

WORKING WITH YOUNG MEN

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Sometimes, especially in the early stages of becoming a geographer, one of the most difficult questions to answer is, "What sort of research do I want to do?" Our discipline is so diverse and extensive and the possible range and mix of methods so large that sometimes this question seems almost impossible to answer. As you get older and build up experience, one piece of work tends to lead to another, and before you know it you are an "expert" in a particular field. But sometimes you may decide to start a project that would be considered outside your main interests; this is the case for the work I reflect on here. The combination of two sets of circumstances pushed me to my new interest: one set personal and the other broadly political.

For many years now, I have been interested in the associations between socioeconomic change in Britain and the changing nature of gender relations. I have undertaken research and written books and papers on the theoretical, methodological, and empirical nature of these changes and have thought and written about what it might mean to try to do feminist research. I have been involved in various ways in policies to challenge contemporary assertions and assumptions about the position of women in contemporary Britain, assuming that, in most cases, girls and women have fewer opportunities and are discriminated against, compared with boys and men—while recognizing, of course, the ways in which divisions based, among other criteria, on class and ethnicity cut across and complicate this simple pattern. I supported single-sex education for girls, for example, and was active in local equal-pay campaigns. I also talked about my work at home and tried to live according to my beliefs.

But then I had a son who, as he moved through the educational system, challenged almost everything I thought and said through his own experiences. Clearly this is not an uncommon experience for parents of teenagers; what was so challenging for me was that it was the girls in his class who were the privileged ones. By chance they outnumbered their male peers in his year group; they were lively, articulate, and well organized, they were good competitors inside and outside the classroom, and they generally seemed more content and at ease with themselves than did the lumpish, antisocial, and uncouth boys in their early and midteens who passed through my kitchen. Statistical proof of these evident gender differences seemed to be supplied by their respective results in the school-leaving exams that my son and his peers took at the age of sixteen. The girls outperformed the boys, not only in the subjects in which female success has been common—in languages and literature, for example—but also in math and science. Moreover, whereas most of the girls moved onto the local sixth-form college to continue their education, too many of the boys left school and, with varying degrees of success, started to look for employment.

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