

ACCOMPLISHING FEMININITY AMONG THE GIRLS IN THE GANG

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Sociologists and criminologists in America have had a longstanding interest in youth gangs dating back to the pioneering work of Frederick Thrasher through to the subcultural theories of the 1960s–1970s to the present. Until recently, the primary focus was on the role of male gang members. In contrast, discussions about young women's involvement in gangs, with a few notable exceptions, have been typically shallow and sexist. In this paper we examine the meanings, expressions and paradoxes of femininity as they are understood and experienced by Latina, African American and Asian-Pacific American female gang members. The analysis, based on in-depth interviews with 141 gang members, is part of a long-term study (1990–present) of youth gangs in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Approximately 2 million American adolescents are involved in serious criminal offences (Inciardi et al. 1993). Because of this high prevalence rate for serious delinquency, criminal justice officials and researchers have shifted their attention from the 'typical' delinquent or what Inciardi et al. (1993) have called the 'garden variety' delinquent to that of the serious delinquent (Horowitz 1990). As a result of this shift in attention, interest in youth gangs has also occurred. This came about partly because of the belief that serious delinquents are more likely to be found in youth gangs and partly because of the perceived relationship between gangs, drugs and violence. The development of the drug trade in the 1980s signalled a transformation from the idea of gangs as 'transitory adolescent social networks to nascent criminal organizations' (Fagan 1990: 183).

Official estimates of the number of youth involved in gangs have increased dramatically over the past decade. Currently, over 90 per cent of the nation's largest cities report youth gang problems, an increase of about half since 1983, and police estimates now put the number of gangs at 4,881 and the number of gang members at approximately 249,324 (Curry et al. 1992). As a result, although the study of gangs is not new (the first major work was done by Thrasher in 1927) public concern about the involvement of young people in gang activity, and the perceived violence associated with this lifestyle, has soared.

Part of this concern about the increase in gangs has focused on the participation of women in gangs. While some researchers argue that girl gang membership is increasing, others have been more cautious, believing that participation has remained relatively stable over time. Estimates of girl gang membership today range from 10 to 30 per cent of all gang members (Campbell 1984; Chesney-Lind 1993; Curry et al. 1994; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Fagan 1990; Klein 1995; Moore 1991). These estimates, based on

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self-reports and community recognition (e.g. police, schools, youth agencies), include young women involved in all girl gangs and mixed (male and female) gangs.

There is little doubt that in recent years female gang participation has generated much public concern and media attention in the US, in large part because they are presumed to be rebelling against traditional notions of femininity. They are typically characterized as becoming more like their male counterparts: wild, hedonistic, irrational, amoral and violent (see Chesney-Lind 1993). Women's magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* try to illustrate vividly that these 'bad girls' have crossed the gender divide with photographs of girl gang members aiming guns with one hand, and throwing hand signs with the other hand (O'Malley 1993). Book length journalistic accounts provide similar impressions (Sikes 1997).

Yet are these young women defiantly challenging traditional gender roles? Although research on female gangs is relatively limited (compared to males), a number of perspectives have emerged. Traditional accounts (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955; Miller 1958; Thrasher 1927) of female gang involvement have downplayed and minimized the role and motivations of girl gang members. They are portrayed in stereotypical ways from personal property to sexual chattel to maladjusted tomboys (see extended review in Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995). A more recent study continues to advance this male-centred view (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). In essence, these accounts view the involvement of girls in gangs in relation to their sexuality. Their sexuality then serves as the basis for their identity as 'bad girls'. Other recent views offer a contrasting view, very similar to those in the media, of girl gang members seizing the streets, gaining independence from, and almost competing with, their male counterparts (Fleisher 1998; Taylor 1993). These contrasting accounts share, and at the same time suffer, from a one-sided, male-focused perspective, and fail to locate the situational context of being young, female, of colour, and poor.

How then do female gang members understand and accomplish femininity? How do they interpret their involvement in delinquency and violence? We explore these questions by first examining recent discussions about masculinity and 'bad girl' femininity on the streets. We then begin our analysis by looking at the different ways in which femininity is constructed within the family among a group of girl gang members. We then turn to examine how girls renegotiate and manage the paradoxes of femininity on the streets and at home.

Bad Girls and Femininity

Masculinities and crime has become the subject of much criminological interests and research in the last several years (Bourgois 1996; Collison 1996; Connell 1987; Jefferson 1996; Katz 1988; Messerschmidt 1986, 1993, 1997; Newburn and Stanko 1994). This new direction in the study of crime stems from wider discussions in the social sciences and arts on masculinities, and calls from within the discipline to 'take men seriously', particularly as the 'crisis of masculinity' heightens in post-modern society (Jefferson 1996). At a general level, this new orientation is trying to reconcile longstanding epistemological debates about the relationship (and dialectics) of social structure and interaction. In doing so, it locates acts of manliness within the broader economic and social class context, and at the same time, leaves room for human agency and interaction. Essentially

masculinities and crime studies examine ‘varieties of real men’ in relation to their differential access to power and resources, and how these different groups of men construct and negotiate with similarly situated others, the meaning of manliness (Messerschmidt 1997; Newburn and Stanko 1994). Messerschmidt (1993, 1997), in particular, suggests that the social structure situates young men in relation to similar others so that collectively they experience the world from a specific position and differentially construct cultural ideas of hegemonic masculinity, namely, dominance, control and independence (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995).

Young males in gangs provide the example, par excellence, as they embody all of the problems of power in contemporary society: violence, guns, drugs, poverty, unemployment, decay of community life, and educational malaise. Young minority male gang members living in marginalized communities, have little access to masculine status in the economy and in education like their white middle and working class counterparts (Bourgois 1996; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Messerschmidt 1997). This collectively experienced denial of access to ‘legitimate’ masculine status creates an arena for exaggerated public and private forms of aggressive masculinity. ‘Street elite posturing’ (Katz 1988) among male gang members with dramatized displays of toughness accounts for one cultural form of public aggressiveness. Male gang members’ constant and aggressive pursuit of ‘respect’ represents another way to construct and affirm manliness in an alienated environment. Gang intimidation and violence are more than simply an expression of the competitive struggle in communities with little to offer, but rather, a vehicle for a meaningful identity and status. Gang banging then is a gender resource for young minority gang members to express their masculinity (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Messerschmidt 1997). At the immediate level of interaction, then, the street is a battleground and theatre for young marginalized minority males to define, shape and do gender (Connell 1987).

This same level of theoretical interest has yet to be extended to women and crime, and raises a fundamental question for ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing difference’: if crime is a resource for expressing masculinity, how then are we to understand the experiences of women and their involvement in delinquency and crime? As Daly asks, ‘would the claim that crime is a “resource for doing femininity”—for women and girls to “create differences from men and boys or to separate from all that is masculine”—have any cultural resonance?’ (1997: 37).

Messerschmidt (1997) argued critically that the general tendency in criminological investigations has been to focus exclusively on differences in men’s and women’s crime, and as a result, women are conceptualized in masculine terms when they engage in ‘typically’ masculine crimes like violence. Therefore, we must look at both the similarities and differences between their involvement in crime to determine when crime is not a resource for doing masculinity.¹ From this vantage point, girls’ participation in gangs offers an avenue for challenging and testing normative gender roles or what Connell (1987) calls, ‘emphasized femininity’.

¹ Joe and Chesney-Lind’s (1995) and Moore’s (1991) analyses of gangs in Hawaii and East Los Angeles respectively, juxtapose female and male experiences in gang activity and highlight how gender is accomplished in gangs.

Partaking in the specific social situation of the gang, girls use the resources available to construct not masculinity but a specific type of femininity and notwithstanding, challenge notions of gender as merely difference (Messerschmidt 1997: 69).

Drawing from the limited but rich ethnographic studies on female gangs, Messerschmidt contends that female gang violence and displays of toughness are 'resources' for establishing a particular notion of femininity, that of the 'bad girl'. This street reputation and status translate as power for girls who operate within the patriarchal power structure of the gangs, the streets, and society. At the same time, girl gang members embrace and engage in some forms of 'culturally appropriate' femininity (1997: 83). Most ethnographic studies on female gangs, for example, find that gang girls concentrate on 'feminine activities' such as appearance and endless sessions of talking. Many also find themselves in typically gendered lower and working class jobs like janitorial services, babysitting and clerical work, and hold unrealistic feminine aspirations like rock singers and professional modelling (Campbell 1990; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995).

These ethnographic studies further suggest that these two specific cultural forms of femininity frequently conflict with each other. Studies on Latina homegirls illustrate this point. Quicker (1983), Harris (1988) and Moore (1991) find some Chicana gang members adopt a 'macho' homegirl image, but in rejecting the Latino cultural norms of being a woman (i.e. wife and mother), male gang members and community residents view the girls as 'tramps' and not the type to marry. A significant focus for inquiry then is how girl gang members constantly negotiate a distinctive sense of femininity in different interactional settings within both their ethnic culture and delinquent subculture.

Research on African American girls also underscores the importance of focusing on cultural and ethnic differences across girl gang groups. Fishman (1988) and Lauderback et al. (1992) indicate that the adoption of a bad girl identity with exaggerated displays of toughness have less to do with rejecting or testing cultural gender norms and more to do with adopting 'greater flexibility in their roles' as they are expected to defend themselves against male violence (Fishman 1988: 15). At the same time, these female gang members are preoccupied with their responsibilities as young mothers including income generating strategies (e.g. drug dealing) and community activism (improving quality of life in their neighbourhoods; making the streets safe for their children) (Venkatesh 1998). Joe Laidler and Hunt (1997) show that African American female gang members are more likely to perceive the group as a source of autonomy, independence and empowerment from men than Latina gang girls, who are organized in relation to their male counterparts.

This article builds on these ethnographic studies and recent discussions on 'bad girl' femininity. It is specifically concerned with uncovering the meaning, expression and paradoxes of femininity as it is understood and experienced by Latina, African American and Asian-Pacific American female gang members. The analytical framework is based on several assumptions. The normative expectations of young women to be feminine and to be a teenager are often at odds. Generally, adolescence is a time for challenging authority, rebelling, seeking recognition among peers, independence; attributes that are associated with masculinity. Femininity, by contrast, starts early on in a girl's life, and is associated with passiveness, obedience, dependency, innocence, chastity and maturity. As Hudson (1984) has noted, 'adolescence is subversive of femininity; young girls' attempts to be accepted as "young women" are always liable to be undermined

(subverted) by perceptions of them as childish, immature or any other of the other terms by which we define the status “adolescent” (p. 32). McRobbie (1981) shows that English working class teenage girls respond to their contradictory position of being perceived as ‘children’ and expectations and fears of entering womanhood by forming tight knit groups. These peer groups are not oppositional, but rather a cultural form of resistance which offers an exclusive and private space for girls to define for themselves, ‘what is feminine’. Membership in female gangs then operates in a similar fashion. Moreover, these conflicting normative standards constantly confront girl gang members in their interactions with family, their male counterparts and their homegirls and become the basis for evaluating themselves and other girls’ femininity.

At the same time, it is important to underscore that notions of femininity are not fixed, but ever changing, depending on the situational context (Messerschmidt 1997). ‘Being feminine’ does not automatically change but is negotiated in the specific social contexts with interactions with other people. These notions may be contradictory in some settings, but are nevertheless seen as an accommodation to the setting. These interactions and negotiated definitions of femininity occur within the race, class and patriarchal constraints of a larger social structure. Young women’s location within the social structure simultaneously affects their interactions and their notions of being feminine. This analysis heeds other recent critiques of Messerschmidt’s recent work as being more structure than action oriented in his supporting evidence (see Jefferson 1996 for a fuller discussion), and examines not only how girl gang members reproduce normative gender expectations, but also how they resist and devise alternative forms of femininity. These alternative forms include but are not restricted to the ‘bad girl’. The following discussion then, begins to tease out the construction and negotiation of femininity, particularly in relation to respectability among girl gang members in their interactions with family, homeboys and boyfriends, and homegirls and other young women.

Research Methods

The data for this analysis are drawn from a long-term, comparative qualitative study of ethnic gangs in the San Francisco Bay Area that began in 1991 and continues to the present. From 1991 to 1993, we conducted face to face interviews with over 600 self-identified male and female gang members (see Joe 1993; Waldorf 1993). The 65 female gang members interviewed were from seven different groups, and were located using the snowball sampling approach (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). This sampling strategy relied on respondents referring members of their group or other groups to be interviewed. The same technique was used in our second study that extended our comparative research to Southeast Asian gangs in the same locale. In this effort, we interviewed 91 male and 19 female Southeast Asian gang members during 1993 through 1994. At present, we are engaged in a third study that revisits and explores other contemporary gang issues among males and females in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have included 57 of the female interviews from the current study for this analysis. From the three studies then, we will be drawing on a total sample size of 141 interviews with female gang members.

The in-depth interview involved a two-step process in which the interviewee first answered a series of questions from a quantitative schedule. The second step entailed a

tape-recorded session, and members reflected on questions from a semi-structured guide about their gang experiences. This combined approach of a qualitative and closed-ended questionnaire provided an opportunity to focus on the group's histories, organization and activities, personal demographics, alcohol and drug use, individual history and involvement with the group, and prior contact with the criminal justice system. We also asked the young women about power relations and gender expectations within the group, with the various males in their lives and with their families.

From the three studies, we recruited and trained five female and four male fieldworkers to conduct the female interviews. All of the fieldworkers were familiar with the gang scene in their communities, having either been directly involved in the street scene or as community workers (e.g. youth workers, public housing liaison). Given their role within the community, they had no difficulties in establishing rapport and trust with the girls. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings ranging from the respondent's or peer's residence, parks, youth centres and coffee shops. The interview with the African American and Samoan girls were conducted in English. The Latinas and Vietnamese women were interviewed in English or their native language (or a combination), depending on their preference. The fieldworkers assisted in translating the Spanish and Vietnamese interviews. Interviews lasted from 90 minutes to three hours. We gave a 50-dollar honorarium in recognition of their participation and time.

Profile

The 141 young women in this study are current members of one of 44 different gangs.

Table 1 offers an overview of their personal characteristics. The 17 African American women belong to one of six groups. Unlike any of the other ethnic groups, four of the African American female gangs are organized as 'independent', without any affiliation or ties to any male group. The other two gangs are part of a larger 'mixed' group which includes females, but comparatively more male members. The African American women in the sample were older than the females of other ethnic gangs with a median age of 23 years (age range of 14 to 27). The members of the 'independent' groups had known each other since childhood, having grown up in the same neighbourhood. All of the African American women lived in or nearby public housing estates, and described their neighbourhoods as dangerous areas for themselves and their children. These are areas where 'people are outside smoking, getting high, drunk, loud and violent' [HG009], and more generally 'people look nasty. The streets are black, they stink. There's so much garbage. People look all dried up, they walking dead' [HG016]. Drug sales and prostitution are plainly visible on the streets in the afternoons, with activity heightening in the evening.

All of the African American women came from extremely marginalized backgrounds. Although slightly over 50 per cent of them reported that they lived principally with their mother and father until their mid-teen years, one of the parents, usually the father, often left home for months at a time due to alcohol and drugs. The majority of the girls stated that their fathers were either unskilled labourers or unemployed (data not shown). Over one-third of them lived only with their mother, and had had very limited or no contact at all with their fathers. Their mothers tended to be either working in the service sector or unemployed. Several of the girls reported that they had either cut off or limited their

TABLE 1 *Personal characteristics of girls in the gang*

	African American (N = 17)		Latina (N = 98)		Asian American (N = 26)		Total (N = 141)	
Age (median)	23 years		18 years		18 years		18 years	
Place of birth								
California	16	95.0%	57	59.0%	7	26.9%	80	56.7%
Other US	1	5.0%	3	3.1%	0	0.0%	4	2.8%
Mexico/Latina America	0	0.0%	38	38.8%	0	0.0%	38	27.0%
Vietnam	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	19	73.1%	19	13.5%
Domestic unit prior to 16 years of age								
Mother and father	9	52.9%	28	28.6%	16	61.5%	53	37.6%
Mother and stepfather	0	0.0%	5	5.1%	0	0.0%	5	3.5%
Mother only	6	35.3%	47	47.9%	3	11.5%	56	39.7%
Father only	0	0.0%	4	4.1%	3	11.5%	7	5.0%
Other relative	2	11.8%	9	9.2%	2	7.7%	13	9.2%
Other	0	0.0%	5	5.1%	0	0.0%	5	3.5%
Unknown	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	7.7%	2	1.4%
Education completed								
9th grade or less	4	23.5%	41	41.8%	6	23.1%	51	36.2%
10th grade	4	23.5%	16	16.3%	6	23.1%	26	18.4%
11th grade	6	35.3%	21	21.4%	9	34.6%	36	25.5%
12th grade	3	17.6%	16	16.3%	3	11.5%	22	15.6%
Junior College	0	0.0%	4	4.1%	0	0.0%	4	2.8%
Unknown	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	7.7%	2	1.4%
Employed full or part time	0	0.0%	29	29.6%	4	15.4%	33	23.4%
If employed, type of work								
Skilled	0	0.0%	6	20.7%	2	50.0%	8	24.2%
Service industry	0	0.0%	16	55.2%	1	25.0%	17	51.5%
Child care	0	0.0%	5	17.2%	0	0.0%	5	15.2%
Unskilled	0	0.0%	2	6.9%	1	25.0%	3	9.1%
Primary source of income								
Job	0	0.0%	24	24.5%	4	15.4%	28	19.8%
Family/friends	1	5.9%	39	39.8%	19	73.1%	59	41.8%
Public assistance	6	35.3%	16	16.3%	0	0.0%	22	15.6%
Hustles	7	41.2%	4	4.1%	3	11.5%	14	9.9%
Combination	3	17.6%	15	15.3%	0	0.0%	18	12.8%
Marital status								
Single	12	70.6%	76	77.6%	24	92.3%	112	79.4%
Living with partner	3	17.6%	14	14.3%	1	3.8%	18	12.8%
Married	1	5.9%	7	7.1%	1	3.8%	9	6.4%
Separated	1	5.9%	1	1.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.4%
Number of children								
None	3	17.6%	56	57.1%	24	92.3%	83	58.9%
One	7	41.2%	20	20.4%	1	3.8%	28	19.8%
Two	3	17.6%	13	13.3%	0	0.0%	16	11.3%
Three or more	4	23.5%	2	2.0%	0	0.0%	6	4.3%
Pregnant	0	0.0%	7	7.1%	1	3.8%	8	5.7%
Number of children residing with you								
None	1	5.9%	4	4.1%	0	0.0%	5	3.6%
One	7	41.2%	19	19.4%	1	3.8%	27	19.1%
Two	3	17.6%	10	10.2%	0	0.0%	13	9.2%
Three or more	3	17.6%	2	2.9%	0	0.0%	5	3.5%
Not applicable	3	17.6%	63	64.3%	25	96.2%	91	64.5%

contact with their mothers who were addicted to crack or heroin. Only 18 per cent of the girls had completed high school, and none of them reported any legitimate employment. The girls relied principally on hustling (drug sales and shoplifting) and public assistance to support themselves and their children.

Among the other ethnic groups, the majority of the young women belong to an 'auxiliary' group to a male gang. All of the Latina and 17 of the Asian-Pacific American girls belong to one of these groups that consider themselves 'separate but equal' to their male counterparts. The median age of the Latinas is 18 years of age with a range of 14 to 32. The Latinas come from more diverse communities and backgrounds than the African American girls. Among Latinas, half of them live in a highly congested and dense area in the city where the shops and residents are predominantly of Hispanic origins. Residential units vary with two major housing projects on either end of the community, transient motels used principally for short-term housing, prostitution and drugs, small apartment complexes, flats and single family homes. Most of the girls came to know each other from having a relative in the group or living on the same street or same public housing project. Gang alliances and rivalries were partly based on territory and ethnicity within the Latina community in San Francisco. The other half of the respondents live in a neighbouring city to San Francisco, which is experiencing an urban sprawl. Therefore, unlike their city counterparts, they did not live in a highly congested area, but instead lived in apartments and houses scattered throughout the city. Nearly 40 per cent of the Latinas were born in Mexico or Latin America, and immigrated with at least one parent. Almost 30 per cent of the girls lived with their mother and father. Nearly half of the girls indicated that they lived principally with their mothers, and several indicated that their fathers had either left the family or returned to their native land. When fathers were present, they were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers. Most mothers worked in the service sector or in unskilled positions. Among the 98 Latinas, approximately one-third reported that at least one of their parents had problems with alcohol or drugs.

Despite the median age of the Latinas, over 78 per cent had not completed high school. Forty per cent of them relied principally on their family and friends for money, and another 25 per cent supported themselves from employment, usually in the service industry. Over three-fourths of the girls were single. Forty-two per cent either had children or were about to give birth. Most of the girls reported that their children lived with them.

The median age of the Asian American females was similar to the Latinas at 18 years of age with a range of 15 to 21. The majority of Asian American girls were Chinese, Chinese Vietnamese and Vietnamese, and had immigrated from Vietnam. The girls came from different neighbourhoods, primarily working class houses and flats. Members came to know each other primarily through school or friends. Over 60 per cent of them live with both parents. The respondents' fathers work in small businesses and semi-skilled jobs, and their mothers work in the small business or in semi-skilled or service industry jobs. Most of the girls were still attending school, and relied principally on their family and friends for money. Only one was living with her partner and was pregnant.

Four Samoan girls were from one group with approximately 15 to 20 members. Members came to know each other through living in the same housing project or through a relative. The respondents' families were lower working class with fathers working in semi-skilled and unskilled labouring jobs and mothers in unskilled and service industry jobs. All the Samoan girls were still enrolled and attending high school.

Most relied on their families for money, but the eldest girl was married with one child, employed in the service sector, and dealt crack with her husband to supplement their income.

The female gang members in this study are similar to the girls reported in other research (Campbell 1984; Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999; Fishman 1988; Harris 1988; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Moore and Hagedorn 1996). They are young women of colour, from families that are either completely marginalized or barely surviving, and living in typically dense and congested neighbourhoods. They live in communities with limited employment prospects and few incentives to stay in school.

The Structure of Accomplishing Femininity

Much of recent gang research, and more generally, street life ethnographies have underscored the importance of 'respect' among inner city young minority men. In this masculine context, 'respect' demands deference to, and at the same time, commands status, power and authority in an environment with few legitimate avenues (e.g. employment, education) to attain a sense of esteem and importance for oneself and among one's peers. The 'pursuit of respect' (Bourgois 1996) and consequently affirmation of masculinity for young minority males is expressed through exaggerated demonstrations of bravado, fearlessness and aggressiveness with others on the street.

According to Messerschmidt, female gang members, like their male counterparts, constantly seek 'respect' from similarly situated others as a way of demonstrating and affirming power and status in a highly marginalized and patriarchal environment. While we recognize that female gang members operate in a male dominated environment, and may sometimes engage in what may be perceived as 'aggressive' masculine behaviours, it may have less to do with adopting the 'style' of their homeboys, and more to do with other contextual factors. Importantly, our respondents' interactions, evaluations of others and self definitions suggest that respect is highly gendered, and holds a very different meaning for females compared to males. For females, the notion of 'respect' should not be solely understood in masculine street terms of power and control. Among the young women in our study, respect is associated with the pursuit of respectability, one important dimension of 'being feminine'.

Respect has a lot to do with the way she presents herself. The way she acts around guys and girls at all times. She isn't a ho [whore], she's not all desperate with the drugs. She acts like a woman. Some girls kick back and don't have respect for the guys. Some homegirls [gang girls] see each other, and they start cussing [at each other and at the guys], 'fucking bitch this, fucking that, fucking asshole'. It starts getting ugly, and he'll hit her. Better calm down. They [those homegirls] got no respect for themselves. [F24]

Nearly all of the girls described respect(ability) in these highly gendered and normative terms regardless of their ethnic and cultural background. As the girls remind us, respectability involves both appearance and conduct. Her clothing, hairstyle, make-up, and stride signify her status as a reputable young woman. Yet her subtleness, restraint, and regard for others are also critical to distinguishing her from others. Skeggs (1997) notes the importance of appearance, conduct and distancing in her recent ethnography of the lives of Northwest working class women. She argues that respectability is a class signifier for differentiating those who are legitimate from those who are not. It is a distancing

mechanism to identify the ‘other’. And perhaps most importantly, ‘respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it . . . It would not be of concern here, if the working classes had not consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening . . . pathological and without respect. It would not be something to desire, to prove and to achieve, if it had not been seen to be a property of “others”, those who were valued and legitimated’ (1997: 1). Still respectability in its normative form is not ‘blindly accepted’, women may express ambivalence, dis-identify or resist and devise alternatives (Skeggs 1997).

As the girls in this study suggest, the meaning of ‘respectability’ goes beyond the middle class notions of the term in other ways. Given their embeddedness in street life culture, and for some, at a very early age, respectability also means being aware and being able to stand up for oneself.

R: A homegirl has to have a mean head on her shoulders. She has to be responsible or respectable.

I: How do you do that?

R: Keep your head up and watch over the moves of others. You can’t let nobody get you or you will be got.

The young women in this study, as we will see below, are well aware that to be entirely feminine and to be respectable in their highly marginalized communities is unrealistic and dangerous. Respect(ability) requires a sense of strength and independence. As Skeggs succinctly points out, ‘to be completely feminine for most women would be almost impossible: it would be to be without agency, to be a sign of powerlessness’ (1997: 102). And as she notes, the women in her study devise different forms of femininity, some of which are an expression of cultural resistance. Similarly then, among the young women in this study, respectability is negotiated and continually challenged in a number of interactional settings.

Interactions with family

There are a range of experiences and expectations among the girls in their family relationships. Regardless of the strength of their parental ties, all the girls believed that it is the family, particularly mothers, who should set the expectations and boundaries for them as girls and young women. In this normative context, it is the mother who they define as the primary caregiver and nurturer in their family. It is the mother who they look to for shelter, care, affection, support, discipline, guidance and structure. As Gina states, ‘I got respect for mothers when they *care* for their children’ [F38]. Because many respondents’ fathers were absent (periodically or permanently), their mothers worked long hours. In these cases, the girls indicated that they or their elder sisters assumed the parental role, babysitting and caring for the younger ones in the family, preparing meals, and cleaning house. This assumption of the motherly role from early adolescence is consistent with other studies on female gang members (Fishman 1988; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995).

In light of the girls’ highly gendered expectations within their own family, some girls describe themselves as coming from a ‘traditional’ background whereby the mother and father ‘expect me to be perfect. To do well in school. To avoid trouble’ [F12]. Notably, several Latina and Asian immigrant girls consider themselves very ‘traditional’ in their appearance, conduct and aspirations, and take great pride in distinguishing themselves

from their American born counterparts. By the same token, they rationalize some of their 'unconventional' activities as part of accomplishing femininity.

Rachel, a 22-year-old Mexican homegirl reports that she came to America when she was 12 years of age. Her father brought the family to California after labouring for three years here and believing he could provide them with a better life. She considers herself 'more like a Mexican girl' than the girls here. She holds traditional ideas about life events like the quincinera and weddings when a girl wears 'white' and has a large party for the family and friends. 'Girls from here just run away or don't bother' [F22]. She holds a great deal of respect for her parents who she states are always loving and giving her guidance. Although she has moved out on her own, she still retains a close relationship to them, and tries to live up to their expectations as a young woman and as a daughter. 'When I go to my mom's, I always help her clean house, take care of my niece. Help her to cook, do stuff around the house and take her to the store' [F22]. Her parents don't like the idea that she 'hangs around with trouble'. She has only had two boyfriends whom she has slept with because 'she is not that *kind* of girl'. She rationalizes her use of crystal methamphetamines as a way of losing weight and becoming attractive. 'I started using it because I had this boyfriend. He always used to tell me, You're too fat, you're ugly, nobody's gonna like you. So I started using it, knowing that you get skinny, I only use it now, you know, to lose weight' [F22].

Likewise, other Latina, Vietnamese, Samoan and Filipino girls find their families extremely traditional and conservative in their expectations of them as girls. The Vietnamese girls complain of the double standards and excessive controls they face as girls. Janet describes the differences in treatment between her brother and herself:

My family still holds Vietnamese traditions. Like they want me to come home after school, cook dinner, clean up the house, Can't go out, just got study. And that is it. No going out. Once in awhile but that is it. Your curfew is 9:00. No boys, they don't want you talking, you are too young for boys. They don't want you to get in love with boys, they might influence you and then you might drop out of school . . . My brother could go out all the time. After he got arrested, my parents try to watch out for us more, but the more they tell us what to do, we disobey them more. We lie to them . . . I mean I know better not to. [617]

Cindy, a 16-year old, echoes this view:

Like see parents, they don't understand that what it's like for guys, they think guys can't get pregnant so they get to go out all the time and they don't care. But when a girl goes out they think we're gonna come home pregnant. That is a big discrimination. Like we are all the same. We can't go out because they think girls are suppose to stay home, cook, clean and guys can just go out and have fun. That isn't right. [610]

All of the Vietnamese girls note that their parents were particularly strict with them throughout their early childhood and teen years. The girls contend that the imposition of curfews and restrictions are not solely to keep them out of trouble, but more importantly, to preserve them and therefore, their 'reputation'. The young women expressed a similar view to this 18-year old, 'Like the Vietnamese, they always think like, they care most about their reputation. Americans don't. In Vietnamese custom, they don't let girls in their teens date or go with boyfriends or even go out' [605]. In this case, her reputation refers to the preservation of her chastity and sexual innocence. But other Vietnamese respondents add that it is also the preservation of her innocence more generally; she should stay out of trouble at school and with the law. In terms of her

parents, her reputation as a 'good girl' is an indicator of their reputation as 'good parents'. Some girls devise ways to 'please' their parents by maintaining the image of the 'good girl', and still engage in more 'liberating' experiences. For example, Susan reports that she brings home friends who are 'good girls' (e.g. dress conservatively, get straight As, and don't go out with boys) to make a good impression on her parents, but goes out to meet her homegirls in the gang to party and 'look for trouble' [614].

Paradoxically, despite our Vietnamese and a few of the Latina respondents' complaints of traditionalism and cultural gaps, many evaluate themselves in the gendered terms of their parents. They describe their transition from a 'good girl' to a 'bad girl', and believe that they are a disappointment to themselves and their families. This transition typically began in school as this 18-year-old Vietnamese woman notes:

Before I was always like a hard working student because my parents expected me to get good grades and also their friends would think that they had good kids who went to school everyday. They wanted their children to give them a good reputation. And I did get good grades and they were proud. But as I got into the peer pressure and the influence of my friends, I started cutting school. I was a very good student and a very good kid but from these influences, I am getting badder every day . . . I get into fights a lot. I don't stay home a lot no more. I know my parents always worry. [605]

While these young women complain about parental control, other gang girls describe almost a complete absence of parental expectations or controls. Approximately three-fourths of the African American young women and over one-half of the Latinas are critical of one or both parents. Most often, they vocalize their lack of respect for their fathers who rarely or sporadically surface, have drug or alcohol problems and/or are violent toward their mothers or them. Several young women judge their own mothers in relation to conventional standards of respectability and more generally, femininity.

I got along with my mom until I was a teenager. Till I could think my own thing and be my own person. She turned into an alcoholic. That's why I don't drink. I don't want to be like her. She used to beat me a lot. I can't stand her. She's a whore. She just don't get paid for her services. I tell her Ma ya know . . . make some extra money on the side. "Don't talk to me that way I'm your mother." I say so . . . your degrading yourself why can't I degrade you? She's had some awful dudes. I remember one guy came home drunk and beat her up and I went in there and bit his leg. Then when he threw me it was a big old oak dresser and she went nuts. He and she used to do coke. They'd try to play it off . . . oh no holier than though righteous bitch. I don't understand your coke addiction. Yeah mom you're stupid, you ain't never done nothing . . . But my dad he's old fashion. I can't live with him either. He believes a woman should be in the house cooking. Cleaning and having dinner ready by the time he gets home from work. Man I couldn't do that. No friends, no life nothing. [F9]

A few gang girls are not only angered by their mothers' drug use and associated problems (e.g. violence, money), but also, their mothers' inability to fulfil their roles and duties as parents. These girls have little respect for their mothers who they point out abandoned them early on for a life on the streets. To these girls, their mothers are everything they do not want to be.

Gang girls respond in different ways to what they perceived as their mothers' defiance toward and violation of conventional expectations of femininity and motherhood. African American respondents tend to completely sever ties to their mothers if they have problems with drugs. Their drug using mothers are perceived as adding another layer of risk to their current life at home and on the street. Latinas rarely cut off all ties, but

instead either restricted their contact with their ‘problematic’ mothers or stand by their mothers, becoming the caregiver.

Although our respondents have quite diverse interactions within their families, they tend to develop conventional notions about gender roles, and in particular, what it means to be a woman and to be a mother. She is someone who is ‘respectable’. She does not sleep around and she does not get heavily involved in drugs and alcohol. She looks after her family, providing care and affection. Importantly, they evaluate their own mothers, and sometimes themselves, in relation to this traditional good girl versus bad girl dichotomy. Some of our respondents acquire these expectations from an early age as they assume a parental role when their mothers are busy working or coping with family violence or drug problems. Many respondents who are from immigrant families develop strategies for fulfilling familial expectations of them as ‘good girls’. Outside the family arena, however, the girls, in their interactions with other females and males, try to negotiate a balance between ‘being respectable’, ‘being an adolescent’ and ‘being on the street’.

Interactions with homegirls and other women

There are two distinct arenas of interaction with other women in which girl gang members find themselves negotiating femininity. One arena involves the interaction they have among themselves. The second arena of interaction entails homegirls’ encounters with other women outside of their group. In both arenas, the girls have very distinct notions and expectations of other female members’ appearance and conduct that are clearly tied to their sexual reputation.

Don’t be a flirt or anything, cause then you have no respect, you’re supposed to stick by your old man. [F8]

Some girls are respected. Some girls are treated like hos. It depends on how you act . . . how many guys you slept with. [F012]

To get respect out on the street you should like not get all fucked up with all kinds of guys and do stupid things in front of guys . . . or going out with your friends and her getting into a fight and you causing it but running away and leaving her there. Make sure you can control your drugs and if you drink, just don’t get too fucked up. Don’t make a fool of yourself. [F23].

At times, they can be more judgmental regarding other girls’ respectability than their male counterparts. Excessive drinking and drugging are defined as disreputable because like flirting and sleeping around, a young woman is likely to get out of control and become sexually promiscuous. This evaluative stance among homegirls is not surprising as others have noted that ‘what is most significant about the stigma attached to sexual reputation is that young women police each other . . . Such policing has material effects in constricting young women’s . . . expression of her sexuality and her freedom of action—her independence’ (Lees 1997: 35). As in Lees’ study of English girls (1997), we find gang girls spending a great deal of energy ‘bitching’ or casting doubt on others’ reputations. This cross-cultural process operates not only as a mechanism of social control, but also of distancing and confirming one’s own reputation.

Louisa, a 19-year-old Latina, vividly recalls why her group of girls broke off from their former set but continues to see the same problem with the younger members of her

current gang. As she sees it, the ‘problem’ is the sexual promiscuity of other members, which reflects poorly on the respectable girls in the group (like her). *Their* conduct gives them a ‘bad name’, and gives rise to sexual harassment.

We use to belong to the Down Town Nortenas. They have guys and girls. Then we broke off from the girls, calling them the Down Town Max cause the girls were just real slutty, real hos, and it was like all the girls that respect themselves, that demand respect. We started our own group . . . These younger girls are out there being slutty with this guy and that guy, it makes everybody look bad, you know? Couple of the girls are real loose with their bodies and when we’re kicking it with the guys, they start looking at us like . . . and we go NO HONEY. . . don’t even think of me like that. Then they get all pissed off . . . and they say, well your homegirl . . . Just cause she does, doesn’t mean that’s me. [F009]

Hey (1997) also finds that bitching serves as a significant cultural practice for white working class English girls in their attempts at ‘othering’. Othering or distancing carries enormous ‘incentives’, providing the means for claiming moral superiority, or more specifically, respectability over ‘bad girls’. In this way, othering reinforces one’s own identity and investments in femininity. In relation to the immediate group, othering strengthens the solidarity of members and at the same time, increases the conflict and competition with more peripheral members of the group and outsiders.

Despite the energy invested in ‘the way a girl presents herself . . . the way she acts around other girls and guys’ [F24], these young women are also confronted with the expectations and pressures of adolescence which often run counter to their efforts to be ‘respectable’. This contradiction is clearest in the girls’ desires to ‘party’, or more specifically, to drink and use drugs as noted above. Some of the Latinas and Asian-Pacific American females tend to avoid drinking and using drugs altogether, believing that these behaviours put themselves at risk of being branded by other homegirls and homeboys as being a ‘druggie’ or a drunk. Moreover, drinking and drugging are associated with promiscuity if a girl parties primarily with only homeboys. This 18-year-old Latina describes the setting:

I don’t drink. There’s a lot of girls who kick back, but they all get drunk and they be with all the guys in there so they wouldn’t have no respect for them. I wouldn’t let them disrespect me or tell me what to do. [F36]

Yet, with only a few exceptions, our respondents admitted that they had both experimented, and often regularly used alcohol and drugs (principally marijuana, but also *pingas* and crack cocaine). While a few of the homegirls reported drinking or using drugs in the presence of other homeboys and homegirls with little worry about others’ perceptions, most of the respondents devised ways to drink or use drugs and maintain their respectability. The most common practice among Latinas and Asian-Pacific American homegirls involves ‘safe partying’ whereby the girls watch each others’ back while drinking and drugging and at the same time, avoiding risky situations.

Like the drug use. It’s all individual. I mean you ain’t gonna go get high and drunk with some guy you just met you know. You gotta have your friends there to make sure you all take care of each other. We’re not supposed to be using pingas cause some girls ran into some problems, they got raped. [F39]

You gotta be open with them. If you think they’re doing something stupid, don’t be afraid to tell them. Tell them how it is. Make sure you’re there for them all the time . . . Like you want to party. Somebody is gonna care for you so once they see you getting a bit too drunk and a guy comes around and tries to like

try something with you. They won't let him. They'll be like, well you know she's wasted, you can't be talking to her right now. [F39]

Respondents rationalize the use of these strategies as a way to circumvent what they perceive to be the 'double standard' for young women. This suggests that the girls actively negotiate a distinctive sense of femininity, one that embraces normative notions of femininity, but also accommodates to the curiosities and pressures of a male oriented-adolescent culture.

Over half of the African American young women, and approximately one-fourth of the Latinas try to restrict heavy drinking or drugging as much as possible to private settings with only other homegirls. In this way, they do not risk negative evaluations from their male peers. Moreover, this partying with 'just the girls' provides freedom and privacy to explore issues of adolescence and femininity unhindered from male 'protection' and control. This private setting, usually at one of the girl's home or apartment, offers a venue for discovery, sharing and support.

One 17-year-old Latina recalls her first drinking session with her homegirls. They enjoyed themselves in this setting so much that it eventually became a regular custom for them to get together on their own to 'unload'.

The first time I drank, I drank with my homegirls at my house in the backyard and we were just drinking Millers. We got drunk. Fried. We had fun and then we started crying. So we went upstairs and went to bed. We were crying about whatever we was talking about. Now we pitch in, go to one of the girl's house, and kick back to drink. If you stay on the street, you'll get picked up. [F23]

Although girl gang members tend to provide each other with some degree of 'freedom' to party, they place distinct boundaries on what constitutes respectable behaviour. When a young woman (regardless of whether she is a member or an outsider living in the same neighbourhood) crosses the line from partying to chasing a high, female gang members define her in ways similar to male gang members. She is the antithesis of a respectable woman. Her drug use is not only out of control and 'unfeminine', but also ruins her sexual reputation because she is perceived to do 'anything' for a high. Many African American and Latina respondents refer to this 'type of girl' in sexualized terms like 'drug sluts', and 'hubba hoes', and rationalize their lack of empathy in this way: 'I can't respect a female that don't respect herself'. [G608]

Our earlier research also shows that female drug sellers hold similar moralistic views of women who have crossed over to become 'drug fiends' (Lauderback et al. 1992; Joe Laidler and Hunt 1997). Importantly, female drug sellers describe their own involvement in dealing as a vehicle for surviving (Joe Laidler and Hunt 1997; Venkatesh 1998). According to Dunlap and her colleagues' case study (1994), Rachel, a female crack dealer and user in New York was able to sustain an independent and successful business without resorting to violence and adopted ways to maintain her respectability to counter the image of her as a 'bad person'. Nevertheless, as Dunlap, Johnson and Manwar have pointed out (1994) women dealers as well as users are typically perceived as having crossed the boundaries of femininity and are stigmatized as 'whores' (1994: 7).

Given the girls' preoccupation with respectability, how then do we explain girl gang members' aggressive posturing and violence among girl gang members? How do we account for this paradox between their aspirations of 'being a young woman' and 'being bad'? At one level, female gang members' 'in your face' aggressive posturing is an

attempt to 'look bad', (as opposed to 'being bad'), and is part of an overall protective strategy to the dangers of a highly masculinized street environment (Campbell 1984; Maher 1997). The girls' participation in violence is an expression of youth resistance as well as a power struggle among a group who are constrained by their race, class and gender (Messerschmidt 1997). As the young women in this study overwhelmingly agreed, fighting brings status and honour in a bleak and limiting environment. At another level, however, their participation in violence is also one of the few available resources for defending their reputation as a 'decent' girl and confirming to others that they are 'nobody's fool'. Respondents indicate that one of the major reasons for female on female violence is due to the 'slutty' behaviour of others.

Q: What is the most violent incident you've been involved in?

A: When I hit this girl over the head with a bat. She had screwed my dude. I walked in on them. After that, that bitch got up, went outside. That bitch slipped up one day, and I busted her on the head with the bat. [HG16]

These types of violent incidents usually occur after the girls have been drinking among themselves. Respondents indicate that drinking loosens them up, and provides courage for confronting other females who disrespect them by coming on to their boyfriends and partners. Janine, a 20-year-old Filipina, recalls the last serious incident arising when she and her homegirl were on their front steps drinking:

This was one of them days that I happened to be getting drunk and my homegirl was too. And we was sitting there, and I accidentally slipped, 'Oh, I seen that bitch with your man'. She was like, 'What? Well, why didn't you tell me this before?' I didn't know what to do. I'm drunk and just telling all. She had just got up and she just went out . . . She dropped her little cup with some E & J, and just stepped up to the girl. And that girl wasn't going out like no punk. She said, 'I'm fucking your man, so what?' And my homegirl she just dipped off into her ass. [HG011]

Leticia, a 20-year-old African American woman, describes her most recent fight was with a woman from her neighbourhood who sold her a gold ring that turned her finger green. She found the fight unsettling principally because it occurred when she was dressed up and situated in a party setting.

R: My cousin said they was rolling around. But you see I wasn't really trippin' because I was on the corner with my uncles and aunties getting drunk and high. I was chillin'. I wasn't in no kind of fightin' clothes. I was in some heels and a good dress and had my nails and hair done.

I: Where were you coming from?

R: It was one of them days. I thought I would be cute for the guys outside. They come up behind my back talking about, 'Where is my money or my ring at?' I says, 'Excuse me? You better get out of my face with that'. She was helluva taller than me . . . I am little short stubby. So I had to duck. And just had to catch and just knocked her down. And then two hos came up and started jumpin' me on my back. It was one on one at first until the two girls came and got on me. They almost stabbed me until my uncle came. (HG23)

As gang girls move out of the family arena and into the domain of their female peers, it becomes clear that they construct a distinctive sense of femininity. For them, femininity is, on the one hand, tied to conventional middle class notions of respectability whereby

young women do not openly draw attention to themselves in appearance and conduct. Sexual reputation is at the core of their definition of female respect(ability). Public displays of ‘bad girl’ behaviour are condemned through ‘othering’ or ‘distancing’. On the other hand, gang girls would hardly accept total submission to normative notions of femininity. Being a young woman does not mean sacrificing exploration and independence. Hanging out and kicking back on the streets are an expression of this independence. However, gang girls also devise methods and rationales for engaging in behaviour more typically associated with their male counterparts on the streets like drinking and drugging. Importantly, however, the girls are always aware of the male gaze to the extent that they demarcate how far ‘respectable’ behaviour can be pushed, and vigilantly police themselves.

Interactions with homeboys and lovers

It is in the girls’ interactions with homeboys and lovers that they become fully aware of the power of the male view. Accordingly, the girls quickly learn that the males in their lives have a number of general assumptions about and categories of women, all of which can be understood in sexualized terms. Tomboys dress, act and are treated like one of the guys. They are counted on when there are fights. Bitches hang around, but are not taken seriously, as they are loud, overly aggressive and bring unwanted attention. Sluts are only around to be passed around. They ‘ask for it’, by getting loaded, drinking too much and flirting. ‘Good girls’ are the antithesis of the slut. They know how to have fun but is always in check and in control.

In light of the girls’ awareness of these definitions, and their own sense of femininity, how do gang girls understand their own relationships with homeboys and lovers? Our respondents uniformly agree that the men in their lives have certain conventional expectations of them. Natalie, a 24-year-old African American girl in an independent group succinctly summarizes this common view: ‘He just want me to *act like a woman*’ (her emphasis) [604]. The girls are very clear on what the men define as ‘acting like a woman’. One of her defining features is domestic. Many of the girls in the auxiliary groups complain that they are constantly cleaning and cooking when they hang out with the homeboys at somebody’s house, when they are partying, and when they have barbecues and picnics at the park. The girls’ reaction to these expectations varies with some accepting this ‘feminine duty’, and others completely rejecting and confronting the males with the ‘chores’.

In several of the African American and some of the Latina girls’ relationships with their lovers, however, there are additional expectations. As Tanya, a 23-year-old African American girl, makes clear, she is in a very strained and contradictory position. Her ‘nigger’ (her words) boyfriend not only expects her to fulfil the traditional domestic duties of a housewife, but he also demands that she bring in her share of the household income. When she doesn’t comply with both of these roles, he often resorts to violence.

He wants me to do everything for him. He wants me to cook his dinner, wash his clothes and shit, and he slaps me around when I don’t do it . . . Because I didn’t have his dinner ready when he came from outside selling his dope. And I didn’t have his tennis shoes, wasn’t white enough one time, so he beat me up . . . He is mean to me at times. He wants to control me. I go out to make money for my kids and he wants my money so he can invest it in his dope and get more dope. I am like what if somebody takes it off

him, where is my money. It is gone. He wants me to be just down for him and do whatever he wants. He wants me to sell dope for him. But I don't. I sell it for myself to make money for my kids. [G607]

Tanya, and others in similar situations to her, indicate that they try to fulfil the domestic duties for their boyfriends or lovers, but are unwilling to be 'duped' into giving their income, usually from drug dealing or shoplifting, to them. She works for herself and her children. As indicated earlier, the gang girl's negotiated definition of femininity is based partly on normative notions of the 'good woman' but also, because of her marginalized position, is grounded in notions of autonomy and self-reliance.

According to the girls, homeboys and lovers hold other traditional expectations of them. In particular, they should act within the confines of 'appropriate respectable behaviour'. The list of 'don'ts' include not to flirt with men, not to sleep with men other than your boyfriend, not to take drugs or too much alcohol, and not to be loud and foul-mouthed especially in the presence of 'others'.

The guys say is isn't right for one of the homegirls to be looking like *that* in front of people. You know we have parties. It isn't right or we look like sluts out there. [F12]

In their interactions with homeboys, the girls realize that this is a double standard to which they are held accountable. They also recognize the power associated with their homeboys' expectations. The consequence of completely defying or resisting these expectations is to be categorized as a 'bitch' or 'slut'. In the girls' interactions with her boyfriend, however, the consequences can be more severe, involving violence. Jenny, a 19-year-old African American woman, describes the fear she feels from her boyfriend's obsessive concern with her 'being a woman'.

I am afraid to look at other men because he is so jealous . . . He has a violent streak in him. He wants me to be passive all the time. He likes to speak for me, he likes to tell me what I should wear and how to act when I am out on the street with him. I don't like it, because I have my own personality. But if I try to say I don't like it, he wants to hit me. He thinks that it is his way of showing affection to me. We do fight, over me wanting to go out there and sell my dope. He wants me to give my dope to him. He gets jumped by the police and ends up in jail, and there goes the money for me and my son that I have to take care of. He pushes me around. Bitch you ain't shit, Bitch you can't go out. I am all kind of bitches but then I am supposed to be his woman. [G608]

Homegirls also recognize that homeboys and lovers constantly preach and regulate their behaviour in large part to protect their own image and status, that is, they don't want to be associated in any meaningful way with 'bad girls'. 'Bad girls' are simply for fun. But reputable girls don't make them out as fools. It is his image that is to be protected as 'master' rather than 'fool'.

Q: Are there any things that homeboys expect the women to do in the gang?

A: To watch out for themselves and not be just with any guy. Don't be with guy after guy after guy cause they don't like their homegirls to be talked about. And not to do any drugs. Doing drugs to make a fool out of yourself, they don't want cause they don't want people talking. [F23]

On partying, some girls, as noted above, try to avoid using or putting themselves at risk when partying with homeboys. Several respondents noted that not only did heavy partying put their reputation with the guys at risk, but it also presented dangers in terms of unwanted sexual advances and sometimes resulted in sexual assault. While some

homeboys try to take advantage of the homegirls when they are high, many girls report that the males took a protective and paternalistic attitude. Some girls interpret this paternalistic attitude as distinctively chauvinistic and took pride in resisting the homeboys' attempts to control them. Linda, a 24-year-old Chicana who reports moderately high levels of alcohol and marijuana use, reasons this way:

Yeah, the guys try to control us. They say, 'Hey girl, you know, slow it down'. But then, you know you don't like any guy telling a woman what to do, of course. So we just speed it up. Then that's when you start drinking faster and they're telling you this and that, and you don't like a guy to be telling you nothing while your drinking. And then you know conflicts start. Sometimes the guys even slap the girls to calm them down because everybody is all drunk and stupid. [F45]

Some of the Asian American homegirls also resist what they perceive to be homeboys' attempts at controlling them—in both their appearance and conduct. This 15-year-old Vietnamese girl notes the differences between her and some of the older girls. From her point of view, the older girls look more feminine, but are really to be admired for their ability to fight and defend themselves.

They [the guys] don't like it when we [the homegirls] dress like a guy with the baggy clothes. They will want us to wear dresses. They do! They go, 'You got to act more like girls'. We are all like a family. And then they tell us to act like a girl. Me and my best friend, we dress like a guy, talk like a guy, and they tell us talk and dress like a girl okay. We never dress like a girl. The older girls dress like 'girls'. You know how, like fancy and stuff that is how they dress. But they can fight too. [603]

It appears then that homegirls' definition of respectability involves both the adoption and rejection of some of the conventional roles of 'being a woman'. Yet it is important to point out that the girls' believe that autonomy and independence in their relationships with others, particularly males, are crucial to being respectable. According to several young women, independence means 'not being pushed around', 'having my opinions heard and counted', and 'standing up for what I believe in'. As Tanya and Jenny suggest, it also means 'taking care of business (to make money) so that we don't have to rely on anyone'. They have experienced too many disappointments with family and lovers.

Based on their interactions with homeboys, but particularly with lovers, the girls develop their own notions of men and masculinity as well. In their eyes, a man has to have respect for her as a woman and as an individual.

I don't like guys that don't have respect for girls. I wouldn't want to be with a guy that thinks of a woman that's less than a man is so he had to respect me. [F19]

We are looking for working men basically. Men that want to work and are going to be responsible. Like if they get us pregnant we want them to stay with us. We are looking for men that want to marry us hopefully one day. Whereas the men that we are left with are the street niggers that wear gold rings, wears gerry curls. You see, I am just with him because that is the environment that I am in, and I am trying to get out of this environment. I would like to have a man. Not no nigger that wants to beat me and makes me make money all the time and give it to him. I want somebody you know that cares about me and loves me, and loves my kids and helps me raise them, and give them a good family. [G07]

Despite these aspirations of finding a 'decent man' of someone who is 'nice', and has a job, many homegirls believe that this is only a dream as they do not have the resources to get out of their neighbourhoods to find a legitimate job nor meet a decent man.

Discussion/Conclusion

Good girls go to heaven but bad girls go everywhere. (Wurtzel 1998: 8)

The idea of the Madonna versus the whore has a long history, and has served the ranks of the middle class well as a method of 'distancing' the disreputable woman (that is, those from the working and lower classes). This patriarchal contrast of the 'good girl/bad girl' continues through the present, and permeates all social classes. As we have shown here, it serves as an 'othering' mechanism even among young marginalized women of colour.

The popular view of the gang girl today is someone who is essentially 'a bad ass'. She is similar to her male counterpart: aggressive, tough, crazy and violent. Yet as we have tried to show in this article, the young women in this study are situated in and must accommodate to the constraints of their structural position in society as well as on the streets. They are female, adolescents and young adults, of colour, poor, living under stressful family conditions and trying to negotiate a sense of identity, including what it means to be feminine. In other words, they *are affected by and affect* their structural position in society.

Our analysis has examined the girls' construction of femininity as they interact with family, other girls and young women, and with the males in their lives. A persistent theme throughout the analysis is the value the girls place on respect(ability). In all three interactional arenas we have looked at, their 'reputation' is one of the most salient markers of their identity as a young woman to the point that they would resort to violence to defend their status and honour. In their interactions with family, they expect their mothers and to some extent themselves to fulfil the normative roles of being female. Our respondents' experience a range with some parent(s) taking a traditional and controlling approach towards their daughters while other parent(s) have abandoned their daughters. Despite this variation, it is clear that the girls' evaluate their mothers' femininity and hold certain expectations about her respectability. In the girls' interactions with each other, they also construct distinct notions of femininity and respectability, and devise methods for resisting and exploring adolescence. As Hey (1997) rightly points out, female relationships are clearly structured in terms of patriarchal assumptions. Among the gang girls themselves, bitching, self-policing, and 'hidden' partying are clear indicators of the significance and ever-presence of the male gaze. The physical presence of males is not essential to the power and control they yield over females (Hey 1997). When homeboys and lovers are present, the girls are clearly aware of the importance of 'acting like a woman', but also define how far they are willing to do this, and refuse to give up their autonomy as individuals. For gang girls, respect(ability) in all three settings, means not only having a 'clean sexual reputation' but it also means being independent. The importance of independence must be underscored. In a recent historical analysis of court records, Davies (1999) found that despite the strong pressures of Victorian respectability in the middle and working classes, female 'scuttlers' in Manchester and Salford were relatively independent as they generated income from factory jobs and experienced some degree of freedom as they transitioned to adulthood and marriage. Given their presence on the streets and their sense of independence, these young working class women sometimes settled disputes and insults through physical fights in public.

What is the meaning then of gang girls' displays of 'toughness' or what Messerschmidt calls, 'bad girl femininity'? Their aggressive posturing is popularly perceived as an

attempt to 'become macho' like their male counterparts. As Miller's study (1998) shows, however, young women are clearly aware of the gendered nature of the streets, and their robbery strategies take this into account as they target other women who are less likely to fight back, manipulate men by appearing sexually available, or working with male partners. Their own perceptions of their involvement in the violent crime of robbery varies with some adopting a masculine identity and others contending that they are not criminal. Our respondents' experiences suggest that there are a number of reasons for 'acting bad' and for engaging in violence. To some extent, 'looking bad' (as opposed to 'being bad') is a protective strategy to the patriarchal environment at home and on the street. It is also a defence mechanism for coping with their 'emotional vulnerability and perpetual disappointment' (Hey 1997: 97). It is also a form of resistance to informal controls on their attempts to explore adolescence and femininity, and for demonstrating a sense of power in an environment that provides them with little status. In this connection, gang girl violence is also one of the very few resources for defending one's reputation as respectable. This is not to say that some gang girls may engage in violence for other reasons.

Middle class girls, by comparison, have a range of resources for exploring femininity and defending a reputation. When middle class girls come together, they are popularly known by adults and their peers as cliques and friendship groups (as compared to lower working class girls who are seen as gang girls). It is in the clique that middle class girls negotiate femininity and adolescence. 'Being nice' as opposed to 'being bossy' means demonstrating 'reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing' (Hey 1997: 65). Middle class girls do draw on 'othering' or 'bitching' as a mechanism for demarcating others, but given their broader resources, they also invest a great deal of energy in exclusionary acts such as guilt and isolation, subtle but obvious displays of in versus out, and selective invitations to social activities and outings (Hey 1997).

This analysis has tried to demonstrate that the notion of the 'bad girl' is a complex one, riddled with questions of not only gender, but also class and ethnicity. Contrary to the idea that gang girls constantly engage in the construction of a 'bad ass' image, we suggest that the accomplishment of femininity occurs through interaction with others and is based in large part, but not exclusively, on acting and being respect(able).

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