



Peer Think - Tools and Ressources for an intersectionl prevention of peer violence  
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Keynote by Angela Mc Robbie

### **YOUNG PEOPLE, GENDER AND ‘RESPECT’: The Need for Mediation.**

In the last 5-10 years I became increasingly aware that there were very specific changes happening in regard to gender , culture, young people. This period coincided with New Labour government in the UK and of course the Bush years in the US.

There was a double movement, it seemed as though girls had now gained equality, feminism had to a point been successful, feminism was even taken into account, girls were doing well, men were getting used to female equality, certain rights had been won, in the workplace, in school, in marriage and intimacy, (against domestic violence, against sex discrimination) and yet at the same time, the idea of a renewed or revived feminism was discouraged, it was out of date, no longer needed, belonging to the past, indeed it was often repudiated, associated with crude stereotypes of anti-men angry 70s feminists, it was disavowed, old fashioned so that to count as a girl or young woman today to be intelligible, it was becoming necessary to disconnect from feminism or dis-identify, such that femininity itself meant ‘not being a feminist’, and likewise certain topics began to become taboo again, particularly the ‘critique of patriarchy’ the battle with men...too old fashioned, the challenging and critical interrogation of masculinity, that too was somehow unacceptable, it became unspeakable.

I argued that this subtle process, a kind of complexification of backlash also represented an enforced de-politicisation, girls and young women now had their interests looked after by government, they had no further need to bother about sexual politics like their mothers had to do, they were being told they just had to work hard at school and then in employment, and then earning their own living they could buy into the consumer culture, indeed begin to embody the new idea of consumer citizenship.

A new kind of active equal passification! Young women were now understood to be active, endowed with capacity, and this kind of space of attention took the form of a new sexual contract to young women, access to education, participation in the labour market, sexual freedom, ie to enjoy an active sexual identity without being tied to marriage and motherhood, but all at the expense of women as a socio-political category. Anger had to be sublimated, it was now again unfeminine. I argued that there was a convergence of popular culture and political culture to manage this sexual contract, in a nutshell Tony Blair was quoted so often as despising the f word, his new labour government shut down the Womens Unit, and then the Equal Opportunities Commission. Women MPs became quiet during his term in office, and his office was known to be hostile to feminism, as part of the old, left past. At the same time in popular culture there was a shift such that through irony and humour, feminism was taken into account but only then to be also disparaged or mocked. Sometimes this was quite gentle as in Bridget Jones with her endearing search 'once again' for a husband, but elsewhere it was more aggressive and sustained, for example through notions of 'cool', through the proliferation of lap dancing clubs, through wedding culture, big engagement rings again, and the expectation that women after work either join their male colleagues, or go home and 'miss out' on the important networking with clients. This was a subtle way in which gender hierarchy was re established in work and employment. The genre of the lads mags for boys ...FHM Loaded Nuts, saw again 'sexism without apology', and with some sense of relief, thank goodness those feminist days are gone and now we can return to masculinity without critique, since women anyway can nowadays choose, they do not have to join in, they are empowered anyway and they are able to make a decision for themselves. If they want to pose as pin ups for our mags they can, but no one is forcing them. In addition to this masculine popular culture along with its counterparts in political culture were responding to a backlash that said men had been deprived by feminism of their opportunities to succeed, that there had been a feminisation of culture, that girls got all the chances, that masculinity had been disempowered as young women were empowered. With ideas like this finding a good deal of space in the common sense of the quality press and TV, and with research increasingly emphasising male under-performance, it was all the easier to take the next step which was to put these facts together and argue that feminism was indeed to blame, it had gone too far, and now was the time to reclaim masculinity. This is what I mean by 'feminism undone' ...it is

sort of unstitched, disavowed, made to seem at best irrelevant and at worst anti-social and emasculating.

Two or three more points of introduction: I argue that this shift gives way or produces a new form of gender power, not re-traditionalisation, but something new, a kind of post feminist conservative re-stabilisation of gender norms, and the role of this new gender power was to re instate sexual/ gender hierarchies but in very subtle and complex ways, and through this language of choice, empowerment, individualisation, and even freedom. Let me summarise how this operates for girls and young women. There is a profound and determined attempt to re-shape notions of womanhood so that they fit with new or emerging (neo-liberalised) social and economic arrangements.

The attribution of freedom and success to young women takes different forms across the boundaries of class, ethnicity and sexuality, however, producing a range of configurations of youthful femininity, entangled in many different ways with race and class. Once assumed to be headed towards marriage, motherhood and limited economic participation, the girl is now endowed with economic capacity. Young, increasingly well-educated women, of different ethnic and social backgrounds, now find themselves charged with the requirement that they perform as economically active female citizens. They are invited to recognise themselves as privileged subjects of social change. The pleasing, lively, capable and becoming young woman, black, white or Asian, is now an attractive harbinger of social change.

I consider this new standing of young women through four key configurations, the fashion and beauty complex produces a post-feminist 'masquerade'. The second is education and employment, within which is found the figure of the working girl. The third figure emerges from within the hyper-visible space of sexuality, fertility and reproduction – the phallic girl. Fourthly, through the production of commercial femininities, there emerges the figure of the global girl in the developing world.

### **Shining in the light: the post-feminist masquerade**

The 'luminosities' (Deleuze) directed to young women an update of Foucault's panopticon are suggestive of post-feminist equality, they are clouds of light that give young women a shimmering theatrical presence, but in so doing mark out the terrain

of the consummately and reassuringly feminine. We can also perceive new dynamics of aggression, violence and self-punishment. Power now is handed over to the fashion and beauty complex, where – as a ‘grand luminosity’ – a post-feminist ‘masquerade’ emerges as a new cultural dominant.<sup>5</sup> The post-feminist masquerade secures, once again, the existence of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony. The hyper-femininity of the masquerade, spindly stilettos and ‘pencil’ skirts, for example – does not in fact mean entrapment (as feminists would once have seen it): it is now a matter of choice rather than obligation. The woman in masquerade is making the point that this is a freely chosen look. It comprises a re-ordering of femininity so that old-fashioned styles (rules about hats, bags, shoes, etc), which signal submission to some invisible authority, or to an opaque set of instructions, are re-instated (e.g., Bridget Jones’s short skirt and flirty presence in the workplace and her ‘oh silly me’ self-reprimands). The post-feminist masquerade comes to the young women’s rescue, a throwback from the past, and she adopts this style (for example assuming the air of being ‘foolish and bewildered’) in order to help her navigate the terrain of hegemonic masculinity without jeopardising her sexual identity. She fears being seen as aggressive or anti male or a competitor so she adopts the air of being girlishly distracted, weighed down with bags, bracelets and other decorative items, all of which need to be constantly attended to.

### **The Working Girl /Working Mother**

Young women are ranked according to their ability to gain qualifications that provide them with an identity as female subjects of capacity. (They can become obsessed with grades.) The young woman comes forward as someone able to transcend the barriers of sex, race and class. She will step forward as an exemplary black or Asian young woman on the basis of her enthusiasm for learning, taste for hard work, and desire to pursue material reward. Meanwhile young women under-achievers, and those who do not have the requisite degrees of motivation and ambition to improve themselves, become more emphatically condemned than would have been the case in the past for their lack of status, and other failings.

There is, however, a decisive shift in the transition to work for young women, as their movement forward finds itself coming up against the idea of social compromise: the new sexual contract operates in the workplace to set limits on patterns of participation

and gender equality. This is particularly the case for women who are also mothers, and who are repositioned in the labour market on return to work after the birth of children.<sup>11</sup> For these women there is an implicit abandonment of any critique of masculine hegemony, in favour of compromise. Young working mothers, it appears, draw back from entertaining any idea of debate on inequality in the household, instead finding ways, with help from government, to manage their dual responsibility. As with the post-feminist masquerade, this is a strategy of undoing, a re-configuring of normative femininity, this time incorporating motherhood so as to accommodate with masculine hegemony. This social compromise is a further process of gender re-stabilisation.

### **Phallic girls: who are they?**

. A 'pretence' of equality permits spectacles of aggression and unfeminine behaviour on the part of young women, without apparently invoking the usual kinds of punishment. The phallic girl gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts. But in this adoption of the phallus, there is no critique of masculine hegemony, no radical re-arrangement of gender hierarchy.

The ladette is a young woman for whom the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures are encouraged and celebrated. Sex is light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status. Luminosity falls upon the girl who adopts the habits of masculinity – heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, getting arrested by the police, consuming pornography, enjoying lap-dancing clubs – without relinquishing her own desirability to men; indeed such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability within the visual economy of heterosexuality.

Female phallicism is a more assertive alternative to masquerade. The apparently taboo-breaking phallic girl emerges as a challenge not only to the feminist but also to the lesbian. Consumer culture, the tabloid press, girls', women's and lads' magazines, as well as downmarket television, all encourage young women, as though in the name of sexual equality, to overturn the old double standard and emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men. And this assumption of

phallicism also provides new dimensions of moral panic, titillation and voyeuristic excitement.

But her unfeminine behaviour permits the re-visiting of debates on sexual violence and rape – for example if the girl in question has drunk so much she has no idea exactly what has happened, or if she has agreed to have sex with a number of men but has not expected to be treated with violence. By endorsing norms of male conduct in the field of sexuality she removes any obligation on the part of men to reflect critically on the questions of lap dancing clubs or the new sex entertainment. Indeed such discussion becomes again taboo.

### **Now Boys**

Now I turn attention to questions of boys, masculinity, and the more heightened or accentuated enactments of masculinity which are at the forefront of everyday life and popular culture in the last two decades. I am interested in why it seems to have become taboo or socially unacceptable to critique masculinity in its aggressive mode, or to challenge manifestations of its dominance across the social field. I suggest that one immediate reason is that there has been a demonization of feminism which has cast feminism incorrectly as an anti-men, out of date, an angry bitter women's movement from the late 70s. This danger, of being taken as a feminist, acts as a repellent especially for young women today, so that there is no collective or political voice for calling young men to account, instead there is even encouragement to re-appropriate masculinity once again, as though it has been stolen away from them. Instead what might rightly belong to the world of sexual politics (in this case let us say conflictual and unequal relations between young men and young women) is de-politicised, often normalised and individualised, becoming 'incidents' only when an especially violent event takes place, such as two high profile rape cases. Consumer culture's focus on sexuality has contributed to the re-stabilisation of gender norms in recent years. In the UK we can see this played out in the aggressive success of 'lads mags', with their ubiquitous hot lesbian scenes, in the mainstreaming of pornography, and in the requirement that girls and young women withhold critique or are silent if they want to count as girls. There is a sense in which this lads culture is actively

provocative, as though saying to the girls OK if you want our approval prove that you are not one of those feminists!...

Let us now consider what the impact neo-liberal values have on boys and young men. Schools and leisure spaces have been the key sites for the transmission, acquisition, and enactment of properly heterosexual identities. But in recent years it has struck me that even though I am not an educationist, schools and youth spaces have become more cruel environments than before. Soft liberal or leftist vocabularies have been marginalised, deemed out of date, absurd, and the symbolic violence of hyper-competitive neo-liberalism has replaced vocabularies of caring, of compassion, of community, of treating everyone as an equal, of empathy for the less fortunate and so on. Instead there has been an enormous increase in bullying and aggression, along with admiration only for those who can emulate the wealth and status of celebrities and stars from popular culture. In the next few minutes I am going to provide a critical overview of the recent work by Ann Phoenix from the IOE in London who has carried out extensive empirical work on boys which parallels some of the existing work already referred to in regard to young women. However it should also be pointed out that there is now a vast body of literature on boys and school under-performance which as Phoenix points out can be summed up in the 'anti swot culture that particularly affects boys and is evident from early children's school careers' (Phoenix 2003).

Arguing that schools are social places as well as learning environments Phoenix she shows how boys have to negotiate between a demand for hard masculinity which values aggression and confrontation, and the values of the school. The boys define and enact masculinity as toughness style and sport ability against the requirements of study. 'Being good at sport, being good at cussing people'. To be popular as a boy means getting into trouble. Working hard means risking being bullied. (I would add that this pervasive anti-intellectualism is one of the powerful ways in which this macho-neo-liberal value system inserts itself into the culture of poor and marginalised young people, tapping into certain populist and defensive working-class elements which are re-coded and brought up to date, see Willis 1987). So you have to be bad to be good or to win as a boy. In her interviews carried out by Phoenix and her colleagues it was clear that masculinity 'entailed being popular by not working'.

Phoenix also shows how racialisation processes wind their way through these negotiations of masculinity. UK African-Caribbean boys have become associated with notions of super or hyper masculinity (the inflation effect of the racial stereotype). These processes mean that there are already in place assumptions about young black males, they are feared and excluded from school but also respected and admired for their styles and bravado. They exhibit great masculinity and resistance to teachers. Of course this rebounds on black males themselves as it becomes an assumption, a stereotype and an expectation. At the same time these same 'cool' characteristics are recognised historically as being ways of self defending psychologically in the face of embedded racial discrimination. So there is a small space of power through exhibiting 'properly masculine' characteristics which appears to give status to these boys while also locking them into a frame of stereotypical negative expectations (Willis made a similar argument about white working class boys in 1978). So strong is the requirement to exhibit successful masculinity that this can easily jeopardise chances of success in the school system. And likewise there is a risk as a boy in being too eager in the classroom 'they'll start calling you teacher's pet'. Phoenix concludes that aware of these codes of peer group masculinity, many boys have to learn how to act masculine in one context and carefully try to maintain school work to secure qualifications. They reduced school work to avoid ostracism and effeminacy. Ann Phoenix could have taken her argument further. Is this culture of self-chosen masculinity also a form of violence on the boys by limiting their possibilities for wider power and equal opportunities? If neo-liberalism produces winners and losers then is this not a way of aggressively maintaining racial hierarchies and actively producing the losers, because it is black boys, especially poor black boys, and white and Asian working class boys who seem to be most dependent on these masculine ideals which hold them back while seducing them into 'hopeless fantasies of power and omnipotence?'. Phoenix seems to fudge the issues. She says neo-liberalism produces these scripts for the boys to follow, which counter the dominant values of the school, producing a masculine counter-culture. In the interviews the boys describe how they themselves respond to this, negotiate it, and either work their way around it, or actively support it. Phoenix stops short at addressing the violence of this imposition of re-surgent masculinity, nor does she pinpoint where exactly the values come from, eg from popular culture, or from the political culture of neo-liberalism modified according to the class location and racial identity of these young men? Or does it



come from the street and from youth culture? Clearly rap and hip hop culture do indeed celebrate unbridled aggressive masculinity and dominant heterosexuality, and this has enormous influence on young people, especially young men. But it is not only from hip hop that post-feminist masculinity emerges, also from Wall Street, from militarisation, and from images of the so called Alpha Males. And there are differences between these masculine scripts, the one from poverty, racism, social exclusion, the other from privilege, and from upper middle class masculine conservative social elites. There is a sense in Phoenix that we are left unsure, are the boys interviewed victims of the imposition of hyper-masculinity by dominant culture or active agents choosing this out defensively as a group identity against what they perceive to be antagonistic forces such as the middle class and 'strange' values of the school? The problem of 'empirical work' with interviews is that a liberal-humanistic element always intervenes, the researcher must be empathetic, it is part of the role, like a therapist or youth worker, communication and understanding depends on compassion. The boys perform aggressive hyper-masculinity, and the researcher realises this eventually backfires for them, she recognises their powerlessness.

I think this allows us to go beyond these findings and pin point the mode and role of anti-violence pedagogy. Boys like this seem to express unmediated defensive and aggressive values, these seem to be peer-group generated and they are quite hermetically sealed, they are a rigid set of norms 'gang culture' like rules or regulations which cannot be broken. I am interested then in how and why these are unmediated? There is it seems an absence of parental voice, sisters voice, teachers voice, the voice of the elders, the extended family, the youth workers voice, the adult voices, in their comments and in what they say, in groups or alone. This in itself could be taken as an index of suffering and poverty. The teachers shy away it is not their role to be tackling anti-social self defeating masculinity, instead they often perceive it as threatening to themselves. And as boys are excluded or marginalised they become educational folk devils, they are labelled and this too becomes a self fulfilling prophesy. This reinforces their becoming cut off from wider value systems, and more deeply entrenched in the subcultural world of the gang and the kinship model it offers. (In other interviews with gang members involved in the recent spiral of knife crime in the UK it is the gang which provides a kind of ethos of family and a sense of belonging.) Phoenix's writing then points us in the direction of re-mediation, the need

to insert social values somewhere between the formal systems of schooling for which so many of these boys seem barely equipped, so much more significant is their need for 'personal and social education', and the peer-group culture of the boys themselves. The need for such intermediaries is reflected in the further research undertaken by Phoenix which focuses on homophobia. Here we see the full force of their violent repudiation of gay asked if they knew any gay boys they reply 'they wouldn't show their faces in this school'. They boys use the word gay as an insult to each other and as a warning to ensure they remain at all times within the codes of aggressive masculinity, this means not hanging about with girls, not working hard at school, and not being respectful to the teachers or effeminate. In wondering why these boys are so homophobic Phoenix also recognises their misogyny and their fear of being 'feminine'. At the same time she has some sympathy, the boys are a little bit more open in one to one interviews, they even talk about being bullied themselves and they 'experience schools as threatening places', alienated as they are from adult authority. My own response to this rampant homophobia also points to the lack of mediation. These crude values and attitudes reflect directly what is found in hip hop culture and rap, and also in traditionally conservative and rigid, often religious cultures. They also reflect what Butler has defined as heterosexual melancholia, where peer bonding is so tight in almost all male institutions (like the military) and where there already is a kind of homo-social love and mutual dependency in this case through the gang then there are also (ghostly) reminders of the same sex love which culture in general requires to be abandoned for the sake of dominant heterosexuality, so these great refusals and repudiations also tell us something about loss, about the complex dynamics of love and friendship which for these boys can never be acknowledged except within the codes of 'respect'. This is another index of emotional deprivation, where middle class boys can be 'indie' and in touch with emotions including those for each other and where intense friendships between boys can be more openly acknowledged, that 'relationality' again for these boys can only exist within the rules of gang culture, with its rituals and its internal systems of power and respect.

## **Conclusion**

I would say that many of these boys are violently alienated from a culture which celebrates materiality, wealth, success, celebrity status, competitive individualism at

the expense of caring, collective and communal values. Their subculture produces a system of equivalent values which can only be achieved through illicit or criminal or 'subterranean' means ie drug dealing, petty theft, etc and violence and hardness and lack of remorse brings a kind of status also with the gang, the hardest, the toughest, the most feared is a kind of inversion of celebrity culture for the neighbourhoods or estates where gang leaders accrue status and are in effect well known across the schools and the communities. Respect means giving recognition and acknowledging status. And this is required from girls as well as from boys. So incredibly bound by notions of not being humiliated are these boys that a petty comment can result in a horrifically violent incident. A few weeks ago in London a trial took place which involved a 14 year old girl who had been violently raped by up to 9 young men, this was a vengeance attack because she foolishly said to a girl at school that she thought one of these boys was 'ugly'. She then realised she would be punished and she most surely was. She was dragged through an estate being brutally raped by the boy in question and his friends, and her life was consequently traumatised as a result of this casual almost insignificant insult. And it was reported that the boys showed no remorse at all, facing a jail sentence they simply took this as the outcome of their actions. Going to jail for 8 to 10 years was again something they could be tough or hard about. A similar case involved a girl with severe learning difficulties whose attackers exploited her sexual vulnerability, led her to an empty space and also gang raped her and again showed no remorse in court. Finally I should comment on the rise of knife and gun crime in the UK in the last decade. In London alone 28 boys were knifed to death in 2008. Once again in most if not all cases there were petty events prior to the attacks, schools, neighbourhoods and friendship patterns came into play. From my own house in N London just a few month ago there were two shrines to boys who were killed just a few minutes walk away. And these events have given rise to a number of campaigns and organisations set up to tackle knife crime. From the police stop and search, to metal detectors in so many schools, also police officers in the schools, and also black community groups setting up or extending youth work, eg Boyz to Men, or Respect Respect, but most interesting to me is Kids Company run by a remarkable woman Camilla Batmanjelidh. She argues forcefully that we cannot underestimate how damaged and disturbed some of these young people are. The most violent she says, have usually been themselves so brutalised (as refugees, or abandoned and abused kids) that they are already mentally incapable of understanding

the consequences of their actions. Her response is close to my argument. In the last 20 years the government and the wider political culture has devalued 'work with young people'. Few students I have taught in the last decades have wanted to be youth workers or social workers even though they have the right qualifications. These have become low status even meaningless jobs. Instead students want to be documentary film makers or PR girls, earning less than they would as a trained social worker, and often ending up working ironically on youth social projects! But overall there has been less interfacing with deprived or damaged young people, teachers back off, frightened themselves by the idea of knives in schools and who is to blame them? But for such disadvantaged young people school itself seems to be a 'failed institution' it does not answer to their needs, instead it reproduces the lack of mediation in their lives. And so as a conclusion my argument would be for re mediation and re socialisation, and a huge increase of resources from the state and governments to work with boys, working that is on a one to one basis. Providing them with words and languages and vocabularies and images as well as with social interactions which would allow them to move to adulthood with guidance and support, with therapeutic help where needed, with the kinds of resources needed to be able to manage their anger and find a meaningful social role which provided the status and respect they so desperately crave. At the present moment, it is interesting that the only available outlet for all of this 'illegible rage' is rap music, the nihilistic, melancholic poetic beauty and hyper-emotion of Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr Dre and 50 Cents.