in the ways that elite schools engage with racial and socioeconomic diversity, often framing inclusion as a benevolent gesture rather than a necessary systemic shift (Ahmed, 2012; Leonardo, 2009). In this context, the potential for meaningful critique and resistance is constrained. However, opportunities exist to disrupt this narrative.

By fostering critical consciousness and encouraging students to engage with feminist and anti-racist frameworks, elite schools can move beyond superficial gestures of equality. For example, integrating critical pedagogy into curricula – where students actively question and analyse systems of power – could help challenge the neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies that dominate these spaces. Additionally, creating platforms for dialogue across diverse groups could expose students to alternative perspectives, breaking down the barriers that sustain privilege and inequity.

Elite schools, therefore, occupy a paradoxical position where they are both sites of immense privilege and potential hubs for transformative change. Recognising and addressing the contradictions inherent in these spaces is essential for fostering a generation of young women who are successful by neoliberal standards and critically engaged and committed to challenging systemic injustice. Yet, even within these privileged settings, young women's emotional and

sexual experiences are often framed through deficit lenses shaped by school cultures and broader institutional discourses that medicalise and individualise their distress.

Pathologising Young Women's Experiences

While cultural discourse often frames young women as sexually autonomous, this section examines how their experiences are routinely medicalised, pathologised, and shaped by gendered assumptions within institutions such as schools and healthcare. Young women's experiences with sexuality are shaped by a complex interplay of institutional norms, cultural narratives, and societal expectations that often pathologise or stigmatise their desires, behaviours, and identities. Rather than addressing the structural dynamics underpinning these experiences, prevailing discourses tend to individualise them – casting distress or difficulty as a matter of poor judgement, failed self-regulation, or personal inadequacy (Orchowski et al., 2013). Within this framing, young women are expected to self-manage risk, uphold idealised standards of health and respectability, and ensure sexual encounters remain equitable, regardless of the power imbalances they must navigate. This reinforces rigid, often contradictory, expectations while masking the broader systems that constrain their choices.

Institutions such as schools and healthcare systems contribute significantly to these narratives. Sex education, for instance, often fails to address female sexuality in a holistic way, focusing instead on risk-avoidance and reproductive health (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2023). This narrow scope leaves young women ill-equipped to explore their sexual identities with confidence and autonomy, perpetuating a broader cultural misunderstanding of their sexual health needs. The prevailing discourse emphasises the dangers and risks of female sexuality – pregnancy, disease, and social censure – while neglecting to celebrate agency, pleasure, and the forms of resilience

that arise from critical awareness and collective support. As a result, young women frequently internalise shame and self-doubt, feeling that their desires or behaviours deviate from societal expectations.

The medicalisation of young women's experiences compounds the issue by framing emotional and relational struggles as symptoms of individual dysfunction. When they seek support, their concerns are often pathologised, sidelining the cultural and gendered dynamics underpinning their experiences. This diagnostic focus isolates their responses from the structural conditions in which they arise, reinforcing narratives of personal blame and contributing to a broader culture of victim-blaming (Cosgrove & Wheeler, 2013; Marecek & Gavey, 2013; Ussher, 2013). Women's bodies, long 'othered' in medical and psychological discourse, are often judged against male-centred norms, reinforcing inequities in diagnosis and treatment (Perez, 2019). Neurodivergence – such as ADHD and autism – is frequently overlooked in young women, with symptoms misdiagnosed as anxiety or depression because they do not fit male-centred diagnostic criteria. Many women only receive an accurate diagnosis in adulthood, often after years of struggling with self-esteem, relationships, and identity (Craddock, 2024). Similarly, conditions such as endometriosis are frequently dismissed as 'normal period pain', leading to significant delays in diagnosis and treatment (Seear, 2009; Votruba, 2023).

Psychiatric diagnoses, too, reflect these biases. Young women experiencing emotional distress or difficulty navigating relationships may be more likely to receive diagnoses such as borderline personality disorder (BPD), a label disproportionately assigned to women and often used to frame emotional responses as excessive or manipulative (Bjorklund, 2006; Marecek & Gavey, 2013). By contrast, men exhibiting similar distress are more likely to receive a diagnosis of post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), positioning their reactions as understandable responses to external events rather than as inherent dysfunction (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2004). Within sexual and reproductive health settings, these same patterns emerge. The normalisation of young women's pain contributes to the frequent dismissal of conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and vaginismus – both of which can significantly impact mental health and sexual well-being yet are often trivialised or overlooked by medical professionals (Zaks et al., 2023). Similarly, young women seeking birth control often encounter resistance, as their reproductive choices are second-guessed or dismissed under paternalistic assumptions that they lack the maturity or competence to make informed decisions (O'Dell, 2023).

These patterns are further intensified for women from marginalised backgrounds, including women of colour and those from lower socioeconomic groups, who are even more likely to experience medical gaslighting. Their symptoms are frequently minimised or attributed to psychosomatic causes rather than legitimate medical conditions (Leece, 2024). Black women, for instance, are less likely to be prescribed pain medication due to deeply embedded stereotypes suggesting they have a higher pain tolerance, a bias with roots in colonial-era medical experimentation (Sowemimo, 2023). These examples underscore the ways in which the medicalisation of young women's experiences reflects systemic gendered biases, reinforcing the victim-blaming narrative and contributing to ongoing health disparities.

Diagnoses such as pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder or BPD, for instance, reflect ideological biases rather than objective criteria (Cosgrove & Wheeler, 2013; Marecek & Gavey, 2013). These labels medicalise diverse sexual and emotional responses and reinforce heteronormative ideals, upholding a broader cultural agenda that seeks to regulate and define female sexuality (Ussher,

2013). The cultural and medical pathologisation of young women's experiences further obscures structural roots of distress and shapes how distress can be recognised, expressed, and treated. Diagnostic frameworks often fail to account for the sociocultural contexts in which distress emerges, narrowing the spectrum of acceptable emotion and codifying particular responses as abnormal or excessive. This has implications for how young women's accounts of harm are received, judged, or dismissed, especially in relation to sexual experiences (Peters, 2021).

Diagnostic framing risks silencing systemic critiques and perpetuating the conditions that contribute to women's distress. The gendered scrutiny of women's reactions to sexual experiences reflects broader societal biases. For instance, a woman who dispassionately describes a sexual assault may be labelled a liar, while one who expresses overt distress might be deemed overly emotional or unreliable (Gavey, 2019). These conflicting labels underscore the rigid expectations placed on women to conform to narrow definitions of appropriate behaviour. Such scrutiny is heightened within the prevailing heteronormative framework, where individuals' social legitimacy depends on their alignment with dominant discourses. Women's responses to their experiences are often judged against these standards, leading to the marginalisation of those who deviate from them.

Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of biopower offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics, referring to the subtle mechanisms through which institutions and cultural norms regulate individuals' behaviours, often leading them to self-police their actions and bodies. Rather than being imposed overtly, this regulation is internalised, shaping how young women experience their emotions, bodies, and choices as sites of constant surveillance and correction. The Panopticon, another Foucauldian concept, is particularly relevant here. It describes a system of

surveillance in which individuals internalise the gaze of authority, modifying their behaviour in anticipation of being watched (Foucault, 1979).

In the context of young women's sexuality, the interplay between biopower and panoptic surveillance manifests in the medicalisation of their experiences, encouraging compliance with normative femininity. By focusing on the broader societal and cultural pressures shaping young women's experiences, limiting frameworks that reduce their (appropriate) responses to mistreatment to individual pathology can be challenged. Recognising young women's capacity for agency, pleasure, and resilience requires a shift towards a nuanced understanding of female sexuality – one that values its complexities and rejects reductive, pathologising narratives (Perez, 2019; Ussher, 2006; Ussher, 2013). In doing so, the systemic injustices that shape young women's lives and promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of their experiences can begin to be addressed.

Pornography as Cultural Influence

Following the discussion of how institutions pathologise and individualise young women's experiences, this section turns to pornography as a powerful cultural force that both reflects and reinforces gendered expectations around sex, consent, and power. It considers how the black-and-white portrayals of sex and desire in pornography contribute to societal misunderstandings and further complicate young women's navigation of these issues.

Pornography, particularly in its mainstream heterosexual form, remains a site of academic and feminist debate. However, despite its saturation in young people's digital lives, it is rarely addressed explicitly in school curricula or policy discourse – an omission noted in recent

scholarship as reinforcing broader cultural silences around sex and power (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). Some scholars argue that pornography can provide a space for young people to explore sexuality and develop positive sexual identities (Attwood et al., 2018), while others critique it as a medium that perpetuates harmful, misogynistic attitudes and reinforces restrictive gender norms (Romney, 2020). Regardless of these debates, there is widespread agreement that pornography has become one of the most accessible and influential sources of sexual information for young people (Healy-Cullen, Taylor, Ross, et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2021).

With rapid advances in digital technologies, pornography is more accessible than ever, particularly for young people with limited financial resources who engage primarily with freely available, mainstream content (Massey et al., 2021). This saturation has significant implications for how young people learn about sex, relationships, and gender roles. Much of mainstream pornography relies heavily on narratives involving power imbalances, coercion, and tropes where women's initial refusals transition into eventual compliance or pleasure, reinforcing a 'no means yes' subtext (Willis et al., 2020). These portrayals convey problematic messages about sexual entitlement and the legitimacy of disregarding female refusal, positioning women's bodies as commodities rather than autonomous subjects (Flood, 2009; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Marcantonio et al., 2018; Mulholland, 2013).

Pornographic scripts often devalue qualities such as empathy, mutual regard, and emotional connection – elements coded as feminine and thus rendered secondary to male pleasure (Allen, 2006; Bridges et al., 2010; Lim et al., 2017). Instead, male dominance is privileged, leaving little space for female agency or genuine consent. Pornography, in this sense, does not operate in isolation but amplifies and reinforces existing gender inequalities that extend beyond sexual

contexts (Connell, 2013; Gavey, 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge that pornography does not create these inequalities; rather, it capitalises on and intensifies them (Waterman et al., 2022). Even if pornography were eliminated, the structural dynamics of gendered control, objectification, and coercion would remain intact (Connell, 2013; Gavey, 2019).

These dynamics reflect broader socio-cultural contradictions that young women must navigate: to be sexually appealing yet passive, knowledgeable yet innocent, and autonomous yet pleasing. Such contradictions mirror patterns found in neoliberal postfeminism, where young women are told they have ‘choice’ and agency, even as they are constrained by rigid, prescriptive gender roles (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Importantly, pornography is not merely an external influence but one that interacts with pre-existing socio-cultural conditions, reinforcing narratives that young women must negotiate in their daily lives. This is particularly relevant in high-achieving school environments where the imperative to succeed academically coexists with pressures to conform to contradictory ideals of femininity (McRobbie, 2015).

While ethical pornography exists, featuring diverse representations, transparent consent, and realistic portrayals of intimacy, research suggests that young people, especially young men, are less likely to seek it out (Healy-Cullen, Morison, et al., 2022). Additionally, ethical definitions are decided upon by the producer, thereby lacking consistency and true ethical standards across the industry (Lecomte et al., 2024). The lack of accessibility to ethical alternatives, combined with the widespread availability of mainstream pornography, reinforces the idea that rough, performative, and often non-consensual acts are part of the ‘sexual norm’. It raises questions about how young people internalise these representations and how they shape approaches to relationships and intimacy in ways that may not be healthy or sustainable (Ashton et al., 2020; Maes et al., 2024;

Megan et al., 2016). However, awareness alone does not insulate young people from the influence of pornography (Crabbe & Flood, 2021; McGlynn, 2022). Findings in body image research reveal that women, despite knowing about Photoshop and digital alterations, continue to strive for the unattainable beauty standards that bombarded them (Bhana, 2023). The same paradox applies to pornography – young people may intellectually critique it, yet still internalise its scripts, expectations, and performances, shaping their sexual interactions in ways that may not always be healthy or sustainable.

The Role of Masculinity and Sexual Scripts

To more fully understand how gendered inequalities are maintained, this section examines the construction of dominant heterosexual masculinity and the discourses that shape young men's sexual expectations and behaviours. Young men experience considerable cultural and social pressure to adopt dominant sexual roles, where their identities are tied to sexual conquest and competence (Phillips, 2000). The male sex drive discourse constructs men's sexual desire as biologically driven and insatiable, positioning women as having a lower libido and, therefore, needing to prioritise male sexual needs (Gavey, 2019; Hollway, 1984b). These beliefs may contribute to perceptions of masculinity as tied to sexual aggression and to interpret rejection as a threat to their status, which can further justify coercive behaviours (Ray & Parkhill, 2023).

Three dominant discourses shape these expectations:

1. The male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984a) constructs men as biologically predisposed to seek out and initiate sex, reinforcing ideas of male entitlement and framing sexual aggression as natural.

2. The 'to have and to hold' discourse (Hollway, 1984a) presents women as gatekeepers of sex, responsible for sustaining relationships through emotional labour and sexual availability, thereby pressuring them to prioritise male pleasure.
3. Permissive discourses (Hollway, 1984a; Jackson & Cram, 2003) promote sexual freedom but often do so within an individualistic framework that ignores structural inequalities, reinforcing the idea that young women are fully responsible for managing sexual interactions.

Building on these discourses, Kitzinger and Frith (1999) foundational study highlighted the challenges many young women face in asserting refusal to sexual advances. While the concept of women as gatekeepers of sex has been previously discussed, their research illuminated how dominant gender roles, positioning women as passive and nurturing, further complicate the ability to assert non-consent (Jack, 1991; Jack & Ali, 2010). These findings intersect with broader assumptions about male sexuality, where men are framed as always desiring and women as responsible for regulating men's impulses (Jones et al., 2024). Such discourses, reinforced through media, peer groups, and pornography, contribute to an environment in which coercive behaviour can be normalised, making it more difficult for young women to identify, articulate, and resist unwanted sexual advances (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019; Potts, 2000; Powell, 2010).

Despite these constraints, young women actively negotiate, resist, and challenge dominant sexual scripts. Research highlights how peer-based discussions and participatory feminist interventions create opportunities for young women to critique dominant norms, reshape sexual expectations, and develop alternative narratives around agency and consent (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a; McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2014). Feminist-informed education and critical discussions provide

spaces where young people can deconstruct harmful cultural scripts and explore alternative ways of understanding sexuality (Clark-Parsons, 2018; Fine, 1988). The development of counter-narratives – framing sex as mutual, communicative, and based on genuine desire rather than obligation – offers an avenue for resistance and transformation (Beres et al., 2019).

Beyond ‘Yes’ and ‘No’: Young Women Navigating Consent, Silencing and Resistance

This section explores how young women experience, negotiate, and resist sexual expectations, paying particular attention to the complexities of consent, silence, and agency. One of the more visible shifts within contemporary discourse is a cultural emphasis on consent, reflecting broader attempts to address gender inequality and sexual violence. Consent education has evolved significantly over the past decade (Harris, 2018), with expanded understandings of verbal and non-verbal cues, and the explicit challenging of rape and communication myths (Beres, 2014; Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Beres et al., 2014). These conversations are increasingly embedded in classroom discussions about sex, yet they often oversimplify consent. Typically framed as the presence or absence of refusal, resistance, or negative behaviour (Thiessen et al., 2021; Whittington, 2021), these simplified approaches fail to address the complex social pressures and expectations that shape consent, including contexts of power imbalances or peer pressure.

Importantly, saying no is not always a straightforward act of verbal refusal but involves navigating deeply entrenched gender expectations and social consequences (Baldwin-White, 2021). Women are often expected to be polite, accommodating, and mindful of others’ feelings (Holmström et al., 2020), potentially making assertive refusals socially risky. The expectation to make ‘good choices’ often conflicts with fears of social retribution, further complicating consent as a clear-cut concept (Kessel, 2020). Consent education that fails to address these underlying discourses risks reducing

the concept of consent to ‘how to get her to say yes’ (Marcantonio et al., 2018). Studies highlight that many women consent to unwanted sex to avoid conflict or coercion (Bay-Cheng, 2020; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Conroy et al., 2015; Gavey, 2019; Walker, 1997), underscoring the need for education to tackle more directly gender norms and social scripts.

Neoliberal ideologies compound the issue of consent, positioning young women as autonomous agents responsible for their own protection and choices. Yet, these ideals obscure how gendered expectations produce and reproduce inequities (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Neoliberal frameworks leave young women alienated from tools that could help them reject sexual obligation and resist coercion, further entrenching the very dynamics consent education seeks to address (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). The complexity of consent is further highlighted by the argument that women’s consent is often granted under conditions of dominance and inequality (Basile, 1999). Social coercion, rather than physical force, shapes how consent is negotiated and maintained (Conroy et al., 2015). Within adolescent environments, the ‘good girlfriend’ script reinforces expectations for young women to prioritise male pleasure and fulfil relational obligations, raising critical challenges for consent education (Conroy et al., 2015). Compounding these issues, many consent education programmes fail to discuss female sexual pleasure, leaving young women disconnected from their sexual agency.

The devaluation of female pleasure is closely tied to broader patterns of sexual objectification (Orenstein, 2020). This absence of focus perpetuates a gap in sexual health education, often referred to as “the missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988). Many young women emerge from adolescence with little understanding of their own anatomy and sexual response (Orenstein, 2016), reinforcing their positioning as objects of male gratification rather than autonomous sexual agents.

The resulting lack of confidence and knowledge undermines young women's ability to assert their sexual agency and leaves them vulnerable to coercion (Orenstein, 2016; Tolman, 2000, 2002, 2012).

The onset of puberty marks a pivotal moment in this dynamic. For many girls, this transition brings curiosity and desire but is accompanied by shame and uncertainty, shaped by societal expectations to keep their bodies hidden or protected (Orenstein, 2016). As young men often learn about sex through pornography, many assume (s)expertise despite limited real-life experience (Potts, 2000). Consequently, young women frequently defer decision-making to their male partners, reinforcing patterns of male dominance and female passivity (Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Daniels et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2018). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) concept of the male gaze, societal perceptions encourage young women to monitor and modify their behaviour, disconnecting from their own desires in favour of meeting externally imposed ideals. These expectations, reinforced through media, peer interactions, and dominant cultural scripts, lead young women to navigate their burgeoning sexuality within a framework that prioritises male desires while diminishing female agency. This further complicates the process of developing sexual autonomy, as young women negotiate a space between self-expression and social acceptability.

For those who attempt to resist dominant discourses, the risks can be substantial. Gender norms often frame young women as 'nice', passive, and emotionally available (Maji & Dixit, 2019), creating expectations that silence dissent and prioritise relational harmony. Jack's (1991) self-silencing theory highlighted how young women may suppress their needs and desires to maintain relationships, prioritising safety and acceptance over self-expression (Jack & Ali, 2010; Kaya & Çok, 2021; Smolak & Munstertieger, 2002). Self-silencing can become emotional labour,

contributing to a ‘loss of self’ and increased vulnerability to depression (Maji & Dixit, 2019). Adolescent relationships, in particular, show strong links between self-silencing and depressive symptoms, especially when combined with coercive or unwanted sexual experiences (Harper & Welsh, 2007; Little et al., 2011). Peer dynamics can amplify these effects, as fears of social rejection or blame discourage young women from speaking out (Caine, 2020; Deming et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 2022).

The broader implications of self-silencing extend beyond intimate relationships, shaping young women’s identities and social behaviours. Attempts to align with dominant norms often lead to minimising the self – whether through shrinking physical presence, avoiding opinions, or deferring to others (Maji & Dixit, 2019). Cultural reinforcements of these norms appear not only in pornography but also in mainstream media and online harassment (Sheffield, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). These patterns create an environment where harassment and violence are normalised, perpetuating what Sheffield (2020) described as ‘sexual terrorism’. Mainstream pornography, with its depictions of female subjugation, reinforces these messages, pushing women to conform to patriarchal ideals to maintain acceptance (Sheffield, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Breaking free from these constraints often provokes backlash, leaving women caught between conformity and resistance (Aadnesgaard, 2020).

The consequences of self-silencing can manifest in broader psychological outcomes, including disordered eating (Buchholz et al., 2007; Norwood et al., 2011; Oldershaw et al., 2012) and strained relationships (Arcelus et al., 2012). While these effects highlight the dangers of internalising dominant discourses, they also point to the need for alternative narratives and positive deviance strategies. Concepts such as ‘alternative discourses’ and ‘positive deviance’ provide

avenues for challenging these norms and fostering new ways of being (Bordo, 2020; Emran et al., 2020).

Alternative Discourses and Positive Deviance

This section introduces the concept of positive deviance to explore how young women resist dominant gender norms and generate alternative discourses, often creating new ways of being that challenge and reshape cultural expectations. Within groups, communities, and broader society, dominant norms shape both behaviours and responses to those behaviours. Mainstream narratives establish what is considered normative or deviant, traditionally framing deviance as any action that threatens the stability of social order (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Early research into deviance emphasised its role in maintaining order and enabling control, positioning deviance as behaviour that is forbidden, disvalued, or offensive (Scull, 1988). This framing has since evolved to include more constructive interpretations. Positive deviance – or non-compliance – describes behaviours that challenge norms with honourable intentions, offering alternative solutions to common problems (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004).

Within adolescent relationships, perceived deviance can take many forms, ranging from behaviours that disrupt normative gender expectations to actions that challenge established hierarchies (Mulvey & Killen, 2017). Examples include young people who deviate from heteronormative scripts, such as those in LGBTQIA+ communities who create alternative ways of being and relating (Semlyen & Ellis, 2023; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). Even within heterosexual interactions deviations can occur, although some forms of non-conformity are less socially acceptable than others. For instance, a young woman who reports a sexual assault by a male peer might be seen as transgressing expectations of silence and loyalty, risking isolation and

blame (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019). As explored earlier, speaking out against sexual harm often disrupts peer group dynamics, leaving young women vulnerable to exclusion and disbelief.

Nevertheless, some young women resist these pressures, accessing discursive frameworks that enable them to articulate injustice and critique systemic betrayals. Their ability to challenge dominant narratives about peer sexual assault stems not merely from individual resilience or self-efficacy but from the broader social and cultural contexts they inhabit (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). These frameworks offer resources for collective support, amplifying young women's capacity to resist harmful norms and assert alternative perspectives (Jordan et al., 2022; Messner, 2016). In these contexts, agency is not simply an individual quality but emerges relationally – fostered by shared understandings, solidarity, and the presence of like-minded peers.

Positive deviance, in this sense, serves as both a reflection and a challenge to established norms, creating openings for cultural and social change (Herington & van de Fliert, 2018). Practical applications of positive deviance often focus on identifying outliers – those who succeed despite systemic barriers – and using their strategies as models for change (Herington & van de Fliert, 2018; Long et al., 2013). Crucially, solutions developed within communities are often more sustainable and impactful than those imposed externally, particularly in addressing entrenched issues such as gender inequality, sexual violence, and cultural expectations surrounding femininity (Herington & van de Fliert, 2018; Long et al., 2013; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003).

Language plays a pivotal role in the positive deviance process, providing the means through which young women interpret and express their experiences, as well as reshape their identities (McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance 2014). Narratives about sexual assault and gendered experiences are

situated within specific cultural, historical, and social contexts, which constrain how these stories can be told (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Ken Plummer (2002) has highlighted the challenges women face in voicing experiences of sexual violence, questioning:

What allows a ‘rape story’ to be told, to be felt, to be heard, to be legitimated?... When can [a woman who has been raped] give public voice to it, and indeed to which public will she voice it; her partner, her child, her parent, the police, the media, the court, a rape hotline, the defendant? When will it be a credible voice, and when will it be an incredible one? (pp. 26-27)

These constraints underscore the need for young women to have greater access to supportive communities where they can develop shared language and strategies to resist dominant narratives. Through solidarity and collective action, young women can trouble and reshape the master narratives that often silence or delegitimise their experiences (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). Doing so requires a shift from individualised, therapeutic approaches toward systemic, emancipatory efforts that prioritise structural change and cultural critique (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Key to this transformation is enabling women to tell their stories in ways that resonate with their lived experiences and identities, rather than confining them to victim or survivor narratives that risk further disempowerment (Marecek, 1999). By reconstructing the terms of their engagement with these experiences, young women create opportunities to counter dominant discourses and reclaim agency (Marecek, 1999).

Countering master narratives and systemic oppression also requires collective identities that foster empathy, solidarity, and the courage to speak what is often unspeakable (Morrissey, 2018). Online

platforms, for instance, offer spaces where education, advocacy, and support intersect, providing young women with opportunities to connect, raise awareness, and challenge harmful norms (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019; Mendes et al., 2019). Despite the risks of online backlash (Lewis et al., 2017), young women who leverage these platforms to question harmful norms and assert alternative narratives embody positive deviance. For some young women, simply choosing to be sexually active conflicts with cultural expectations or family values, placing them in precarious positions if they experience sexual harm. Rather than receiving support, they may face blame or shame for their perceived transgressions. Yet, despite these constraints, many young women continue to carve out spaces for resistance, accountability, and collective support. Their willingness to take risks – whether through speaking out, mobilising online, or challenging social hierarchies – creates openings for others to follow, demonstrating the transformative potential of positive deviance.

Summary

This chapter examined the complex interplay between societal norms, individual agency, and the social construction of gender roles, focusing on how these dynamics influence young women's experiences of femininity and sexuality. It highlighted the pressures exerted by heterosexual norms, particularly within socioeconomically advantaged environments, where femininity is often constructed in relation to counterbalancing masculinity. These expectations shape behaviours, attitudes, and sexual scripts, such as those found in pornified media, that prioritise male desire, leaving young women to negotiate their agency within frameworks of compliance and constraint.

At the same time, the chapter highlighted how youth culture is challenging and reshaping dominant discourses. Feminist ideologies and collective activism are creating spaces where alternative

narratives around sexuality and consent can flourish. These efforts illustrate the importance of addressing systemic issues through individual resilience and collective engagement and discursive fields that foster solidarity and support.

Additionally, this chapter examined how the literature challenges deficit-based framings of young women, highlighting their capacity to negotiate, resist, and reimagine dominant gendered expectations. Studies point to the role of peer discourse, feminist-informed education, and collective critique in enabling young women to disrupt normative sexual scripts and develop alternative understandings of intimacy, self-expression, and agency. The concept of positive deviance was explored as a theoretical framework for understanding how normative constraints may be challenged from within, offering insight into the possibilities for cultural and social transformation.

Having explored the theoretical and empirical foundations that frame this research – focusing on gender, sexuality, and the socio-cultural forces shaping young women’s experiences – this chapter has traced how power, desire, and resistance circulate through cultural discourses. The following chapter shifts attention to the methodological approach. Grounded in feminist theory and informed by principles of CPAR, this study prioritises collaboration, dialogue, and reflexivity. These methodological choices reflect a commitment to ethical research and the creation of spaces where young women can critically engage with, resist, and reimagine dominant narratives surrounding heterosexual femininity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research as Praxis: Co-creating Change Through Reflection and Action With Young Women

At the core of my research is a deep-seated desire to foster positive change for young women. This desire has directly shaped my choice of CPAR as a methodology, ensuring that young women's voices are not only included but central to the research process. This work is driven by an aim to create spaces where young women can gather and see their experiences and challenges reflected in their peers, contrasting the often isolating and idealised portrayals found in today's digital realms of perceived perfection and relentless pursuit of 'leadership qualities' as a measure of a young woman's value and potential. Such environments can leave young women feeling alone in their distressing and confusing experiences, with few avenues for safe expression or shared understanding. They are simultaneously encouraged to embody confidence, resilience, and ambition – traits that often prioritise visibility and achievement over well-being and authenticity. While decades of progress and movements like #MeToo have amplified women's voices, fostered collaboration, and challenged the normalisation of sexual predation, many aspects of gendered oppression remain unchanged, and such experiences continue to persist.

When I began working as a counsellor at a single-sex girls' school – after years teaching in co-educational settings – I encountered a new depth of insight into how young women understood and talked about sex and relationships. Many of their accounts were laced with silence, shame, and deeply gendered expectations about how to behave as someone's girlfriend or in casual encounters. The young women often came to counselling believing something was wrong within themselves – diagnosing their distress as depression or anxiety – rather than recognising the social

conditions contributing to their struggles. This research arose from the desire to create space where their voices could be heard and understood within a broader cultural and relational context. I invited participants from another socioeconomically privileged, single-sex girls' high school in the South Island to share their observations with me. Using a CPAR methodology, that included focus groups and workshops, I sought to centralise their voices and add volume to situations where they are often silenced. This is my effort to create space for young women to disrupt a naturalised and problematic discourse and to foster social justice in places where injustice continues to flourish.

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological framing of the project. First, I introduce the broad theoretical perspectives drawn on. Second, I discuss the methodological scaffolding of CPAR.

Paradigm

This research is grounded in a critical/radical paradigm, drawing on interpretative tools from critical feminist theory and poststructuralism. This paradigm challenges positivist assumptions of an objective reality; instead, situating knowledge as socially constructed and deeply tied to power relations. A critical/radical feminist approach is an interdisciplinary framework concerned with how power, oppression, and gendered structures shape lived experience. It can highlight that dominant constructions of truth and reality have been shaped within patriarchal power structures – historical and contemporary (Gavey, 2010; Grant & Giddings, 2002). Within this perspective, knowledge is understood to be closely tied to power, serving the interests of privileged groups while often invalidating the experiences of marginalised individuals (Freire, 1972; Gavey, 2021). Feminist critical theorists emphasise that claims to objectivity and universal truth have often been used to repress and exclude marginalised groups, granting authority and status to those in power (Dickerson, 2013; Fox, 2014; Gavey, 2021). Whether in religion, secular law, race, or gender,

dominant groups have been positioned as the arbiters of truth; for example, believers over atheists, whites over minority races, or men over women. Rather than simply countering dominant knowledge with alternative facts, the critical/radical research paradigm aims to disrupt and deconstruct the narratives that reinforce systems of oppression (Gavey, 2010). These narratives – steeped in colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist structures – determine whose voices are amplified and whose experiences are dismissed, thereby sustaining inequities (Gavey, 1989, 2019).

Ontology and Epistemology

Relativism serves as the foundational ontological premise of this study, asserting that human experience and practice are intrinsically linked to one's perception of reality and truth (Gavey, 2019). From this perspective, individual interpretations of the world are mediated by the social contexts to which one is exposed. These interpretations are inherently historical and contextual, making absolute access to 'reality' or 'truth' unattainable within this framework. A relativist ontology suggests that reality is not singular or fixed but continuously shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts. As Nightingale and Cromby (1999) argued, knowledge is not produced in isolation but emerges through interactions that define what is considered 'true' at different times and places. This reflects the idea of multiple realities, where individuals and groups construct meaning based on their unique positionalities and lived experiences.

This research adopts a social constructionist epistemological stance, which posits that meaning is not inherent but socially and contextually produced. The concept of *différance* (Derrida, 1982) supports this view, illustrating how meanings are contingent, shifting, and never fully fixed. While physical objects may have material properties, their significance is always socially constructed and

subject to reinterpretation. For instance, the meaning of a school uniform is not intrinsic – it is shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional discourses that vary across contexts. Similarly, young women’s understandings of gendered expectations are formed through ongoing social negotiations rather than existing as stable truths. The limits on knowing the world beyond language and text form the foundation of constructionism as an epistemological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Fox, 2014). Therefore, one’s ability to make sense of the world is constrained by the cultural resources available which inform one’s behavioural compass and reinforce normative societal ideas and values. Foucault (1979) referred to this as *pouvoir-savoir*, meaning “being able to do something only as you are able to make sense of it” (Gavey, 2019, p. 81). In this way, social constructionism aligns with qualitative research, as it addresses the cultural systems of meaning that emerge when groups of people gather.

A social constructionist epistemological stance was particularly suited to frame the participants’ discussions of sex and the social expectations placed on them as young women. This epistemological lens allowed for an analysis of how the discussions both produced normalising discourses and, at times, generated alternative discourses that challenged mainstream practices. The ways in which these young women produced, reproduced, or deconstructed ideas formed the core of my investigative interest. By analysing their social interactions within friend groups, I explored how they perpetuated, critiqued, and reshaped traditional belief systems, revealing both continuity and resistance within their cultural frameworks.

Discourse and Subject Positions

A key tenet of critical feminist theory is the concept of discourse, which emphasises that language is both constructed and constructive. Rather than merely reflecting an objective truth, language

actively shapes social understandings and realities (Gill, 2000). Dominant discourses, often perceived as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’, play a crucial role in reinforcing societal norms and power structures. These discourses carry significant authority and are reproduced by those who benefit from them, perpetuating existing hierarchies and inequalities. Conversely, alternative discourses emerge from attempts to create meaning and power within groups seeking to challenge or destabilise the dominant frameworks that have historically marginalised or oppressed them (Gavey, 2010). When bolstered, these alternative discourses can become powerful tools for significant social change, offering new ways of ‘being and seeing’ and carving out space for legitimate new subject positions (Gavey, 2010).

Discourses not only describe actions but actively shape them. They influence how young women see and position themselves within a sexual and sexualised narrative. They determine what can be spoken, who may speak, and with what authority (Gavey, 2010). They construct and define belief systems, values, and knowledge, shaping the power dynamics that govern what young women understand to be their voices. The language available is thus limited and shaped by these discursive structures (Mills, 1997).

Rather than describing the social world, discourses construct it, creating subjects and objects within the realities they produce (Macleod, 2002). For instance, feminism, as a system of meaning, remains marginalised and is often silenced by dominant frameworks around gender, culture, and human behaviour (Gavey, 1989, 2019). Power relations are central to critical feminist inquiry, as they shape and enable particular ways of being while excluding others, especially for women and marginalised groups. Alternative ways of being – those that challenge dominant assumptions about ‘normal’ life – can disrupt these power structures (Barrett, 2005; Fox, 2014; Gavey, 1989, 2010).

The position one can take up in relation to discourse is known as a subject position (Weedon, 1989). Rather than being the sole authors of their beliefs, individuals are shaped by dominant cultural narratives, which offer particular ways of being and thinking. These positions both enable and constrain, determining whether individuals are aligned with dominant, privileged groups or pushed to the margins. For young women navigating heterosexual relationships, subject positions profoundly influence how their behaviours and identities are interpreted (Allen, 2019; Gavey, 2010). The effects of these positions depend on how they are taken up and judged within different cultural contexts. For instance, adults may reproduce discourses of sexual innocence for youth, while peer groups might invoke slut-shaming or determine legitimacy through the framework of a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

Methodology: Critical Participatory Action Research

The theoretical orientation of this research aligns with the methodological approach of Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR). CPAR provided a fitting methodological approach because it directly engaged with the gendered power dynamics, social conditioning, and resistance explored in this study. More than just a participatory tool, CPAR offers a feminist and justice-oriented praxis – foregrounding collaboration, critique, and transformation (Fine & Torre, 2021; Fine et al., 2021).

Originating in liberation psychology and radical social research (Martín-Baró, 1996; Du Bois & Eaton, 1899; Fals-Borda, 1987; Lewin, 1946), CPAR is deeply rooted in movements for anti-colonial resistance, feminist struggle, and community-based activism. While it shares with other participatory approaches a commitment to equity and collaboration, CPAR is distinguished by its

grounding in critical theory and its sustained focus on structural critique and collective transformation (Fine et al., 2021).

CPAR recognises that traditional forms of knowledge production have often served to reinforce systems of privilege and exclusion. Instead of integrating marginalised voices into dominant frameworks, CPAR works to disrupt and reconfigure those frameworks. It positions those most affected by injustice as co-researchers, not subjects, and values their situated knowledges (Collins, 2022; Harding, 1993) as foundational to transformative inquiry. As Fine and Torre (2021) assert, the act of naming injustice is not merely descriptive but political and generative – linking personal experience to broader systems of power.

CPAR draws on intersectional feminist insights to expose how overlapping structures of oppression – including racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity – shape young women's lives. Rather than treating these as separate or additive, CPAR understands them as interwoven and context-dependent, producing complex forms of privilege and marginalisation. The principle of "no research on us, without us," first articulated by South African and Māori activists and later adopted by disability and HIV/AIDS movements, underpins this methodology and its ethical imperative (Fine et al., 2021).

My commitment to CPAR emerged from years of listening to young women in my counselling practice, where the effects of structural injustice are made visible in young women's everyday lives. I have witnessed the silencing, confusion, and self-surveillance that many young women experience around sexuality, consent, and agency – particularly as shaped by neoliberalism and social media. While I bring professional experience, I do not claim authority over their

experiences. I chose CPAR to ensure that this research would not be about young women but *with* them – co-constructing meaning, critique, and potential pathways forward.

The CPAR process structured the research relationally and ethically. Central to this were a series of focus groups and workshops, which are detailed in following sections. Young women were invited to co-define the research focus, shape the workshops, interpret data, and reflect on findings. These processes made visible how the subject positions available to them constrained what could be spoken, and who could speak. A commitment to CPAR meant working with participants to unsettle dominant narratives, interrogate myths and silences, and challenge the "unthought knowns" that shape everyday experience (Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 11). CPAR values vulnerability and relational trust, recognising that sharing lived experience requires courage and care. The workshops created space for openness, discomfort, solidarity, and mutual recognition. Through this, the research became not only a method of inquiry but a space of resistance and imagining otherwise.

A note on the use of 'voice' in this thesis

My reasons for engaging with the concept of 'voice' emerged from intersecting places, and in some ways my approach was more literal than theoretical. I was drawn to the visceral and physical aspects of making a sound; of contributing something of oneself that locates the speaker within a social frame. Across years of working with young women, I had repeatedly observed how often their literal voices in social settings were muted or dismissed, and I often found myself wondering what they would like to have said, beneath the surface of politeness and compliance.

While I fully acknowledge that ‘voice’ is never neutral and is always co-constituted within context-dependent discursive structures, I also wanted to recognise that many young women experience themselves as unable to speak ‘their truth’, to make a comment, or to have their experiences heard or validated. From the margins, this sense of ownership over one’s voice - albeit socially constructed - can nonetheless generate a felt sense of legitimacy and worth.

In that sense, while the discursive framings of voice remain conceptually important within the philosophical underpinnings of this thesis, to deny these young women the opportunity to have their ‘voices’ recognised would risk reinscribing the very silencing that I had repeatedly witnessed. I therefore chose to hold the theoretical critique in one hand while, with the other, making a conscious ethical and political commitment to create space for ‘voice’. This methodological tension - between critique and practice, became a defining feature of the research process.

The following section outlines the theoretical and philosophical foundations that inform this study’s methodological and analytical approach, including contributions from Paulo Freire, Susan Bordo, Michelle Fine, and Nicola Gavey, among others.

Paulo Freire: Foundations of Critical Participatory Approaches

Of particular significance to the field of participatory action research is Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationalist renowned for his groundbreaking pedagogical approach that championed the social and political empowerment of oppressed communities. Freire emphasised the importance of challenging taken-for-granted norms and naturalised conditions that perpetuate economic and social inequities. His work called for a critical awareness of the socio-cultural realities that shape

human experiences and the potential individuals have to reconstruct those realities (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019). Freire (1972) argued that achieving ‘metamorphic social change’ necessitates creating conditions for ‘conscientization’ – a process where individuals develop the capacity to see the possibilities available to them, particularly in relation to the power dynamics that privilege some groups while disadvantaging others (Gavey, 2021).

Freire’s principles align seamlessly with the ethos of CPAR which seeks to create collaborative spaces where marginalised voices are heard and actively shape the research process and its outcomes. His emphasis on dialogical methods and mutual learning resonates deeply with CPAR’s focus on relationality and co-construction of knowledge. Freire’s vision extends beyond critique; it fosters the conditions for individuals to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression, thereby fostering a participatory and transformative framework for action.

Susan Bordo: Feminist Contributions to Participatory Research

Susan Bordo, a feminist scholar, has influenced critical methodologies by interrogating the intersections of culture, power, and the body. Her groundbreaking work, particularly in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Bordo, 2023), challenges the ways societal norms shape women’s embodied experiences and reinforces CPAR’s commitment to addressing structural inequities. Bordo’s insights into how women’s bodies are culturally scripted align with this study’s aim to uncover and critique the hidden dynamics of power influencing young women’s lives.

As a prominent female scholar in a field historically dominated by male voices, Bordo’s contributions are particularly significant. She exemplifies the importance of feminist scholarship in reshaping critical theory and participatory approaches by emphasizing the voices of women and

challenging the androcentric biases that have long shaped academic and cultural discourse. Bordo's work resonates with CPAR's focus on lived experience and its dedication to amplifying the perspectives of those often sidelined in research.

Michelle Fine: Critical Inquiry for Justice

Michelle Fine has been instrumental in shaping CPAR, blending feminist critical theory with participatory methodologies in ways that resonate deeply with this study. Her influential paper 'Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire' (Fine, 1988), brought attention to the silences around young women's voices, particularly in relation to desire – a concept often erased or misunderstood within dominant narratives. Fine's work reflects her commitment to generating and producing knowledge that challenges inequities and foregrounds the lived experiences of those most affected by injustice. Her role as a philosopher and researcher who bridges theory and practice is evident in her ability to critique and create pathways for transformation. The critical approaches Fine employs – bringing silenced voices to the fore and questioning the systems that perpetuate inequality – have significantly influenced my thinking and approach in this research. Her framework has provided a foundation for creating spaces where young women's experiences can be articulated, heard, and validated, underscoring the transformative potential of this methodology.

Nicola Gavey: Cultural Critiques of Power and Sexuality

Similarly, Nicola Gavey's work has been a crucial influence on this thesis, particularly her ability to extend and adapt Foucauldian theory into a feminist framework that addresses the nuances of gendered power. Gavey's critical engagement with how societal discourses shape sexual subjectivity has offered valuable insights into understanding the cultural conditions that young

women navigate. Her book, *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (Gavey, 2019), has informed my exploration of how deeply embedded narratives about gender and sexuality can perpetuate harm and constrain agency. Gavey's emphasis on unpacking these discourses aligns with my efforts to amplify young women's voices and examine the structures that underpin their experiences.

Both Fine and Gavey's contributions have shaped the methodological and analytical approaches of this research, creating a foundation for critical reflection and meaningful action. Building on these theoretical foundations, this research also sought to apply participatory principles in practice. One way this was achieved was through the formation of an advisory group, ensuring that young women were actively involved in shaping the research process.

Advisory Group

Aligned with the participatory ethos of CPAR, I invited Year 13 students from my school to act as research advisors. I addressed the year group, outlining my study and inviting volunteers who might be interested in discussing important issues, refining research questions and processes, and reviewing my ideas for data generation activities. Five students initially stepped forward, and we met one afternoon in my office, where I provided food and a comfortable space to foster open dialogue. I asked them to share what they saw as the pressing issues in the lives of young women their age, particularly in the realms of relationships and sexuality.

The group spoke at length, with palpable energy at times, about the injustices and frustrations they had observed and experienced. They expressed a strong desire for change and a longing for simple acknowledgment of their humanity and equality in the sexual and relational spheres. Their insights

were candid and thoughtful, offering valuable feedback on my workshop plans. For instance, they suggested incorporating social media more deliberately into the conversations, using platforms like TikTok and Instagram as entry points to ground discussions in participants' lived experiences. Their feedback highlighted the value of incorporating a youth advisory voice to allow access to the importance of incorporating digital media as a lens for analysing societal norms. They also asked if we could continue meeting as a group, describing the experience as refreshing and meaningful, a space where they could finally talk about issues they had previously struggles to articulate.

Our meetings fostered a reciprocal learning environment. I shared resources and introduced feminist theories and ideas that resonated with and validated their experiences and emotional responses. In turn, the students shared aspects of their 'culture', their digital lives, social dynamics, and unique ways of understanding the world, which broadened my perspective and enriched the research process. These exchanges deepened my understanding of their lived realities and bolstered their confidence in their voices and ideas, reinforcing the central aim of CPAR: to co-create knowledge and encourage participants as agents of change. The full impact of these meetings and the tangible evidence of their desire for change, can be found in Chapter 4.

Participants and Recruitment

To recruit participants for this study, I approached a socioeconomically privileged, special character, integrated girls' school whose community profile closely resembled the one in which I work. The school maintained strong connections to nearby state and integrated boys' schools, making it a meaningful site for exploring relational dynamics within the wider schooling ecosystem. After obtaining approval, I was invited to speak to the Year 13 cohort at a year group

meeting. I introduced myself and briefly outlined my research focus, inviting participants to share their observations, uncertainties, and hopes as young women navigating a culture shaped by heteronormativity. I framed the study within the broader societal backdrop of a highly sexualised, heterosexual landscape – one that often positions girls in relation to masculine desire and norms. I described how these cultural expectations might shape how they felt about themselves and what they believed they were expected to do sexually, even if they did not identify as heterosexual.

Participants were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria: they needed to be at least 17-years-old and identify as female. While they did not have to identify as heterosexual, I explained that the research focused on the cultural dynamics of heterosexuality – particularly how societal expectations around sex and relationships impact young women. Participants could be sexually active (currently or in the past) or not at all. I emphasised the importance of including non-heterosexual participants, recognising that heteronormative expectations are imposed on all young women, regardless of how they identify or behave (Kelly, 2007).

To my surprise, the meeting sparked significant interest and engagement. Many students asked questions about how to sign up and the time commitment required. The atmosphere in the room was lively, with laughter and banter among the students, and, by the end of the day, nearly a third of the cohort had emailed me to express their interest. The participants organised themselves into friend groups, which created a foundation of trust and openness within the focus groups and workshops. These groups consisted of three, six, and two groups of five participants, though some changes occurred for the second workshop. For example, some participants invited new members if someone from the original group was unable to attend, and one group reduced in size from five to two members. Three participants who felt uncomfortable or hesitant in the first session chose

not to return for the second. All participants were 17-years-old, in Year 13, and represented a mix of day students and boarders.

The young women’s decision to form groups based on existing friendships demonstrated their investment in the process and contributed to a sense of safety within the workshops. Their participation signalled their consent and readiness to discuss sensitive topics like sex, share their observations, and engage in reflective conversations. Those who felt uncomfortable or socially vulnerable in relation to the topic chose not to participate, which helped maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and comfort.

The workshops were designed with an awareness of the cultural pressures unique to socioeconomically advantaged girls’ schools, where narratives of emphasised femininity and resilience often intersect with systemic inequities. Based on what the participants shared, discussions explicitly addressed these cultural dynamics, allowing participants to critique the norms shaping their school environment and their relationships.

The following Tables 1-4 outline the participants. Most participants were Pākehā – a term used in Aotearoa New Zealand to refer to non-Māori people of European descent; with three identifying as Asian, and one participant, who only attended the first focus group, identifying as Māori/Pasifika.

Table 1. *Group 1 Participants*

Focus Group Session 1	Workshop Session 2
Carrie – Asian	Carrie

Inez – Asian	Inez
Brie – Pākehā	Brie
Sara – (Unable to attend)	Sara – European/Pākehā

Table 2. *Group 2 Participants*

Focus Group Session 1	Workshop Session 2
Pam – Pākehā	Pam
Stormi – Pākehā	Stormi
Kim – Pākehā	Kim
Kris – Pākehā	Kris
Scotty – Pākehā	Scotty
Betty – Pākehā	Unavailable
	Erin – Pākehā

Table 3. Group 3 Participants

Focus Group Session 1	Workshop Session 2
Betty – Pākehā	Betty
Rebekah – Pākehā	Rebekah
Hazel – Pākehā	Declined to return
Isla – Pākehā	Declined to return
Maia – Māori/Pasifika	Declined to return

Table 4. Group 4 Participants

Focus Group Session 1	Workshop Session 2
Maureen – Pākehā	Maureen
Skye – Pākehā	Skye
Nigella – Pākehā	Nigella
Mandy – Pākehā	Mandy
Delia – Pākehā	Delia

To ensure a supportive and inclusive environment, I emphasised that participants were not required to share personal information or experiences. While the workshops encouraged collective discussion, they were not intended to function as ‘group therapy’. From the outset, I made it clear that participants could approach me individually at any time, should they wish. After signing up, they were invited to complete a brief form or speak with me directly, providing a chance to share any information they felt was important or to express any concerns. However, no one opted for a

private conversation, and the forms – designed to invite confidential disclosures – yielded no comments. Every precaution was taken to create a safe, respectful, and productive experience for all involved. This included clearly explaining the boundaries of my confidentiality while being transparent about its limits – namely, that I could not guarantee the confidentiality of other group members. The environment we created was designed to affirm the value of each participant’s contribution and to uphold mutual respect throughout the process.

Data Generation: Focus Groups and Workshops

The research I undertook was with a group of people who are often underappreciated as a source of information. Often dismissed as ‘young and naïve’, they are typically seen as needing adult guidance and tutelage, rather than being recognised as possessing unique and valuable insights into their own sociocultural worlds. Creating space for their knowledge opens up the possibility of addressing community challenges by asking those most directly affected. In doing so, it creates a place where participants are listened to, and their experiences and thoughts are valued. This underscores CPAR’s methodological strength: its commitment to co-constructing knowledge and positions participants as equal partners, not passive subjects.

Focus group participation centralises the voices of those directly experiencing the issues under investigation (Harding, 2020; Horner, 2016). This approach values participant knowledge and actively challenges traditional hierarchies of expertise, reflecting feminist critiques of unequal power relations in research. CPAR takes the academic and the non-academic group/community organisation or charity and facilitates equal partnerships in every aspect of the research, from design, analysis, and output (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019; Horner, 2016). The concept of equal partnership is as much an ethic as it is a methodology, in that it uses an underpinning democratic

value in the production of knowledge and human progress through participation (Fine & Torre, 2021; Horner, 2016).

Historically, participatory action research, including CPAR, has been influenced by values of initiating change through theory and practice (praxis), with a focus on improving social situations affected by poverty or discrimination and uncovering ‘expert’ knowledge from within the affected cohort (Fine & Torre, 2021; Fine et al., 2021). CPAR uniquely combines critical orientation with participatory principles, enabling the flattening of hierarchies and resituating those often on the margins. It is particularly aligned with feminist goals of challenging systemic inequities, amplifying silenced voices, and fostering transformative possibilities for collective action.

Data collection began with a focus group approach designed to gather participants’ initial perspectives and surface shared themes. While traditional focus groups are typically structured around researcher-led questions (Kitzinger, 1995), I adopted a more flexible approach, deliberately limiting structure beyond the opening activity to support authentic engagement. This initial activity prompted participants to reflect on societal expectations of young women, setting the stage for deeper discussions. The resulting conversations sparked moments of discomfort, recognition, and critical inquiry – catalysing the conscientisation that became central to subsequent sessions. While the first meeting followed a traditional focus group structure, the second evolved into a more collaborative workshop format. This transition marked a shift toward co-creation and participant-led inquiry, which is explored in more detail later in this chapter.

The significant pressures experienced by these young women stem from social norms that police problematic behaviours, often with the threat of backlash for transgressing them. This made it

more difficult for some to envision alternatives. In the case of young people, resistance practices and counter-discourses may not yet be fully formed or visible. This raises the methodological question of how researchers can make sense of human accounts and recognise not only speech but also ‘silence’ as a site of meaning and potential (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2019). Foucault’s concept of *pouvoir-savoir* highlights how access to critical frameworks can foster an awareness of the personal as political. Such frameworks may help young women identify the ways in which dominant narratives have shaped their sense-making – whether through constraint, negative self-definition, or suppression (Hlavka, 2014) – and, in turn, may create openings for alternative ways of being and knowing.

Because young people are often undervalued as a source of knowledge, their thoughts and many of the discourses they draw from are often not legitimised. Understanding how social systems influence and impact young people’s lived experiences is key to understanding what needs to be changed rather than the assumptions of an adult authority. The CPAR approach to research, which has the goal of social justice and change (Horner, 2016), aligns closely with my ethical practice as a counsellor, where the young person, as expert in their own experience, determines the direction of their therapeutic journey.

A combination of focus groups and workshops, grounded in CPAR (Fine et al., 2021), was used in place of individual interviews for several reasons. Freire (1972) emphasised that transformative social change occurs through collective action, not isolated individual effort. Accordingly, these focus groups were not simply a means of gathering data but were designed to challenge and deconstruct normalised yet harmful ways of being these young women were navigating. The second meeting built on these discussions within a workshop environment, where participants

could share and reflect on their experiences in a space that actively resisted the social norms that typically constrain responses around such issues. Through creative exploration and collective meaning-making, the workshops opened opportunities to question, reinterpret, and pushback against these limitations.

Feminist methodologies, in particular, offer an opportunity to flatten hierarchies and bring marginalised perspectives into the centre of the knowledge production process (Harding, 2020). Participatory methods, such as focus groups, play a critical role by shifting authority away from the researcher and validating subjugated knowledges (Horner, 2016; Naples & Gurr, 2014). My reflections following each workshop were an integral part of the process. After every session, I recorded observations, noted recurring ideas, and documented my responses to what had unfolded. This reflexive practice allowed me to critically engage with the research process, identifying both the power dynamics at play and the ways in which the discussions both disrupted and reproduced dominant narratives. The interplay between social context, positionality, and the recognition of subjugated knowledges underscores the value of these methods in feminist research (Harding, 2020; Horner, 2016; Naples & Gurr, 2014).

Values Informing the Focus Groups and Workshops

Manaakitanga, the principle of respect, care for others, and generosity that underpins ethical research in Aotearoa New Zealand, was a guiding value in shaping the focus groups and workshops. I sought to create a warm and welcoming environment, arranging a large table for all participants to gather around and providing a variety of food options for them to enjoy. This helped to foster a non-judgmental atmosphere where challenging concepts and potentially sensitive topics could be explored with openness and curiosity.

Additionally, wānanga, with its emphasis on collective knowledge creation and respect for Indigenous perspectives, aligns seamlessly with the principles of CPAR. While wānanga can serve as a specific method within CPAR to facilitate deep, culturally grounded discussions, it also enhances CPAR's broader commitment to co-constructing knowledge that reflects the community's values and lived realities. Bringing a cultural lens to the research expands both what is considered allowable and what is actively encouraged. In this context, the 'discussions' and 'thought space' inherent to wānanga invite critical thinking, debate, and the co-creation of both new and inherited knowledge, while also normalising the role of emotion in intellectual and relational processes (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020).

Within the context of this research, I aligned my approach with the philosophical underpinnings of wānanga, creating a space for openness and emotional integrity that honours and reflects the unique cultural setting of Aotearoa New Zealand. This framework provided an opportunity to harness and celebrate the insights, emotions, and lived experiences that participants brought to the research space. As a verb, wānanga refers to an active process of dialogue and group discussion, where participants engage in meaningful conversations on topics of collective importance. More than just conversation, wānanga serves as a way of constructing and shaping knowledge with shared purpose (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). It is a space for deep thinking and collaborative problem-solving, wherein participants can “engage in active and collective thinking and problem-solving; not just talk” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 5).

Central to this collaborative process was ako, a Māori principle meaning both to teach and to learn, where teacher-learner reciprocity fosters reflection, respect, engaged consciousness, and the building of relationships (Akama et al., 2019). Ako, when coupled with wānanga, transforms the

meeting space into one defined by its purpose rather than by preconceived structures or fixed agendas (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). This approach allowed participants to co-create a dynamic and responsive environment that prioritised authenticity and mutual exchange over rigid procedural frameworks.

Although most participants in this study were Pākehā, with three identifying as Asian, and two as Māori/Pasifika (who declined to return), the incorporation of wānanga philosophies enabled authentic and honest conversations. Rather than serving as a specific method, wānanga in this research enhanced the emotional freedom of the space, facilitating openness, flexibility, and a natural flow of dialogue. This cultural framing, dovetailed with manaakitanga (care and generosity) and the principles of CPAR, collectively created a safe and meaningful environment. These elements enabled young women to share their thoughts, learn from one another, critically reflect on assumptions they had previously taken for granted, and collaboratively form new ideas and perspectives. The intersection of wānanga, ako, and CPAR created a deeply relational and engaging process that prioritised collective learning, personal growth, and cultural respect.

From a personal perspective, the addition of Māori principles was important for my own connection to Aotearoa New Zealand. They reflect the participatory and relational approach at the heart of my research, fostering collective meaning-making and critical reflection. As a Pākehā New Zealander, my commitment to upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi is deeply connected to my respect for these ways of being and doing. Growing up in this country, elements of tikanga have been woven into the person I have become, shaping how I engage with others and understand knowledge as something that is relational, lived, and shared. I acknowledge the significance of

these concepts beyond methodology and approach them with care, ensuring their use is appropriate and honours their cultural depth.

To help mitigate power imbalances, I incorporated COMPASS for relational safety in co-design (Mulvale et al., 2021). This framework helped to establish rapport and trust before engaging in data-gathering activities. With each group, we held discussions to mutually agree on how we would keep ourselves and each other safe. Given the study's focus on addressing the 'silencing' of certain topics, it was critical that every participant felt free to speak openly and be listened to without judgment. Mulvale et al's (2021) COMPASS framework felt particularly aligned with my counselling background. It emphasises ensuring statements are clarified rather than assumed, creating space for deeper exploration, and modelling genuine interest and respect for every contribution. This approach allowed participants to share, ask questions, and express uncertainty without fear of judgment, even if they felt others in the group might already know or understand the topic. It facilitated a space for vulnerability within a safe and supportive environment, fostering both individual reflection and collective dialogue. During the workshop phase of our meetings, young women were encouraged to work collaboratively in identifying strategies to navigate social and relational challenges – challenging assumptions that they lack the capacity for such work or that these strategies are unnecessary. These discussions built on existing friendships and shared experiences, with participants aware that their contributions were part of a collective process.

Tilly, my school's golden retriever and well-being dog, was present at all focus groups and workshops. The participants were given the option to include her, and all enthusiastically agreed.

Her calming presence added an additional layer of comfort to the sessions, her chin resting on various knees and participants patting her as she leaned against them while they talked. I maintained a friendly, informal, and relaxed approach to encourage trust and ease among the participants. From the outset, I emphasised that the young women were the experts in this area of knowledge, which helped further encourage their confidence in sharing experiences and perspectives.

I deliberately kept the structure flexible, planning only the main outline based on my research questions. This flexibility allowed each group to take different trajectories, informed by their unique experiences, observations, personal beliefs, and values. The groups varied in terms of social positioning, beliefs about sex and relationships, popularity, and sexual experiences. Each group shared personal experiences, including instances of violations and injustices, though their responses varied. Some viewed these experiences as violations, while others framed them as something expected or normal/ised. General observations often linked back to personal or friend group experiences, creating a rich foundation for discussion.

In designing the discussions, I deliberately chose not to mention pornography in the invitation sent to potential participants. This choice was intended to elicit the hegemonic discourses shaping the subject positions available to the young women without explicitly framing the discussion around pornography. As access to pornography has become normalised, I was more interested in uncovering the organic connections the participants might make rather than predefining the conversation. A similar approach can be found in the work of Beres and Farvid (2010) and Farvid (2015), who strategically framed language to gather insights about socially and culturally prescribed meaning-making. By positioning the participants as experts, I avoided presuming that

they had consciously oriented themselves to pornography as a primary source of information about heterosexual relationships.

Facilitating the Focus Groups and Workshops

The workshops commenced in May 2022 and involved four groups, each meeting twice over 10 weeks, resulting in a total of eight data generation sessions. The first session focused on gathering participants' thoughts, observations, and personal stories. The second session aimed to build on these insights, fostering critical awareness and deeper reflection. At the end of the first session, participants were encouraged to observe their worlds – whether through social media, conversations, or everyday interactions – and to note examples that resonated with the themes discussed. These examples were intended to foster reflection and 'conscientisation', an outcome I deliberately sought. Beyond collecting their initial thoughts, I aimed to observe their growth as they engaged more critically with the discussions.

An introductory activity was used to stimulate thinking. Each participant received sticky notes and pens and was asked to conduct a 'brain dump' of everything they associated with the 2022 ideal young woman in terms of appearance and behaviour. They then repeated this task, focusing on how this ideal woman should act sexually – how she should behave, and what she should embody. This broad, open-ended approach avoided leading participants in any specific direction. Having previously trialled this activity with the research advisors, I found it effective for uncovering latent beliefs and assumptions. The research advisors had described it as a powerful exercise for recognising previously unexamined thoughts and based on that experience I selected it as a generative starting point for opening up shared reflection in the focus groups.

Once participants completed the activity, they shared their ideas with the group, reading aloud their notes. This process initiated discussion and provided the foundation for subsequent conversations. Many participants' initial responses reflected what I would term a 'sanitised classroom version' of their ideas – suggestive of sexualization but omitting the deeper details and impacts of their experiences and observations. For some groups, these discussions marked a significant shift in their awareness. Many began noticing 'problems' or patterns they had not previously recognised. Discussions often revolved around themes such as young men's entitlement, expectations, and the subsequent objectification of women. These conversations unfolded naturally and authentically, with my role primarily focused on clarifying participants' points and occasionally posing questions to challenge or deepen their analysis.

At the close of the first focus group session, I encouraged participants to return to their environments and look critically at the media and interactions around them. They were invited to bring relevant examples to the second session, whether from social media, podcasts, or personal anecdotes. This task served two purposes: to cultivate a critical lens and to anchor the second workshop session in lived, contextualised examples. In the second session, many participants returned with TikTok videos, personal anecdotes, or observed examples to share. These contributions provided organic starting points for the workshop session's dialogue and were used to scaffold further exploration of the themes emerging from the first focus group.

The focus groups and workshops for each group lasted approximately 2-hours per meeting, generating data through audio recordings, which were later transcribed. Following the initial workshop, I reflected back preliminary analytical threads to each group – not to verify the data, but to support ongoing clarification, connection-making, and deepened dialogue. This dialogic

process aligned with the participatory ethos of the research and created space for participants to revisit, expand upon, or nuance their earlier comments. In several cases, this reflective exchange prompted participants to articulate new or evolving insights in light of the time that had passed since the first meeting.

Much of the content shared during the first focus group session showed indications, from my perspective, of strong elements of victim-blaming in some groups. Sharing these transcripts back to the participants led many to express discomfort when hearing their words reflected to them. This discomfort proved to be a productive entry point for critical analysis, as participants began to interrogate their own belief systems and question the origins of these narratives. This approach enriched the data and created an additional layer of analysis, as the unfolding of their thinking became a key focus of the study. This moment reflected a methodological strength of CPAR: the ability for dialogue and reflection to become not just data but part of the analytic and transformative process itself.

The second workshop marked a significant divergence among the groups in terms of their responses and levels of engagement. Broadly, the second session served as a space to deepen critical thinking, enhance awareness, and foster *conscientisation* – the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1972). For some groups, it involved robust discussions that reinforced their resolve, created solidarity, and cultivated shared strategies for resisting constraints they identified in their lives. These discussions centred on the broader cultural systems that position young women as objects of desire or, conversely, render them undesirable and invisible. One particularly striking discussion involved unpacking the notion of who determines a woman's worth, prompting critical realisation at the extent to which their perceived value had been shaped by external forces beyond

their control or conscious awareness. As they reflected on how their worth had been subject to external judgment – expressed through both macro-level cultural norms and micro-level interpersonal interactions – this discomfort became a productive entry point for further analysis. For some, this led to deeper engagement with how these norms operate and how they might be resisted. Conversations about how young women can collectively bolster their own and each other’s self-worth were particularly generative, and these discussions are explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Freire’s (2009) problem-posing approach was integral to these workshops. Rather than encouraging participants to passively absorb knowledge, this method positioned them as critical thinkers – actively engaging in dialogue, reflection, and analysis. Tailored scenarios were introduced in each group to challenge binary thinking and stimulate discussion about real-life situations, often involving their own friend groups. These activities prompted critical engagement with the implications of their assumptions, allowing the girls to examine the relational dynamics and discursive forces at play.

While the problem-posing activities varied depending on each group’s existing levels of socio-cultural awareness, all groups engaged meaningfully with the scenarios. Participants began to question previously taken-for-granted beliefs, reflected on the systems that shape them, and considered their own positions within these structures. This process was not about teaching theory but facilitating connections between abstract concepts and lived experience. By reframing social norms and interactions as contingent and open to critique, participants were able to reimagine what was possible – developing deeper insight into both their current realities and alternative ways of thinking, being, and relating.

Data Analysis – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a widely used method for analysing qualitative data, enabling the researcher to identify and construct meaning-based patterns, referred to as themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). One specific type of TA, reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA), centres on the researcher's active engagement with the data, guided by their theoretical orientations and research questions. Reflexive TA explicitly acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity – encompassing their positions, assumptions, and interests as an integral part of the analytic process. This approach required me, as the researcher, to critically reflect on how my social background, beliefs, and behaviours influenced the research process and its outcomes (Finlay & Gough, 2008).

As a woman working with young women, a reflexive approach was particularly vital for recognising and articulating the ways in which my own experiences informed the research. In contrast to analytic methods that emphasise objectivity by distancing the researcher from the data, reflexive TA embraces subjectivity as a strength, moving away from positivist traditions of knowledge production (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). It aligns well with the feminist and critical frameworks underpinning this study, which prioritise the contextual and relational nature of knowledge. Reflexive practices included journaling after each workshop to document my initial impressions, emotional responses, and emerging questions. This practice helped surface my assumptions and supported deeper analysis of power dynamics and discursive constructions. For example, when themes of victim-blaming arose in participant discussions, my reflective notes became a prompt to examine how such narratives might reflect broader systemic conditions rather than individual shortcomings.

Reflexive TA was the best choice for my study because it provided the flexibility to align theoretical orientations with participants' voices while accommodating the complex social and cultural dimensions of the data. It allowed for a nuanced exploration of how participants' experiences and discourses were shaped by broader power structures and hegemonic narratives, which is central to the study's objectives.

Reflexive TA follows a six-phase approach to analysing qualitative data, providing a structured yet adaptable process for constructing and developing themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). These phases include: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. Each phase was designed to engage deeply with the data and capture the most authentic and meaningful insights from the participants. In the sections that follow, I provide a detailed account of how I applied this method throughout the analytic process.

Familiarisation with the Data

To begin the analysis, I used the transcription app Otter to create initial transcripts of the recorded workshops. While the app provided a baseline for the transcription process, it was only approximately 40% accurate. It found the Aotearoa New Zealand accent difficult to understand and struggled to capture moments where participants spoke over one another, often losing valuable pieces of conversation. Despite its limitations, the app offered a starting framework for organising the data.

Transcribing each 2-hour workshop, which involved four to five participants, required significant time and attention. This process allowed me to become deeply familiar with each group's dynamics and the nuances of their interactions and thought processes. I meticulously corrected and

completed the transcripts, filling in gaps and highlighting specific moments that stood out. For example, I noted the roles participants took within their groups, the tone in which comments were made, and the relational subtleties that shaped their discussions.

Throughout this stage, I recorded my observations and reflections in a notebook, focusing on noticing important ideas that resonated with the research questions. These notes became a foundational layer of analysis, capturing preliminary insights and areas for further exploration. I discussed these observations with my supervisors during monthly meetings, incorporating their feedback and interpretations into my journal for future reference. This iterative process of listening, reviewing, and reflecting ensured a thorough and meaningful engagement with the data before moving into the coding phase.

Generating Codes

In this phase, I undertook a close reading of each transcript to identify excerpts that were significant, theoretically relevant, or rich in meaning. The coding process was primarily deductive, shaped by the study's critical theoretical foundations – particularly its focus on power, marginalisation, agency, and resistance. This reflects reflexive TA's openness to theoretical orientation while acknowledging that themes do not simply emerge but are actively constructed by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

While guided by these critical orientations, I maintained a constructionist lens, remaining attuned to meanings that might not have been explicitly anticipated. This openness to evolving interpretations aligns with reflexive TA's emphasis on the researcher's active role in meaning-making (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Early codes focused on notions of 'silence' – exploring how

participants articulated or responded to constraints on their voice and agency. From there, attention shifted to patterns of ‘alternatives and opportunities’, highlighting points of discursive rupture, critique, and reimagining. This dual coding focus – attuned to both constraint and possibility – supported a nuanced exploration of the cultural narratives participants were negotiating.

I ensured inclusivity by capturing all relevant ideas, particularly those that illuminated the lived experiences and nuanced observations of the young women involved. Insights were grouped to aid thematic organisation, differentiating between overt, semantic meanings (directly stated ideas) and latent meanings (implicit, underlying messages) within the discussions. It included attention to unspoken and unspeakable moments, instances where societal norms constrained what participants could articulate.

I dedicated significant time to reviewing the transcripts, annotating codes in the comment margins to capture emerging concepts and connections. This iterative process helped me deepen my understanding of the data and develop a coherent structure for analysis. I transferred these ideas into Word to further refine and group concepts. Using Miro, I then visualised and organised the codes from each workshop group, separating them by the first and second sessions. This visual mapping allowed me to step back and see the bigger picture, identifying overarching patterns while retaining the distinct insights of each group.

Constructing Prototype Themes

Using a combination of manual annotations and digital tools, like Miro, I organised the codes into potential themes. This iterative process involved grouping related codes, identifying patterns, and reflecting on the interconnectedness of ideas to ensure the groupings captured the participants’

experiences and insights. The process was highly dynamic; themes were continuously refined as I revisited the data to verify their accuracy and deepen my understanding. This cyclical engagement allowed for the themes to evolve organically while remaining closely tied to the data.

Theme Development

After constructing initial prototype themes, I engaged in an iterative process of refining and interrogating their coherence, scope, and conceptual clarity. It involved deep engagement with the dataset, questioning how each theme was being shaped by my interpretative lens, and considering alternative ways of making sense of the patterns. At this stage, I examined the relationships between themes, ensuring they were meaningfully distinct while also exploring potential overlaps or tensions.

I revisited the coded data extracts within each theme to assess whether they sufficiently supported the conceptual claims I was making. In doing so, I refined and reworked the thematic structure, sometimes collapsing themes, splitting them, or reconsidering the language used to describe them. This process was not about ensuring themes ‘accurately represented’ an objective reality; rather, about constructing themes that best articulated meaningful patterns across the dataset in ways that aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework.

Throughout, I maintained reflexive notes to critically examine my own influence on the thematic development process, considering how my positionality and assumptions might be shaping the analysis. The goal was not to remove subjectivity but to remain transparent and deliberate in how the themes were being constructed and articulated.

Defining and Finalising Themes

Once I had identified a set of candidate themes, I turned to the task of clearly defining and articulating each one. This involved synthesising the codes and corresponding data extracts into coherent, nuanced narratives that captured the essence of participants' meaning-making. At this stage, I focused on interpreting – not just describing – the data, attending to both the surface and deeper discursive patterns embedded within each theme.

Each theme was critically evaluated for internal consistency and distinctiveness, ensuring it reflected the complexity of the data while staying relevant to the research questions. Through multiple rounds of refinement and clarification, I developed a thematic framework that wove together participants' voices with broader theoretical and contextual insights, readying the analysis for presentation in the findings chapters.

Writing the Report

In the final phase, the constructed themes were woven into the analytical narrative of the research report. This involved situating each theme within the broader theoretical landscape and connecting participants' insights to the existing literature. Rather than simply presenting findings, I sought to craft a narrative that illustrated how meaning was made, disrupted, and contested across the dataset. A reflexive component was also integral to the writing process, acknowledging the ways in which my own positionality, values, and theoretical commitments shaped the interpretation of the data. This transparency deepened the analysis and aligned with the methodological principles underpinning the study.

Analytic Directions and Implications

The themes derived from the data were deeply intertwined with the study's theoretical foundations, particularly feminist and constructionist ideologies. Each theme was analysed not only for its explicit, surface-level meanings but also for its connections to power dynamics and the ways participants navigated agency within these contexts. This dual-level analysis – linking individual experiences to systemic structures – examined how the themes interacted with existing theories, highlighting areas where they upheld, challenged, or refined prevailing narratives. By embedding the themes within critical theoretical perspectives, the analysis offered nuanced insights into the participants' lived realities and their socio-cultural frameworks.

Academic Rigour

Maintaining academic rigour was a cornerstone of this research. Transparency was ensured throughout both the data collection and reflexive TA phases, with detailed documentation of each step. The CPAR methodology prioritised the centrality of participant voices in the data collection phase, ensuring that knowledge was co-constructed through ongoing dialogue rather than extracted. Participants actively shaped discussions, aligning with CPAR's commitment to participatory, iterative meaning-making.

Finlay's (2002) conceptualisation of reflexivity as a 'swamp' was a useful metaphor throughout this process, encouraging me to navigate the complexities of my own subjectivity with care and critical awareness, self-analysis, intersubjective awareness, and attention to discourse and power. I engaged with Finlay's five variants of reflexivity: (1) introspection, through journaling and questioning my assumptions after each session; (2) intersubjective reflection, by remaining attuned to the dynamics between myself and the participants; (3) mutual collaboration, through

participant feedback, shared meaning-making, and co-construction of insights during workshops; (4) social critique, to examine the broader power structures informing participants' narratives; and (5) discursive deconstruction, to analyse how language and silence shaped their subject positions. Together, these strategies supported a reflexive and critically engaged analytic process that honoured the co-constructed nature of knowledge within this study.

In the analysis phase, reflexive TA was used to construct themes through an iterative process, where researcher subjectivity was acknowledged as an analytic resource rather than a limitation. Reflexive practice played a key role in critically engaging with the data, enabling sensitivity to both the theoretical framework and the lived experiences of participants. This approach ensured that themes were developed through sustained interaction with the data, rather than predetermined coding structures.

Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that quality in reflexive TA arises not from procedural reliability but from theoretical coherence, depth of interpretive engagement, and deliberate transparency about the analytic process. Rigour was not about coding consensus or neutrality – it was grounded in an epistemological commitment to meaning as contextual, relational, and shaped by the researcher. Researcher subjectivity was not set aside, but drawn upon, reflexively and deliberately, as part of the meaning-making process. This required immersion, recursive engagement, and time to dwell with the data, to allow space for complex and unexpected insights to emerge. Themes were understood as patterns of shared meaning anchored in a central concept, not merely summaries of content or repeated topics. In this sense, both CPAR and reflexive TA demanded a form of rigour that was situated, relational, and contingent – responsive to the data,

shaped by my own positioning, and grounded in a critical awareness of power, knowledge, and voice.

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (reference number 21/356). Following approval from the school's principal and Board of Trustees, I was able to approach the students directly. In line with ethical guidance, parental consent was not required; instead, informed consent was obtained directly from the participants, acknowledging their capacity to consent as Year 13 students. All participants received comprehensive information outlining the purpose of the research, their rights – including the right to withdraw – and the time commitment involved, ensuring they could make an informed and voluntary decision to participate.

A Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix B) was distributed during the initial meeting with the Year group and provided to each participant. This document clearly explained that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide an explanation. It also outlined that their data could be removed upon request, to the extent that was practically possible. Additionally, the information sheet detailed how confidentiality within the workshops would be managed. While I could guarantee my own confidentiality, I emphasised the importance of participants considering what they shared with their peers, given the group setting's inherent limitations regarding confidentiality. This issue was also addressed in the Consent Form (see Appendix C). The information sheet included contact details for several helplines, such as Youthline, 1737, The Lowdown, and Safe-to-Talk, should participants feel the need to seek

additional support. I also informed them that the school counsellor was aware of the project and available to provide assistance if any concerns arose during or after the workshops.

As noted above, to help address the inherent power dynamics, COMPASS was used to establish relational safety, with explicit agreements on creating a collaborative and respectful environment. Participants were invited to shape the focus groups and workshops by suggesting discussion topics, activities and the length of time spent together. To protect the participants' anonymity in the final reporting, all transcripts were anonymised, with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. While it was acknowledged that group members might recognise one another in the write-up, steps were taken to minimise this risk for other readers. Identifiable features were carefully removed from all data extracts.

Additional measures were taken to address the anonymity of participants who identified as non-European. As the research was conducted at a socioeconomically privileged girls' school with limited ethnic diversity, I recognised the potential for these students to be easily identifiable. While their contributions were critical to understanding the broader context of the study, ensuring their safety and comfort in sharing their experiences took precedence. After discussing this issue with the participants, it was collectively decided that they would identify themselves only broadly as 'Asian', to maintain a similar level of anonymity as their peers. This approach, while challenging, was necessary to protect these students and encourage open, honest discussions.

The workshops provided a platform for participants to critique their social environment, including observations about young men in their community and their school's approach to sexual education. These discussions often highlighted systemic shortcomings and cultural influences. Although

anonymising these contributions meant potentially losing some cultural specificity, it was a compromise made to uphold the ethical commitment to participant safety. By prioritising informed consent, anonymity, and access to support, this study adhered to the highest ethical standards, aligning with the principles of respect, care, and social responsibility central to both research ethics and the participatory nature of this study.

Practical Implications for Counsellors

The workshops demonstrated the value of group-based approaches in school counselling, providing a model for facilitating discussions on sensitive topics within a safe and supportive environment. The collaborative framework enabled participants to share and validate their experiences and observations, highlighting the potential for similar methods to be integrated into school counselling practices. This implication is discussed more in the conclusion, Chapter 7.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the methodological approach underpinning this research, which integrates CPAR with reflexive TA. Acknowledging the complexities of reflexivity in qualitative research, I drew on Finlay's (2002) conceptualisation of reflexivity as a 'swamp' – a terrain requiring critical self-analysis, intersubjective awareness, and attention to discourse and power and engaged with Finlay's five variants of reflexivity. The methodology and its methods were deliberately chosen to centre the voices, observations, and lived experiences of the participants, while addressing the socio-cultural dynamics that shape their realities. This approach maintained a strong focus on the relational and structural power imbalances central to the research topic, aligning with the study's commitment to social justice and systemic change.

The use of CPAR provided a framework that emphasised collaboration, co-construction of knowledge, and a shared commitment to challenging dominant narratives that marginalise young women. These commitments were enacted through iterative cycles of discussion, reflection, and action, where participants contributed both as subjects and co-analysts, shaping the direction of the inquiry. Focus groups created spaces for shared meaning-making, while workshops facilitated the active transformation of ideas, fostering critical consciousness and collective agency.

Reflexive TA supported systematic exploration of meaning patterns in the data while remaining attuned to both theoretical commitments and the researcher's subjectivity. Themes were developed through iterative, inductive engagement with the data, participant dialogues, and critical self-reflection. My positionality was acknowledged as integral to the process. Reflexive journaling, in particular, enabled ongoing interrogation of how meaning was being co-produced. Finlay's (2002) 'swamp' metaphor aptly captured the entangled nature of this process, where researcher and participants navigate blurred boundaries, and meaning is constantly in flux.

The chapter also addressed ethical considerations, including participant safety, informed consent, and the creation of an inclusive, dialogic research environment. Taken together, these methodological choices reflect a commitment to participatory, feminist, and critically reflexive practice aimed at generating socially relevant and transformative knowledge. The next chapter builds on this foundation by presenting the findings and insights generated from the participants' discussions and reflections. It explores how young women navigate their bodies, relationships, and societal expectations, with particular attention to how dominant heterosexual norms influence their sense of self and agency. By foregrounding participants' voices and critically analysing their

experiences, the findings contribute both to academic knowledge and to practice-based insights, particularly within school-based counselling.

The methodological orientation outlined in this chapter reflects a deliberate challenge to conventional research hierarchies. By employing CPAR as both a framework and a practice, this study prioritised equity, participation, and collective meaning-making. Such an approach also demands a high degree of reflexivity – a willingness to examine not only participants' realities but also the researcher's role, assumptions, and influence.

Recognising that research is never neutral, the next chapter turns inward to explore the ethical, political, and personal dimensions of this work. It considers how my identity as a counsellor, woman, and advocate for social justice shaped the research journey, raising critical questions about power, privilege, and authenticity. Reflexivity here is not just a methodological tool, but a political practice – one that demands ongoing accountability for how knowledge is produced, and to what end. In this way, the next chapter reflects on not only what has been uncovered, but how it has been uncovered – situating the analysis in the entanglement of researcher, participants, and the broader cultural narratives under investigation.

Chapter 4. Reflexivity

The Shadow Knows: Reflexivity in Feminist Research

In this chapter, I critically reflect on the assumptions and personal philosophies that have influenced my research journey. As researchers, it is crucial to acknowledge how our subjectivities shape the questions we ask, the methodologies we choose, and the interpretations we draw (Finlay & Gough, 2008; Gough, 2016). Knowledge production is complex, requiring deliberate introspection and honest questioning of our own perspectives and worldviews. This reflexive process strengthens the research and deepens engagement with its production.

The metaphor of shadows underscores this reflexivity – illuminating the unseen influences that shaped my work while acknowledging what remains partially obscured. Shadows represent both what is revealed and what lingers on the edges of visibility, challenging researchers to interrogate the assumptions we take for granted. Bringing these shadows into focus allows us to make visible the dynamics of power, privilege, and positionality that operate within the research process. My decision to use CPAR and reflexive TA emerged from longstanding commitments to social justice and person-centred practice. These commitments shaped how I approached the research, both methodologically and relationally – prioritising spaces where participants could feel safe, heard, and central to the meaning-making process.

Given my career-long work with young people, it would be easy to assume that I fully understand their experiences. However, this is not the case. Despite engaging daily with adolescent women, listening to their struggles and triumphs, I remain outside of their cultural realities. Like every other adult who did not grow up in the digital era, I cannot fully grasp what it means to be a young woman in a world shaped so profoundly by social media. Schools often replicate this error –

assuming insight into young people's realities and imposing structures to manage perceived problems, particularly around digital life.

Yet, as increasing evidence suggests (Ayala et al., 2021; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a; Cammarota & Fine, 2010, ; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Haraway's, 2016; Healy-Cullen et al., 2023b; Healy-Cullen, Taylor, Morison, et al., 2022), engaging young people in discussions about their lived experiences and sense-making offers critical insights. Understanding their challenges – many of which research indicates carry significant risks – allows for the development of structures and processes that genuinely support them. A collaborative, dialogic approach may offer a more effective and positive way forward. This recognition shaped my approach to research, reinforcing the need for methodologies that centre young people's voices and experiences.

In this chapter, I explore aspects of the research process that were personally significant and required reflection to uphold ethical and rigorous practices. I also consider the impact of the research on me, the unexpected insights it has revealed, and how its influence continues beyond data collection. As part of this exploration, I examine the advisory group's development of *Ask Aunty Hilda*, and our collaboration with three local boys' schools, their boards of trustees and a university facilitator in the Community of Practice, as well as the role of the focus groups and workshops. By reflecting on the interplay between my experiences, values, and research practices, this chapter highlights the often-unspoken dimensions of the research journey – those that shape, unsettle, and, ultimately, strengthen the work.

Cultural Shaping

As a Pākehā cis-gender woman, I recognise the privilege that comes with living a middle-class life. My upbringing was rooted in a lower middle-class context – with careful financial management and limited but valued opportunities. It provided a foundation that has since evolved into greater access and resource as an adult. This shift has shaped how I understand socio-economic dynamics, particularly the interplay of privilege, opportunity, and systemic barriers, both in my own life and in the lives of those with whom I work. Within my career, I have been given significant opportunities for development and resourcing, allowing me to further my own skills while supporting and advocating for others. All the while, I have been able to meet my basic needs and those of my family – an everyday privilege I never take for granted.

My positionality is also shaped by early tensions between conformity and resistance. On one hand, I was encouraged to ‘be a lady’ – an ideal grounded in conservative, classed femininity. On the other hand, I was raised to speak out against injustice. These messages often sat uneasily alongside each other. Growing up in Dunedin, Ōtepoti in the 1980s, difference was not widely embraced, and my family’s background and values – shaped by my Kiwi mother and German-Austrian father – often set me apart. I developed interests and ways of being that diverged at times from conventional Kiwi norms. Early encounters with expressions, like ‘that’s just the way things are’, taught me that the status quo is often maintained through uncritical repetition, a stance I have long resisted.

As a young teenager, I was deeply passionate about environmental issues. At 14-years-old, while reading a Greenpeace magazine, I came across an article that connected gender inequality to environmental destruction. This perspective marked a pivotal shift in my focus – I realised that

addressing gender inequality could serve as a powerful pathway to fostering positive environmental change (Wonders & Danner, 2015). This connection made me acutely aware of how systems of power and oppression operate to exploit resources – whether forests, oceans, or women – and deepened my commitment to understanding and challenging these dynamics.

It was not until university that I found a framework that made sense of these tensions. In my early 20s, an undergraduate paper on the philosophy of sex and sexuality changed everything. It introduced me to the concept of feminism – an entire world of thought that resonated so deeply it was as if a new language had been handed to me. Strangely, it was a male lecturer who first identified himself as a feminist. At the time, that felt oddly validating, as if a man’s endorsement somehow legitimised the movement. The irony was lost on my younger self. But the seed was planted. That same year, he offered me a summer research position investigating the impacts of pornography on communities – a pivotal step in what would become a 26-year journey into feminist inquiry. Another paper, *The History of Women*, catapulted me into an awareness of my female ancestors, their erasures, their strength, and the echoes of their marginalisation in the spaces I still moved through.

I was uneasy about these histories and noticed how many gendered barriers were still accepted as normal ways for men and women to be. The ‘natural order of things’ seemed very much like a construction that suited one group more than the other. At age 8-years, when going on one of my many childhood walks with my wonderfully contemplative German father, who always posed philosophical questions and wonderings, we talked about why we have the ideas and thoughts that we do and how different they would be had we been born into another culture, country, or time. I remember this being quite an amazing realisation – I am simply the ‘flavour’ of the environment

I was steeped in and it could have been something entirely different depending on the context within which I was raised. There began a deep belief, albeit an entirely uneducated one, but an innate awareness nonetheless, of the ways in which culture creates, perpetuates and mobilises one's beliefs and values, privileging some things above others and rendering others as worth less.

Counselling Contexts

When I began my work as a counsellor in a socio-economically advantaged all-girls high school, I became aware of things that had not been so apparent to me while I had been working with at-risk youth as a teacher in a high school with significant socio-economic barriers. I had originally decided to do a counselling qualification to bolster the work I was doing with these at-risk students and their families. When a counselling job came up at my current school, my then colleague encouraged me to apply. My initial reaction was that I did not want to work in a socio-economically privileged school, where the students had everything and everyone they needed. There are always a small number of teachers who want to work with and enjoy 'challenging' students, and I knew that in this way I would not be needed. But I decided to apply and use it as an experience and stepping-stone. Once in the job, I realised that, like many others, I had made assumptions about these young women's lives. The appearance of perfection was superficial; beneath it, mental distress and family struggles were often just as significant as those of their socioeconomically disadvantaged peers. However, the privileges that money affords made these struggles far less visible.

My approaches to this new place of work were similar in that I saw myself as an advocate for young people who were marginalised and oppressed by a variety of systemic limitations, (albeit different systems of oppression – from poverty, abuse and neglect, to material wealth, emotional

neglect, and hidden family harm), and I worked with them to access better ways for them to be seen as the valuable, worthy young people they were. The types of conversations I had in that role were different, and beginning work in an all-girls' school environment, with its hyper-femininity and strong focus on heterosexist norms, created a different kind of environment for these young women to 'be' and, therefore, a different way for me to respond and engage. What they *could* be seemed to be quite clearly marked out for them, strict codes of how to do things 'right'. After such a very long time, here I was again, amongst young women being referred to as 'ladies' and requiring things of them that ladies would do. Fourteen years on from that beginning, I am pleased to say that things at my school are vastly different, the gender trap actively challenged, with leadership that promotes and celebrates female success and feminist victory, and highlights and critiques limiting belief systems. Despite these positive changes within the school leadership, cultural and community beliefs and discourses are still issues that affect ways that many of these young women are able to access alternative ways of being, with conservative systems still driving what is made possible or allowable in many ways.

'The Help' as Inspiration for Change

When I started my counselling job at the school, I was finishing my master's in counselling. My decision to use narrative therapy to explore adolescent relationship violence and sexual coercion for my master's research has similar roots to the reasons for this doctorate. Working with young people meant that I heard and witnessed numerous relationship narratives that were extremely limiting for the young women with whom I was engaged. I heard very clear and repeated stories of what it meant to be someone's girlfriend, what was expected, and the options they felt they had within that framework. It was here that I started to hear more about pornography and the ways that

these young women were internalising their feelings as something wrong with them, rather than something wrong with what was being done to or asked of them. My master's topic planted another seed that has continued to grow and flourish through this doctoral research.

During one term holiday, I read "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett (2009). I remember feeling a real excitement about what I was reading – the collection of voices from a group of women, unifying them and giving them a strength they did not have before. The women in the book met together, talked and shared, and came up with ways to support and resist the oppression and marginalisation they experienced. What they did was dangerous; their lives were literally at risk, given their less-than-human status in the eyes of the rich white families who employed them as their nannies and housekeepers. Reading this book gave me an idea about how some of the stories that the young women at my school told me about their relationship experiences could be told. A 'collection of voices' that could be put together in a book of some sort to allow them to see that they were not alone with these experiences – experiences of what it meant to 'be the girlfriend', what one was meant to do in that role, and how one was meant to do it without fuss.

Despite the young women sharing their experiences, thoughts, and concerns with me, in the great scheme of things, in the cultural world where action begets action, the voices shared in the silo of my counselling space were not affecting the change that the collective voice potentially could. I asked the then principal of my current school, and board of trustees, if I could do my collection of voices idea, whereby I wanted to create a wave of talk among the students, hoping for some awareness and consciousness raising of their shared experiences. Through a new awareness for these young women, I hoped for change that would place these young women as more central in their own lives. I was told I could not go ahead as the idea was deemed too controversial and

sensitive. Naturally, I was disappointed at the time. However, I now realise that in order for change to take place, a readiness for change must come from within the organisation itself, including enough members having a shared resolve to implement that change, and a belief that the change is possible (Weiner, 2020). An awareness of the issues was not present, therefore change at that time was not going to be possible.

Counselling and Research as Resistance: Reimagining the Cultural Conditions of Young Women's Lives

Over the following years, while the girls and young women talked to me about all manner of challenges and concerns, the young women who shared their experiences of sexual assault at the hands of a boyfriend or boy 'friend' remained an overarching motif. My passion grew as I worked to support them and examine the structures that perpetuate such a widespread issue. What became evident early on, and still holds true 14 years later, is the limited narratives available to young women who experience sexual assault and the constraints on what can be said. To begin with, the language used to describe what took place was rarely language that deemed the event to be wrong or criminal. It was positioned as distressing or unwanted, but it almost never crossed a line into holding the young man (or men) to account (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019). To do so was to risk almost everything that matters to an adolescent woman – social inclusion and acceptance. This was often swiftly removed if she was seen or heard to be negatively describing the events that took place. To go to the authorities was simply out of the question because these young men were, by all accounts, most often 'good young men'. Sport-playing, academically engaged, socially valuable young men who simply happened to do something in a moment that was 'not okay' and often seen as the result of a 'misunderstanding'.

Calling out a boy's behaviour as sexually inappropriate – or worse, as assault – was often met with intense backlash. His friends would rally around him, often retaliating against the girl who spoke up. Even more troubling, the girl's own friends would frequently side with the boys, minimising what had happened and supporting the perpetrator. I witnessed this pattern repeatedly, a stark reflection of male sexual privilege and the power dynamics that upheld it (Myrttinen & Schulz, 2023). Assaults at parties were filmed, shared, laughed about, and circulated further. Yet these incidents were rarely labelled as 'assaults'; instead, they were framed as typical party hook-ups, where young women were seen as equally responsible, regardless of the circumstances (Hunt et al., 2022).

Accounts of one very drunk girl being raped and assaulted by three boys were not uncommon, and the pornification of their behaviours, to me, seemed increasingly apparent. It seemed, at times, that they were filming their own porn-inspired movies, starring in their own non-consensual entertainment. Often, other young people were present watching, laughing, filming as they drank, or silently shocked but feeling unable to intervene or pressured to go along with the general acceptance of the event (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019).

It was during this time that I became more interested in the impact that pornography was having on the lives of these young people. Offhand comments or questions about its role in their relationships began surfacing during sessions. I started to make it a point, when appropriate, to ask the young women about the sex they were having and whether they were comfortable with what they were doing. The answers were often alarming: barely a girl I spoke to said she enjoyed what was being asked of her, and she would frequently add that her boyfriend got ideas from the porn he watched. My longstanding interest in this area helped me recognise the centrality of

pornography within these young people's lives and I decided it was time for me to explore this issue more deeply. I desired to critically examine the broader cultural forces at play and consider how education, open dialogue, and policy could better address the pervasive influence of pornography on adolescent sexuality.

The mobilising moment for me came following the death of Grace Millane, the young English tourist murdered by a man while on a Tinder date. The man, like many, claimed as his defence that the violent sex that led to her death was consensual (Edwards, 2020). I felt an enormous amount of anger and emotion at the way the defence continually normalised male sexual dominance (and violence) and the way that the intricacies of female survival in the face of gendered fear were turned into loud, ignorant victim-blaming. Where is the justice for any woman in this madness of male sexual superiority, where women are still held responsible – even when murdered – for 'asking for it', for not fighting back, or not leaving, not telling someone, or for wanting sex in the first place? I felt the burden of womanhood during that trial and decided that I would step in and try to add to the collection of amazing women (and men) who speak up about these things, who contribute to counter-narratives and find resistance in the form of knowledge, participant voice, and ultimately (hopefully), change. So it was, with this sense of injustice and anger and motivation for a better world for young women, that I embarked on this doctoral journey, one grounded in practice and change.

Haraway's (2016) statement that there is no impartiality when it comes to research felt very relevant. Feminist qualitative research is always interpretive, and due to the subjectivity and personal histories researchers bring to their research, the product can never be considered neutral. Consequently, contributions to therapeutic work are inherently political. The way in which the

problem is seen, heard, and reshaped within this environment is ethically and, therefore, politically, part of adhering to or critiquing systems that have enabled it to flourish. The personal, the interpersonal, and the meanings ascribed, require the system within which the experience was interpreted be addressed. In this case, that means examining the ways in which a patriarchal meaning web (Waldegrave, 1990) continues, if allowed, to give meaning and context to the issues. It is this ill-informed meaning structure that creates and perpetuates both the issue and the personal plight of those within it.

Advisory Group and the Genesis of *Ask Aunty Hilda*

As a cultural outsider, I had clear ideas about my research and what I thought I knew about the young women from whom I was going to gather data, but I asked the Year 13 cohort from my school if any of them would be willing to assist me by being my advisors, looking over my ideas and plans, and giving feedback on anything I may have missed. Eight young women were interested in helping – a wonderful group of students perfectly positioned, socially and philosophically, to be my experts and guides, and give me an insight into things they thought were an issue. I showed them what I had put together for the workshops and asked for feedback. They quickly stated that where I had said, ‘use magazines to discuss images that promote what young women should be like’ as a starter activity, should be replaced with ‘share TikToks or Instagrams that promote the ideal young woman’. That was a perfect example of one of the ways that I sat outside of their cultural norms. I did not have a TikTok account, (although I did get one at this point and tried to trick the algorithms into thinking I was a 17-year-old girl), and I rarely engaged with my Instagram account at that time. They then began discussing the issues they thought were important for them as young heterosexual women. They sat around the table in my office and

talked for 2-hours, discussing the things that they felt, the anger, fear, frustration, and the complexity of their positions.

At the end of the 2-hours, the group were full of enthusiasm and said how amazing it had felt to talk like that together, to sit down and discuss these very real, significant things. I did not realise that this was a unique experience, that young women sitting together, talking about their gendered realities, would be new territory for them. It was surprising to me. They emailed me later that night to ask if they could come back and do it again. There began our fortnightly or so catch-ups, where they would sit around the table in my office with chocolate biscuits and lots of things to discuss.

During one of these sessions, they decided that maybe they could do something bigger, create a group or a club and invite other schools to participate. For a while, the ideas went around in circles. They asked students they knew from other schools, boys from the boys' schools close by, and wondered about making a video of talking to students across town about relationships and consent and then sharing it with all the schools to play in assembly. They struggled to get any kind of enthusiasm or buy-in. Then, during one of our meetings, one of the advisors suggested the idea of making a website, predominantly for our school students but one which may grow to be known and, therefore, service other young people. This change from advisors to activists, was a significant moment of participatory involvement. These young women were now working as a group to hopefully effect change on a wider scale, and they were excited, determined, and full of dedication to why they believed what they were doing was so necessary. This was a noteworthy shift from 'helping me' with my research to being fully invested in finding solutions and making change to their own cultural environment. They had been passionate all along, but this became theirs to own and grow, and demonstrated the power of collaborative, social action.

The website would include information about sex and relationships (especially tailored for young women) with an anonymous question portal, where the advisors (and I) would answer the questions and post them back onto the website. This seemed like a great idea, and the group quickly got to work planning the types of topics that should be covered, where good information could be sourced, and who was going to create what part of the content. The young woman who had the idea of the website was thankfully also the one who could make it, creating the platform on which we then started building the information these young women thought was most needed. The content was a mixture of what these students themselves had worried about when they were younger: periods and body image, gender and sexuality information, anatomy and bodily awareness – something that they thought was obvious but often lacking. They decided to begin with positive signs in relationships because they thought too much time was spent talking about negative relationships and sexual assault. ‘What about good sex and relationships?’ they wondered, ‘we never seem to hear about that’. That was a relevant point that I had, in some ways, not thought about. I was generally focused on the injustices I heard about and wanted to do something about them. However, I had not really considered that sex, for young people, did not have to be and was not always negative. It reminded me that in my role as counsellor it is only the negative stories that I ever hear, and that, actually, young people do and can know about good relationships and sex and were perfectly positioned to create the right blend of information for their peers. Thus began the website *Ask Aunty Hilda*.

Communities of Practice

One of the most exciting parts of this process has been the continuation of the advisory groups’ website. Sadly, they left school before it was finished, but they had done the majority of the setting

up, adding the information and creating a solid website platform. This original group felt enormously proud of their work and were awarded a special prize at the end of year prize giving. One participant said, “*Out of the last 5-years at school, this is the very best thing I have ever done*”. Other participants said, “*This has been the best experience I’ve had. I feel like I did something so meaningful – it feels amazing*” and “*Thank you so much for making this possible, I always wanted to do something like this but had no idea how to do it*”. These young women described a memorable and significant experience that shaped and changed what some of them wanted to study, how they viewed themselves as young women, and what that might mean going forward as they stepped into the next phase of their young adult lives.

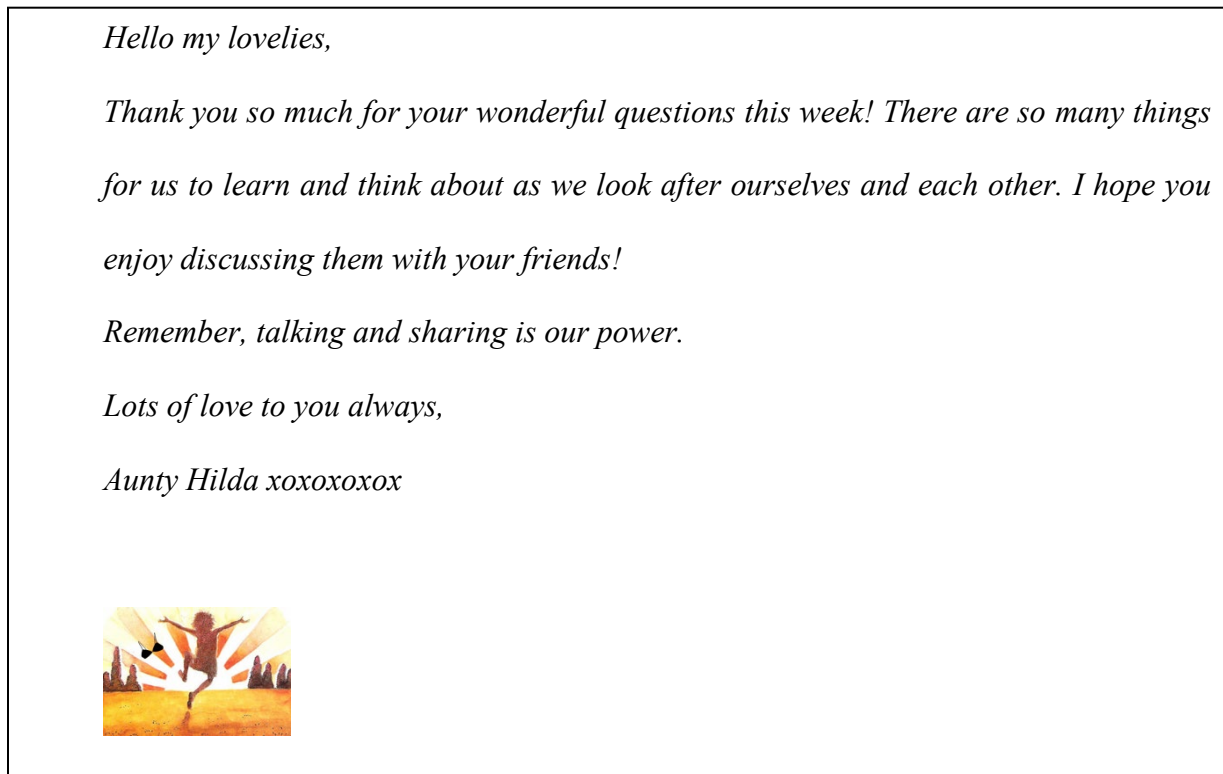
At the start of the next school year, I talked to the new Year 13s and told them about the advisory group, their project, and the hope that it would be continued. They had decided as a group they would be known as ‘Aunties’, an agony aunt approach to the question portal, and a tuakana-teina (older-younger) philosophy from Te Ao Māori to the website in general. At its core, tuakana-teina embodies principles of guidance, support, and reciprocity, while encompassing mentorship, leadership, and mutual respect (Woods, 2011). Those with more knowledge and experience (the tuākana) have a responsibility to guide and support those with less experience (the teina) with the imparting of wisdom, advice, or practical assistance. The teina are also a valuable source of learning for the tuākana, and knowledge is shared in both directions. Tuakana-teina reflects Māori belief in the importance of a collective well-being where there is a continuity of knowledge, values, and wisdom (Woods, 2011). This group drew on a foundation of relationships, interconnectedness, the sharing in humanity of respect, reciprocity, and mutual support. They hoped to share what they wished they had known when they were juniors about their bodies and sex, and how might they

best engage with and create opportunities for growth through shared experiences and talk resulting from the website.

Ten young women became the backbone of the Aunty collective, meeting with me every Monday lunchtime. We would eat chocolate biscuits and read the anonymous questions that had come through. They would discuss how they thought these should be answered, and I offered my thoughts for them to consider. I would then post our agreed answers onto the website and email the whole school from the Aunty Hilda email address. An example of an email is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

School E-mail from Aunty Hilda



Critical Feminism and Chocolate Biscuits

Although the website showed an enormous amount of user activity, valuable in its own right, there was also objective evidence of further conscientisation happening in my office every week. Other students were asking questions that were sometimes relevant to the lives of the young women answering them, and they were able to reflect on this, often alone with me in a counselling capacity, as to how answering the questions got them thinking about what was not okay in their own lives; perfect example of the tuakana-teina reciprocity working to enable and enrich both parties.

For some of the Aunties the process impacted their relationships and the ways they were thinking about themselves in relation to heterosexual norms, which for two students meant they no longer wanted to stay in those relationships. Others had serious conversations with their partners about what they were uncomfortable about or things they had reflected on that they wanted to discuss.

These young women described the weekly meetings as significant learning experiences, particularly in relation to relationships, sex, and communication. They generously allowed me to include their reflections here:

It's the community that is this group that makes it work – I've learned so much!

*It's been such a great experience, I learned heaps and liked knowing I was helping others;
I have learned to be more confident and stand up for myself when things aren't right.*

*Without these conversations we've shared, it puts the power with the boys when they say
'everyone else does it', but having this made us feel less insecure.*

For me, it was about having a space to talk about things while knowing we were helping others at the same time.

This was about community – us doing this together for our wider school group. It felt so cool being part of that idea.

I really wished I could've had something like this in the junior years, coz it's so useful.

It's often awkward for kids to talk to their parents, but this means they can still be educated and ask the questions they want to know about.

These young women discovered that sharing, critiquing, talking, and asking, lead to changes both in themselves and within the wider community. They were able to affect change, make other people's lives less confusing, and have a sense of belonging in a group that did not exist before. Their hope was that the website would continue, each year the Aunties handing it over to the next group. We are now into the third generation of Aunties, each group building upon the last, bringing new insights, experiences, and personal drive and passion. Critical participatory activism has been a very real outcome of the CPAR methodological process. While it began for me as a tool for meaningful research, these young women have embraced it organically, finding meaning, purpose, and personal growth from being part of something that seeks to find alternatives and options for young women. For my own counselling practice, I have discovered new ways of doing 'the work'. Assisting someone in their personal journey is a real privilege, but creating ripples in the socio-cultural fabric, is exciting, and this process has shown me possibilities within this work that can encompass numerous ways of eliciting change.

Communities of Action

During the latter part of the year, a group of young women from the Year 13 cohort met with me, wanting to discuss an idea they had. The *Ask Aunty Hilda* website, and the recent release of *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023), had created opportunities for discussion in the Year 13 common room about sexual assaults by boys from the nearby boys schools that many of the students had experienced or witnessed. Once they started talking about it, they realised that this was a problem many of them shared and an experience that was far greater than they had been aware of. This group wanted to have the Year 13 cohort write letters to the boys' schools, where each girl could report her experience and share it. No names would be used, but they wanted to illustrate the problem in real terms, accompanied by a cover letter stating their hopes for collaboration and consultation to create stronger and more robust education, particularly around consent for the boys' schools. My first thought and comment to them was how enormously proud I was, how incredibly courageous and brave they were, and how excited I was to hear these young women standing up for one another whilst standing beside each other, having a voice and trying to elicit some real change.

This was a deeply emotional moment – years of my work, hopes, and passion seemed to converge in the actions of this remarkable group. Initially, they wanted to do it all anonymously, but I encouraged them to think about what it would mean to stand beside their message versus throwing it into the wild and not having any idea that anything had been done. These young women met with me often, and regularly, for a few weeks, while they collected the letters from their peers. We talked through some of the ethical and legal considerations, such as:

- Should they include their names on the cover letter as the steering committee, and what might that mean?

- What happens once the letters are sent and control is lost?
- What if media attention follows?
- Could there be backlash from the boys or their peers?
- Who are their support systems? Are their parents aware and on board?

Other procedural things were considered, including meeting the acting principal to share and discuss how it would be done. The senior leadership team fully supported these young women and the importance of this extremely brave use of voice. CPAR orientates the researcher(s) to where the findings and research should be shared, circulated, and disseminated – moving beyond traditional academic sites (Fine & Torre, 2021). In this case, the group of young women sent letters to the principals and Boards of Trustees of three boys' schools. The letters were seen as an act of dissemination but came with specific risks and consequences, which were difficult to anticipate and not necessarily intended. Notably, there was recognition among the senior leadership team of how vulnerable the participants were and how they needed to be kept safe from any backlash but still provoke activation and change (Fine & Torre, 2021). Therefore, it was decided the response to the letters would be directed back to either me or the acting principal, with me being the liaison between the adult communications and letting the students know what was taking place at each step.

These young women hoped for validation of the situation that they and so many of their peers found themselves in and, while thinking about their processes, they invited two other girls' schools in the area to take part in the letters project. One school was very keen to participate but then withdrew their involvement shortly after, stating they were sorry, but they no longer felt

comfortable taking part. The other school responded with negativity at the idea and suggested that the girls not go ahead with their plan.

Such responses highlight the complexity of challenging these kinds of issues and the way that oppressive systems and silencing within elite schools or, more broadly, girls' schools, can continue to provide resistance to change, or a desire to maintain the status quo (Zeller-Berkman et al., 2020). It highlights the challenge that action can face when confronting these systems. As Fine and Torre (2021) noted, "participatory researchers must be engaged in collaboration, with a bold vision of evidence as a humble resource in struggles for justice, advanced through the voices, desires, lines of analysis, and dreams of those most impacted" (p. 67). That these young women persisted – despite resistance, withdrawal, and silencing – demonstrates the radical potential of youth-led action when supported within ethical, participatory frameworks.

The Emotional Struggle for Justice

Significant events took place in the days and weeks after the letters were delivered to the boys' schools. I felt anxious in the days following the delivery of the letters, uncertain about how they would be received and whether I had made any serious ethical or professional missteps. I carried a deep sense of responsibility for the young women I had encouraged to speak out. I spent my professional and academic supervision sessions talking about the issues and the many and varied feelings and thoughts I was having. Nonetheless, there was a strong current of energy and excitement at what could come of this process. How this act of rebellion, from these young women, against injustice and oppression might create and affect some change against what had become heterosexual norms in these young women's social context.

Collaboration was what the young women had asked for: education and an awareness of the wider issues and how they (and the young men) were being affected. The collaboration began a few days later, a meeting with two of the three principals from the boys' schools, my principal, acting principal, and me. I explained the background to the letters, the exciting change in young women supporting each other, and the real need for more and better sex education generally. I argued that specifically within their boys' schools we might be able to achieve some positive change through open, honest dialogue and creative thinking. They suggested I contact the counsellor shared between the three boys' schools and discuss next steps and work with him to come up with what was needed in these spaces. The counsellor showed genuine interest in collaboration, and plans were made to meet and discuss the issues. One of the boys' schools decided to forward their letters to the police and this step introduced the involvement of detectives from the sexual assault team. While the young women from my school were already aware of their options and the available support, it was important to convey to the detectives that the young women were not actively seeking police intervention.

The police, however, saw an opportunity to engage constructively with all the schools involved. Their approach included reminding the young women of their rights and options, and emphasising to the young men the potential consequences of a formal complaint. At the same time, the police education teams connected with me to explore how their programmes could be adapted to better address these issues, particularly in boys' schools. This engagement added another dimension to the broader social collaboration around these concerns.

Throughout this process, regular communication with the counsellor working across the three boys' schools ensured a consistent and collaborative approach. We exchanged updates on

communications, shared insights into the resources needed, and identified potential individuals or organisations to involve in the ongoing efforts. This partnership was instrumental in maintaining a sense of shared purpose and fostering a coordinated response to a deeply challenging issue. Amidst the logistics and planning, I continued to navigate complex emotional terrain – balancing professional responsibilities with a deeply personal investment in the outcomes of this work. These parallel tracks of care, collaboration, and conscience became the foundation for a new kind of educational alliance.

When Action Creates Change

Since the initial meeting, significant progress has been made. The boys' schools have come together to seek guidance from national and local experts in consent education tailored to boys-only settings. Principals and board chairs have written to the Year 13 girls in gratitude for their letters, addressing their concerns, and providing updates on their efforts to audit and enhance sexual education and consent programmes. This work now includes a thorough review of policies and practices, supported by a strong evidence base and expert academic involvement.

Engaging an academic facilitator with extensive expertise in sex and consent education was an important early step. Ahead of convening a larger group discussion, the boy's school's counsellor and I met with the facilitator to outline the broader challenges. This culminated in a comprehensive session attended by principals, board members, the facilitator, the boys' counsellor, and me, advocating for the young women's voices to be heard. The discussions revealed a gap in understanding among some male participants, underscoring the complexities of addressing these issues in entrenched systems, but also the difficulty in accepting something supposedly common, while simultaneously never having seen evidence of it.

Throughout this meeting I found myself holding back, conscious of the delicate balance needed to maintain engagement without provoking defensive responses. This tension was a striking reflection of the broader dynamics we were working to challenge. As Michelle Fine (1987) noted, silences often serve to protect existing power structures, shaping what can and cannot be openly discussed. My principal and I later reflected on the irony of this situation: while silence and restraint were necessary to preserve collaboration, they also mirrored the very systemic inequities we sought to dismantle. This delicate balancing act underscored the complexity of fostering change within entrenched systems. On the one hand, careful navigation was required to maintain engagement and avoid defensive reactions. On the other, these very measures risked perpetuating the dynamics we were working to challenge. This tension highlights a broader paradox within institutional efforts to address inequalities, where attempts to confront systemic issues like sexism can, at times, unintentionally reinforce them (Cunha et al., 2019; Gaim et al., 2022).

The collaboration between schools has since gained momentum, with media interest focusing on their joint efforts to address these challenges. While this attention is valuable, the heart of this story lies with the young women who took a bold step to confront an enduring issue. The young women chose to name it **The CLEAR Voice Initiative: Change. Learn. Educate. Advocate. Respect.** It has inspired tangible changes. Funding applications are underway, and a masculinities expert has been working with one school and is soon to start with another. A parent seminar is scheduled to be held at our school for the staff and boards of the four schools, where I will join the two academic contributors to present the issues and research-informed strategies for moving forward. From there, each school will continue developing tailored plans to address the unique needs of their communities.

The young women who spearheaded this initiative are proud of what they have helped make possible. Their courage to voice their experiences and push for change has been transformative – not just for them but for the schools and communities involved. This work is a testament to the power of collaboration and the possibilities that arise when young people are supported in addressing deeply rooted societal issues. When I asked them what they had learned from it, they said:

Sticking together is really important.

Not thinking you have to do everything by yourself.

To reach out and get help from others.

That something good can come out of something bad.

That something bad can be channelled into something that's proactive.

This has had an enormous impact on our Year group.

We've got more courage and clarity – it hasn't just happened to me...

Knowing that there are people that support you and will be there with you.

Knowing we are doing something for the women of the future... that feels pretty cool.

We are all so proud of our Year...

These reflections capture the personal growth of those involved and the collective transformation that emerged through their shared action. Their words indicate an understanding of solidarity,

resilience, and the intergenerational impact of their efforts. What began as a response to harm became a means of reclaiming agency and effecting cultural change within their school community. Their voices – both individual and collective – demonstrate the potential for young people to challenge and reshape the structures that shape their lives.

With Heartfelt Gratitude

The young women who began this work finished school before they could see the fruition of their efforts. Since then, for 3-years in a row, young women have created change; they changed in themselves by way of being part of the process; and they made cultural and social change by talking, sharing, being there for one another, and collectively speaking out. Like them, I found a place to be in their projects, dreams, and schemes. I was invited as a cultural outsider (due to my age and position) to be part of their team, where our humanity was shared as women, young and old(er), with similar experiences and hopes for a better way forward. These young women did something amazing for themselves, each other, and the young women who will come after them. But they did something amazing for me too, and I will remember them, their bravery and wonderful use of voice, forever.

While this wider study is grounded in CPAR, the principles of youth (Y)PAR – particularly its focus on young people as agents of change – closely align with the participatory ethos of this research. As Cammarota and Fine (2010) noted, “YPAR teaches young people that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural; are designed to privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and thus changeable” (p.2).

The insights and actions of the advisory group set the stage for a deeper exploration of how young women navigate and make sense of the gendered structures shaping their lives. Their work created momentum for broader cultural shifts, and my engagement with both the participant groups and the advisory group provided a kind of understanding that was intimate, personal, and deeply reflective. Working with these young women, I was continually reminded that research is not a neutral process; it is shaped by relationships, the dynamics of power and trust, and the willingness of participants to speak their truths in spaces that are not always receptive. These groups became a site of both knowledge production and personal connection, where I witnessed moments of hesitation, frustration, and, at times, profound clarity.

As I turn now to my reflections on working with these participant groups, I consider what it meant to be part of their meaning-making processes – their negotiations of silence and voice, complicity and resistance, struggle and possibility.

Meeting with Fabulous Young Women: Participant Groups

Group 1

I had, of course, wondered who would join and which ‘types’ of students would want to participate. This group of four young women presented as being quietly confident and deeply thoughtful. They wanted to participate to help me with my research, because they found the topic interesting, and were curious about what it would involve for them. My experience generally of young people and this kind of topic is that the young women more entrenched in hegemonic ways of being, who spend time with the popular boys, are often less likely to want to talk about it. It is almost like they do not ‘see’ the structures and guidelines and rules for being, despite knowing intimately the ways that they are required to work within them and how they are to keep the rules of engagement alive

and prominent for themselves and each other. This is in line with standpoint epistemology, which states that the further one is away from the normative binds of a hegemonic position, the clearer the view of oppression becomes (Harding, 1991; Harding, 2004).

This was indeed what I encountered with the first group, a group of sexually inexperienced young women who were very astute in relation to the wider social, political, and sexual situation and how this helped shape their worldview. They seemed able to see trends and sexual expectations and comment on these from feminist positions and how it made them feel about themselves in relation to the social and heterosexual environment around them. While they described themselves as ‘less popular and more nerdy’, their ability to critique dominant cultural narratives positioned them as particularly articulate commentators on the pressures shaping adolescent femininity. They were able to link their observations of the real world with online messaging, movie themes, and gender generalisations. They could be reflective and introspective about their own processes, acknowledging their thoughts and feelings in relation to outside pressures. They could see themselves within the wider social structure as valuable members who were capable of making their own decisions rather than feeling pressure to be a certain type of young woman and do things that they could not see the benefit in (albeit difficult at times).

They spoke a lot about the pressure of future sexual performance, the pressure of needing to orgasm to meet their partner’s expectations, and the fear of not being able to meet these demands. While these are all examples of the orgasm imperative discourse (Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021), they were also able to see how these norms and expectations further perpetuated gendered ideas of women needing to perform and please their partner, while limiting their own access to embodiment. I was simultaneously pleased to have these observers and cultural commentators and

also disappointed not to have had a group of young women fully engaged in the adolescent sexual world. After all, these types of young women did not come to my office to speak with me, the counsellor, about their negative sexual experiences. Hearing these young women talk about themselves in relation to themselves sexually from a position of reflective strength was relatively new.

I left our meeting feeling slightly unsure of myself and the understandings on which I had built my doctoral foundation. Was I wrong about what I thought young women were experiencing? It left me feeling a little bit flat that these participant responses were ‘not telling my story’ (Weatherall et al., 2002) – the story I was most curious to hear – nor the one I had imagined might uphold the broader narrative I had hoped to trace. This highlights my naivete at the beginning of my data collection and the desire to get to the core of what had interested me. However, this group became a real gem in how they spoke of resistance and counter-narratives. These women drew on discourses and ideas that contributed to potential solutions. Their strength in relation to being able to uphold their own position within a school culture that privileges popularity and femininity became more evident as time passed. Their perspectives offered interpretive depth to my analysis, helping to shape the direction of early codes and sensitising me to alternative discourses of resistance and self-definition that may have otherwise remained obscured.

Group 2

I met the second workshop group later that week. A group of six confident, sexually active, young women. These young women were the type of participant I had been hoping for. Engaged in the front lines of party life, they were quick to give me the stories I wanted to hear and bolstered my views on the prominence and popularity of pornography amongst young men and the negative

repercussions on young women. These young women were the ‘popular girls’, both by their own admission, embodiment, and my observation. It felt good that they wanted to talk and tell me their thoughts and experiences, and while that is what my role as a school counsellor normally involved, this felt different somehow. My role as a researcher made me feel more vulnerable and reliant on them. When talking with a counselling client, they lead the process, they share what feels right for them, and I work with them to find modalities and approaches that resonate with them, supporting them in their discoveries along the way. This was similar in that I did not want to lead them, but I *wanted* them to share and say certain things, and I felt pleased and excited when they met my hopes. I felt like I was completely at their mercy, my doctorate entirely reliant on their collaboration and willingness to share.

On reflection, it took time during the analysis and the beginning of the writing to realise that I, too, was contributing to the privileging of the ‘popular girls’ by the way in which I was often giving them more space for their voice when presenting the findings. They were telling the story I was wanting to tell, so I was giving them more opportunity to do so. This does not undermine the value of their contribution, their discussion helped to position their experiences within the cultural conditions of what was possible for these young women (and the young men they described). To this end, they were reproducing (and producing) a discourse; their shared cultural understandings about the way things are to be viewed, engaged with, and spoken about (Weatherall et al., 2002). While they were individuals telling me about their experiences and thoughts during the workshops, they were of course a group of women describing a cultural phenomenon, one which clearly represented the mainstay of many unhelpful and limiting beliefs about women and their place within a heterosexually dominant environment. In order to counteract their dominance in the

findings, I needed to spend more time focusing on the nuances of the other groups, the other ways that their access to equity and voice were limited, not just in the more overt ways that this group presented.

There were a number of times when this group upheld strong allegiance to rape myths and victim blaming (male dominance, slut-shaming, victim-blaming, social hierarchies based on sexual interactions, etc.), and I engaged in much more conscientisation and problem-posing (Freire, 1972) than with other groups, who showed less adherence to dominant and normative patriarchal scripts. I revisited key themes and points from our previous sessions with the group, reading back their own words and interpretations (as I did with every group). This practice, aligned with both participatory action research and reflexive TA, ensured that my initial interpretations were transparent and accountable, allowed participants to clarify or reframe what had been said, and supported ongoing reflexivity and co-construction of meaning throughout the analysis (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). At the beginning of the second workshop for group two, I read back to them the list of themes and main points they had made. There was a silence at the end before they all confessed, 'It sounds really bad when you say it like that'. From there, we were able to discuss their responses and thoughts. We also read extracts from legal definitions relating to consent, which created more talk and reflection. I was careful to 'wonder' with them, to avoid any kind of suggestion that I thought they were wrong somehow, but to pose alternatives and legal frameworks and ask them what they thought of them. As Freire (1972) stated, this makes students critical co-investigators in the dialogue rather than docile listeners.

I was also aware that, at times, I felt critical of the things that were said by some group members, their harsh criticism of victims of sexual assault, and the way they upheld and perpetuated belief

systems that were the reason for my concern and interest in this area. Feminist research is inherently challenging and implicitly critical of systems and/or participants within that system. Anything that aims to disrupt, unearth, or create new opportunities for political freedoms and theory will require action and change, thereby bringing both researcher subjectivity (my own biases and perspectives) and possible criticism (Fine, 1992). I aimed to hear from the young women, for them to tell me their stories; thus, ethically, it was important for me to be aware that my duty was to do that. The dilemma was how to carefully navigate damaging and harmful belief systems, both in the moment and how it was then written about.

My reading around discourse analysis provided helpful guidelines in thinking not about individual voices and how I was (mis)representing the speaker, rather thinking of their words as reflections of a wider system of meaning in general (Weatherall et al., 2002). As this group progressed, they shared a lot of detail and content about the current situation they and their friends were in. At times it was hard to hear the stories and see how entirely normal their accounts seemed to them. As the discussions progressed, the group began to move away from earlier expressions that echoed victim-blaming and slut-shaming narratives, opening space for more reflective and critical engagement. Now, I felt truly excited about the possibilities that *they* were finding, with resistance and solutions all laying with them and how they could effect change. For them, this was their moment of conscientisation, where they began to question and critique the very things they had relied upon as normal gendered experiences and gain a growing awareness of the realities of their sociocultural positions and the ways in which they could transform their current reality (Friere, 1972). This becomes what Grossi (1981) called *disindoctrination*, whereby there is an awareness and understanding of a wider system being at play (in this case, the patriarchy). The young women

began to recognise that they were part of a system that was not necessarily (or at all), serving their best interests. Their actions – often not wanted, enjoyable, or freely chosen – were ultimately benefiting others whom the system privileged. I loved witnessing this awakening in them and felt excited about such an enormous shift in attitude and the possibilities for this kind of awareness, writing in my research journal: *“Oh my god, that was amazing – I actually witnessed the beginnings of cultural change. It was a moment Friere would be proud of! Conscientisation happened before my very eyes!!”* (13.06.2022).

Yet, it is also important to name my own positioning. The excitement I felt at their transformation risked slipping into a kind of ‘white saviour’ framing – one where I was too invested in their ‘recovery’ from harmful scripts. This has been a critical site of learning. Rather than viewing their change as a success story for my research, I now understand it as a moment of collective reflexivity – an evolving conversation about complicity, resistance, and the possibilities for agency under constraint.

Group 3

The third group I met with were entirely different again, both in dynamic and in how the session unfolded. One an outspoken proponent of the benefits of masturbation, the next a once shy, now more confident young woman, and two other participants who did not speak (apart from introducing themselves and tentatively participating in the starter activity) due to apparent discomfort about the topic. This was a completely different experience to the two other groups and required a different kind of involvement from me. Unlike the prior groups, this one introduced a distinctive dynamic characterised by discomfort, hesitant participation, and the emergence of a dominant peer-voice, which shifted the tone of discussion and demanded more active facilitation

on my part. The flow was not immediately evident, mainly due to the two young women who were extremely uncomfortable. One participant, Rebekah, led the group, trying to get the other two extremely quiet participants to join. This created a greater awkwardness in them as they were being focused on, and they retreated further into themselves.

Of course, I wanted to hear what they had to say, but I was aware of their silence and the way that feminist research conceptualises silence as active and saturated with meaning (Jack & Ali, 2010). My interest in silence and silencing seemed to be illustrated by their apparent hesitation at what they felt they could speak of or not. Their silences did not feel neutral. They were situated, culturally loaded silences – possibly protective, possibly shame-informed, and certainly meaningful. In a focus group environment, silence can also signal discursive boundaries – what is sayable, and what is not (Gavey et al., 2021). The second participant, Betty, was eager to talk about the pressures on virgins from other girls. This group spoke a lot about girls enabling and promoting the negative attitudes of the young men they witnessed, and they felt more pressure from other young women than from the boys with whom they spent less time overall.

The second group had been extremely opposed to the idea of masturbation and any kind of self-touch; however, Rebekah was adamant from the beginning of our workshop that this was something that was a vital piece of what every young woman needed to know about, with Betty quietly agreeing, “*Know your body and know what you like*”. She was also very comfortable stepping into what felt like a research assistant role, following up with other participants on their answers, suggesting they answer with more detail, or encouraging them to participate more, at times reframing or correcting their contributions in ways she believed were more appropriate or

accurate. It was slightly awkward for me in that I wanted to let things play out, but I also did not want someone to take the reins and go off in a direction I was not going in.

On reflection, all the groups, in fact, had a participant like that, someone who at least in some way managed and directed the group and reminded them of the ways that ‘our group does things’, policing and directing certain attitudes and ways of being. Rebekah’s assertive role could be understood as a performance of discursive authority – an attempt to shape group norms, bring marginalised topics like self-pleasure into the open, and assert a sexual subjectivity that challenged normative silence (Davies & Harré, 1990; Fine, 1988; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Tolman, 2002). While Rebekah, at times, assumed a position of dominance or authority that was unfamiliar due to what seemed like her lack of hierarchical awareness (interesting to me that this felt uncomfortable when I was, in fact, trying to create this after all), she was doing the same, albeit in a different way to the others.

It is in this way that focus groups help to give participants an opportunity to both explore and clarify their thinking, find their priorities, and pursue these while thinking about their own questions (Kitzinger, 1995). The researcher is able to gain access to the cultural workings of each group, the norms and values, how these things are upheld (or not), and how this conversation and discussion moves the group (Kitzinger, 1995). There is potential power for change and awareness, and the group itself can create moments of discursive movement, even contagion, which may carry into spaces beyond the workshop. However, there is also the potential for reinforcing and perpetuating unhelpful ideas. Voices that were in the minority were often glossed over in favour of the dominant narrative, and it was interesting to watch how meanings and understandings were created and carried. In the cases of my groups, there was generally a united direction, with friends

having similar values and interests. There were still comments every now and then that suggested an alternative and these, given the structure of the data collection environment, were given space and at times allowed to germinate which, in some cases (particularly Group 2), led to whole group change.

Group 4

The last group was a mixture of participants, six young women who had the full spectrum of experience, from sexually inexperienced through to long-term boyfriends and everything in between. They were thoughtful, aware, politically engaged, and curious to learn and share as a group. Their reasons for participating were that, as a friend group, they would benefit from having these discussions facilitated, and they were really interested to know what my research was about. I found this group to be a representation of all the groups; they were fluid across the social groups at school; some had attended parties and experienced the hook-up/party scene, and some were observers, having had little heterosexual (or other) experience. This fluidity positioned them as both insiders and observers – moving through party scenes and peer groups while often retaining a critical distance from dominant norms.

They discussed both their experiences and observations as a group, using the opportunity to share reflections on past and current relationships. Together, they explored how they had felt within these relationships, while also feeling confined by the external constraints surrounding them – highlighting the tension between intimacy and social expectation, and the ways in which assumed silence within their peer groups and families shaped their sense of self and meaning-making.

This group took a much stronger stance in relation to their rights as women, expressing anger at the way their bodies are assumed to belong to men. A shared sense of frustration emerged in their

discussion of the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. There was a political fire in this group, evident across all members. They spoke about their bodies as objects – things to be confined and controlled – and expressed outrage at what this might mean for them in the future. They reflected on how a decision made in America could easily influence how women’s bodies are seen, spoken about, and regulated elsewhere, particularly through the normalising influence of a globally connected social media landscape (Bordo, 2023; Foucault, 1979; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008).

I felt a familiarity with this group, in that how they saw the issues and the way they were choosing to participate in the broader conversations felt recognisable to me and how I might have been at their age. There was an ease with which the conversations unfolded and there was an aspect of comfort with the topics and the kinds of passion they felt for what they discussed. There was a sense of balance in this group – an adaptability across social categories grounded in both lived experience and observation. Perhaps this liminal position enabled a certain clarity; they could speak to the structures from both within and without. Their disappointment at the lack of communication about bodies and sex – particularly from school – echoes broader cultural silences around female embodiment and desire (Allen, L., 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006). One participant shared that her mother was someone she could talk to about everything; however, the others were particularly disappointed about the lack of communication from their mothers about their bodies and sex. One participant told a story that caused the group to laugh: *“I got home from school when I was about 14, and there was an old book about sex that had belonged to my mother, and it was on my bed along with a bible!”* The anecdote was met with laughter, but it also signalled the fragmented and contradictory messages that young women are often given – where religious

morality and hushed biological facts are offered in place of relational, ethical, or pleasure-based sex education (Allen & Brooks, 2012; Tolman, 2002).

These four groups offered distinct and valuable insights into how young women make sense of themselves in relation to dominant sexual and gendered norms – sometimes challenging these frameworks, sometimes upholding them, and often doing both at once. Their voices, shaped by varied social positions and peer dynamics, illuminated not just the pressures they navigated, but their capacity for critical thought, resistance, and relational reflection. Engaging with these groups shaped the direction of the research and deepened my own reflexive understanding of the role I play as both counsellor and researcher in this space.

Ongoing Practice

My counselling role has undoubtedly evolved as a result of the events emerging from this study. I now actively champion participatory approaches in other areas of the school. Rather than relying solely on adult-led solutions to adolescent issues, I advocate for young people to take an active role in the problem-solving process. The success of the *Ask Aunty Hilda* website exemplifies this shift. Contrary to the common assumption that young women naturally engage in open conversations, the website has fostered a space where meaningful and candid dialogues occur – spaces that previously seemed unattainable.

The addition of working with the boys' schools has been both an exciting development and a challenging reminder of the complexities inherent in tackling these issues. It has reinforced what the young women so clearly articulated – the most meaningful solutions lie in women coming together to share their experiences, insights, and hopes for a collective vision of change. While the

boys' schools bring an important perspective to this work, they operate with different levels of awareness and varied goals, which has, at times, made collaboration difficult. This disparity highlights the importance of continuing to centre the voices and experiences of young women while remaining open to nuanced dialogue.

Navigating this terrain has required my principal and me to carefully articulate what matters most, what is needed, and how to ensure those messages are both understood and acted upon. The process is a reminder that meaningful progress often demands persistent effort to have the depth and urgency of these issues truly heard. At the same time, it has illuminated opportunities to extend this work by collaborating more closely with other girls' schools. By connecting young women across schools, the shared understanding that solutions lie within their collective agency, vision, and determination can be amplified, uniting them in a way that transcends institutional boundaries.

This experience has deepened my commitment to supporting young women in critically engaging with the sociocultural conditions that shape their lives. Rather than positioning them as in need of awareness, I recognise them as already located within complex systems of meaning-making, capable of naming and interrogating the structural and cultural forces they navigate. The emphasis, then, is on co-creating spaces where this critical consciousness can be articulated, shared, and mobilised. The path forward lies in honouring their voices and enabling their collective knowledge and situated insights to inform and guide meaningful cultural and structural change.

While I have always seen my role as inherently political and frequently collaborated with young people on social justice projects, this experience has deepened my understanding of how such a perspective can be woven into everyday counselling practice. I am accustomed to working on

behalf of young people – sharing their stories, advocating for change, and collaborating with adults in positions of power who can implement those changes. However, this journey has taught me the importance of creating spaces for young voices to be heard and fostering genuine youth leadership. This understanding aligns with the foundational principles of CPAR, where the knowledge and leadership of those most affected by the issue are central to the process of transformation. These experiences have reinforced that young people possess the potential to influence social and cultural change, and their voices deserve to be noticed and valued.

The demands of school counselling – where the volume of individuals needing support often overshadows the time required to develop youth-led initiatives – had previously obscured this potential. Yet, this experience has revealed the transformative impact of enabling young people to take an active role in addressing the issues that matter to them. By fostering these opportunities, young people are empowered to make a difference and equipped to shape the cultural and social landscape in meaningful ways. The introduction of *Ask Aunty Hilda* has prompted other young people to approach me with ideas for similar initiatives on various issues. This reflects their desire to have a voice in their own lives and to share their collective knowledge and experiences. It emphasises the counsellor’s dual role: as a bridge to accessible systems and a trusted space where young people can express the deeply personal significance of their ideas. It is about recognising and amplifying their voices, validating their experiences, and supporting their right to shape and claim legitimacy in their own lives.

Summary

The reflections in this chapter have highlighted the ways in which my position as a researcher and counsellor shaped the questions I asked and the methodologies I employed. This reflexive stance

also underscored the importance of recognising how dominant cultural narratives and silences influence both my interpretations and the lived experiences of the young women who participated in this study. These insights lay the foundation for the next chapter, which turns to an analysis of how young women learn to perform femininity within a heteronormative and pornified culture – one that both prescribes sexual scripts and simultaneously erases women’s desires and autonomy.

In Chapter 5: *Ghost Bodies, Spectres of Sexuality*, I delve into the ways young women experience their bodies as haunted spaces, shaped by cultural expectations and marked by absences of knowledge and voice. The chapter explores how the silencing of female desire and bodily awareness manifests both symbolically and practically, leaving young women to grapple with invisible scripts and erasures that shape their relationships to their bodies and sexuality. It unpacks the ways in which sexual scripts, shaped by pornography, rape myths, and postfeminist ideals, construct expectations of femininity, leaving many young women disconnected from their bodies and desires. The chapter also considers how these dynamics are both internalised and resisted, revealing moments of tension, contradiction, and possibility.

Chapter 5. Analysis and Discussion

Young Women and their Ghost Bodies: Spectres of Sexuality

“I feel like school doesn’t want you to have sex – it’s all about be careful and don’t have a baby”
(Erin, Group 2).

Sex is everywhere for young women. To be surrounded by something so pervasive – both in their personal lives and the wider culture – yet to have it rendered paradoxically unspeakable, shapes how many navigate the expectations of a heterosexual, heteronormative world. They are positioned in relation to the sex they may want – or think they should want – while negotiating the constant sexualisation of their bodies. This negotiation is further complicated by contradictory messages from adults, particularly parents and teachers, about appropriate behaviour and self-expression (Allen, 2008; Healy-Cullen, Morison, et al., 2022; Healy-Cullen, Taylor, Morison, et al., 2022; Healy-Cullen, Taylor, Ross, et al., 2022). These tensions embed postfeminist ideals of empowerment within normative gender roles, where female objectification is rebranded as proactive sexual agency. Such a framework creates privileged and desirable subject positions for young women, even as it limits their access to genuine sexual subjectivity (Harvey & Gill, 2011). The result is a double bind. Feminist discourses may be present and even normalised; yet, young women are frequently excluded from meaningful participation in decisions about their own bodies (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Fine & Torre, 2021; Tolman, 2012). This contradiction contributes to the formation of ‘ghost bodies’ – bodies that are hyper-visible yet disconnected from personal ownership and agency.

This chapter explores the social context described by the young women in the workshops: the discursive and institutional conditions that shaped their (in)ability to access knowledge about sex

and their bodies, and the silences that prevented them from acting agentically in their sexual lives. My research took place in a socioeconomically advantaged girls' school, where considerable attention is paid to cultivating forms of femininity deemed appropriate – particularly those that align with parental ideals of success (Luthar et al., 2013). These elite schools market superiority and distinction, promising parents an education that will shape their daughters into accomplished, respectable young women – legitimated in their femininity, but non-threatening to dominant masculine scripts (Wardman et al., 2010). The regulation of social behaviour is central to this promise, reinforcing ideals of feminine success that emphasise grace, achievement, and compliance (McCall, 2019).

These school cultures intersect with the already complex transitions of adolescence – a period marked by conflicting messages about bodies, desire, and relationships. Curiosity and confusion coexist with strong social expectations, amplifying the difficulty of locating oneself within this landscape (Lamb, 2010). The shift from girlhood to young womanhood is frequently accompanied by a new awareness of the body as object: scrutinised, judged, and available for public commentary (Impett et al., 2011). Social processes during this time require young women to take up newly circulating expectations – what kind of bodies they should inhabit, and how they should perform them (Tolman et al., 2006).

Social media and peer dynamics further intensify this surveillance. Girls receive relentless messages about how to take up space – how much, in what ways, and to what end. In the absence of consistent bodily knowledge, these messages often produce uncertainty and insecurity. As embodied subjects, young women are positioned to perform femininity while concealing or minimising aspects of their femaleness (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). Their femininity may be

socially rewarded, but their embodied experiences remain unacknowledged or rendered shameful. As participants from across all the groups shared, the expectations of how they should perform femininity are relentless and demanding. Some of their extensive examples are shared below:

- Carrie: Instagram's all about - well mine anyway! – being kind and caring, pleasing your man, and obviously the right body and big boobs thing.
- Inez: Yeah, you've got to be submissive, and obedient, kind of weak. And skinny, but not too skinny. And be really committed to the relationship without being clingy, but be really experienced in sex, without having really done it with anyone else...
- Brie: Like always nice and helping others and never angry or too much of anything and follow the rules. (Group 1, Focus Group).
- Scotty: Tall and blonde, skinny, good fashion and be pretty. Like big boobs and toned. Oh and popular and rich.
- Stormi: Yeah and like sporty and confident. Like obviously pretty and stuff.
- Kris: And definitely good skin.
- Pam: Yeah and good teeth, but like I reckon things like being confident, but not too overly, you know, not too loud, but still funny and smart, but I don't know, not too smart.... And obviously a perfect body and big tits. Oh and yeah good at sport.
- Erin: And B.Js! [Blow jobs]. You've got to be good at them and know lots [about sex] and not be scared or frigid. (Group 2, Focus Group).
- Rebekah: Um, like not too big or too skinny, not too loud or too quiet, like just the perfect amount of everything. And obviously all the beauty standards we see all the time, long hair and tan and nice make-up, but like not opinionated or, but like being sexual, but just the right amount, you know, like maybe edging towards sex, but not with too many people.
- Betty: Yeah and like not being a tease, and kind of giving guys what they want, even if it's not what you want.
- Maia: Umm, polite and kind and not speaking your mind and mentally stable, like and kind to everyone and not a virgin and not a whore. (Group 3, Focus Group).

Maureen: Not too dramatic, naïve, but know stuff [sexually], and I feel like, you're supposed to look the way society wants you to look, like the way you dress and stuff, like you can't kind of go against it, like easily.

Mandy: Well, you've got to keep in shape, and care about your looks and image and be kind and innocent or people won't find you attractive. And you've got to dress a certain way, like not too conservative, but then not too skimpy, but still sexy – except, then supposedly we shouldn't be sexual or anything because we're too young and it will kind of ruin us. (Group 4, Focus Group).

The subject positions available to young women are multiple but unequally distributed. Some conform more easily to patriarchal ideals, offering social capital in exchange for compliance (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; McCall, 2019). Others, particularly those aligned with feminist or non-normative expressions, can attract criticism, shame, or social exclusion (Mattsson, 2015; Paechter, 2018; Tolman, 2002). Even naming oneself as a feminist can result in rejection, especially within school cultures where popularity is tethered to patriarchally sanctioned performances of gender. Negotiation of competing scripts often leads to the embodiment of bodies that are seen and judged yet rarely inhabited from within. These young women are visible but not agentic; they are present in their social worlds but absent in their own sexual narratives. Without access to affirming knowledge that enables embodied engagement and critical reflexivity, they remain suspended between objectification and erasure.

The Pleasure Gap

The young women I met with shared one common message: a longing for knowledge and education about their bodies and sex – something they felt had been withheld throughout their years at high school. Group 2 reflected on their health class experience:

Pam: If someone asked 'what's an orgasm?' they [the teacher] wouldn't answer.
Group: Oh, I just learned about that recently.
Stormi: Oh! I didn't know that girls could orgasm... can they?! (Focus Group)

The students' assumption about the teacher's refusal to answer a basic question about female pleasure underscores the discomfort many educators face when addressing the sexual realities of young people. These limitations are often shaped by restricted curriculum time, a lack of teacher training, and the perceived expectations of conservative parent communities (Terry et al., 2012). Within this context, pleasure is sidelined in favour of risk-management messages – contraception, alcohol use, sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention – where female desire is either erased or rendered dangerous (Carmody, 2009; Fine, 1988). This absence of information appears not accidental, but structural. Participants described a curriculum that seemed designed to keep them ignorant of their sexual rights while hyper-aware of potential consequences, as if to pre-emptively shield them from becoming the 'promiscuous disappointment' they are tacitly warned against. The result is a predicament in which young women are sexualised by society but shamed for sexual expression, often through subtle forms of adult-led slut-shaming (Williams, 2021). Nigella reflected on the way this silencing becomes internalised:

Nigella: It's like when you do things that a guy wants to do, you don't speak up for what you want or enjoy. It's like you keep it a secret; you don't even tell your friends because you know deep down you're not supposed to be doing it. Coz if you do say something, people will discuss it, and then you get shamed. (Group 4, Focus Group)

Across the focus groups, conversations about female pleasure were largely absent until I introduced the topic. Even with full permission to discuss any aspect of sex, the participants initially omitted any mention of desire or orgasm. This absence suggested more than discomfort. It reflected a discursive silence, where heterosexual intercourse is centred and male partners implicitly assumed, while women's pleasure remains almost unspeakable (Haus & Thompson, 2020). Notably, while the young women had received no formal education on female sexual pleasure, they were well-versed in boys' sexual habits, particularly masturbation. As Mandy

commented, *“The boys talk about wanking all the time, but girls never do. I feel like girls aren’t supposed to do that”* (Group 4, Focus Group).

This uneven knowledge reflects a broader gendered pattern: boys’ sexual behaviours are normalised, even celebrated, while girls’ sexual curiosity is stigmatised or erased. Participants described hearing about boys watching pornography together, masturbating in groups, and treating these behaviours as shared social experiences. While these accounts were not based on direct observation, they offer insight into how young women understood and constructed male sexual cultures in their peer environments. In contrast, discussions of their own sexual curiosity were often marked by discomfort or shame, with only one or two suggesting that masturbation might be a healthy or informative act. The disparity between how male and female sexual behaviours were perceived and spoken about points to the gendered discourses that render some forms of sexuality visible, normalised, and even communal, while casting others into silence, stigma, or self-surveillance. Despite the increasing visibility of sexually empowered adult women in mainstream media, adolescent girls remain without accessible frameworks for understanding their own pleasure. As Delia from Group Four commented:

Delia: We don’t learn about our own pleasure, but we learn a lot about how to pleasure boys – or at least that’s what people talk about in class and that’s kinda what then gets the attention (Group 4, Focus Group).

Their sexuality is framed through contradictory scripts – desirable but not desiring, performative but not autonomous. Popular culture continues to privilege heterosexual scripts in which sex is male-driven, and same-sex attraction among girls is rendered performative, existing largely for the male gaze (Aubrey et al., 2020). This cultural void limits young women’s opportunities to develop embodied sexual subjectivity. While adult women may have access to more expansive subject

positions, adolescent girls are often left without language or space to explore their sexuality. The absence of these pathways hinders self-discovery and reinforces an uneven sexual landscape where boys enjoy more freedom to express and explore desire (Sun et al., 2016; Ward, 2016).

- Pam: Boys are always like, ‘I’m going to go and have a wank’, but girls would never say that.
Stormi: For boys it’s normal, they do it together.
Kim: Yeah, they do it together.
Kris: Yeah, they watch porn together and wank and play games like ‘Bang!’ to see who can finish first, and soggy biscuit and stuff. (Group 2, Focus Group)

The casual normalisation of male masturbation – often framed as collective, even humorous – highlights the social permission granted to boys to explore and inhabit their sexuality. Girls, by contrast, described female masturbation as unspeakable or unimaginable. As Delia put it, “*Girls never talk about it, but guys walk around with their hands down their pants all the time*” (Group 4, Focus Group 1). Skye added, “*I thought only boys could do that*” (Group 4, Focus Group). Maureen’s surprise that masturbation was “*actually a female thing as well*” (Group 4, Focus Group 1), revealed just how effectively female pleasure has been erased from possibility. Their reflections show how girls’ bodies are not only policed externally but also rendered unknowable to themselves – sexualised yet disconnected from their own pleasure.

- Rebekah: I feel like there’s a real stigma around masturbation for girls, when there really shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t be like that.
Betty: Yeah, especially when guys are so casual about it.
Rebekah: Yeah, they talk about doing it all the time! (Group 3, Focus Group)

Rebekah also added “*we don’t get the opportunity*”, which acknowledges the systemic nature of this absence: it is not about individual shame or reluctance, but about structures that have historically excluded girls from the discourse of sexual autonomy. Her comment, “*it’s not weird, it’s completely normal*” (Rebekah) resists the haunting scripts that have rendered female pleasure

deviant or invisible. In recognising the need for change and voicing a different possibility, she began the process of undoing the ghosting: reclaiming the idea of a body with wants, needs, and the right to explore both.

In contrast to Rebekah's openness, Group 2 had the following discussion:

- Scottie: Girls would never admit to anything like that [masturbation].
Erin: Some girls talk about pleasuring themselves – they don't care.
Kris: Our friend group would never do that though.
Scottie: And if somebody did, everyone would be like 'Ewwwww'! No! No one would admit to it because it's not normal – or normalised.
Pam: I feel like you only hear about that from feminists.
Group: Yeah. (Group 2, Focus Group)

Despite shifts in how female sexuality is portrayed in popular culture, female masturbation continues to carry moral and classist associations inherited from a bygone era, when women's sexual desire was constructed as impure, dangerous, or immoral (Groneman, 1994). The extracts above illustrate how social control continues to operate through in-group policing of sexual behaviours, reinforcing acceptable norms of male and female sexuality. The normalisation of pornography and associated behaviours among young men is sharply contrasted with young women's limited agency when it comes to body awareness and pleasure.

In this same group, these regulatory norms were reinforced not only through language but also through affective responses like ridicule and disgust. What Edwards (2000) described as extreme case formulations – absolutist language like 'always', 'never', and 'normal' – featured prominently in their talk, marking the boundaries of what is considered acceptable femininity. Disgust emerged as a particularly powerful boundary marker. Kris, echoing the sentiment of her peers, expressed it in unequivocal terms: "*God no, no way; I can't think about it [masturbation], it grosses me out!*" (Group 2, Focus Group).

In this group, the young women expressed comfort with the idea of young men touching them and having sex with them – even when that sex was unwanted or unpleasurable. It was framed as far more acceptable to have someone else do things to their bodies than to touch their own bodies for sexual pleasure. The comment, “*I feel like you only hear about that [masturbation] from feminists*” (Pam) signals a reluctance to be associated with explicitly feminist discourse, aligning with research that shows how young women carefully manage their positioning to avoid being seen as ‘too feminist’ (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a). This caution reflects the broader cultural imperative to appear fair, likeable, and reasonable – qualities that help girls avoid the ‘killjoy feminist’ label (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a). Within this framing, touching one’s own body becomes not only socially deviant but also symbolically disloyal to a gendered power structure that privileges male access and authority over women’s bodies (Gavey, 2019).

Amidst these constraints, second-wave feminists radically challenged the construction of acceptable female sexuality, and the medicalisation or pathologising of anything that sat outside heteronormative, penile-vaginal sex (Swartz, 2013). Advocates for embodied autonomy framed clitoral orgasms and masturbation as acts of resistance – rebellions against patriarchal expectations that positioned women as passive and selfless in sex (Frank, 2014). This reorientation toward embodiment, pleasure, and knowledge, marked a decisive shift away from discourses of purity and restraint, instead positioning self-pleasure as a political reclamation of agency.

Performing Sex

While women take up positions along a continuum – from self-pleasure being seen as problematic to it being a site of feminist resistance and empowerment – the expectations within heterosexual sex remain more rigid. An ‘orgasm imperative’ discourse is prevalent, placing pressure on women

to experience (or, to perform) orgasm to satisfy their partner and validate their partner's sexual prowess (Fahs, 2011; Gavey, 2019; Potts, 2000). This discourse, reinforced by pornography, perpetuates the belief that women's bodies should effortlessly respond to heterosexual encounters with multiple orgasms. When this does not occur, women are often led to feel defective, particularly if achieving pleasure requires effort, communication, or self-knowledge (Frank, 2014).

Brie captured this tension:

Brie: There seems to be this expectation that you have to orgasm when you have sex, and I don't know, but I feel like I let that affect me, it's better now, but for a while, I was like 'if I ever have sex, I need to do this' and it won't count as sex unless I orgasm. It had me worried about what if I can't. (Group 1, Focus Group)

Brie's reflection highlights the internalisation of cultural expectations surrounding female sexual performance. Her concern that sex "*won't count*" unless she orgasms reveals how dominant scripts shape behaviour and produce anxiety about sexual adequacy. Within this framework, orgasm becomes less about personal pleasure and more about validating the encounter as 'successful' sex (Fine & McClelland, 2023; Gavey, 2019; Potts, 2000; Tolman, 2012). The absence of a pedagogy of pleasure – where knowledge about the body, desire, and consent is explored as an ongoing, agentic process – creates a void in which normative expectations flourish unchecked. Brie's experience echoes wider research showing how young women internalise heteronormative scripts that prioritise performance over embodiment, and satisfying others over knowing oneself (Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Lamb, 2010). Kris captured some of this tension when she said:

Kris: Like sex for guys is good and like how to make girls feel good at the same time should be, yeah..." (Group 2, Workshop).

The pressure to perform sexual adequacy intersects with neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility – discourses that dominate elite school environments. Young women are encouraged

to be high-achieving, self-regulating, and independent; yet are rarely given the relational tools or discursive permission to question sexual norms. They are taught to ‘choose wisely’, to be responsible for their safety and futures, while simultaneously being denied the knowledge needed to make informed, agentic decisions about their sexual lives. In this context, Brie’s reflection that “*it’s better now*” signals more than personal growth – it points to a shift toward critical awareness. Her comment suggests a nascent resistance, a move away from internalised norms of performative sexuality and toward a reimagined sense of self as a subject of desire, rather than its object. Similarly, Mandy and Delia reflected:

Mandy: Not only is it all about how to prevent it [pregnancy] or how to stop it [sex], but it’s all focused on like males, how to pleasure them and make sure you’ve got a condom, you know? Like, why am I learning about a condom? I don’t have a penis and like, they’re not learning about our bodies in their classrooms.

Delia: These guys are all so uneducated about the female body. (Group 4, Focus group)

However, the broader cultural environment rarely supports such resistance. Many participants described what I interpreted as a ‘silencing training ground’ where girls are encouraged to be desirable but not desiring – to comply with scripts of availability but not to author them (Gavey, 2019). In elite school contexts, this tension can be particularly acute. The label of ‘slut’ operates as a disciplinary mechanism, policing curiosity, refusal, and dissent (Farvid et al., 2017). Expressing a desire for ‘more’ – whether knowledge, clarity, or pleasure – can be cast as deviant, selfish, or socially risky. Maureen articulated this clearly:

Maureen: It’s about going with what the guys want, it’s not speaking up for what you want or even if you enjoyed it. It’s about keeping it a secret, like don’t tell anyone, because people are going to find out and discuss it and cast you as a slut or a tease. It’s just not worth it. (Group 4, Workshop).

Repeatedly, participants described how the absence of foundational sexual knowledge left them without the language or confidence to articulate discomfort, desire, or refusal. In many cases, this meant they interpreted their own hesitation or lack of enthusiasm not as a valid response to coercive expectations, but as a personal shortcoming.

- Brie: I had so many questions that weren't answered during health class.
Carrie: And there's a big gap with parents. They seem to be absent in the conversations and leave it to school.
Inez: I get worried and confused about sex and I think we need to learn more about it at school – things like how to talk to boys about what we want and consent and orgasms. Boys and girls need to learn more about that.
Carrie: We're just dealing with the repercussions of older generations and their thoughts about sex being bad and shameful for women.
Brie: Totally. Like how come we never got taught about our bodies and our own sexual pleasure. (Group 1, Workshop)

Carrie's framing of sex-negative legacies as "*repercussions*" speaks to the generational entrenchment of silence. These young women are not simply uninformed – they are navigating inherited constraints that actively discourage them from seeking knowledge or voicing confusion. Jarkovská and Lamb (2018) observed that adult fear and shame around youth sexuality often masquerade as protection, even as they produce harm. The participants' comments suggest that the very systems meant to support them – school, family, curriculum – have become sites of avoidance. In the absence of reliable guidance, their questions remain unanswered, and their sexual scripts are shaped in isolation.

This frustration was echoed across other groups. As Skye (Group 4) put it, "*right when we need it [sex education] and have real legitimate questions about sex, we don't have those classes*". Others in her group called for sex education that extended beyond biology and risk prevention into the realities of sex – pleasure, communication, consent, and emotional readiness.

- Nigella: We actually need proper sex education, not just how to put on a condom.

- Mandy: Yeah, like talking about what actual sex is like, not just what you see in media.
- Maureen: And like more health classes and for longer. Not just in the junior years when you kind of don't know enough to ask proper questions.
- Skye: I think it's strange that right when we need it... we don't have those classes. (Group 4, Workshop)

Across the focus groups, there was a shared critique of the timing, content, and delivery of sex education. Formal instruction often faded just as students began to need it most – leaving them reliant on peers, media, and culturally embedded assumptions about gender, sex, and power. Pam (Group 2), noted, “*I think they're [teachers] scared of exposing us*”. As others have argued (Allen, 2008; Healy-Cullen, Morison, et al., 2022; Waling et al., 2021), this avoidance reflects an orientation that privileges adult control over young people's lived realities. These conversations call for youth-led, dialogic approaches – ones that centre young people's questions, contexts, and meaning-making over moral protectionism (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a).

The pervasive presence of pornography continues to outpace the hesitant and often fragmented responses from home and school, contributing to a discursive tension that undermines young people's meaning-making about sex (Healy-Cullen et al., 2023b). Even among those with greater porn literacy, concerns persist about how such content is internalised and negotiated. The young women I spoke with described a culture where acts like choking and slapping were perceived as increasingly normalised – spoken about frequently, referenced in social media, and widely assumed to be taking place. While not all participants had direct knowledge of such acts occurring in their peer groups, many identified a shared sense that these behaviours were expected or acceptable. Meanwhile, school-based education focused narrowly on STI prevention, offering little that acknowledged the broader sexual cultures shaping young people's expectations and understandings. These competing discourses reflect a disjunction between institutional framings

of sex and the complex, sometimes ambiguous ways young people experience and imagine themselves as sexual beings (Allen, 2008; Allen, L., 2008; Rothman et al., 2023; Terry et al., 2012; Waling et al., 2021).

While sex education remains fixated on disease prevention and pregnancy avoidance, meaningful education that centres young women within their own sexual lives and experiences often remains glaringly absent (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Cooper, 2021; Ezzell et al., 2020; Faustino & Gavey, 2021; Healy Cullen et al., 2023; Healy-Cullen et al., 2023a). Within this current framework, many young women encounter two dominant narratives that uphold particular ideologies about women's bodies and sexuality. On one hand, there is the narrative of pornified sex, which, while often recognised by young people as unrealistic (Siobhán Healy-Cullen et al., 2023), still emerges as a primary source of information about sexual acts and expectations. On the other hand, the protectionist approach seeks to counter pornography's influence but frequently leaves young women without usable knowledge or language for their own experiences. As Skye explained:

Skye: It's just really bad. They don't teach you about anything that's real. Like You quickly touch on consent and then it's back to periods and you're like, wait, did we miss a bit of that chat?!" (Group 4 Focus Group)

What emerges is a state in which young women may be constantly positioned in relation to sex yet not supported to explore or define it on their own terms. These dominant discourses constrain possibilities, creating spaces where young women's bodies and agency are simultaneously materialised and erased – deemed visible, but denied subjectivity. They are, in effect, (de)flourishing in a vacuum of meaningful education. As Kim noted:

Kim: The teachers are scared that they're going to be encouraging the kids to have sex. They think if they don't mention it then we'll not do it or something. (Group 2, Workshop)

For these young women, the absence of meaningful information about female sexual pleasure did not appear coincidental. Rather, it reflected a more layered dynamic – shaped by cultural discomfort, intergenerational silence, and a persistent lack of language for discussing young women's desire and agency (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Tolman, 2002; Waling et al., 2021). This was not always an intentional omission, but it produced effects that were powerfully silencing. In some cases, it intersected with what seemed like parental denialism – a tendency to assume daughters were either not encountering sexual content, or to hold them responsible when they did. As Skye (Group 4, Workshop) noted, "*girls are always held accountable for the actions... like everyone does*". These tensions stood in sharp contrast to the hypersexualised portrayals of women across media platforms, where girls are expected to be desirable but not desiring. Within this contradiction, sex education emerges not only as incomplete, but – through its overwhelmingly negative framing – deeply unreliable and out of step with young women's realities. As Group 4 noted:

Delia: Like we hear about consent at school, but it's always about like if you're under the influence don't do anything [sexually], but like that's when you typically want to do it more. And like, they don't discuss the in-betweens or anything... like saying no or yes just like totally isn't like that. And there's so many different things that can come up...

Mandy: yeah, like just assuming you want to be choked and stuff. Which is like scary. And you don't feel like you can say no, so you're kind of consenting...

Nigella: Yeah, it's not actually how the consent stuff happens. (Group 4, Focus Group)

Addressing this gap requires more than a revision of curriculum content; it calls for broader systemic change across governmental, institutional, and cultural domains (Fine et al., 2021). If young women are to be equipped with the agency, knowledge, and language to navigate their sexual lives with confidence and care, the systems that continue to reproduce these contradictions must be confronted. This means challenging the silences and moral gatekeeping that restrict what is deemed appropriate to teach, and reimagining sex education as a space that genuinely centres young people's lived experiences, questions, and possibilities.

The young women's reflections made clear that sex education reform cannot be confined to classroom delivery. Without structural change at the level of government and policy, efforts to centre pleasure, consent, and agency will remain fragmented and inconsistent. Aotearoa New Zealand's decentralised curriculum model – where schools and parent bodies hold considerable influence – often upholds conservative values that silence sexuality and reinforce gendered ignorance (Allen, L., 2008c; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022; Waling et al., 2021). These structural limitations intersect with enduring ideals of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell's, 1987), where young women are expected to be high-achieving and self-regulating but also compliant, kind, and sexually modest. Neoliberal discourses frame their success as personal responsibility, while rewarding adherence to social harmony and respectable femininity (McCall, 2019; McRobbie, 2015). Within this tension, young women are denied the conditions to develop sexual subjectivity on their own terms. Nigella articulated her experience with the expectations of respectable femininity clearly:

Nigella: My parents found out I had sex and after they finished screaming at me, they stopped talking to me. I'm still made to feel like I did something

completely wrong. I did something horrifying. My Mum said I totally let her down.

Mandy: Yeah, like parents just do what their parents did. Like my Mum's never said anything about sex.

Skye: Yeah, like our school tries to keep us all sheltered and focus on getting like excellence and opportunities and stuff. And parents don't want to have the sex talk with us because we're girls and... (Group 4, Workshop).

While these discourses appear to celebrate the modern, high-achieving young woman, they ultimately function to uphold patriarchal and neoliberal structures. By positioning girls as simultaneously accomplished and controllable, self-reliant yet modest, these ideals constrain rather than enable meaningful autonomy or agentic sexual subjectivity (McRobbie, 2007, 2015). The persistent absence of a discourse of desire (Fine, 1988) – particularly within high-decile girls' schools – intensifies this silencing, even as broader cultural messaging persistently sexualises girls' bodies through media and consumer culture.

Within this paradox, the ideal girl is expected to be 'sassy, sexy, and successful' (Allan, 2009; Farvid & Braun, 2014) – a version of femininity that demands the strategic balancing of postfeminist confidence and achievement with traditional notions of restraint and respectability (Allan, 2009; Allan, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2014; Mattsson, 2015; McCall, 2019; Paechter, 2018). Any disruption of this ideal – whether by taking up too much space physically, intellectually, or emotionally – risks social regulation, exclusion, or disciplinary responses.

Teachers, navigating the tensions between institutional expectations and parental scrutiny, may unconsciously reward girls who are quiet, compliant, and non-disruptive – thus reproducing narrow models of acceptable femininity (Terry et al., 2012; Wardman et al., 2010). Within these institutional constraints, sexuality education becomes particularly fraught, shaped by cultural

discomfort and institutional caution. Consequently, young women are left to negotiate these contradictions with minimal support, while their well-being, sexual knowledge, and agentic capacities are framed as individual responsibilities, rather than as entangled within broader sociocultural and structural conditions.

Success, Not Sex

In socio-economically advantaged schools, the kinds of knowledge that are legitimised often reflect the values of the parent body, with institutions aligning themselves to uphold high-society expectations. Within these environments, the category of ‘girl’ continues to evolve across political, social, cultural, educational, and economic domains, with historical advances allowing women and girls greater participation in spaces they were previously excluded from (McCall, 2019). This legacy continues to shape how contemporary young women are discursively positioned within neoliberal frameworks of success (McRobbie, 2007).

The ideal of ‘having it all’ – of excelling academically, athletically, and socially while maintaining the right kind of femininity – carries hidden costs. Young women must meet contradictory expectations: they must be driven and high-achieving, yet modest, graceful, and always emotionally available to others. Within this framework, embodied self-awareness and sexual subjectivity are conspicuously absent. Within this model, sex and sexuality are displaced by exam preparation, extra-curricular success, university pathways, and curated achievement. Their bodies, rather than being experienced as sites of personal agency, often become symbols of family aspiration – success drawn from a set of attributes that confer social capital, linked more to purity and compliance than to bodily autonomy or sexual agency. Some participants expressed this tension when discussing the possibility of more progressive sex education in their schools:

- Erin: I doubt they'd allow us to, because 'young ladies shouldn't be doing that'.
Pam: Yeah, grace and discipline – that's us! (Group 2, Workshop 2)
Mandy: We had the police come once to talk about stuff (sex and relationships) and they were so good and open and gave us choices and info. But the teachers were SO uncomfortable and came up to us after and asked if we were ok. They said it was "so inappropriate" and "that was too much". And I was like – "No, that was great".
Delia: Yeah, they try and keep us really sheltered
Nigella: They actually want us to be innocent and pure. (Group 4, Workshop)

These young women described being caught between conflicting cultural messages: on one hand, the societal expectation that they should appear sexually knowledgeable, available, and attractive – especially through peer norms and media representations; on the other, a school environment that sought to preserve their innocence and restraint. This contradiction, between the sexualised expectations circulating in peer and media cultures and the institutional imperative to preserve feminine innocence, produced a discursive space in which their questions and experiences were rendered unspeakable.

Despite institutional claims to support 'the whole child', participants revealed a significant gap in the knowledge made available to them. The discomfort of educators, the privileging of innocence, and the avoidance of open discussion left them without clear guidance – expected to 'know better' without being told what that actually meant. Within this vacuum, many were left to navigate a pornified, objectifying sexual landscape with little formal support (Waling et al., 2021).

In many socio-economically advantaged school contexts, particularly those with church affiliations, sex education is further constrained by moral and religious sensibilities. While often framed as protective, these frameworks tend to reinforce heteronormative ideals and promote abstinence until marriage, marginalising diverse sexualities and pleasure-based understandings (Allen, L., 2008; Allen, 2020; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). The result is an education that

regulates more than it informs – scripting acceptable forms of femininity through silence, omission, and moral framing.

- Carrie: I would have liked to learn about sex with the same or different genders. It was only ever a penis in a vagina. (Group 1, Workshop 2)
- Rebekah: There’s an assumption I want or need a male. Actually, I’m quite happy with myself. I know what I like! (Group 3, Workshop 2)
- Skye: We never learned about how to pleasure ourselves, or that we even could – it was all about how to please a male. And then I think, well, not everyone wants to have sex with a guy! What if you aren’t straight, if you’re a lesbian, all of that, they’re going to be clueless. There’s no education about any of that. (Group 4, Workshop)

These comments make visible the cost of reductive curricula: a sex education that centres male pleasure, presumes heterosexuality, and leaves young women’s desire largely unacknowledged. The absence of inclusive, affirming content around self-pleasure, diverse sexualities, and relational dynamics narrows the terrain of what is thinkable – and teachable – in sex education.

Across the literature, this persistent lack of timely, relevant, and inclusive sexuality education is widely recognised (Fraser et al., 2021; Pound et al., 2017; Waling et al., 2021). The uneasy terrain between liberal and conservative approaches – shaped by socio-political anxieties and institutional conservatism – continues to block the delivery of content that speaks to young people’s lived realities. Adult discomfort around adolescent sexuality too often masquerades as care, resulting in evasive strategies: omissions, euphemisms, or the outright silencing of the very topics that matter most. As Nigella (Group 4, Workshop) put it, “*they actually want us to be innocent and pure*”.

In this silence, pornography rushes in to fill the void. These portrayals do not merely misinform – they train young people to imagine sex through scripts of power, domination, and gendered performance. At the same time, the myth of the ‘virginal daughter’ remains deeply embedded, particularly within elite and religious school contexts. The result is a discursive terrain in which

young people are sexualised by media and peers, yet denied the tools to understand themselves as sexual subjects.

When adults withhold comprehensive, caring, and accurate education, they do more than leave young women underprepared – they create the conditions for shame, coercion, and disempowerment to flourish. For many, the outcome is a ‘ghost body’: a dislocated subjectivity in which the body is felt as something done to, rather than lived through – a site of evaluation, but not exploration (Healy-Cullen et al., 2023a; Tolman, 2002, 2012).

The next section explores how this vacuum of knowledge, coupled with the cultural saturation of pornography, reshapes the sexual expectations placed on young women – and what is lost in the process.

“It’s Like They Want Us to be Virgin Porn Stars” – When Bodies Are Not Your Own

“Once a woman is thought to have said yes to something, she can say no to nothing” (Angel, 2022).

Recent years have seen a marked increase in young people’s access to pornography, accompanied by mounting concerns about how they interpret and are shaped by this media (Behun & Owens, 2019; Davis et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2017; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019). Although many scholars caution against a deficit model that assumes young people are incapable of critical media engagement (Healy-Cullen et al., 2023b; McKee et al., 2022), young women remain underserved by systems that fail to equip them with the tools to decode and challenge pornified narratives. In the absence of intentional, inclusive, and pleasure-centred education, they are often left to navigate conflicting expectations – ones that simultaneously demand purity and sexual availability.

This tension can be amplified in socioeconomically advantaged school environments, where expectations of achievement and respectability co-exist uneasily with the hypersexualised norms circulating through media and peer culture (McCall, 2019; McRobbie, 2015). For many of the study participants, the pressure to perform a version of femininity that is both desirable and restrained was acutely felt. As Kim (Group 2) commented, “*It’s like they want us to be virgin porn stars*” – a phrase that encapsulates the contradictory standards that demand both innocence and expertise, compliance and availability.

These pressures are not just abstract cultural forces – they are lived and embodied. Participants spoke of practices such as choking and slapping becoming increasingly common in their peer cultures, despite limited understanding, consent, or desire. Not all participants described these behaviours as something they had directly encountered; many were responding to what they perceived as normative or expected, shaped by what was seen, heard, or assumed. This perception of normalisation – whether grounded in lived experience or collective discourse – matters, as it illustrates how ideas of what is ‘typical’ can impact sexual decision-making and self-understanding, even in the absence of personal engagement.

Within these discursive conditions, young women often experienced their bodies as public terrain – scrutinised, sexualised, and shaped by others’ expectations. Their accounts reveal a struggle to claim ownership over their sexuality in environments where shame, silence, and spectacle intertwine. For many, the transition from passive recipient to active subject remains fraught, especially in contexts where bodily autonomy is both feared and feted.

Further, the rise of online misogyny, patriarchal backlash, and male-centric narratives of sexual entitlement continues to erode spaces where girls can develop grounded, self-directed understandings of their sexual selves (Gavey, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017). Feminist educators and researchers must contend with a digital landscape that too often reinforces the very inequalities they seek to dismantle – yet this landscape also offers clues about where the most urgent work lies.

This is How You Do ‘It’

The impact of easy and frequent access to pornography on adolescents is increasingly evident in the shifting dynamics of sex and relationships (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). While young people are not necessarily having more sex or starting earlier, the kinds of sex that are expected – and the unspoken rules that surround them – have shifted significantly (Lim et al., 2017; Rostad et al., 2019). For many, pornography now functions as a kind of informal sex education, shaping dominant scripts about what sex should look like (Crabbe & Flood, 2021; Flood, 2009; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006; Healy-Cullen, Taylor, Ross, et al., 2022). The normalisation of pornographic sensibilities – often referred to as the pornification of sex (Davis et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2017) – was evident in participants’ descriptions of their experiences with young men:

- Pam: I feel like they want to train you up to be a porn star.
Kim: Yeah, to be like in porn, really impactful and fast and shit.
Scottie: And less about pleasure and more about control. (Group 2, Focus Group)
- Betty: Yeah, in the movies and stuff they’re [men] always dominant.
Rebekah: Yeah, I think it’s like the rougher the better or something. (Group 3, Focus Group)

The young women’s accounts suggest that sex had become increasingly performative – less about shared intimacy and more about technique, dominance, and spectacle. These expectations were not confined to specific encounters; rather, they circulated across wider peer and media contexts,

shaping assumptions about what sex should involve and how it should be enacted. As Stormi (Group 2) commented, “*There’s so much pressure*”. Pam (Group 2) added, “*They just think you’ll do it*”.

While their reflections revealed concern and frustration, they also demonstrated a degree of critical distance. The young women were not simply absorbing pornographic messages but actively questioning them – articulating unease with the mismatch between these cultural scripts and their own understandings of what sex could or should be. Their comments mark an important moment of negotiation, where dominant discourses are not just internalised but made visible, contested, and, in some cases, resisted.

Participants feared public shaming if they failed to meet sexual expectations, especially given the social capital many young men gained through boasting about conquests. ‘Shit talking’ those who did not comply reinforced a coercive standard: be sexually adventurous to gain approval, but maintain a veneer of purity to avoid judgement. This double bind – requiring young women to embody both innocence and expertise – produced a space of impossible contradiction. The paradox was voiced directly by participants:

Erin: It’s like they want us to be virgin porn stars, it’s crazy.
Kris: Yeah, like, know everything and do everything, except not do it with anyone until it’s them. (Group 2, Focus Group)

Here, the contradiction is named outright. Being seen as sexually available while retaining social respectability required young women to perform a highly curated version of femininity – knowledgeable, desirable, and accommodating, yet restrained. This was described by the young women as creating intense social pressure and reinforcing the ghost body metaphor central to this chapter: young women are rendered visible as objects of sexual desire yet disconnected from

ownership or agency over their sexual selves. This conflict speaks directly to the virgin–whore dichotomy discussed earlier (Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Tolman, 2000). For these young women, achieving the ‘perfect kind of girl’ meant navigating conflicting ideals. As shared earlier, they were expected to be physically flawless – sporty, slim, with the ‘right’ body – and socially compliant, projecting kindness, care, and a non-critical stance toward young men. At the same time, behind closed doors, they described pressure to fulfil pornographic fantasies involving rough, dominant sex, including acts like anal sex (Faustino & Gavey, 2021).

The attributes most valued by young men, according to the participants, were paradoxical: kindness without resistance, adventurousness without autonomy, and sexual availability without promiscuity. This blend of ‘head girl and pole dancer’ left the young women grappling with a version of femininity that was both absurd to them and yet inescapable. They were acutely aware of its contradictions but recognised the need to maintain these norms to remain socially accepted. This internalised contradiction highlights the cultural power of pornography as both discourse and demand – projecting rigid and often harmful ideals of sex while muting young women’s agency. That feminine success is increasingly aligned with this pornified narrative underscores how deeply these cultural conditions have been absorbed into normative expectations, leaving limited room for pleasure, consent, or self-determination.

Despite a consistent and overarching pattern of male interest in rough, controlling sex – often including anal sex – none of the young women I spoke with described enjoying these acts. Many expressed discomfort, unease, or even disgust at the thought. This disjuncture points to the influence of pornography on shaping young men’s expectations around what constitutes pleasurable and rewarding sexual interaction (Lim et al., 2017). Pornographic content is often

heavily scripted toward specific kinds of sex, promoting these acts as normative or desirable sexual practices (Behun & Owens, 2019; Bridges et al., 2010; Dines et al., 1997; Faustino & Gavey, 2021; Flood, 2009). The young women all attributed the amount of porn watched by young men as a causative factor for the constant interest and requests for particular kinds of sex – their bodies becoming extensions of the pornography the young men had been watching:

- Carrie: They [the boys] almost certainly get all their ideas from porn. (Group 1, Focus Group)
- Rebekah: Apparently the boys watch porn all the time. Like at school, on school trips. (Group 3, Workshop)
- Nigella: It's so interesting how guys can list the porn actors' names and talk about their favourites and list what movies they were in.
- Delia: Yeah and they think that's what actually happens and they go into it expecting this from you and then they think there's something wrong with you, like because you can't do this. Nope! That's your problem! (Group 4, Workshop)
- Scottie: They definitely get their ideas from porn.
- Kris: They all watch it and expect the girls to be real into it.
- Scottie: Girls don't really watch it though.
- Erin: You don't know it and you don't know what to expect. (Group 2, Focus Group)

These accounts illuminate a complex and gendered double bind: young women are expected to perform sexual behaviours shaped by pornographic scripts, even as they described themselves as not willing to engage with or endorse pornography. Participants consistently described this as an asymmetrical dynamic – where men's consumption of pornography was normalised and discussed openly, while women's sexual curiosity remained stigmatised – and often in the groups denied. As a result, young women felt pressure to conform to male-driven expectations while maintaining a façade of innocence and disinterest in the very practices being demanded. Despite these contradictions, the young women's comments revealed a critical awareness. Their rejection of

these expectations – voiced with clarity and frustration – suggests that they are not passive recipients of dominant norms. However, this resistance exists in tension with the cultural dominance of pornography, which frames sex as performative, rough, and male-centred.

Without alternative frameworks that centre mutual pleasure, communication, and agency, young people – particularly young women – are left navigating relationships shaped by imbalance. Nigella and Delia’s observations capture this dynamic wherein young men not only expect porn-style sex, but also position girls as inadequate if they cannot or will not comply. This reinforces a cycle of shame, confusion, and self-doubt, making it difficult for young women to assert boundaries or explore their own sexual subjectivity. In the absence of high-quality, inclusive sex education, pornography risks becoming the primary educator – often with harmful and reductive consequences (Behun & Owens, 2019; Fahs et al., 2015; Faustino & Gavey, 2021; Herbenick et al., 2023).

“Oh God, This is What I Have To Do” – Navigating Coercion and Compliance

While all participants recognised the popularity of rough and porn-inspired sex among young men, the ways they responded to this expectation varied. Groups with less sexual experience expressed heightened fear and uncertainty. For them, sex was not framed as mutual exploration, but as something potentially coercive – something that might be done to them, rather than with them. Some described using excuses, like saying they had their period, only to be met with the dismissive suggestion to ‘just do anal’.

Betty: Some girls try and get out of it (sex) by using their period as an excuse, and guys are like, “Don’t worry, we’ll just do anal.” I think anal’s awful, the worst thing in the world. I don’t think it would feel very good. (Group 3, Workshop)

- Brie: It scares me that a dude might think that's what I want without asking me and do that to me.
- Inez: There's definitely pressure, and girls are like, 'oh god this is what I have to do'. (Group 1 Workshop)

These reflections highlight the internalised expectation that young women should perform sexual acts they neither desire nor consent to, and the anxiety associated with refusing. Inez's concern about "*what might happen*" at a party underscores how fear, rather than desire, shaped her anticipation of sex.

- Inez: Sometimes I think, before I go to a party, like what if something happens tonight. Like my first time and I feel kinda anxious and worried about what they might want me to do.
- Brie: I get worried, like with choking and anal being so normal and stuff, like what if a guy just does it without checking with me, and then I get confused about what I'm supposed to do during sex. (Group 1, Workshop)

Other participants echoed these concerns, with Group 2 speaking more directly to the entitlement they perceived from young men:

- Kim: They all want anal. Anal, anal, anal, and no one wants to – And sometimes they put it in without asking!
- Pam: There's like no communication – because they think they can.
- Stormi: They want you to do stuff to them but they wouldn't do it in return, but they expect you to do whatever they want. (Group 2, Workshop)

Nigella's account of her boyfriend attempting anal sex despite her refusal shows how coercion and disregard for consent operate even within relationships:

- Nigella: Like even if you say 'No', they still try and give it a go, like I said no to anal with my boyfriend, coz, like god no, and he tried to do it anyway without my consent. (Group 3, Workshop).

These excerpts illustrate how certain pornographic scripts – particularly those involving rough sex and anal – have been normalised to the point where consent is seen as optional. Girls described being expected to perform sex acts they actively resisted, and yet felt they had little power to assert

their boundaries. Pam's comment about doing "*stuff like anal and choking*" in new relationships speaks to the internalised pressure to measure up to past partners:

Pam: In a relationship, you still do stuff like anal and choking and stuff, especially if you're new to the relationship and you know he's been with other girls and you're like, I want to be as good as they were. (Group 2, Workshop).

Laughter within the workshops – particularly in moments where someone mentioned 'putting it in without asking' – served as potentially diffusing discomfort while signalling a collective recognition of these kinds of encounters. Feminist analyses of objectification suggest this kind of laughter can mask unease or distress, allowing the conversation to proceed without directly naming the harm or discomfort being described (Gavey, 2019; Gloor et al., 2022; Tolman, 2012).

These accounts point to a sexual terrain in which coercion is often normalised, boundaries are routinely tested or ignored, and clear communication is notably absent. Within this context, girls' bodies are positioned less as sites of shared intimacy and more as instruments for male gratification – a dynamic underwritten by pornography and sustained through silence. In the absence of counter-narratives grounded in mutuality, agency, and relational care, many of these young women were left to navigate confusion, fear, and self-doubt alone.

Consent education is often reduced to a procedural checklist focused on obtaining a verbal 'Yes' and avoiding legal consequences, rather than fostering meaningful, mutual understanding. The young women I spoke with highlighted how such oversimplified messaging fails to reflect the lived complexities of consent, particularly when layered with social consequences and coercion.

- Delia: And also, the realities of consent; they say we have to stop and discuss – yes or no – but that seems unrealistic and missing out the in-betweens.
- Skye: And also, if you say ‘No’ the boy assumes he just has to work harder to get you to say ‘yes’ – like, she’ll change her mind eventually.... We are always having to deal with the consequences of either outcome.
- Mandy: If you say no, they’ll keep persisting until they’re like “actually screw you, you suck, you’re a tease, you said you were gonna do this,” and they get really angry.
- Nigella: If you say no once you’ve started, you have to be ready to deal with the backlash. You’re expected to finish what you started. (Group 4, Workshop)

The anger and backlash the young women described, speaks to deeply entrenched assumptions of male entitlement and ownership over women’s bodies. While disappointment in response to a ‘No’ might be expected, what these participants described went far beyond that: persistent coercion, retaliation, and emotional manipulation designed to extract a “Yes”. Such behaviour reflects gendered scripts that position men as pursuers and women as gatekeepers – responsible for managing male desire, expectations, and disappointment. Skye’s observation that “*the boy assumes he just has to work harder to get you to say ‘yes’*” signals a dangerous cultural belief that ‘No’ is merely a hurdle to overcome rather than a boundary to respect.

Consent, as it is often framed in classroom settings, fails to account for the considerable social and gendered pressures shaping these interactions (Beres, 2014b; Healy-Cullen et al., 2023a). The young women spoke candidly about their fears: that a gentle or ambiguous ‘No’, softened to avoid conflict, might be misread as disingenuous – encouraging further pressure and boundary-pushing. These accounts revealed how consent education fails to reflect the lived complexities of sexual encounters within hookup culture, where ambiguity is common, and communication is often constrained.

- Maureen: I’ve noticed that consent doesn’t really exist. Not in the way it’s supposed to. Because the guy will keep forcing you until you say yes, and then you say yes when you don’t want to, but they got the yes they need, so it doesn’t

matter. They've learned about consent as a way to guilt you or force you into giving it, but not actually giving it. (Group 4, Workshop).

Maureen's comment reflects a profound failure of consent education. While these programmes aim to simplify consent for clarity, they often overlook the dynamics of power, coercion, and gendered expectations. As Skye noted, "*We are constantly having to deal with the consequences of either outcome*". A 'Yes' is not always freely given; it may be a reluctant agreement made to preserve safety, avoid confrontation, or maintain social standing. The young women also expressed concern that boys either receive a different kind of education or absorb it differently – often interpreting consent not as mutual agreement but as an obstacle to overcome. Maureen's critique that boys 'weaponise' consent education points to a deeper issue: systemic failures that leave dominant, often harmful, gender scripts intact.

Addressing this gap requires a fundamental shift in how consent education is taught. The latest Education Review Office (2024) report, found that more than three quarters of school leavers reported not receiving adequate or meaningful consent education. Beyond verbal agreements, young people must understand consent as ongoing, embodied, and relational – shaped both by spoken words and non-verbal cues, emotional context, and the presence of genuine mutuality. At the same time, systemic reforms must dismantle the gendered norms that naturalise male persistence and place the burden of sexual negotiation solely on young women. Until these changes occur, consent education will remain incomplete, and young women's boundaries will continue to be sites of contestation rather than affirmation.

While the implementation of consent education marks a meaningful step in addressing sexual harm, its current framing continues to fall short. The dominant model assumes that consensual sex

is inherently free from coercion and that obtaining a verbal ‘Yes’ is sufficient for ethical interaction (Beres et al., 2014; Jeffrey, 2022). This model often ignores how gendered power dynamics shape how consent is given – or negotiated. It also tends to frame consent as a legal or procedural safeguard rather than a relational, ongoing, and emotionally embedded process.

Such assumptions are especially problematic when layered onto traditional sexual scripts that assign responsibility to women to manage male desire without causing conflict or discomfort (Baldwin-White, 2021). These scripts teach that men should pursue sex, while women are expected to initially resist, only to eventually give in – rendering persistence a sign of commitment and refusal a hurdle to overcome (Jozkowski & Humphreys, 2014). In practice, this creates conditions where consent is less about autonomy and more about avoiding guilt, disappointment, or backlash.

Nigella’s account makes this tension explicit:

Nigella: At the time I didn’t really realise how bad it was – but with my ex, I would often be uncomfortable about things and say ‘No’, then he’d get all sulky and tell me I’d led him on and say he was all bricked up. And I’d think, oh, maybe I did lead him on and then I’d do stuff because I felt guilty. I mean I did consent, but I didn’t want to and I got totally guilted into consenting to stuff. (Group 3, Workshop)

Here, Nigella articulates a form of consent that emerges not from desire or mutual agreement, but from emotional pressure and internalised obligation. Her experience reflects what Beres (2014b) termed ‘coerced consent’ – where a ‘Yes’ is given, but not freely. The mechanisms at play – sulking, guilt-tripping, accusations of leading someone on – function as subtle but potent forms of coercion, drawing on familiar gendered scripts to secure compliance without overt force.

This kind of coerced agreement blurs the boundaries between consent and violation. It also highlights a critical failure of consent education: in its eagerness to simplify, it misses the

emotional and relational complexity of real-life sexual encounters. When young women are taught that their ‘Yes’ is all that matters – without consideration of how that yes was obtained – they are left vulnerable to manipulation, shame, and self-doubt (Harris, 2018). Ultimately, without a more nuanced understanding of consent – one that foregrounds emotional safety, mutuality, and power – young people will continue to navigate intimate experiences without the language or frameworks they need (Bay-Cheng, 2020). Nigella’s reflection is not an anomaly; it is a window into the inadequacy of a consent model built on assumptions of neutrality in a context still deeply shaped by gendered inequality. These pressures are not one-sided. For young men, rejecting sexual opportunities can result in ridicule or exclusion, jeopardising their social standing within peer groups. For young women, ‘kindness’ often becomes equated with sexual availability – refusing to follow through after ‘leading a boy on’ is seen as a socially punishable act (Ford, 2021). This can lead to significant social repercussions from both male and female peers, reinforcing unspoken rules that protect male egos while limiting female agency.

The young women I spoke with seemed to be acutely aware of these dynamics. While young men are pushed to assert dominance and secure masculine status, the girls described parallel roles: enabling that dominance, while managing the tension between being desired and being desirable. This reflects the notion of the ‘ghost body’ – a state where their worth is defined by others’ use and desire of them. Their sense of purpose becomes externally located, oriented toward male wants rather than their own embodied agency and preferences (Cooper, 2021). This emotional and sexual labour is vividly expressed in the following discussion:

Kim: Sometimes you want to be like “Stop, No!” But that would be so embarrassing – everyone would be ooooooohhh!

- Pam: They'd get angry and try and get back at you for not giving them what they want.
- Scottie: Yeah, but it's probably just disappointment and embarrassment.
- Kris: Because they get caught up in the pressures of what the boys will think.
(Group 2, Workshop)

The young women's reflections reveal the layered social pressures surrounding consent and refusal. Saying 'No' becomes more than a personal boundary – it challenges entrenched expectations about female compliance and male entitlement. Fear of embarrassment, retaliation, or social exclusion often compels young women to silence themselves, prioritising others' feelings and reputations over their own well-being.

What stands out is their emotional generosity. Several participants framed male coercion as a by-product of peer pressure or fragile masculinity, suggesting that boys 'can't help it' or are just trying to save face (Gavey, 2019). This form of 'peacekeeping' illustrates the uneven emotional labour embedded in heterosexual encounters, where young women are expected to manage both their own discomfort and the emotional fallout of male rejection.

This dynamic reinforces the fragility of hegemonic masculinity, which requires constant reinforcement and validation (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016a). Young women are positioned as responsible for maintaining this construct, often at personal cost. The unspoken demand to soothe, comply, or avoid conflict highlights a deeper imbalance – one that most consent education fails to address. Challenging this imbalance requires rethinking consent beyond the transactional 'Yes/No' model. Without acknowledging the relational, emotional, and structural factors that shape sexual encounters, young women will remain largely responsible for navigating a sexual culture shaped by male entitlement and gendered power relations.

Conclusion

With only a few months of high school left, the young women I spoke with appeared unprepared for the next phase of their adult lives. Their knowledge and embodied awareness of sex and sexuality felt limited when compared to their male peers – peers who, through society’s celebration of male sexuality and the privileges afforded by elite education, often entered adulthood with a stronger sense of sexual agency. This inequity was particularly pronounced in socio-economically advantaged schools, where familial and institutional expectations around ‘elite’ education and ideals of respectable femininity contributed to a sex education gap that left young women at a distinct disadvantage.

What emerged from these conversations was a strong desire among the participants to know more about their bodies, their pleasure, and the complexities of sexual relationships. Yet, their understanding of pleasure was largely constructed through the lens of male desire. The idea of self-pleasure, including masturbation, was often dismissed as irrelevant or unnecessary, reflecting both limited awareness and the persistent silencing of women’s sexual autonomy. This silence is profound. As Orenstein (2016) observed, there is no more effective way to render something unspeakable than to refuse to name it – a ‘psychological clitoridectomy’. For many participants, the possibility of female orgasm was a recent discovery, revealing the deep cultural silence that continues to suppress women’s sexual knowledge.

Despite the constant exposure to sexualised media, the absence of honest, supportive conversations with adults created a vacuum – one filled instead with shame, uncertainty, and alienation from their own bodies (Allen, L., 2008c; Rothman et al., 2023; Waling et al., 2021). In this silence, pornography emerged as the dominant form of sex education. But the messages it offers – sex as

something done to women rather than with them – reinforce damaging dynamics of dominance and submission. Women’s pleasure, comfort, and consent are frequently absent or distorted, while coercion and humiliation are often normalised. Within this framework, young women are left to perform roles scripted by a system that commodifies their bodies.

Many participants described their bodies as unfamiliar, detached from agency or desire. In this state of disconnection, pornography-driven narratives – choking, anal sex, and other acts rooted in control – can take hold more easily. These are not simply questions of taste or preference but raise serious concerns around health, safety, and consent. The dynamic reveals how the persistent absence of a discourse of desire remains one of the most pressing issues facing young women. Without language, tools, or support to understand and explore their own sexualities, they are vulnerable to harm, particularly in environments that continue to privilege silence over dialogue.

What becomes clear is that closing this gap requires far more than curriculum reform. It calls for a systemic reorientation of cultural norms that continue to deny young women their right to embodied knowledge and sexual subjectivity. Until these systems are meaningfully challenged – in education, in media, and in the broader cultural context – young women will continue to enter adulthood without the support they need to navigate sexuality on their own terms.

This chapter has examined how young women are positioned within heteronormative and pornified scripts that both define and constrain their sexual agency. It illuminated how expectations of performance and purity collide, leaving many to grapple with the contradictions of being both desirable and desired. While these performances attempt to conform to external ideals, they also

signal deep disconnections from bodily knowledge and sexual subjectivity – gaps sustained by silence, shame, and social conditioning.

Building on these insights, Chapter 6: Performing Femininity: Rewriting Desire, explores how the silencing of female desire and bodily awareness manifests both symbolically and practically, shaping young women's relationships to their bodies and sexuality. It also considers how re-storying, collective reflection, and feminist praxis can disrupt these scripts, offering glimpses of agency, embodiment, and transformative possibility.

Chapter 6. Analysis and Discussion

Performing Femininity: Rewriting Desire

In a socio-economically privileged girls' school, social groupings structure the landscape of power and privilege. While each group occupies different subject positions with varying degrees of access to status, influence, and visibility, all contribute to shaping the cultural conditions of the school. Importantly, even those with social capital may encounter discursive constraints – topics like sexuality and pleasure remain difficult or embarrassing to talk about, reinforcing forms of silencing that cut across social hierarchies.

I met with four groups of young women, each group a different representation of femininity and popularity – both producing and being produced by the social norms they navigated. One of the larger groups consisted of young women who were all sexually active and had been since Year 11. These young women were deemed the more popular girls, by their own admission (and referred to as such by other groups with whom I met), and spent time with the popular boys from the two boys' schools in the area. The other three groups described themselves as less popular, or able to float across groups, and their sexual experiences varied from nothing at all to past sexual relationships with an ex-boyfriend or relatively new experiences of sex. All the groups were engaged in the heterosexual interplay, observing and contributing, albeit in different ways due to their perceived roles and the ways in which they interacted (or not) with the young men from the nearby schools.

It is important to clarify from the outset that in this chapter the term ‘silence’ does not simply denote an absence of speech; rather, it refers to the complex and often contradictory ways young women navigate the discursive constraints around sexuality. Silence here is not passive; it is active, embodied, and strategic – an affective and social labour shaped by what is culturally permissible or intelligible (Lewis, 2024). Even when they are not explicitly silenced by others, young women engage in a constant negotiation of how, when, and whether to speak. This negotiation reflects both personal caution and the broader discursive structures that define what can be said and by whom. In this way, all groups remain answerable to the hegemonic centre – they are not outside of it, but differently located within it, choosing varying degrees of complicity, resistance, or adaptation to maintain social legibility and safety.

The stakes of understanding silence extend far beyond the individual. They reveal how gendered power dynamics are reinforced through everyday social interactions and institutional structures. By unpacking the mechanisms and consequences of silence, this chapter seeks to shed light on how young women are both constrained and enabled by these dynamics, and complicit in reproducing them. This chapter addresses the way in which silence is used and experienced by young women to remain socially safe from serious peer reprisal. Silence is not merely an absence of speech, but an active strategy that young women adopt to navigate a fraught social landscape. For instance, maintaining silence about personal opinions or experiences, particularly those that challenge dominant narratives, acts as a shield against ridicule or ostracism (Mazzei, 1997). By aligning themselves with male-dominant discourses, or refraining from disapproval, young women often gain temporary social currency but at the cost of their authentic voice, which can result in internalising the very norms they wish to escape (Jack, 1991). For example, the expectation to

conform to submissive femininity often precludes young women from articulating discomfort or objection in social or sexual situations. This lack of voice reinforces their marginalised position, perpetuating a cycle where silence is simultaneously a form of protection and a means of oppression.

This imbalance in whose voices are heard and whose are silenced reflects the socially constructed nature of gendered power. Rather than positioning this disparity as a fixed or inherent truth, it is better understood as a discursive condition – an effect of cultural, institutional, and interpersonal practices that shape what is sayable and by whom (Gavey, 2010; Lewis, 2024). By paying attention to these discursive conditions, we can begin to challenge the systems that sustain them.

The young women consistently demonstrated a capacity to critically examine the cultural conditions shaping their sexual subjectivities. Long before becoming sexually active, many were already internalising messages via media, school, and peers, about how heterosexual relationships should be performed, and who they were expected to be within them. These messages were rarely direct; more often, they took the form of silences, scripts, and aesthetic trends that, over time, became normalised. For some, silence functioned as a form of protection – a strategy to avoid judgement or conflict. For others, it was the result of not yet having the confidence, permission, or language to speak. This complexity was articulated powerfully in the following exchange:

Brie: The thing about media is that it's obviously a form of education. Like even before health classes started, you would watch movies. When you're like 10 and it's like kissing and everything. Yeah. So, like, media could be a big part. I think of just introducing more realistic, like, portrayals and roles for women and sex.

Carrie: But I think this stems a lot from social media, obviously, but books as well. Like it's on TikTok, I guess, and Instagram, it's always, there's a lot of like,

oh, like, enemies to lovers and like how to kind of control, control. Yeah, like, you know, like a knife to her neck and, like, staring at her passionately. Like dangerous passion.

Inez: There's this sort of romanticised or like, I don't know, not ideal man, but there's this type of guy, usually fictional, who's definitely dominant, but they're like, dark and brooding, but they also are just like, kind of mean, but and also to you. And also in sex like they can, I don't know, like, in lots of media. So they're controlling of you, but they love you, but you know, like, it's so...

Interviewer: Would you say it's almost kind of abusive?

Carrie: It's not abuse, but just I see that, like, that guy in so much like, lots of different types of media. It's like the same dude. Oh yeah, and, you know, there's a lot of choking a lot of like, he tells you what to do. But it's consensual. So it's sexy for the girl – but it kind of feels like it's not. I don't know. It's kind of...

Brie: Yeah, I think that's what I was gonna say is that it's almost like aesthetics and stuff becoming popular. You know, it starts off small and then because it's small, you want to get involved because you might genuinely like that, and then it popularises it, and then all of a sudden, it's trendy so everyone can see, and even if they don't truly enjoy it, yeah, not to say that everyone who's joined the trend of choking doesn't actually enjoy choking but you know, there are probably a decent chunk, who are just saying, yeah, I like this, because everyone else in the friend group is saying.

Inez: Say someone else didn't enjoy it, they might not be brave enough to say that. Just not have the confidence in that moment to say it wasn't my thing. Coz they think they're the only one. (Group 1, Workshop)

Betty: I've seen it so much, the movies and stuff where the guy has been like rejected by the girl, and then they've gone and raped her anyway. And then, like, I suppose it's all part of the movie, but it sort of teaches guys that that is an option, and it's okay.

Rebekah: And there's another trope for the guy to get like rejected and then keep trying to like force her, not even necessarily sexual, but just like romantic and just to keep pursuing her even though she clearly said, "No". In the movies, it's really cute, but if you imagine yourself in these situations, it's not cool, and it teaches guys all the wrong stuff about what they can and can't have. (Group 3, Workshop)

These reflections reveal the participants' growing capacity to name coercion and challenge the harmful scripts embedded in cultural narratives. Even as they operate within a highly gendered and sexualised environment, they demonstrate resistance and insight, suggesting that young women are not only shaped by culture but are also actively shaping how they respond to it (McRobbie, 2008; Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

While these young women demonstrated a striking ability to deconstruct media tropes and name the gendered dynamics shaping dominant sexual scripts, they did not always describe the behaviours they identified as abusive. Their critical reflections often stopped short of naming harm explicitly, instead hesitating around terms like 'abuse' or 'coercion'. This reluctance highlights the enduring strength of cultural narratives that frame control and dominance as romantic or exciting, particularly when presented under the guise of 'consensual' intensity or passion.

Their uncertainty is not evidence of ignorance or passivity, but a reflection of the discursive complexity they must navigate. The tension between what they recognised intellectually and what felt culturally acceptable reveals the normalisation of harmful behaviours within dominant heterosexual scripts. Labelling these behaviours as abusive risks masking social discomfort and challenges the very frameworks that structure desirability, status, and relational belonging. To name abuse in this context would require not just knowledge, but a break with cultural legibility.

This struggle also signals a broader systemic failure: the absence of critical, inclusive education around power, consent, and relational dynamics. Without shared language or adult frameworks for meaning-making, these young women are left to process discomfort alone, in ways that often protect the social order rather than challenge it. The framing of choking, dominance, and control

as “*not really abuse*” – as Carrie described, “*sexy for the girl*” but “*kind of feels like it’s not*” – illustrates the ambivalence produced when desire and danger become entangled within normalised narratives.

Rather than viewing this ambivalence as a lack of awareness, it can be understood as a site of discursive struggle where resistance, confusion, and conformity are all present. These young women were not voiceless. On the contrary, their ability to articulate discomfort and critique dominant ideals, even while constrained by language and cultural scripts, demonstrates an active, if uneven, negotiation of power and possibility.

These young women were able to critically analyse the messages that were being presented to them as producing and mobilising a cultural climate they saw as damaging for young women. Their reflections highlighted their awareness of the media’s role in shaping these harmful narratives and the absence of media representations that might empower or assist them in navigating interactions and relationships with young men. However, the silencing of women’s speech is not limited to explicit dismissals. It also manifests through subtle mechanisms that delegitimise their voices. Even when women are given space to speak, their words are often reframed to align with dominant patriarchal narratives. For example, Carrie’s insights into her fear of interaction with boys due to her lack of experience were expressed in terms of personal inadequacy rather than systemic issues that limit opportunities for young women to develop confidence in gendered interactions.

It is also important to acknowledge that there may be cultural and racial dynamics shaping Carrie’s and Inez’s reflections. Both identified as Asian, and there may be culturally specific expectations

surrounding gendered interaction, as well as pervasive sexual stereotypes associated with Asian women. Neither explicitly referenced their racial or cultural identity in discussion, nor did I feel it was appropriate to question them directly on it. To do so would have risked imposing interpretive frames that were not participant-driven, potentially reinscribing the very silencing this study seeks to challenge. This intersection of race and gender, while beyond the scope of detailed analysis in this thesis, nonetheless remains a significant dimension of how femininity and desirability are constructed and experienced. These complexities warrant further exploration through research led by scholars who are culturally positioned to engage more deeply with the intersecting effects of race, gender, and sexuality.

Carrie: That is one thing is that I'm one of the people who do not talk to boys like at all. There's no way. There's no place for me to interact with dudes my age. My sport is all girls clubs, all girls and they do, they interact with the like adult males. Imagine just like, boom, you're combined; you know a lot can go wrong because you've never like interacted with them normally. And I actually am, like, a little worried. Like, I don't know how to talk to a boy, you know? Like it's just, and then you know, you can flip it and think a lot of boys don't know how to interact with girls, that can all go quite wrong.

Brie: Yeah, submissive females are really desirable. It's a desirable quality. It's very permeated into internet culture.

Inez: There was a girl on Instagram nodding constantly while the words of what girls like to be called during sex came on the screen. It was all like baby girl and princess and stuff, like really. (Group 1, Workshop)

Where emphasised femininity is dominant (Kincaid, Sennott & Kelly, 2022) access to boys and heterosexual interaction often structures which performances of femininity are recognised and rewarded (Currier, 2013). Within this framework, Carrie's lack of engagement with boys might position her outside dominant scripts of desirability, potentially limiting her access to forms of social capital that are commonly aligned with 'popularity' (Duncan 2004, 2012). However, this

positioning is not necessarily disempowering. By existing at a distance from the highly policed terrain of heterosexual approval, Carrie may in fact experience a degree of freedom – space to question, resist, and make meaning on her own terms.

Within her immediate friend group, this distance from dominant heterosexual scripts enabled critical reflection and mutual support. Together, these young women demonstrated a shared capacity to interrogate media portrayals of sex and gender, articulate frustrations, and locate themselves within wider cultural narratives. What is often framed as ‘popularity’ – being ‘in’ with the boys – emerges here as a precarious and contingent status (Duncan, 2004, 2012), one that requires ongoing labour and compliance with narrow ideals of femininity. In contrast, Carrie and her peers’ positioning, while less publicly validated, may allow for more agentic meaning-making, albeit with its own constraints.

Girls who do not actively participate in heterosexual interactions are often subject to deficit framings, such as being labelled shy or socially awkward (Ringrose & Reynold, 2020). These labels reflect wider cultural discomfort with alternative expressions of femininity and are further entrenched by adult silences around sex and relationships (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016). When parents and educators fail to offer inclusive, meaningful dialogue, young women are left to make sense of their experiences within peer frameworks that often prioritise heterosexual desirability as the key to value and visibility. This adult silence perpetuates the hierarchies that young women must navigate, as they are left without the tools to critically analyse or resist their social positioning (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016). These young women are afforded less access to the privilege that often comes from being popular with the boys, which then disseminates to the girls’ social interactions and rankings at school (Duncan 2004). This is a phenomenon that relies on elitism and

power because the popular group is generally much smaller compared to the number of girls across other groups. Thus, while these less popular and/or shy girls are, in fact, the more common type to be found, the popular group and their ideals reign supreme due to its relationship to hegemonic masculinity. They look and act a certain way and respond and react to male attention in ways that strengthen the heterosexual narrative. They are, in this regard, the stereotype of the perfect young woman (Mattsson, 2015; Paechter, 2018).

However, both of these options (popular versus alternative interests) create limitations for being, and both positions are constrained by the resources available to navigate a path whereby they are able to decide and engage in sexual relationships. Impett et al. (2006) have argued that “adolescent girls come of age in a patriarchal society in which they are under pressure to be seen and not heard” (p. 131). However, when they are not heard, they also cease to be seen, their silence removing them from having any access to the power afforded them in the adolescent girls’ school environment, where voice gives one access to social privilege.

The Sounds of Silence

During the first workshop, Group 3 had five participants; in the second round, only two returned. While one had gone overseas, the other two chose not to come back. In the first session, despite being surrounded by their friends, they appeared profoundly uncomfortable. The questions – designed to be accessible and non-personal – were met with visible hesitation. When invited to contribute, both declined, their discomfort palpable.

Rather than interpreting this silence as mere awkwardness, I came to see it as meaningful. It may have reflected the cultural scripting that renders discussions of sex and gendered expectations

unsafe or inappropriate, even among peers. Despite reassurances that no one would be asked to speak directly, they remained silent. This silence, I suggest, was not an absence but a presence of something not yet sayable. As Poland and Pederson (1998) argued, what is unsaid can be as revealing as what is spoken.

It is tempting to pathologise this silence, to read it as a lack of confidence or self-knowledge. But to do so risks overlooking the discursive conditions that shape what kinds of speech feel possible, safe, or worthwhile. Their refusal to speak may have been a form of agency in itself – an act of boundary-setting in a space that, despite my efforts, still carried institutional weight and thus power differences. The difficulty of speaking openly about sex was echoed elsewhere. Pam (Group 2), described how disclosures about sexual harm risk were met with suspicion or backlash. In such environments, silence may function as self-protection. Whether through visible discomfort or strategic quiet, the reluctance to speak should not be mistaken for disengagement or disinterest; it may be one of the clearest indicators of the cultural terrain these young women must navigate.

In the context of the workshops, the ability to contribute and be heard was often bound to perceptions of power and legitimacy. In Western cultural contexts, voice is frequently equated with presence and agency (Mazzei, 1997). Yet, in these discussions of heterosexual relationships, many young women described feeling peripheral to the decisions and consequences surrounding sex – as if agency belonged to others, even when the stakes were theirs. Their comments revealed not a lack of awareness, but a sharp critique of the gendered power imbalance that underpins sexual interactions. Group 4 shared:

Maureen: Guys seem to be in a position where they decide on the rules for sex.

- Skye: Yeah, but then the females are held accountable for the action.
- Nigella: It's like, another tally mark or something. A life-changing thing, if something goes wrong, it's a life-changing impact for the girl.
- Delia: They don't have like very much consequence for their actions whereas, like, for us, I feel like if one thing goes incredibly wrong, then that's our life now dedicated to an event... especially with the stuff in America with like abortions... If something was to just go wrong... then you can't even do anything about it... they've completely stopped you from being able to take care of yourself safely. (Group 4 Workshop).

These reflections illustrate an acute awareness of the unequal burdens carried by young women – emotional, physical, and legal. While young men are often seen as arbiters of the terms of sexual engagement, young women can be cast as both gatekeepers and scapegoats, held responsible for consequences they often have limited power to control (ref). The double bind is both structural and deeply embodied. Participants articulated how their value was frequently assessed through their compliance with male desires. As Rebekah noted:

But it's like, 'If you won't do this, if you won't do that, then why would anyone want you?'... It's not, 'Why would *I* not want you,' but 'Why would *any* guy want you?' when you clearly won't give them what they want. (Group 3, Workshop)

These comments reflect how heterosexual desirability becomes both a form of social capital and a disciplinary tool. The young women understood that failing to conform to expected behaviours, especially those informed by pornographic or gendered norms, risked not just rejection but a withdrawal of worth. Yet, these critiques were not made from a place of passivity. That they were voiced at all reflects a discursive resistance, a willingness to interrogate the gendered expectations that shape their experiences – even if doing so outside the workshop remained fraught.

Rebekah's comment captures the tension young women navigate as they are positioned within cultural scripts that frame their value through male desire. These scripts operate through male peers

and among girls themselves, where expectations about sexual experience become a measure of belonging. Rebekah and Betty's exchange reveals how the pressure to conform, whether through action or performance, becomes internalised and enforced within peer culture:

Betty: Everyone expects that everyone has, like all the girls are kind of expecting that the other girls have done it [had sex]. And if you haven't done it, it's like, 'why haven't you done it?' Like 'it's not that bad' kind of thing, 'just do it', but then also, don't do it with too many people, but make sure you've done it.

Rebekah: And if you're not interested in the first place, that's a whole different story. Just like, please. I don't want to do it.

Betty: Sometimes it's just easier to say you've done it, and then people will leave you alone. Like the other girls say that, not our friend group. (Group 3, Workshop)

The contradiction here is striking: girls are expected to have had sex, but not too much; to want it, but not initiate it; to be desirable, but not desiring. Betty's comment that it can be "*easier to say you've done it*" highlights how silence, or the strategic manipulation of truth, functions as a tool to manage peer judgement. This is not evidence of passivity but of constrained agency. Young women learn to speak in ways that maintain social safety, even when those scripts obscure their real experiences. These dynamics are not limited to peer interactions. Nigella's story exemplifies how familial responses can reinforce the same double standards, creating conditions where honesty becomes risky and silence is reinforced through shame.

Nigella: You know how I was scared to tell my parents I was having sex, but they eventually found out. Dad stopped talking to me, and my Mum completely lost it at me and said I had completely lost her trust. But then he [boyfriend] told his parents, and they were like, oh yeah, we'll give you some condoms – we figured you'd be doing that by now. But my parents made me do pregnancy tests and made the whole thing about how hurt they were. (Group 4, Workshop)

Nigella's account was constructed around the emotional asymmetry of adolescent heterosexuality. While she described her boyfriend's sexual activity as being met with resigned acceptance, hers was treated as a moral failure. The contrast illustrates how agency can be unevenly distributed both in action and interpretation. Her description of her parents' reaction positioned her sexuality as a betrayal, making it difficult for her to speak openly, even when she later needed support. This silence can be read as relational rather than individual: a form of constraint negotiated within the affective terrain of care, power, and approval (Jack & Ali, 2010). The emotional fallout became a silencing mechanism in itself, foreclosing the possibility of open conversation and support.

Nigella's story also reflects how cultural scripts around gender and responsibility are sustained through institutions of family and education. By casting girls as the moral guardians of sexuality, and boys as its inevitable pursuers, young women become burdened with managing their own experiences and maintaining the reputations and emotional stability of those around them. When silence is the price of belonging or safety, even when resistance is present, it can remain unspoken.

Nigella: It still infuriates me how what happened in that relationship (ex-boyfriend). All the things I didn't feel comfortable with, but did anyway, coz he's like, "Oh, we'll do it... eventually"... And then, after I broke up with him, like a few weeks later, there were sexual allegations against him from someone else. I'm a lot happier now, a lot more myself again, but I was too scared to tell my parents what was happening. I couldn't. I mean, I was grounded when they found out, and they still bring it up and hold it against me for the 'bad' thing I did.
And one other thing – not long after, my brother asked me to find something in his room, and Mum and I looked, and while we were looking, we found condoms in his drawer. Mum just took them, and nothing happened... He didn't 'let the family down'. (Group 4, Workshop).

Nigella's account is located within conflicting expectations that many other participants described; expectations shaped by peer dynamics and cultural and familial ideologies, including religious values. She talked of being unable to confide in her parents about her negative and coercive

relationship experiences because of their likely reaction, leaving her to navigate the harm alone until she felt able to end the relationship. Her parents' expectation that she remained 'pure and virginal', tied to both moral and religious ideals, placed her in a position where preserving their framework took precedence over her well-being (Jack & Ali, 2010). This demand extended beyond her behaviour to include the internalisation of shame. Unable to reconcile her experiences with the expectations placed upon her, Nigella struggled to name her ex-boyfriend's behaviour as abusive. Instead, she seemed to absorb the blame, framing her struggles as a personal or moral failing rather than recognising the systemic nature of the harm she endured.

This silencing – both external, through parental judgment, and internal, through her own self-monitoring – meant that Nigella felt unable to seek support, and struggled to process the abuse in a way that affirmed her perspective. She positioned the lack of safe spaces to voice her concerns as a barrier to care, reinforcing the idea that speaking out would risk damaging valued relationships, particularly with her parents, whose earlier responses had been punitive and shaming. The internal conflict voiced in her account was compounded by the contrasting treatment of her brother. While she was vilified for 'letting the family down', her brother's possession of condoms was framed as eliciting no moral outrage – *"Mum just took them, and nothing happened"* (Nigella). This stark inequity deepened Nigella's sense of injustice and isolation.

In contrast, participants with more visible social status described a different but similarly fraught set of conditions. These young women were expected to navigate the contradictory ideal of being sexually experienced without being *"too much"* – a dynamic Erin (Group 2) captured in her comment about needing to be a *"virgin porn star"*. This construct demanded that they appear sexually available and confident, while still conforming to ideals of modesty and moral restraint.

Sexual activity was often less about personal desire and more about performing the expectations scripted by heterosexual discourse – where a young woman’s value was tethered to how convincingly she could embody both innocence and sexual expertise. In both home and peer contexts, these young women described navigating complex, gendered scripts that made it difficult to access support, voice discomfort, or express contradiction. Whether shaped by conservative religious ideals or performative peer norms, these frameworks seemed to constrain the ways they could speak, act, and make meaning of their own experiences. Yet their reflections also made clear that they saw the inequalities embedded in these norms – they were not naïve, but silenced.

These two narratives – Nigella’s familial silencing and the socially visible girls’ strategic navigation of contradictory sexual expectations – highlight the diverse yet converging ways in which young women are compelled to manage voice and visibility. Whether shaped by moral expectations at home or by the need to curate desirability in peer settings, the outcome is often the same: diminished agency and a constrained space for authentic self-expression. Nigella’s difficulty naming her experience as abusive reflects not personal inadequacy but a broader societal failure to provide the interpretive frameworks needed to make sense of harm.

At the centre of these dynamics lies a deeper question: whose voices are heard and whose are dismissed? As Ahmed (2024) and Gill (2007) argued, young women’s speech is often demanded by cultural scripts of self-expression, yet simultaneously devalued or disbelieved, particularly when it challenges male entitlement or dominant norms. Within the cultural hierarchies these young women navigate, male speech is frequently privileged, even when it reinforces harmful or objectifying narratives. When boys speak degradingly about girls, their words are often brushed

off as banter. To challenge such talk risks not just social discomfort but a fundamental questioning of structures that preserve male entitlement and normalise female subordination.

In contrast, young women's speech, especially when it names harm, is often met with suspicion or dismissal. Participants described the high cost of speaking out:

Stormi: You don't really want to (support the boys in favour of yourself/friends), but you kind of have to.

Scottie: If you talk about a boy in a not good way, you'll get hated on by all of them.

Kris: If one of the boys did something to you, you could never tell their friends because they'd tell them and they'd be, 'No, no, no, not true,' and they'd all hate on you.

Pam: Yeah, the amount of hate you'd get would be phenomenal.

Kris: Slayed is the word. (Group 2, Workshop)

These reflections make visible the threat of social backlash. Speaking out is framed as betrayal, and silence as self-preservation. The ironic use of 'slayed' captures the extent to which voice is policed and punished. Yet there is criticality here too. The participants know the cost of silence and speak about it with a knowing cynicism. Their tone is not only self-protective but subtly resistant, signalling an awareness of the scripts they are expected to follow.

While some young women appeared to hold social capital through their connections to dominant peer groups – often boys from nearby schools – this capital was conditional. It required adherence to norms of heteronormative desirability and porn-influenced sexual performance. Visibility brought scrutiny; belonging demanded complicity. Deviating from the script or speaking out could lead to exclusion. For many, silence or strategic restraint became necessary for maintaining social safety. By contrast, young women with less visibility sometimes described greater latitude in

defining their boundaries. Removed from the gaze of high-status male groups, they encountered fewer immediate pressures to perform femininity in narrowly sexualised terms. This marginality offered some freedom – though not immunity – to resist the dominant heterosexual economy.

Several participants described how boys regularly shared real or imagined sexual encounters as a form of bonding and status-making. These stories circulated freely, establishing norms for what girls were supposed to do, how they were evaluated, and how their worth was determined:

Scottie: They shit talk girls that aren't... yeah, and they're like, oh, she was blah blah, and you obviously get what they're saying. The boys talk about everything – they're so TMI [too much information], and they share what the girls were good at or not, so you hear what you're supposed to do.

Kim: Yeah, and it makes you kind of nervous about what if you embarrass yourself. (Group 2, Workshop)

This dynamic was echoed across groups. Mandy (Group 4), for instance, commented: “*You hear lots from the guys about what they did with girls and what the girls supposedly did. They make up so much stuff and exaggerate stories*”. These reflections point to an asymmetrical discursive power: boys’ speech sets the terms, while girls’ reputations are constructed in its shadow. The pressure to conform is intense, yet their critique is present in their group discussion.

Silence here is not an absence of awareness but a tactical navigation of risk. Within the broader context of sexual reputation, judgement, and credibility, young women learn to weigh the consequences of speaking carefully. Their silence is shaped by social threat and moments of insight that point to the possibility of alternative ways of knowing and being. These small cracks in the dominant discourse matter. They hint at what might be possible if girls’ speech were not only allowed but believed. As the following section shows, the possibility remains fragile but not out of reach.

The idea of fairness for male peers, and the fear of reputational harm, surfaced repeatedly across Group 2's discussion. Kris's comment that accusations could "*ruin a boy's life*" reflects a powerful cultural narrative: that men are more vulnerable to false claims than women are to actual harm (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016; Ryan, 2019). This framing positions men as the true victims of sexual violence discourse, while simultaneously undermining the credibility of women's accounts. These myths serve to protect male entitlement by characterising women as emotionally volatile and unreliable narrators, reinforcing the idea that men's futures are worth protecting – even at the expense of women's safety and agency.

Kris: Sometimes their horniness takes over their brain and they're not even themselves.

Kim: Yeah because we know the boys well and we think – that's not them. And then they do something and it changes your perspective, just because they're not thinking straight or something. (Group 2, Workshop)

Despite recognising troubling behaviour, the young women's responses often deferred to sympathetic narratives about the boys involved. By attributing coercive or harmful actions to a loss of self-control – "*their horniness takes over their brain*" – the participants echoed dominant male sexual drive discourses (Hollway, 1984), which frame male desire as biologically inevitable and difficult to resist. Kim's reassurance that these behaviours are "*not them*" represents a protective distancing tactic, one that preserves personal relationships by separating the behaviour from the actor. This dissonance makes it easier to maintain friendship or affiliation with boys whose actions would otherwise be cause for alarm.

These responses also reveal how deeply constrained the available discursive resources were for the participants. Even when they voiced concern or disapproval, their critiques were wrapped in layers of empathy, as if harm had to be justified or understood rather than named. In doing so, the

group reproduced a familiar narrative: that sexual misconduct is a momentary lapse rather than a conscious decision situated within a context of structural power imbalances.

- Kim: There's lots of times girls are obviously too drunk to know what's really happening, I think that's really wrong when that happens, they know what they're doing. The boys know exactly what they're doing. And they know that because the girl's drunk, she's probably going to say yes to that.
- Stormi: The boys do a lot like... what's the word... encourage each other, like "Hey, get me in there".
- Interviewer: Yeah, so if there's a girl who's really out of it, the other guys join in?
- Group: Yeah, sometimes. Yeah, yeah.
- Scottie: It kind of becomes a thing, because on the odd occasion girls just stay in one place and boys come and go. Cause she's just there and ready.
- Kim: It sounds bad but it happens.
- Scottie: I don't know, but like boys would literally just take anyone that they can.
- Kris: Yeah, anyone they can.
- Stormi: It's really, really sad.
- Pam: That's really – you can't really blame it on the girl at all. But then when people hear the stories the next day, they're like, "Oh, she's such a slut for doing that".
- Scottie: Like four guys in one night.
- Pam: But it was really the boys that were instigating it all happening. (Group 2, Workshop)

The tone of this exchange is one of resignation, with moments of critique softened by ambivalence. The scenario they describe – where multiple boys take turns with an incapacitated girl – is serious, but it is framed in ways that obscure its violence. Phrases like "*it sounds bad but it happens*" or "*it kind of becomes a thing*" dilute the severity of what is being described. Only Pam explicitly challenges the dominant narrative by refusing to blame the girl and pointing out the boys' role as

instigators. This section illustrates how the repetition of such scenarios breeds normalisation. Even though the participants express discomfort, their language signals an emotional distancing – an attempt to make sense of the unacceptable by rationalising it as part of the social terrain. This mirrors what Deming et al. (2013) and Sinko et al. (2021) found in their work, that the more routine sexual aggression becomes, the less likely it is to be identified as such.

Pam and Stormi's comments reflect important counterpoints. They show that even within these heavily coded discussions, young women are capable of naming harm and recognising the broader gendered dynamics at play. Stormi's final reflection – "*It's really, really sad*" – is simple but potent. It holds space for the emotional weight of what is being discussed and gestures towards the beginnings of a critical awareness. These moments of clarity highlight both the constraints and the capacities of the participants. While dominant cultural scripts shaped much of the conversation, they did not go unchallenged. The young women navigated a discursive landscape filled with contradiction, where caring about their peers, maintaining social relationships, and critiquing structural inequity all pulled in different directions. Yet, within these tensions, the capacity to imagine different possibilities remained present – subtle, fragile, but undeniably there. The juxtaposition of these voices highlights the power of social dynamics in silencing alternative perspectives. Even within a discussion that acknowledges harm, the collective weight of prevailing norms works to downplay the complexity of consent and culpability. The comment, "*You still know in your head*" (Pam), exemplifies a reductive, black-and-white framing that obscures the nuanced realities of intoxication, vulnerability, and coercion. Pam's statement, which evokes the image of someone being unable to resist or recognise assault, offers a vital counterpoint – one that is frequently drowned out by dominant narratives.

This group's conversation stands in contrast to others (Groups 1, 3, and 4) who, less embedded in party culture, articulated more critical perspectives. Those groups appeared more able to name structural inequities and express the need for education grounded in mutual respect and clarity around consent. Their conversations contained more space for imagining alternative sexual and social frameworks – ones that refused to accept harm as normative. What is (re)produced is a troubling pattern: dominant narratives perpetuate harm and delegitimise the voices that challenge it. This leaves young women caught in a discursive bind, where their experiences are invalidated and their efforts at resistance are constrained. Addressing these issues requires more than just individual education; it necessitates a collective reworking of the cultural frameworks that protect perpetrators and silence critique.

Delia: I've been at parties where guys just force themselves on girls who are drunk or sleeping and like jump on them and start doing what they want and like shoving themselves down their throat or fingering them and stuff. If you're in your bed, you should be safe - in your room, or a tent, or whatever. (Group 4, Workshop)

Delia's account is unambiguous. It names the acts for what they are and insists on the right to safety in intimate spaces. Her refusal to euphemise signals a rupture – an insistence that this violence cannot be normalised or softened. It is this kind of clarity that is often made impossible within peer cultures shaped by silence and social risk.

Yet, even in Group 3, where critical awareness was evident, deeply ambivalent views about accountability remained:

Rebekah: That whole like, obviously, like not all men, but like, it's enough men for people to be scared. Like, sure, not everyone's horrible. But at the same time, clearly, enough people have done horrible things that people are scared.

Betty: No, and I think another hard thing in that situation is obviously like people make bad choices like nice people make bad choices. And like that might be to impress people. And I reckon for a lot of the time that those nice people do make bad choices it is to impress people. But like, for girls, it's really hard for them to get any sort of closure. And the only thing that's like encouraged is that they like report it but then reporting it doesn't really change anything. It doesn't teach anyone anything. It's just all of a sudden this potentially really nice guy has been blacklisted kind of thing. Which, obviously you don't want that to happen to the girls but at the same time it's not nice for a guy who made like I say it'd be a really nice guy, to be in that position. So, it is almost a scary thought to think about from both points of view. (Group 3, Workshop)

Betty's commentary encapsulated the contradictory position many young women find themselves in. Her words reflect an internalised imperative to empathise with boys, even in the context of harm. While her comments register a concern for victims, they are simultaneously shaped by the belief that the reputational consequences for boys are worse than the experience of violation itself. This is not a moral failure on her part but a window into the broader cultural myths these young women are required to navigate. Rape myths, including the notion that 'nice guys' can't be perpetrators', serve to insulate socially privileged boys from accountability, especially when their behaviour is framed as a mistake rather than a violation (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

Rebekah's comment, "*it's enough men for people to be scared*", registered awareness of the systemic nature of this issue. Yet Betty's balancing act – trying to protect both victims and boys – revealed the emotional and relational burden young often women carry in managing harm. Rather than being empowered to name injustice, they are encouraged to interpret violence through a lens of ambiguity, empathy, and narrative restraint. This is where the silencing runs deepest. It is not just external, but internalised: a learned rewriting of experience to make it more palatable to others, especially to boys. As Fine (1982) argued, naming injustice is a crucial step in resisting it. Yet these girls demonstrate that naming is costly – socially, emotionally, and relationally. To speak

openly is to risk being dismissed, disbelieved, or excluded. To remain silent is to protect the fragile social balance that keeps boys comfortable and girls safe.

What these narratives demonstrate is not simply confusion or indecisiveness, but a structure of feeling shaped by patriarchal norms that demand empathy for perpetrators and caution from the harmed. Silence here is not passivity, but survival. Yet, even in the midst of silence, the young women voice moments of clarity, recognition, and critique. They are not just reproducing dominant narratives; they are also straining against them, searching for other ways of understanding, naming, and imagining relationships that could be different – more respectful, reciprocal, and safe. In the next section I explore how these young women used conversation as a site of counter-discourse, where new meanings and possibilities could begin to take shape.

“Talking Together has Totally Diminished the Power of the Boys’ Expectations” – The Potential of Talk to Disrupt: When Talking Breaks the Silence

“Scream

So that one day a hundred

years from now

another sister will not have

to dry her tears

wondering where in history

she lost her voice”. Sikh poet, Jasmin Kaur (2019).

Efforts to address issues affecting women have, at times, resulted in significant progress, fostering both awareness and tangible change. The #MeToo movement stands out as a powerful example – a platform that enabled women to unite in solidarity, challenging rape myths and dismantling slut-

shaming narratives (Maes et al., 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Jaffe, 2018). By standing together, women mitigated the isolating impact of speaking out alone, creating a collective safety net against the backlash from politicians, commentators, and columnists who sought to reassert rape myth supremacy (Maes et al., 2019). This mobilisation disrupted the assumed norms of silencing and marginalisation, threatening those who benefit from maintaining gender inequity and the social status it upholds.

The potential loss for those who align themselves with the dominant group, whether through behaviours or narratives, underscores the power of collective voices. I asked the young women to reflect on what might create meaningful change for themselves and others, inviting them to consider the potential of talking together as a way to disrupt the silencing they had experienced.

Carrie: There's a social media forum where people can just upload stuff, and there are sort of little things like, like, one of them is called "Seen Stories" and stuff. And a lot of those at the moment are about women taking charge of their own bodies, especially because a lot of them are based in America. And since Roe v. Wade has just been overturned, there's been a lot more women coming forward and talking about their bad sexual experiences or about why they need rights and access to particular things in terms of sex, whether that be after sex or before, you know, just that sort of stuff.

Brie: It's good, but it shocks me to see how many things or ways that people can harm women. You know, whether it's emotionally, physically, or sexually. There's just so many stories, and yeah, now they're getting the guts to come forward, you know, because lots of other people have come forward. But it's sad that these were all stories from beforehand, but only now, since there's a big sort of drama about it, are people thinking, 'damn', okay, I've been sad with this, but maybe I can use this for the good, bettering others. And like it's sad that it's always been there, but it's only now that it's ok to step up, because people are worried about what people will do to them.

Interviewer: I wonder if people feel more comfortable to step forward now because they know there are many other people doing it too?

Inez: Definitely, there's more power in groups. Alone is, it's awful. It's scary.

Brie: I think we just need to do more stuff, like make apps, sign petitions, speak up about stuff when you hear things.

Carrie: Yeah, talk about stuff, but take preventative action, maybe to raise awareness about certain things to take people's experiences and turn it into something, I'm just not sure what that would be right now. (Group 1, Workshop)

These young women articulated the transformative potential of unified action and collective storytelling to advance the rights and well-being of women. While they expressed uncertainty about the precise mechanisms to achieve this action, they articulated a recognition of power inherent in shared experiences and solidarity. Their reflections suggest a deep understanding of how individual vulnerability is mitigated when voices join together, creating safety and amplifying the impact of their messages. They acknowledged that isolation in addressing women's rights issues, particularly those fraught with societal stigma, often silences individuals, whereas collective action provides a platform for change.

Their discussion touched on the role of online platforms as spaces where women could gather, share experiences, and educate others, as well as the hope such spaces represented. Online collectives offered both practical and symbolic benefits: practically, they serve as tools for advocacy and mobilisation; and symbolically, they represent a growing refusal to accept silencing and erasure (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017). By referencing the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, they also highlighted how global events reignite personal and collective activism, illustrating how systemic setbacks can paradoxically spur resistance and innovation in advocacy.

The frustration expressed around the limitations of petitions, awareness campaigns, and preventative actions also highlighted the tension between symbolic action and substantive change. For these young women, there is recognition that while such strategies are necessary, they often

feel insufficient in addressing the enormity of the challenges faced by women. The sense of anger and urgency in their conversation reflects a broader frustration with the slow pace of systemic change and the ongoing societal positioning of women as inherently vulnerable and in need of collective defence.

Additionally, their dialogue demonstrates a developing awareness of the intersection between personal and collective responsibility. By discussing both the individual courage required to speak out and the collective strength needed to protect and amplify those voices, they highlight the dual dimensions of resistance: personal empowerment and structural transformation. The mention of preventative measures and their desire to “*do more stuff*” (Brie) hints at their willingness to explore creative solutions, even as they grapple with the enormity of the issues at hand. This dual focus on education and action situates their perspectives within a hopeful trajectory, where the lessons of the past inform the potential for future advocacy.

- Maureen: It makes you feel like your body’s not your own, you know, like I know it’s happening in America, but like the fact that it happened even though, you know, it got reversed, and now it’s back again. It makes you feel like why are these people getting control over what I do with my body, especially since the majority of them are men. Like why do they know what I want, what is best for women? It’s honestly scary.
- Delia: It’s in America, but it’s a loud comment about us all as women, like our worth and what other people think they can do with our bodies. (Group 4, Workshop)

Maureen and Delia articulated the tension between the perceived value of their youthful, feminine bodies and the marginalisation and lack of agency they experience. Their reflections on events like the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* highlight how external control over women’s bodies, particularly by men, symbolises broader societal attitudes toward women’s autonomy.

This lack of agency mirrors the contradictions of adolescence described by Wyn and White (2000), where young women's bodies are sites of both cultural power and vulnerability. For these participants, their bodies are commodified yet subject to systemic disempowerment, amplifying feelings of marginalisation and fear. Nevertheless, their critiques demonstrate a growing awareness of the structural forces shaping their experiences. By naming these fears and injustices, the participants disrupt the silence imposed on them, showing the potential for collective resistance and reclaiming of agency.

Betty: I think you might as well feel sexy for yourself when you can, I don't see why you'd want to feel ugly for yourself. But I think it also comes back to the like not sexualising yourself, but at the same time we kind of are sexualising ourselves, because the trends in clothing and stuff are marketed to appeal to the male gaze, or whatever. So like I want to feel good for me in what I'm wearing, but what I'm wearing is actually probably mainly made for me to look good for guys.

Rebekah: Yeah, you actually just go round in circles. (Group 3, Workshop)

Betty and Rebekah express a paradoxical awareness of the conflicting pressures they face in navigating self-presentation. Betty's desire to feel good for herself is entangled with the recognition that clothing trends are often designed to appeal to the male gaze. This tension highlights the cyclical nature of their experiences – seeking autonomy while conforming to societal expectations of femininity. Rebekah's comment, "*you actually just go round in circles*", succinctly captures the frustration and futility of this dynamic.

All the young women in this group displayed moments of critical reflection on their social positioning, insights that were frequently entangled with the reinforcement of harmful cultural scripts. The pull of internalised norms remained strong, shaping how they saw themselves and how they interpreted each other's behaviours.

- Kim: Oh god, it's such a common thing. Like oh my god, girls do it about other girls all the time. Like if you hear a story about a girl getting with 10 guys in one night and she had her boobs out, then she was asking for it. It's just like what people say. It's awful.
- Pam: Internalised misogyny, if you will!
- Group: What? What is that?"
- Pam: It's just engrained on you as girls to think negatively about women and other girls, like prejudices. Like who really cares if a girl's got her boobs out. But boys would say the same thing if someone came to a party or something with their tits out, they'd be like, 'Oh she looks like a slapper'. But seriously, they'd love it.
- Kris: We dress for ourselves. Like last week we were all dressed up for a party and then went round to the boys' house to drink, but we all put our hoodies on.
- Scottie: Yeah, it was actually funny – we were like, 'We're going to the boys' place, we have to cover up'.
- Kim: Because we all thought otherwise we'd look like we were asking for it. (Group 2, Workshop)

The group's reflections account for some of the internal contradictions many young women must navigate in social and sexual settings. Their humour and self-awareness suggest they are not simply reproducing dominant gender norms unknowingly – they are negotiating them, sometimes cynically, and often under pressure. Pam's remark about "*internalised misogyny*" is telling. Framed with humour, but delivered with insight, her comment worked to momentarily disrupt the prevailing logic of the group. In this context, laughter marked both recognition and discomfort: the group knew what she meant, even if they had not named it before.

Throughout the focus group and workshop, Pam emerged as a participant willing to challenge dominant narratives, even in a group closely aligned with the boys they socialised with and the discourses that protected those boys. Her ability to raise critique from within – without alienating

herself from her peers – signals not only confidence but a kind of discursive agility. Rather than confronting the group head-on, she offered a way to think differently while staying within the bounds of relational safety.

The group talking of their decision to ‘cover up’ before visiting the boys’ house was revealing. It illustrates a clear awareness of how they might be judged, and the lengths they must go to in order to manage those judgments. The irony, that their party outfits were acceptable in other contexts but had to be hidden when entering a space dominated by boys, exposes the pervasiveness of rape myths and the pressure on girls to pre-emptively defend themselves against blame. Their actions were not simply about modesty; they were about protection from narrative violence. In this moment, Pam’s naming of internalised misogyny becomes a small act of refusal – a way of surfacing what is usually left unspoken. It does not undo the structures at play, but it gestures toward a possibility: that the girls are not only complicit in upholding these norms, but also capable of identifying and questioning them, together.

When Kim said, “*Because we all thought otherwise we’d look like we were asking for it*”, in response to putting hoodies on before seeing their guy friends, she illustrated the extent to which dominant discourses of respectability and blame have shaped her group’s understanding of safety and self-presentation. Though Pam had jokingly named this earlier as “*internalised misogyny*”, the broader group did not necessarily share that terminology. However, their actions and reflections revealed how these internalised logics continued to inform how they viewed themselves and each other. These tensions were deeply felt but not always explicitly articulated; a dynamic reflective of broader patterns in postfeminist culture, where freedom and self-expression are entangled with self-regulation and surveillance (Gill, 2017).

Throughout the workshops, many of the young women described their lives in ways that aligned with a sense of personal freedom, fun, and choice. Yet these descriptions were often underpinned by contradictory assumptions – individual responsibility coexisted with the dismissal of ongoing sexism, and personal choice was exercised within narrowly defined expectations of desirability. Rather than seeing themselves as constrained, these young women were often positioned – and positioned themselves – as freely choosing subjects, even as they navigated a terrain deeply structured by gendered norms. As Gonick et al. (2009) argued, this depoliticised sense of agency works to obscure the cultural and structural forces that continue to shape young women’s experiences and limit the available options for critique (Gill, 2017, Moran, 2017, Riley et al., 2016, 2023). What might otherwise be seen as the effects of sexism are instead understood as personal failures, misjudgements, or overreactions.

This dynamic was evident again when the young women described their reactions to overhearing sexually explicit conversations among their peers:

Brie: There were these girls in the bathroom really loudly talking about what they wanted to do with their partners at the formal and how they wanted to be pounded and slammed and risking going without a condom and stuff, and I was totally judging them for being so loud about it all, but at the same time I was judging myself for judging them. It was bizarre because I had this whole reaction to them, and it’s embarrassing to even say it, but I was like, ‘What sluts’ and that’s totally not who I am or what I think, but I...

Carrie: I think it’s a little bit because of how we’ve been brought up. You know, it’s like something happens, and I’m like, God, is this what I actually think or is this because I’ve been brought up to think like this, you know? (Group 1, Workshop)

This exchange demonstrates a moment of reflexivity and tension – an internal push and pull between ingrained judgment and emerging critique. Brie’s discomfort with her initial reaction, and Carrie’s framing of these attitudes as socially conditioned, indicate how slut-shaming narratives

are not only perpetuated externally but maintained through self-surveillance and peer policing. These discourses do more than regulate behaviour; they fracture potential solidarity between young women, redirecting attention toward judgement rather than shared recognition of structural constraint (McRobbie, 2007, 2008, 2015; Reynold & Ringrose, 2011).

Crucially, this kind of reflection only became possible in the context of collective conversation. Within the safety of the workshop space, participants were able to unpack and question taken-for-granted beliefs. As Willis (2009) has noted, the meaning-making practices that shape gendered norms are cultural and relational – formed and reformed through everyday talk. Here, internalised misogyny did not go unchallenged. Instead, it became an object of critique, enabling the group to begin reworking the narratives that had previously constrained their interpretations of themselves and others.

Talk as a Tool for Reimagining Agency

Through this shift in discourse, the young women began to explore more critical ways of understanding their social environment. In Group 2, Pam's ongoing contributions often served as entry points for this reimagining. While earlier conversations had been characterised by defensiveness around boys' behaviour, the group gradually moved toward articulating a stronger ethic of care for one another. Over time, their talk became less about individual blame and more about collective conditions. This turn held space for rethinking shame, fear, and the cultural silencing of young women's experiences.

Pam: I reckon they need to make it easier and safer for girls to say if they've been raped, coz if you get raped, where do you go? The police station is so scary and intimidating and you think they'll judge you.

- Scottie: Yeah, because it happens a lot, but I don't think people are actually educated about what rape actually is, that it just happens, when it shouldn't happen. But yeah, if someone got raped, you wouldn't be like, 'I'm going down to the police station'.
- Kris: A parent would be the worst person. Maybe a sister or a lady you don't really know, or the hospital maybe?
- Erin: Family Planning is good I think. Lots of people go there. (Group 2, Workshop)

In the early stages of the workshops, Group 2 struggled to identify any examples of rape. The normalisation of coercive or non-consensual behaviour in party culture made such acts difficult to name, let alone challenge (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017). By the final workshop, the shift was clear: they had begun to recognise rape as a prevalent issue – something real, close, and worthy of response. This transformation was not the result of a single breakthrough, but the cumulative effect of collective talk, reflexivity, and relational trust.

Pam's question – "*Where do you go?*" – regarding the absence of safe places to report rape, became a catalyst for the group. Rather than silencing the conversation, it opened up a moment of shared reckoning. The group began to imagine new possibilities: alternative support networks, systems that did not yet exist but that they could begin to name. These conversations disrupted the earlier defensiveness around boys' behaviour and instead centred on the lived realities of girls – their safety, uncertainty, and need for care. In speaking together, these young women began to disrupt the silence that had previously left them feeling isolated. Their reflections revealed how shame, fear, and cultural scripts had constrained their ability to articulate harm. In dialogue, they forged a collective voice that enabled them to reframe their experiences not as individual failures or confusions, but as the product of larger systemic conditions.

Significantly, this reframing also marked a departure from earlier conversations that had either centred boys or sought to protect them. For the first time, the focus shifted. These young women no longer positioned themselves as reactive to male power but as agents of their own change. They saw one another, rather than the boys, as the catalysts for transformation. This shift away from male-centred narratives toward a more collective, girl-centred politic speaks to what Proweller et al. (2021) described as a move toward solidarities grounded in critique and care.

As Fine (1982) argued, naming injustice is not just a personal act but a political one. When young women are given the space to talk together, they begin to unpick the cultural myths that have shaped their silences. In doing so, they carve out space for new ways of being with themselves, with each other, and with the world. These shifts are not final or complete, but they hold immense promise. They suggest that collective dialogue is not only a method of research but a method of transformation.

Importantly, the exuberance of their discussion speaks to how collective safety and structured reflection can foster new ways of thinking and being. While the transformation was not linear or total, there were glimmers of something shifting – moments where vulnerability, when held collectively, made space for tentative forms of agency. As the girls worked together on a shared idea, the room became louder, lighter, more hopeful.

Scottie: We need more stuff like this! Like we've never ever had the opportunity to talk about sex before and be so open and not be judged.

Kim: I know this is for your study, but more of this would be so good, coz we've all really loved it.

Stormi: Maybe we should make a club like Sex Education!

Group: Oh my god!! Yes!! That would be so amazing!!

- Kris: We could run little afternoon sessions with the younger girls.
- Pam: We'd have to call it something else, coz school wouldn't let us have a group with sex in the name...
- Kim: Well, it's a really hard thing to be open about, but I totally don't agree with that, like what would people think if we came out and were just promoting sex in like a really good and healthy way?
- Group: Yes! I so want to do that... We could change the world! (Group 2, Workshop)

Here, there is a clear recognition that sex is not something to be silenced or shamed. When Kim remarked, "*school wouldn't let us have a group with sex in the name*" and the reply came, "*I totally don't agree with that, like what would people think if we came out and were just promoting sex in like a really good and healthy way?*" it shows a growing confidence in their right to access and share knowledge that challenges dominant norms.

This moment also illustrated the group's emergent adversarial stance – what Herington and van de Fliert (2018) termed 'positive deviancy'. Their enthusiasm signals a readiness to push gently against institutional and other social norms and reflect critically on the structures that have shaped their silence. Importantly, their ideas emerged not as polished activist strategies but as tentative imaginings – hopeful responses made possible by the supportive dynamic cultivated in the workshop setting.

- Stormi: So that girls going into Year 11 aren't traumatised like we were.
- Pam: Yeah, we should tell Mrs ** tomorrow that as soon as people get to Year 11 it's a sex fest, so they might as well teach them before they get there!
- Kris: We can comfort them and look after them, let them know what they're getting themselves into and know how to prevent things.
- Scottie: I reckon a group where girls could talk about ideas and solutions, rather than personal stories, coz confidentiality would be an issue.

Stormi: I just don't want my sister to go through what I've seen my friends go through. (Group 2, Workshop)

While the suggestions may have been playful or idealistic, they also reflected a meaningful shift. This group was no longer positioned solely as recipients of harm but as emerging agents of change. Their energy was not the outcome of a sudden transformation but the cumulative effect of building safety, trust, and a space that invited reflection. Within this co-constructed environment, the young women began to reframe their experiences, moving from internalised blame toward shared responsibility and collective imagination. This is where the methodological scaffolding of the workshops – grounded in critical participatory action research – becomes visible. These shifts did not emerge from individual epiphany but through ongoing dialogue, affective resonance, and a sense of relational accountability.

Maureen: I thought it was cool that we all sort of had the same ideas sort of going on. It's nice to know other people feel the same way.

Skye: Yeah, it's kind of weird because it's not something we normally discuss, so...

Nigella: Yeah, it was so good to like actually talk about it!

Mandy: I mean, we could run something like this at school, but without teachers there, like a safe group where people can talk. (Group 4, Workshop)

These reflections demonstrate the affective force of realising shared experience. Across the dataset, silence emerged both as a theme and a strategy – a learned response to avoid scrutiny, stigma, or shame. Breaking that silence in the company of others did not immediately undo its effects, but it created space for tentative resistance. The suggestion of creating student-led, teacher-free groups, while not necessarily actionable, signals an emerging desire to shape the structures around them. Rather than reading this as a wholesale move from silence to activism, it is more

useful to see it as a form of collective prefigurative practice – a way of imagining alternative futures in small, tangible moments. What matters here is not whether a club was formed, but that the idea could be spoken aloud and met with enthusiastic affirmation. These were moments in which their words and their visions were met, rather than dismissed. That, in itself, was a form of cultural disruption.

The repeated commentary about the absence of open conversations with mothers further illustrates how silence is transmitted across generations. While one participant spoke of being able to talk to her mother, most described relying on friends or siblings for information, highlighting a significant gap in trusted, intergenerational communication. This silence reinforces discomfort around sex and signals a lack of guidance at crucial developmental moments, making peer-driven spaces all the more important.

Importantly, these discussions between the participants begin to push back against dominant narratives that construct young women as passive, naive, or disinterested in the complexities of sex and relationships. In actively participating, they assert their right to knowledge, disrupt shame, and challenge the structures that have historically kept them silent. The potential of collective spaces becomes clear as sites of learning, validation, and solidarity.

Delia: Like, have the opportunity to have like a one-off class and then go into friend groups and talk about it, like school actually making time for that kind of opportunity. It would be so beneficial to us.

Skye: I mean, it's been so good to discuss this here; it's been like the first time we've ever sat down, apart from maybe one-on-one and discussed any of this stuff.

Mandy: Yeah, like knowing how this went well for our friend group, knowing that we can now discuss these kinds of things.

- Nigella: Yeah, this has been so beneficial for us; I thought it was a really good idea for us to do this. (Group 4, Workshop)
- Betty: It has definitely been interesting to be here and to talk about this stuff. We spend so much time not talking about it – it was refreshing to actually talk about it. It was good and it’s so important. I think everyone should have the opportunity to talk about it and to make it normal, instead of like...
- Rebekah: Yeah it’s so good to talk about it openly because like most people are like having sex and hooking up, but you feel a pressure to not talk about it openly, just because if you do then everyone’s gonna be like ‘oh you’re a slut’ you know. (Group 3, Workshop)
- Inez: And I think the thing about this that is good, is if the idea could be carried forward so that all the girls know the same stuff and everyone is on the same page, coz it would lessen the kind of showing off, or shaming stuff and everyone would be on more of an equal footing and people wouldn’t feel like they have to do stuff they don’t want to. (Group 1, Workshop)

Across these groups, a consistent theme of relief and validation emerges. The opportunity to speak openly – without fear of being misinterpreted, judged, or shamed – was framed as rare and powerful. Many reflected on how silence had been modelled by adults and was expected of them by their peers. Sex was something to do, but not something to talk about. Inez’s hope that “*everyone could be on the same page*” spoke to the deeper longing for community and shared understanding. In her words, there was recognition that silence fuelled competitiveness and insecurity, often experienced as showing off, shaming, or feeling pressure to conform. In this context, talking becomes more than catharsis; it becomes a quietly subversive act of cultural resistance.

While these discussions centred on young women, the solidarity expressed – through both critique and care – signals potential for broader cultural shifts. As Delia pointed out, schools could play a part in making space for these conversations. But it was clear the girls valued informal, peer-led dialogue even more. They were not simply asking for curriculum; they were asking for connection.

The power of these collective moments lies not just in what was said, but in what was made possible through saying it.

Counter-narratives and Resistance

A definitive message runs through these final reflections: the young women were seeking a recalibration in how sex, bodies, and agency are discussed and understood. Their conversations revealed a longing to break free from the inhibition and self-doubt that had been normalised in their lives. The focus groups and workshops provided a rare space where these internalised silences could be surfaced and shared. The isolating effects of neoliberal individualism – intersecting with the hyper sexualisation of young women and the demand to perform normative femininity (Gonick et al., 2009; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022), had siloed these participants, making the possibility of solidarity feel distant. Talking seemed to begin to change that.

Through conversation, the young women were able to locate one another in the dark, drawing light from the recognition of shared experience. These were not abstract debates but grounded exchanges, shaped by lived realities. The workshops created a setting of safety and mutual respect, where new language emerged, and existing assumptions could be questioned. What began as fragmented stories and half-articulated thoughts became, over time, a shared vocabulary. It was in this collective meaning-making that empowerment became possible.

This critiquing of norms, echoes, on a smaller scale, the political energy of movements like #MeToo, where the transformation of private pain into public conversation generated profound cultural shifts. In my study, the stakes were smaller but no less significant. Speaking together disrupted dominant cultural scripts and opened up new ways of thinking, even if tentatively. The

young women's willingness to listen to each other, question themselves, and reframe their experiences marked a quiet but powerful resistance.

It also highlighted how critical the context was. The identity of the facilitator – an outsider, not part of the school's internal structure, mattered. Many participants voiced concerns that teachers might break confidentiality or carry judgment into the classroom. My status as a visiting counsellor/researcher created a space that felt different: temporary, protected, and unburdened by institutional surveillance.

Scottie: We would never do this at school and I wouldn't open up at school because the teachers would share it.

Kim: We would never ever do this at school and I wouldn't open up either. Yeah, they'd tell each other. (Group 2, Workshop)

Inez: It's not something we normally talk about, and I think having someone we don't know talk about it with us has made it possible to be honest. It's been so interesting to see what other people's thoughts and views are.

Carrie: Yeah, coz it's a bit taboo to just start talking about guys and sex and just bring it up, so this has been so good having you here to do it kind of for us. (Group 1, Workshop)

Maureen: We've never had an opportunity to have these conversations, but it's such a big thing but never gets acknowledged.

Skye: Yeah, and this kind of scenario is best, like a trusted adult who we won't see all the time and friends we can trust. (Group 4, Workshop)

This dynamic aligns with feminist and critical pedagogies, which emphasise the importance of recognising power structures within educational settings. As others have noted (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014; Mozziconacci, 2016), even the most well-meaning teacher cannot step outside the institutional authority they represent. In contrast, facilitated spaces that disrupt those power dynamics can foster the kind of open dialogue that is rarely possible in traditional school structures.

The shift from unspoken to spoken was not neat or total. The young women did not suddenly become activists or experts, however there was movement and a softening of the silences. A noticing of the scripts and a testing of new language. Over the course of the focus groups and workshops, the participants expressed more openness, more reflection, and more willingness to consider their experiences in political, rather than purely personal, terms. They appeared to learn things about themselves and one another, and through this learning, a different way of being in the world began to feel possible. These shifts matter because they suggest that when given the opportunity, young women are more than capable of critical reflection, solidarity, and social imagination. What is needed are the conditions that allow it.

From Unspoken to Shared

From an initial reluctance to speak openly, many began to explore their narratives with greater confidence, reflecting critically on their social and sexual environments. While some perspectives evolved, what emerged more clearly was a sense of shared understanding – a realisation that their experiences were not isolated or abnormal but shaped by broader cultural forces. Through honest dialogue they gained new insights into their own bodies, their rights, and the possibilities that might come from collective reflection and support. In this way, the workshops offered not only space for discussion, but a context in which new ways of knowing and being could begin to take shape.

While much of the commentary throughout the workshops centred on young men and their behaviour, the energy for change came from young women themselves – through shared knowledge, growing confidence in their voices, and a strong desire for education and awareness. These were not just conversations about sex; they were moments where the body became political.

What had previously been framed as a girl's body existing for someone else's pleasure was, for some, beginning to be reimagined as something to be claimed – for their own desires, their own agency, and their own futures. As Fine (1988) powerfully put it, these young women were tentatively moving toward “entitlement rather than victimization; autonomy rather than terror” (p. 50). Carrie's reflection is emblematic of this shift:

Carrie: It made me think about our bodies in general – who they belong to and who they are for. (Group 1, Workshop).

Throughout the workshops, many of the young women grappled with the schizoid discourses of femininity (Renold & Ringrose, 2011) – those fragmented and often contradictory cultural scripts that regulate their bodies and behaviours. Carrie's comment suggests a quiet but significant recalibration: a movement toward self-recognition, and toward seeing herself not simply as the object of someone else's desire but as someone with her own.

Carrie: My view on sex has changed; I thought it was a man's thing, I didn't know it was for women as well (Group 1, Workshop).

For Carrie, and others like her, the workshops offered space to reflect not only on sex but on selfhood. Her comment reflects an integration of cultural critique and personal experience – marking a small but meaningful shift in how she imagined her sexual subjectivity and rights. For girls raised to believe sex is for boys and that their bodies are for others' gratification, discovering the language of desire, entitlement, and choice is a powerful counter-narrative (Lamb, 2010).

Among the sexually active participants, similar reflections emerged. Many shared experiences where boys invoked a silent competition – ‘other girls do this, so should you’ – that reduced their worth to sexual performance. They came to realise that this pressure was not driven by one another,

but by an imagined norm imposed by boys' expectations. In speaking together, they discovered that these pressures were widely felt yet rarely questioned. The relief of recognising a shared reluctance offered a way out of isolation – a path toward rethinking what they wanted on their own terms. By naming these dynamics and rearticulating their desires, the young women began to occupy more agentic positions. They reclaimed sexuality as something that could belong to them – not something done to them. This shift away from silent compliance toward critical reflection and shared resistance marked a hopeful rupture in the dominant script.

Erin: Talking together has totally diminished the power of the boys' expectations (Group 2, Workshop).

Talking as a strategy of resistance created space for collective reflection, solidarity, and transformation. As Iglesias and Cormier (2002) suggested, it is through this connection that oppressive systems can begin to be confronted and unravelled. In rejecting the social scripts they had long internalised, and building new ones together, these young women began to cultivate a deeper sense of their own worth and subjectivity. Their conversations opened up possibilities for resisting rape-supportive cultures and imagining alternatives rooted in mutuality, safety, and respect. Crucially, they imagined what an alternative might look like. They spoke of early, comprehensive, and inclusive education – where knowledge about bodies, relationships, and agency was seen not as taboo, but as foundational. A vision emerged in which scripts of masculinity and femininity could be disrupted, and where girls' desires could be acknowledged as central, not peripheral, to the conversation (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014).

In this chapter, I have shown how collective storytelling, through the relational space of these workshops, offered an opening for social critique and a move from personal failing to shared

understanding. In speaking together, the young women began to reclaim voice, connection, and possibility, shifting from internalised shame toward a tentative yet meaningful reimagining of what could be different.. The conclusion builds on these insights, turning toward the implications for counselling, education, and broader cultural change. It considers how participatory approaches can support young women in resisting limiting norms, developing new narratives of strength and agency, and reshaping the structures that shape their lives. In doing so, the next chapter brings together the central themes of this thesis and looks ahead to what might yet be possible.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

From Ghosts to Gutsy: New Narratives of Power and Possibility

This thesis has employed an approach informed by CPAR to explore how 17-year-old women experience, interpret, and respond to societal expectations regarding heterosexual femininity.

Using participatory methodology and drawing on feminist theory, this research centres young women's voices, highlighting their ability to critically reflect, challenge dominant discourses, and reshape cultural narratives. By working within small, self-selected friendship groups, the participants articulated both resistance to gendered stereotypes and affirmations of dominant norms, demonstrating the complexity of negotiating gender identity in their social contexts.

This study discussed how collaborative spaces – where shared dialogue and exploration are prioritised – can foster solidarity, agency, and critical insight. While participants navigated the contradictions and constraints imposed by patriarchal expectations, they also demonstrated a capacity for critique and transformation, offering glimpses of alternative possibilities. One significant aspect of their context was their attendance at a socioeconomically privileged integrated girls' school, where interactions predominantly occurred with boys from single-sex neighbouring schools. These dynamics amplified the social scripts governing gender and sexuality, intensifying the need for spaces where young women could reflect, question, and reimagine their roles.

The central question guiding this thesis, ‘How do young women in high-decile girls’ schools collectively experience and reshape contemporary norms and expectations of heterosexual femininity?’, has been addressed through an exploration of narrative redefinition, counter-discourses, and participatory group work. This research highlights how young women can generate new understandings, challenge limiting belief systems, and co-create alternative narratives that honour their agency and complex identities. Crucially, this thesis also identifies practical strategies for counsellors and educators to work collaboratively with young women. By embedding participatory approaches into school practices, it becomes possible to move beyond individualised responses toward collective strategies that challenge norms and expand possibilities for how young women see themselves and their futures.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 introduced the rationale for this thesis and outlined its central focus on gender norms, heteronormativity, and young women’s navigation of femininity within socio-cultural frameworks. **Chapter 2** reviewed key literature, exploring how heteronormativity, neoliberalism, pornography, and postfeminist discourses influence young women’s experiences. It highlighted the gaps in sex education, the persistence of rape myths, and the ways patriarchal narratives structure expectations of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology and methods, providing a framework for the CPAR approach used to create participatory spaces for young women. It detailed recruitment, workshop processes, and ethical considerations, emphasising the importance of social constructionism in shaping the research design. **Chapter 4** reflected on the research process, including the challenges and transformations experienced as a cultural insider and outsider. It discussed how feminist research

can act as a political endeavour, drawing attention to the personal and professional implications of conducting this work.

Chapter 5 began the analysis, examining the absence of bodily knowledge and sexual awareness from women-centric perspectives. It explored the impact of sex education, pornography, and adult attitudes, identifying how these influences perpetuate disconnection and can limit young women's ability to assert agency. **Chapter 6** extended this analysis, focusing on silencing and self-silencing as strategies young women adopt to navigate social and sexual expectations. It highlighted the potential of collective storytelling and counter-narratives to challenge dominant discourses, demonstrating how shared experiences can foster agency and hope.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by situating the findings within broader discussions of feminist scholarship and offering practical strategies for counsellors and educators. It outlines strengths, limitations, and areas for future research to build on these insights.

Importance of the Study and Its Contributions

This thesis builds on decades of feminist scholarship dedicated to addressing gender inequalities and power differentials that have historically constrained young women's opportunities for self-expression and agency. It highlights the ongoing challenges young women face, particularly in sex education and the ways they are taught to perceive their own bodies, sexuality, and relational roles (Fine & McClelland, 2023). Despite progressive shifts in gender awareness, rape myths and social narratives that normalise, minimise, and even excuse sexual violence remain pervasive, shaping young people's understandings of what constitutes 'normal' and 'consensual' sexual behaviour.

This research underscores the complex and often contradictory pressures young women experience as they attempt to navigate their sexuality within frameworks shaped by heteronormative ideals, pornified narratives, and neoliberal expectations. In particular, hookup culture has altered the landscape of sexual interactions, simultaneously offering new possibilities for agency while limiting the language and frameworks available to express ambivalence, desire, or boundaries (Kincaid et al., 2022; Tolman, 2012; Wade, 2017). Many young women in this research described being corralled into ways of being and performing femininity to maintain social relevance and acceptance.

However, this study also reveals how young women seek out agency, even within these restrictive socio-cultural frameworks. Their participation in group discussions demonstrated a desire for connection, solidarity, and a critical interrogation of dominant norms. Through their collective reflections, participants identified moments of resistance and began to reimagine possibilities for their bodies, relationships, and identities.

This thesis emphasises the importance of educational approaches that centre young women's voices and support their self-determination (Gavey, 2019). It argues for participatory practices that acknowledge structural constraints while creating spaces for dialogue, exploration, and counter-narratives. These strategies enable young women to critique harmful norms and construct new, affirmative frameworks for sexual agency, pleasure, and mutual respect.

Overview of Key Findings

This research provides three key insights into the ways young women experience and respond to socio-cultural expectations, particularly those tied to gender, sexuality, and relationships:

1. **Disconnection and Constraint:** Young women experience a profound disconnect between their personal desires, bodily awareness, and societal expectations. This tension is particularly evident in their relationships and sexual experiences, where they often feel uncertain, conflicted, and pressured to conform to gendered norms. Many participants described feeling ill-equipped to assert their own needs or boundaries, reflecting broader gaps in education, language, and support systems that shape their ability to navigate intimacy and consent.
2. **Collective Reflection and Growth:** Participatory group discussions provided a safe, supportive space for young women to explore, articulate, and reframe their experiences. These discussions fostered solidarity, self-awareness, and a critical interrogation of dominant narratives, enabling participants to challenge restrictive norms and develop alternative perspectives. The process highlighted the transformative power of peer collaboration, where young women could test ideas, validate emotions, and co-construct solutions to the challenges they face.
3. **Counselling Practices and Participatory Methods:** This research underscores the value of group work and participatory approaches in school counselling practices. Facilitating spaces for critical reflection and dialogue allows young women to identify patterns, resist harmful stereotypes, and reshape societal expectations in meaningful ways. Such approaches move beyond individualised solutions, enabling collective agency and fostering resilience through shared understanding and collaborative learning.

Addressing Cultural Conditions and Possibilities

This thesis emerged in response to the urgent need to address the evolving socio-cultural conditions that shape the lives of young women attending elite schools. Social media has introduced new layers of influence, providing both constraints and possibilities. While it reinforces restrictive ideals of femininity – emphasising appearance, compliance, and heteronormativity – it also offers spaces for resistance, solidarity, and voice (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). For many young people, particularly those navigating elite school environments, this duality reflects the tensions of modern femininity. To be socially accepted often requires conforming to emphasised femininity that supports male-centred narratives and hierarchical peer structures; yet, social media also enables counter-narratives to emerge, providing opportunities for connection, visibility, and hope – even if not always in their offline lives.

Young women within high-decile schools, such as that in this study, experience both privileges and pressures. These schools often reflect the aspirational ideals of society, encouraging high achievement and limitless potential (McRobbie, 2015). While such environments foster ambition and success, they also sustain postfeminist myths that young women can ‘have it all’ – so long as they are resilient, attractive, and uncompromisingly capable. Yet this narrative ignores the emotional costs and gendered vulnerabilities many face, particularly as recent media reports highlight misogyny, sexual assault, and gendered violence within elite boys schools in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia (Gannon et al., 2024). This context underscores a double bind: young women are encouraged to excel and thrive while the broader cultural environment continues to normalise misogyny and sexual harm, forcing them to rise above systemic inequalities. They are praised for resilience while being subtly blamed for failing to overcome challenges imposed by

gendered hierarchies. Narratives of positivity and strength often deflect attention from the structural violence embedded within rape-supportive cultures, framing women's distress as personal weakness rather than systemic harm (Marecek & Gavey, 2013).

Challenging Harmful Normalisation

Adolescent sexual cultures further complicate these dynamics, particularly through the normalisation of coercion and sexual violence (Hill et al., 2023). Young women who appear less visibly distressed than society expects often find their experiences dismissed or invalidated. The absence of language to articulate feelings of unease, discomfort, or ambivalence about sexual encounters exacerbates this issue. For many, peer acceptance requires silence, perpetuating the internalisation of shame and disempowerment.

This research highlights how sex education gaps – particularly around female sexual desire and bodily knowledge – compound these challenges. Despite sex being hyper-visible in culture, the young women in this study reported knowing very little about their own bodies. Their understandings of sex were often other-oriented, focused on pleasing men and meeting expectations rather than exploring desire or pleasure (Allen, 2020).

Schools, which often frame education as holistic development, paradoxically operate as asexual spaces, failing to integrate discussions of sexuality and consent into broader teaching practices (Fine & McClelland, 2023). Health classes may briefly address these topics, but the lessons rarely translate into daily school life. Instead, schools reinforce the expectation that young women should remain ladylike, pure, and demure – qualities that ultimately silence their questions and restrict conversations about sex, relationships, and bodily autonomy.

Sexuality, Silence, and Pornography

The dissonance between silence and hyper-sexualisation leaves many young women disconnected from their bodies and uncertain about their desires. Within this gap, pornography has emerged as a dominant influence shaping youth culture and perceptions of sex and sexuality. Social media amplifies these dynamics, creating a revolving door of trends that shape language, actions, and peer hierarchies (Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

The pervasive presence of pornography offers young men sets of scripts for sexual performance, which continues to position women as passive, submissive, and available (Behun & Owens, 2019; Keene, 2019) For many young women, it creates pressure to conform to sexual scripts they neither desire nor enjoy, leading to internalised inadequacy when their experiences fail to match cultural ideals. Fear of slut-shaming and social exclusion often prevents them from speaking openly, deepening their isolation and disempowerment.

Yet, the study also highlighted opportunities for change. Through participatory dialogues, young women demonstrated a strong desire to understand themselves, speak up, and support each other. Their willingness to challenge norms, redefine consent, and create counter-narratives signals the transformative potential of peer-led discussions and safe spaces for learning.

Hope and Agency in Collective Action

Despite the restrictive pressures discussed, this research reveals hopeful possibilities. Young women's critical engagement in group settings enabled them to explore desires, confront silencing, and challenge sexual scripts that often left them feeling powerless. They expressed a desire for connection, not only to understand themselves better but to collectively resist harmful norms and

redefine relational dynamics. The findings suggest that schools, particularly those privileged with access to significant resources, are uniquely positioned to foster this agency through participatory approaches that centre young women's voices. These approaches provide scaffolding for collective critique and cultural change, demonstrating that meaningful shifts are possible when young people are supported to challenge systemic narratives and reclaim their autonomy.

Emphasis on Participant Voices

This research created significant opportunities for young women to engage in open, reflective conversations about sex, relationships, and their bodies – topics that had previously been difficult or even impossible for them to discuss. The participants consistently expressed a desire for safe, facilitated spaces where they could share experiences, validate feelings, and make sense of the expectations and pressures they faced. Many described these discussions as transformative, enabling them to rethink assumptions about themselves, their peers, and their relationships. The participants' reflections revealed a widespread silence around sexuality within their social circles – a silence that left them feeling isolated and uncertain about how to approach these topics (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). By breaking this silence, the workshops created connection and confidence, providing participants with the language and frameworks to articulate their experiences more clearly and critically.

A particularly noteworthy insight was the nuanced understanding of consent that emerged from these discussions. Many young women reflected on the social obligations they felt – to prioritise boys' feelings, avoid rejection, or protect friendships – and how these pressures often overshadowed their own desires. These gendered dynamics, while deeply embedded in peer relationships, became visible and open to critique through the group process (Jones et al., 2024).

By unpacking these tensions, participants gained greater clarity, confidence, and a sense of agency, which many described as freeing them from some of the anxieties and expectations they had previously internalised.

The research highlighted the transformative power of participatory methods and group work to amplify voices and challenge prevailing norms. Many participants reported a marked decrease in anxiety related to sexual pressures following these conversations. Further, they experienced a renewed sense of safety in their values, decisions, and relationships. As friends, they discovered solidarity in their shared experiences and found strength in recognising their similarities, rather than fearing differences. By directly centering participants' voices and lived realities, this study highlights the power of collective narratives to disrupt dominant discourses and reshape understanding. It underscores the value of facilitated spaces where young women can critique social norms, explore alternative perspectives, and envision possibilities for more equitable and authentic relationships.

Ongoing Work and Implications

As a school counsellor, this research has provided valuable insights and critical reflections, deepening my commitment to adopting a CPAR approach. My doctoral journey began many years ago in my own personal interests and undergraduate study, but finally took shape as a response to the stories shared in my counselling office, and has evolved into a transformative exploration of how participatory methods can empower young women and disrupt limiting narratives. This work reinforces my belief in the potential of CPAR as a model for practice and a framework for systemic change within schools.

The school environment, however, is fraught with challenges. Understaffed teams, critical mental health needs, and care and protection issues often dominate counselling spaces, leaving little time for group work. Concerns about confidentiality and safety can also make structured group discussions seem impractical. Yet, this research demonstrates the transformative potential of creating safe spaces for collective reflection and dialogue – even in resource-limited settings.

The group discussions in this study revealed the profound impact that shared conversations can have. While participants were never asked to disclose personal experiences, the general discussions generated outcomes akin to individual counselling sessions – including validation, normalisation, and a sense of being heard (Kogen, 2019). The group dynamic fostered a sense of solidarity and support which strengthened friendship groups and created ripples of influence beyond the workshops.

Many participants described how their friendships were transformed by these conversations – becoming safer, stronger, and more open. The impact of these changes extended beyond the individuals involved, influencing their peer networks and social dynamics more broadly. This finding underscores the potential for participatory group work to generate lasting change both at the individual level and within broader social systems.

This research highlights that schools – often constrained by time, resources, and institutional demands – can still create opportunities for meaningful engagement when they prioritise collective approaches (Steen et al., 2022). The findings suggest that small, structured group discussions can serve as accessible interventions to disrupt harmful norms, amplify student voices, and empower

young women to approach gendered challenges with greater confidence and agency (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2022).

Practical Strategies for Counsellors in Schools

This research highlights the critical role school counsellors can play in addressing the socio-cultural challenges young women face by embedding participatory group work into their practice. While individual counselling remains essential, group-based approaches provide a unique opportunity to facilitate conversations that support young women in exploring shared experiences, challenging restrictive norms, and developing collective strategies for resistance.

Group work fosters a sense of connection, allowing young women to see that their struggles are not isolated experiences, but shared realities shaped by broader cultural and social forces. These discussions help to disrupt internalised narratives, validate feelings, and strengthen solidarity, which are crucial elements for building confidence and agency.

To integrate group work effectively, school counsellors can:

- Embed sessions into health education programmes – using existing curriculum frameworks to provide structured, topic-specific discussions.
- Collaborate with cultural advisors or educators – drawing on expertise and community connections to ensure that discussions are inclusive and culturally responsive.
- Use structured frameworks to guide dialogue – offering tools for reflection, problem-solving, and narrative development, helping young women create counter-stories that challenge dominant norms.

While time constraints and confidentiality concerns remain challenges, this research demonstrates that participatory approaches can be adaptable and scalable to meet the needs of schools. They can be embedded into existing programmes or delivered as standalone workshops, ensuring they remain accessible even within resource-limited environments.

The findings suggest that such strategies can reduce feelings of isolation and equip young women with the skills and language needed to navigate gendered pressures and reshape social expectations. In this way, group-based methods offer a transformative addition to traditional counselling practices, positioning schools as key sites for change, resilience, and growth.

Bridging Research and Cultural Practice

During the time of my data collection, my research advisors were in the process of creating the *Ask Aunty Hilda* website. This initiative has now evolved into its third generation of Aunties, and I am honoured to remain an equal member of the group. While the young women in the group are the experts in adolescent experiences, my role often involves offering reflective questions and guiding their thinking to explore the origins of their ideas or belief systems. Each year, the group has consistently been composed not of close friends but of individuals united by a shared commitment to the cause. It has been fascinating to observe how these young women use the space to demonstrate leadership and provide guidance to their younger peers while embracing the learning and sharing that unfolds during the weekly meetings.

The impact of *Ask Aunty Hilda* was immediate and continues to have important effects. The principles of conscientisation and participatory action are clearly demonstrated through the initiative, as young women come together to share their concerns anonymously in a public forum.

This process transforms feelings of isolation and loneliness over issues related to sex, body image, or relationships into a sense of community, with other young people responding to these concerns. The students at the school have shown their deep engagement with the platform, expressing through their usage that they ‘believe’ in Aunty Hilda. Although they are fully aware she is a construct, they choose to see her as a caring and compassionate figure who listens and provides support. This belief highlights the immense power and potential of *Ask Aunty Hilda* as both a resource and a symbol of care and connection.

The Aunties, who meet weekly, have a poster on the table to guide them in answering the questions submitted to *Ask Aunty Hilda* (see Appendix D). Initially, new Aunties often respond with direct advice, such as ‘leave him’ or ‘don’t be with someone who doesn’t respect you’. While well-meaning, these responses do not address the underlying needs of the person seeking help. Over time, the Aunties have learned to adopt a more thoughtful and supportive approach, following a structured framework that I use when talking with parents and teachers about engaging with young people: 1) Acknowledge, 2) Empathise, 3) Normalise, 4) Offer Support, and 5) Collaborate.

This process has strengthened their ability to provide meaningful responses and enhanced their capacity to reflect on and address challenges in their own lives. By developing skills in active listening and empathetic communication, these young women are equipped to make a tangible difference in the lives of others while gaining a deeper understanding of their own experiences. This upskilling highlights the potential for young people to support one another in impactful ways, fostering a sense of agency and connectedness.

In addition, the *Ask Aunty Hilda* initiative underscores the limitations of traditional one-on-one counselling when dealing with socio-cultural issues. While individual counselling is undoubtedly valuable, it often remains confined to the individual without extending its impact into broader social justice or social change initiatives. In contrast, group-based, counsellor-facilitated participatory work creates ripple effects that extend outward, enabling collective growth and action (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). Additionally, equipping young people with tools to listen and validate others has had a reciprocal effect, helping them to reframe and better understand their own problems, with one young Aunty commenting and the others agreeing:

I've learned to acknowledge my own feelings first when I'm struggling now too. Like not be so hard on myself. Attend to how I'm feeling, then come to the how I'm going to solve it part a bit later.

Whole-school approaches to sexual violence prevention are increasingly recognised as effective strategies. However, as demonstrated by the dismantling of the Mates and Dates programme due to its one-size-fits-all approach, a more nuanced, context-specific strategy is essential. One of the most unexpected and revealing insights from my research was that every participant reported never having the opportunity to discuss sex or their experiences as young women navigating a highly sexualised social context. While I anticipated some constraints on the cultural resources available to them, I had not expected the extent to which their own conversations about these topics were limited and inhibited. This silence extended to their friend groups, which often lacked spaces for meaningful, reflective discussions about sex (Howard Valdivia et al., 2023).

Within health classes, many students expressed feeling unable to ask questions or share their thoughts due to fear of social repercussions. Additionally, the content and timing of these classes

were frequently described as inadequate. In contrast, the workshops provided a unique space where participants felt seen and heard, fostering a sense of validation and connection. The most frequent feedback from participants was, ‘Everyone should get to do this’; highlighting the value and impact of these opportunities for open dialogue and critical reflection.

As a result of the data collection process, the *Ask Aunty Hilda* website was conceived and established by the cultural advisors involved in my research. This initiative was directly inspired by their belief in the power of dialogue and shared experiences as catalysts for social change. The goal began to materialise when the Year 13 cohort collectively reflected on shared sexual assault experiences that were brought into their awareness. Their response was to write letters and invite local boys’ schools to collaborate on strategies to minimise harm, enhance education, and promote greater social understanding.

This idea was motivated by their hope to foster meaningful change – for themselves, the young women in the years below them, and across the broader community. Their efforts represent a commitment to creating a safer, more informed environment for all young people. This project, now entering its third year, continues to evolve and is poised to expand by including other schools and exploring new models of practice.

Strengths and Contributions of the Study

This research was conducted within a socially-economic advantaged school in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand – a context that offered a distinct vantage point from which to explore the gendered social and sexual expectations shaping young women’s lives. While the findings are grounded in a specific cultural and educational setting, the insights they offer speak to broader

structural patterns, particularly those connected to silence, privilege, and the regulation of femininity. Rather than limiting the research, this contextual specificity strengthens its contribution by revealing how normative discourses are negotiated in particular locations, offering a detailed map that others might build on in diverse settings.

My dual positioning – as a researcher working in one school and collecting data in another – provided both the necessary ethical distance and the relational insight to support deep and meaningful engagement. Rather than introducing bias, this positioning enabled reflexive, dialogic inquiry grounded in trust and cultural responsiveness. My ongoing work as a school-based counsellor sharpened my attentiveness to the stakes of the issues being explored and enhanced the ethical sensitivity with which I approached the research.

The collaborative relationships formed with cultural advisors during the data collection phase became a powerful catalyst for wider change. Together, we developed *Ask Aunty Hilda*, a platform that invited young people to anonymously raise questions about sexuality, relationships, and identity. The conversations that emerged from this initiative sparked further dialogue within my own school setting, culminating in a series of anonymous letters written by Year 13 students. These letters invited local boys' schools to engage in a community conversation about gender, consent, and education, and, ultimately, led to the formation of a Community of Practice among school leaders. While these initiatives were not part of the formal research design, they represent a valuable extension of its participatory and activist intent.

The research began with a desire to understand and create change through a sociocultural lens, foregrounding the everyday realities of young women's lives. Even as it illuminated the enduring

force of gendered norms, it also traced moments of reimagining and resistance. Like an invisible fault line capable of reshaping landscapes, this work demonstrates the quiet potential of dialogue and collective reflection to disrupt entrenched structures.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of sustained, collective efforts to enact social change. Addressing the embedded hierarchies of gender, race, and class requires institutional shifts and personal and cultural transformation. Teachers, parents, and other key adults must be willing to do their own reflective work, bridging gaps in their understanding and co-creating spaces of possibility with young people (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022). This study highlights how education, when grounded in dialogue and relational practice, can become a site of hope, criticality, and transformation.

Limitations

While this study highlights the potential of participatory approaches, there are methodological limitations. The power dynamics inherent in group settings may have influenced participants' contributions. Despite efforts to foster egalitarian environments, subtle pressures to align with perceived expectations of what they thought I, the researcher was hoping to hear from them may have shaped responses - for example, whether they thought they should perform "appropriate" versions of their sexuality discussions, or embellish things for my research 'benefit' (Allen, 2008; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). However, this limitation also reflects the realities of adolescent social contexts, offering valuable insights into how such pressures operate and how they can be challenged.

The process of conscientisation, while a strength, also carries risks of ‘groupthink’. Group dynamics, including internal hierarchies and social desirability, may have unintentionally shaped collective narratives that obscured individual perspectives. While the use of self-selected groups mitigated this risk, further research could explore how to balance cohesion and diversity more effectively.

Looking Forward

Rather than viewing these limitations as constraints, this research frames them as opportunities for growth. The findings point to future directions that can build on the strengths of participatory action research while addressing its challenges. For example, further studies could examine how group work strategies might be adapted for different school environments, or how educator training programmes could better prepare staff to facilitate conversations about gender and sexuality.

While this thesis represents a starting point, it also demonstrates the scalability and adaptability of participatory methods. By embedding reflection, dialogue, and collaboration into school practices, access to the kinds of transformative spaces that enable young women to critically engage with and reshape their worlds can be broadened.

Future Research Directions

This study highlights several critical areas that warrant further exploration regarding young women’s experiences of sexuality, relationships, and gender expectations. The findings reveal both ongoing challenges and opportunities to build on the strengths identified within participatory approaches. In particular, further investigation is needed into educational strategies, school

cultures, and peer dynamics that shape young women's socio-sexual development and how these factors might be reimagined to create more inclusive and empowering environments.

Engaging Young Men and Promoting Mutual Understanding

While this study focused on young women, it became clear that young men play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining the cultural scripts around sexuality and gender. Interestingly, the participants did not see young men as the sole source of these challenges, (nor as the cure), but they expressed frustration at the lack of education and awareness among their male peers. This highlights an urgent need to explore collaborative, gender-inclusive approaches that foster mutual respect and shared responsibility for shaping healthier narratives.

Future research could examine how educational programmes involving people of all genders might build empathy and understanding. Studies focusing on peer-to-peer learning models or dialogue-based interventions may provide insights into reducing gendered hierarchies and misconceptions about consent and pleasure. Such approaches could also investigate the potential for group-based discussions to bridge gaps between male and female experiences, challenging the dominance of heteronormative narratives.

Supporting Female Body Autonomy and Awareness

This study reinforced the importance of addressing body autonomy, sexual agency, and self-awareness among young women. Many participants expressed uncertainty about their own desires and bodily knowledge, often shaped by pornified expectations and gendered assumptions about sexuality. Future research should focus on how small-group learning environments can provide

opportunities for critical reflection and peer support, enabling young women to assert value and confidence in their sexuality.

Studies could also examine how sexual citizenship frameworks – which prioritise knowledge about anatomy, consent, and pleasure – might be integrated into school curricula. Such approaches have the potential to disrupt harmful narratives and create new possibilities for expression and connection within adolescent peer groups. Longitudinal studies may further assess whether these interventions lead to lasting changes in attitudes and behaviours.

Building on Participatory Approaches

The findings highlight the transformative potential of participatory action research in addressing socio-cultural issues. Future research could investigate how methods like those used in this study – particularly peer-led discussions and collaborative storytelling – might be expanded into whole-school approaches. Studies exploring the scalability of these interventions, including how they integrate with existing health education and pastoral care systems, would offer insights into their broader applicability.

There is also value in exploring how online platforms, such as the *Ask Aunty Hilda* initiative, can complement face-to-face interactions. Research could investigate how digital spaces might provide continuity of support, reaching young people who may feel uncomfortable or excluded in traditional classroom settings.

Addressing Social Media and Pornography Influences

Given the recurring themes of pornography, social media, and digital culture throughout this thesis, future research should delve deeper into these influences. Studies could examine how media

literacy programmes equip young people with tools to critically engage with and deconstruct harmful representations of gender and sexuality. Additionally, research might investigate how online environments act as both sources of harm and spaces of resistance, shaping young people's ability to negotiate agency and affirm identity.

Long-Term Impacts and Sustainable Change

While this study provided a snapshot of young women's experiences at a particular moment, further research could assess the long-term impact of participatory approaches. Longitudinal studies could track how group-based discussions influence self-perception, peer relationships, and sexual decision-making over time. Such studies might also explore how these conversations ripple outward, influencing wider cultural shifts in attitudes and behaviours.

Finally, research into policy and curriculum design could provide valuable insights into creating systemic change. This includes investigating how comprehensive sexuality education can be implemented as a human right, ensuring that young people have access to accurate information and supportive environments that prioritise their well-being and agency. The potential impact of these changes is immense. Even small but deliberate adjustments within school-wide approaches to sexuality and gender education have already proven to yield considerable benefits. Building on this foundation, future research should continue to explore scalable models and collaborative strategies to ensure lasting, transformative change in the lives of young people.

The Need for School-Wide Approaches

Investigating the micro-cultures within socio-economically advantaged schools would provide valuable insights into how institutional privilege intersects with gender norms and expectations. Further exploration of partnerships between elite girls' and boys' schools could reveal new

pathways for addressing these systemic issues collaboratively, creating opportunities to develop shared understandings and strategies that disrupt entrenched inequalities. Future research should examine the impact of comprehensive, school-wide programmes on aspects of sexuality and femininity. Evidence from this study suggests that these approaches – when implemented thoughtfully – can lead to small but significant shifts in student attitudes and understanding. More research specifically on high-decile schools is needed, particularly given the significant number of media reports highlighting sexism and misogyny in elite boys schools in both Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

Involving Parents and Educators

Staff and parents play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. However, significant gaps persist in their understanding of gender and sexuality education, and these gaps inevitably influence students' experiences (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016). Schools often prioritise traditional achievement metrics and reinforce gender stereotypes in their pursuit of funding and reputation, sidelining the need for inclusive, reflective approaches to gender and sexuality education. Research that examines parental and staff perspectives on these issues could uncover barriers and inform strategies to improve support within the school community. Future studies should also investigate how professional development programmes for educators and targeted workshops for parents can increase their confidence and competence in addressing these topics effectively. Importantly, research should address how to overcome institutional resistance to gender and sexuality education by aligning school practices with the needs of students rather than the fears of adults. This approach must centre young people's voices and experiences, recognising their desire for accurate, inclusive information that reflects the realities they face.

Reframing Sex Education as a Human Right

Fundamentally, gender and sexuality education should be regarded as a basic human right. Research must explore how to establish sexual bodily knowledge and sexual citizenship education as essential components of schooling – expectations that parents and communities must demand rather than resist. Overcoming political fearmongering and cultural anxieties requires a commitment to aligning educational practices with student needs. Too often, young people’s educational experiences are shaped by the fears and discomforts of adults, rather than being grounded in evidence about what is most beneficial for students (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016). Future research should aim to investigate and dismantle these barriers, shifting the focus to inclusive and evidence-based approaches that prioritise students’ well-being.

Collaborative research could engage students, parents, and educators in designing inclusive, rights-based sexuality education frameworks. Such approaches could offer young people opportunities to develop a deeper sense of bodily autonomy, relational awareness, and critical engagement with gendered expectations. Aligning educational policies with the lived realities of young people would ensure their needs are prioritised over societal discomfort, paving the way for more equitable and reflective practices in schools.

Conclusion

I began this doctoral research with a desire to create opportunities for meaningful change for young women navigating heterosexual environments. A frequent lack of bodily awareness and agency, combined with socio-cultural norms that privilege male dominance – particularly through social media and pornography – emerged as critical areas requiring attention. Central to this work was

amplifying the voices of young women and focusing on their experiences, understandings, and the ways they envision solutions and acts of resistance.

Using a CPAR approach, this study highlighted the transformative potential of counsellor-facilitated group work in schools – a practice that remains uncommon. The insights gathered from participatory group discussions (Chapters 5 and 6), grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, revealed how young women actively challenge and reshape societal expectations. In addressing the core question of how they collectively experience and transform contemporary norms of heterosexual femininity, the research demonstrates the value of participatory group work as a framework for counselling practices that move beyond individualised support to address broader socio-cultural conditions.

The literature review (Chapter 2) established the need for alternative approaches to addressing the socio-cultural issues affecting young women. It examined how patriarchal norms, heteronormative expectations, and postfeminist discourses shape social structures and institutional spaces, contributing to constraints on young women's autonomy and agency.

A recurring theme throughout this research was the profound lack of bodily knowledge and sexual awareness among participants. This became particularly apparent during the group discussions, the *Ask Aunty Hilda* initiative, and classroom health sessions on anatomy and sex. Many participants expressed discomfort or even disgust toward their own bodies, reflecting a belief that their anatomy was something to be hidden or disconnected from. Alongside this discomfort, they also articulated the gendered expectations that positioned sexual behaviours as the responsibility of women – even as they described the peer pressure and social coercion exerted by male peers.

This tension between personal desires and external expectations highlighted the complexity of navigating relationships and sexuality within a cultural framework that normalises male entitlement. Influences such as social media and pornography further compounded these pressures, reinforcing narrow ideals about women's bodies and behaviours and making it difficult for participants to distinguish between internal desire and externally imposed norms.

The research also demonstrated how conscientisation – the process of becoming aware of and critically analysing systemic influences – emerged among participants. Through participatory feminist methodologies, young women were supported to confront and reshape restrictive norms. The power of problem-posing and social critique, fostered in a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental space, revealed what can be achieved when these conversations are moved outside of peer group hierarchies and into reflective, dialogic spaces. In this setting, young women became cultural observers and commentators, developing the capacity to recognise conditions of possibility and to imagine change – whether through subtle acts of defiance or broader cultural challenges.

Overall, this study demonstrates that young women both need and want opportunities to discuss their bodies, relationships, social expectations, and sexuality. Their previous inability to do so – rooted in fears of slut-shaming, judgment, or 'getting it wrong' – was compounded by a lack of bodily awareness and gendered socialisation. Yet, even while expressing this discomfort, participants articulated frustration with the rules they were expected to follow, and sought ways to resist, question, and rewrite them. While this research highlights the challenges young women face, it also signals the potential for change within school environments, particularly through counsellor-led group discussions that centre dialogue, solidarity, and critical reflection. These

findings reinforce the need for whole-school approaches that address gendered norms and create spaces where young women can build confidence, self-awareness, and the capacity to act with agency.

I hope that the findings of this research inspire greater opportunities for young women to critically engage with and transform their world, challenging the constraints of a society that has historically benefited from their silence. This study advocates for an ongoing commitment to dialogue, collective action, and education – laying the groundwork for inclusive and equitable environments where young women are not only heard, but supported in reshaping the cultural conditions that have long worked against them.

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Appendices

Appendix A Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

13/9/2020

Project Title Discovering, Discussing and Developing the Socio-Cultural Impacts on Young Women's Heterosexual Experiences

An Invitation

Hi, my name is Marcelle Nader-Turner. I am a counsellor at another girl's school in Dunedin and I'm really interested in finding out more about young heterosexual women and what it's like in 2022 trying to navigate that space. I am doing this research for the Doctor of Health Science qualification and would really love your valuable insights! You can choose to participate or not and if you do participate, you can change your mind at any time without giving a reason.

What is the purpose of this research?

I'd like to find out more about what it's like to be a young heterosexual woman in 2022. What are the factors that influence what is expected of you as a young woman and what are the ways that this shapes your or other young women's behaviour? Being able to discuss these things and think about alternative ways of being and shining a light on some of the issues that are problematic and thinking of ways to change them is part of the purpose of this research.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

If you are 18 as of the 31st of April and identify as female, you are invited to participate. You do not have to be heterosexual and you do not have to be, or have been, sexually active to participate.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you would like to participate, please email me at marcellent88@gmail.com. There is a consent form you will need to fill out, along with a short questionnaire. These will be sent to you once you email me your interest to participate.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

This research will take place in workshop groups of four or five, where we will discuss all the things relevant to young heterosexual women's experiences. As a participant, prior to the workshops, you will have the opportunity to fill out a form or talk to me about anything that may be of concern for you personally regarding this topic. This is so that you can share anything in a confidential manner about things that may be difficult for you or anything that has happened to you that you would like to acknowledge before beginning in the group space.

After the initial meeting, all the participants will work in small groups to discuss their observations of life as a young heterosexual woman and what this means for you all— what do you notice about the expectations put on you and other young women and how are these expectations managed and controlled?

Audio recording of the discussions and brainstorming, and, art-based activities will be gathered to be analysed.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Because we'll be talking about a variety of things relating to sex, there might be some aspects of what is discussed which are uncomfortable for you. It's really important that you know can talk to me at any time during or after the

session, or talk to your school counsellor, who is aware of what we are talking about. It's important to remember though, that at no time are you expected to share anything personal, but rather share your thoughts on the general social situation.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If you would like to talk to someone, you can contact your school counsellor, who knows about our project.

If you would prefer to speak with someone else, there are helpline numbers you can access:

Need to talk? Free call or text [1737](tel:1737) any time for support from a trained counsellor.

[Lifeline](tel:0800543354) – 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP).

[Youthline](tel:0800376633) – 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz or online chat.

thelowdown.co.nz – or email team@thelowdown.co.nz or free text 5626.

[What's Up](tel:08009428787) – 0800 942 8787 (for 5–18 year olds). Phone counselling is available Monday to Friday, 12noon–11pm and weekends, 3pm–11pm. Online chat is available from 3pm–10pm 7 days a week, including all public holidays.

What are the benefits?

There has been a lot in the media recently about the way that young women are treated by young men at times and how they feel about this. Being able to share, listen and find new ways of doing things is a very valuable thing to be able to do for ourselves and each other. For me personally, it is something I feel passionate about and I would like to assist young women to find a way to shape their own experiences. This project is also part of what I need to complete for my Doctorate.

How will my privacy be protected?

Everything that is talked about with me or in the group is confidential (although I can't control what other people might say or do, I do ask everyone to maintain strict confidentiality). All the data I gather will be used in my written work, however, there will be no way that anyone will be identifiable and all names will be changed.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

This project does not cost you anything, however, it will take up six hours of your time over the year.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have a month to consider the invitation before you need to sign up and during this time you are welcome to discuss as many questions or concerns you may have.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You will be fully informed throughout the process – I will share it with you as we go and ask for your comments. At the end, you will receive a summary of the research project, with access to all of it should you be interested.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Gareth Terry gareth.terry@aut.ac.nz 0800288 864 (7366)

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows: marcellent88@gmail.com

Researcher Contact Details:

Marcelle Nader-Turner marcellent88@gmail.com

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Gareth Terry gareth.terry@aut.ac.nz 0800288 864 (7366)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEK Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix B: Consent and Permission Forms



Consent Form

For use when focus groups are involved.

Project title: Discovering, Discussing and Developing the Socio-Cultural Impacts on Young Women’s Heterosexual Experiences

Project Supervisor: Gareth Terry (gareth.terry@aut.ac.nz)

Researcher: Marcelle Nader-Turner (marcellent88@gmail.com)

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 10/02/2022
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I understand that when I am asked to share things from my own social media feed, I will have time to choose what I would like to share and I am aware I am not obliged to share if I choose not to.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant’s signature:

Participant’s name:

Participant’s Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date on which the final approval was granted* AUTEK Reference number *type the AUTEK reference number*

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.



Permission for researchers to access organisation school staff / students.

For use when permission is being sought from the head of an organisation to undertake research within the organisation or with the organisation's people.

Project title: Discovering, Discussing and Developing the Socio-Cultural Impacts on Young Women's Heterosexual Experiences

Project Supervisor: Gareth Terry (gareth.terry@aut.ac.nz)

Researcher: Marcelle Nader-Turner (marcellent88@gmail.com)

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 30/09/2021
- I give permission for the researcher to undertake research within _____
- I give permission for the researcher to access the staff / students / employees of _____

Principal's CEO's signature:

Principal's CEO's name:

Principal's CEO's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date on which the final approval was granted* AUTEK Reference number *type the AUTEK reference number*

Note: The head of the organisation should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix C: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement



Disrupting the discursive scaffolding of pornified sex

TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

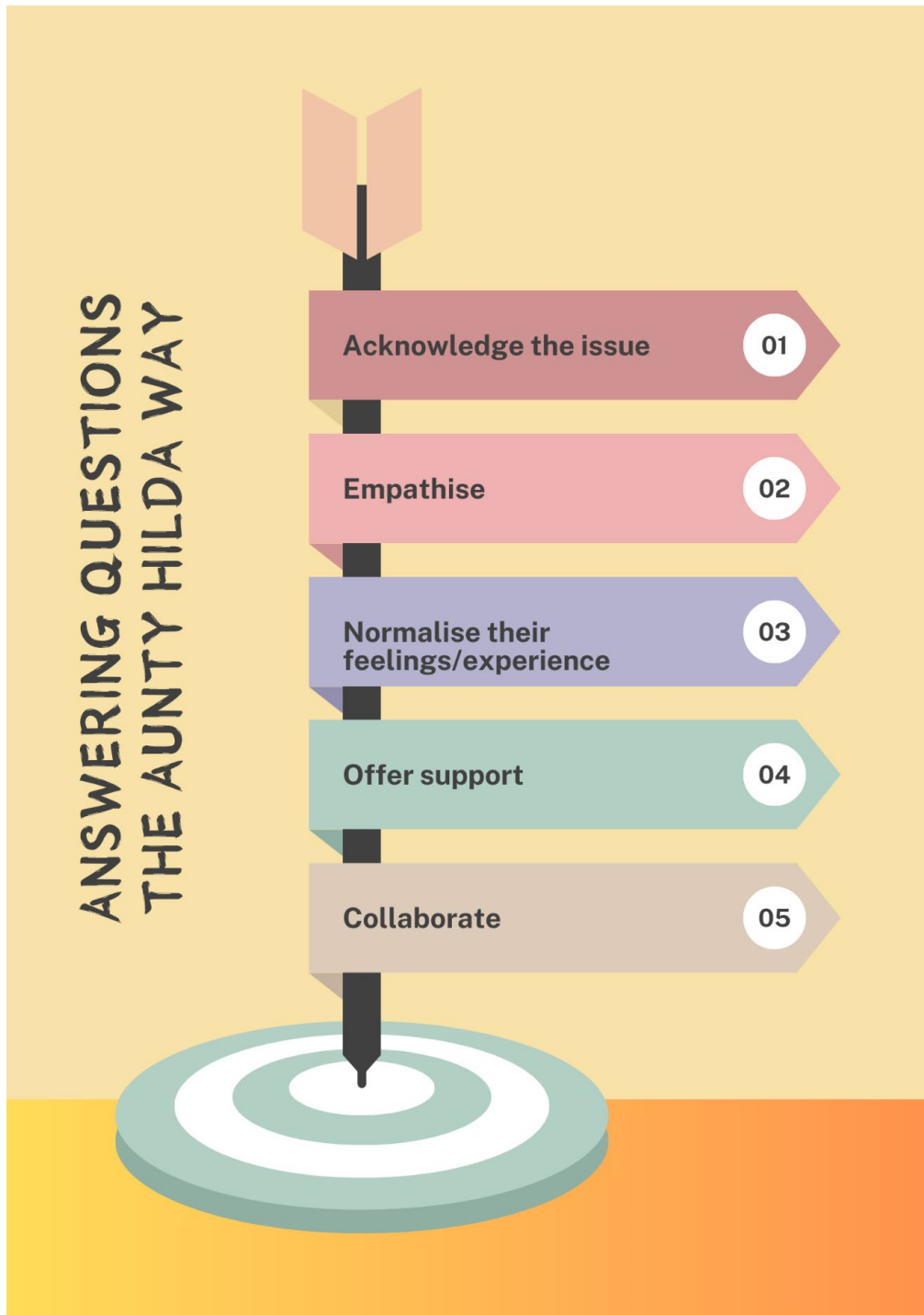
I Rosanna Moss (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

Signature: *Rosanna Moss* Date: 2022/09/23

Appendix D: Ask Aunty Hilda – Guiding Questions Poster



Appendix E: Ethics Approval AUTECH

8 February 2022

Gareth Terry
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Gareth

Re Ethics Application: 21/356 Discovering, Discussing and Developing the Socio-Cultural Impacts on Young Women's Heterosexual Experiences

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 8 February 2025.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: naderturnercounselling@gmail.com; emma.green@aut.ac.nz