

What We Don't Talk About

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As a young woman, I have been constantly bombarded with societal pressures from my friends, family, partners, and the media. With this multi-screen video I seek to address the experiences faced by the majority of women, and encourage people to eradicate the taboos that surround certain aspects of femininity and female adolescence. These videos illustrate the complexity and chaos of growing up as a female by depicting abstracted and stylized experiences of the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

The distinct color themes produce a powerful *mise-en-scène* of femininity, youth, and bedlam. Each video is inspired by a different female video artist: Chantal Akerman, Tracey Emin, Martha Colburn, and Candice Breitz. I borrowed techniques from each of them to make a series of videos, each with vastly different elements that still work in harmony. Though the themes and styles within each are unique, they create a cohesive piece on the complexity of female adolescence.

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Adolescence is defined by the internal struggle between authentic self and a false projection of self¹. The teenage years are pivotal in the development of a person's true identity, and girls are faced with countless pressures that make these years even more complex and difficult. Growing up is hard. Growing up as a young woman is harder.

The teenage years of a woman's life are when she goes through the rites of passage of becoming a woman and begins to deal with the challenges of being a woman. Though girls deal with societal pressures from the moment they are born, many pressures begin to affect women in their teenage years.

We need only look as far as our Declaration of Independence to see that women and men are rarely treated as equals. Jefferson writes, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." Equality is wonderful, and this statement is great in theory, but there is no mention of the equality of women. Women did not have the right to vote, they were restricted from certain college degrees, and a married woman had no control over her assets or her freedom². These restraints have since been abolished, but women still face problems of inequality. The expected role of a woman as a housewife, the wage gap, and rape culture are all social problems that diminish the rights of women.

I don't mean to say that men are terrible and have no hardships, or that the challenges that I and other young women face are the worst that any person faces, but I want to acknowledge, understand, and analyze female-specific pressures that can make a girl's maturing years confusing and hard.

I feel like I expect to "figure myself out" in this time in my life, to discover my unique identity, become a real individual, but I realize that doing so is difficult when I must fit inside the borders that society has set for me as a woman. I've conformed to the standards of my gender with reluctance for most of my teenage life, feeling like my true self is being masked by the pressures of femininity. But recently, I wondered if embracing and understanding these pressures and my own womanhood would not destroy my identity, but strengthen it.

When I turned thirteen, I was so excited to finally be a teenager, a woman, and to indulge in the opportunities that came along with growing up. I didn't expect to receive pepper spray in my Christmas stocking that year, or to see the story of a girl only a few years older than me who had been raped and had her naked, unconscious body photographed and distributed over social media, or to hear the term "whore" used for the first time in real life to describe the girl that sat next to me in math class. It is a big and scary world, and the task of growing up as a young woman is daunting, confusing, and even dangerous. I don't expect to become a master navigator of adolescence, but I hope that learning and teaching about what girls face as they age will give me the tools I need to do my best.

Section I: The Feminine Mystique

¹ Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Ballantine Books, Random House, 1995.

² Salmon, Marylynn. "The Legal Status of Women, 1776-1830." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, 2017

“The feminine mystique” is a phrase coined by activist and writer Betty Friedan in her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*. The feminine mystique is defined as the *false* notion that a woman’s role in society is to fulfill the sexual needs of her partner and to bear children. Friedan was a leading activist for women’s rights and feminism, and she wrote *The Feminine Mystique* to discuss these issues and institute change. Friedan uses her own personal experience and the experiences of other women to analyze how the feminine mystique affects women, specifically the suppression of their dreams and denial of their unique identity.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan describes the expectation that a woman’s end goal in life, her sole purpose, should be to settle down with a family and focus on mothering children and pleasing her husband. She states that “[t]he feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom’s wife...Mary’s mother’” (Friedan 71). Women needn’t have dreams, careers, or aspirations that do not align with their husband’s needs; they were expected to get married no later than twenty-one and leave behind any inklings of wonder they had about what their lives could have been. I wonder how fulfilling a woman’s life could truly be if she was not free to dream or, as Friedan goes on to discuss, even have a unique sense of identity.

Psychologist Erik Erikson used the phrase “identity crisis” to illustrate the point in a man’s life where he doesn’t know who he is or what he wants. This crisis was normal and expected, but it was strictly a man’s crisis. A unique identity was not required for a woman’s role in society. Her biggest aspiration was only to please her partner, and her position was predetermined, preset. There was no room for confusion. Friedan expresses her opinion on this issue, proclaiming, “In terms of the old conventions and the new feminine mystique, women are not expected to grow up to find out who they are, to choose their human identity. Anatomy is woman’s destiny, say the theorists of femininity; the identity of woman is determined by her biology” (79). Friedan explains the societal expectation placed on young women in the 1960’s to live their lives without questions about their own identities. When she says “the identity of woman is determined by her biology” she is suggesting that no matter what a woman wishes for herself, so long as she is a woman, she is expected to conform to this notion, to live her life according to the societal expectations of her gender.

Today, society has begun to encourage girls to follow their dreams and aspire to have a life that is more than being a wife whose purpose is to please her husband. But there is still an expectation that at some point women will settle down, many times leaving behind a career, to start a family. There are still career paths that women are often deemed “unfit” to participate in, such as engineering, military, astrophysics. As Friedan said of young women 50 years ago, Many young women still “slid[e] easily into their sexual roles as women before they [know] who they [are] themselves” (Friedan 76).

Sitting in our bedroom, my roommates and I laughed with both frustration and delight at the world. We had just watched Peggy Orenstein’s TED Talk “What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure,” the first inspiration for this project, and we were passionately talking over each other, sharing stories of the pressures that we faced as young women. We discussed the increasingly young age that girls are expected to become the sexual instruments of men, and my roommate said something that made us all fall silent and wallow in the truth of her statement: “Girls know how to perform oral sex before they’ve

ever even seen a penis, and guys don't think the clitoris exists!" And we all erupted in whoops of agreement. Young women are exposed to the pressures of sexual acts before they are ready, whereas many boys remain oblivious to the biology of women until they are forced to understand it. Girls are also pressured into and often perform sexual acts that they are uncomfortable. These acts are often ones that girls are unwilling to have performed on themselves and would not dare to ask for even if they did. The humorous yet stinging accuracy behind this statement proves the modern existence of Friedan's "feminine mystique" and its impact on girls today.

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Section II: Body Image

Look at the front of any woman's magazine and you'll probably see headlines like this: *Small is Sexy! Ass is Back! How to Drop 5 Pounds in 2 Weeks! How to Contour your Nose, Boobs, Hell Even Ears! Lip Plumpers! Waist Trainers! THE Best Diet Pills! Brazilian Waxes!* Body image is the ruler of the young woman's life. We are constantly pressured to change the way we look to conform to mainstream beauty standards. These ever changing beauty influences condition girls to be uncomfortable with their bodies and feel that they have to alter them. Girls are bombarded with images of beautiful models with long legs, small waists, smooth skin, thick hair, and symmetrical faces. We are taught to believe that this body shape is the epitome of beauty, and we should strive to achieve this regardless of personal preference, comfort, or our own health. Our society has normalized beauty so that the best compliment a girl can receive is "You look pretty today". But what is beauty, and how do the societal standards of beauty diminish a woman's femininity and unique sexual self?

Losing weight is the leading cause of happiness in women.³ With over half of US women feeling unhappy with their bodies, weight is one of the most widespread insecurities in females. Size zero supermodels cover billboards and runways, using their seemingly perfect bodies to advertise clothing, makeup, even cars. Even though the average American woman is five foot four and weighs 166 pounds⁴, the average model is five foot nine and weighs 114 pounds⁵. It doesn't make sense that a body type held by less than 10% of the female population is the one society uses to advertise clothing⁶. There is a very specific body type that fashion companies advertise their clothes with, but this niche body type does not exist only on billboards. "One size fits all" brands like Brandy Melville design their clothing to be worn by tall, thin girls like the ones they employ to model their apparel. This "one size fits all" mentality suggests that a small body, the size that these clothes *actually* fit, is the ideal size, the only "good" size. The pressure to be thin follows us everywhere, and it is obvious that our society has a weight body image issue. Twenty four million Americans have an eating disorder, but only 10% of those people are

³Castillo, Stephanie. "Glamour Body Image Survey Shows Social Media Is Making Women More Insecure." *Medical Daily*, Newsweek Media Group, 21 Oct. 2014 www.medicaldaily.com/glamour-body-image-survey-shows-social-media-making-women-more-insecure-307599.

⁴Cloe, Adam. "Average American Woman's Weight and Height." *Live Strong*, 18 July 2017, www.livestrong.com/article/357769-weight-height-for-the-average-american-woman/.

⁵"What Is the Average Model Height and Weight?" *TSM Agency*, 23 Apr. 2017, www.blog.tsmagency.com/average-model-height-and-weight-requirements/.

⁶*Beauty CULTure*. Directed by Lauren Greenfield, 2011. *Vimeo*, vimeo.com/152227272. Accessed 11 Dec. 2017.

receiving treatment.⁷ These illnesses often stem from low self-confidence and body image issues. When thin bodies are on the front of every magazine, girls are taught to idealize that body type and take any measures to get there.

From the time girls are young, they see hairless women everywhere. Shoe commercials show smooth legs and bathing suit models sport clean-shaven armpits. Women are expected to remove all their body hair soon after they grow it. While most women remove the hair from their armpits and legs,⁸ the hairy area with the biggest taboo is the female genitalia. A study done by Indiana University showed that only twelve percent of girls ages 18 to 24 do not alter their pubic hair in any way.⁹ A similar survey released by *Cosmopolitan* found that while only twelve percent of women expect their partner's to completely remove their pubic hair, forty six percent of men prefer their partner's be bare.¹⁰ This difference could be based simply on preference, but it may also suggest that girls are expected to exceed their own expectations for their partners. Women are urged to remove all of their body hair and are brainwashed to justify this by deeming it a choice. Some women have subjective reasons for this "choice" saying that removing their pubic hair is more comfortable for them, but according to an online study conducted by UCSF, over half of women say that they remove pubic hair for hygienic purposes, despite the clear evidence that pubic hair actually protects against bacteria and viruses. Women are pushed to remove their body hair by media and men, and as girls grow up surrounded by smooth-shaven women, they are taught to feel shame in their body hair. In all simplicity, women wouldn't have hair if we were supposed to remove it.

The changes we make to our bodies stretch all the way from hair dye to pedicures and make a stop at labiaplasty. Plastic surgery as a whole is a market that young women pour millions into to have their appearances altered, but possibly the most disturbing of these surgeries is labiaplasty. Labiaplasty is the fastest growing cosmetic surgery among teen girls;¹¹ it's a plastic surgery procedure that removes skin from the labia, usually for cosmetic reasons. This procedure is growing in popularity as women with small labia minora fill the porn industry, thus creating a society of men who expect to see perfectly proportioned labia and women who want to fulfill this expectation. Not only can the procedure cause bleeding, scarring, swelling, and infection, it can also decrease sexual sensitivity and pleasure. The labia minora have hundreds of nerve endings and erectile tissue and when this tissue is removed, that sensation hotspot goes with it. It is appalling to me that the pressure put on women to make themselves look perfect can even urge them to alter their genitalia to look like a plastic doll (the most sought after labiaplasty look is called "The Barbie").¹²

⁷ The Renfrew Center Foundation for Eating Disorders, "Eating Disorders 101 Guide: A Summary of Issues, Statistics and Resources," published September 2002, revised October 2003. Accessed March 2, 2014. <http://www.renfrew.org>.

⁸ Toerien, M., Wilkinson, S. & Choi, P.Y.L. *Sex Roles* (2005) 52: 399. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-2682-5>

⁹ Castleman, Michael. "Pubic Shaving: Which Women? And Why?" *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 15 Sept. 2015, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/all-about-sex/201509/pubic-shaving-which-women-and-why. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

¹⁰ Thomson-DeVeaux, Amelia. "40 Percent of Men Have Asked Their Partner to Change Their Pubic Hair." *Cosmopolitan*, Hearst Communications, 26 Apr. 2017, www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a9535211/pubic-hair-removal-trends-stats/.

¹¹ Orenstein, Peggy. "What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure." TED. October 2016. Lecture.

¹² Orenstein, Peggy. "What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure." TED. October 2016. Lecture.

As I sat in a circle of friends at a slumber party, an alarm on one of my friends' phones went off, and she announced that it was time to do her squats. She tried to justify these 1am squats by saying, "I need a thigh gap". Earlier that night she had refused herself a slice of pizza and asked us if we could fit our hands around our thighs, and now she had gotten all our friends, including me, to join her workout. We were in sixth grade, still wearing training bras, and worrying about if our legs touched when we stood up.

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Section III: Sexual Pleasure

For many young women, their teenage years are when they first have sexual experiences, and it is valuable for women to be able to discuss their experiences with others who can relate. One night, a few of my friends and I were laughing over relationship stories when one of my roommates told a story that got me thinking. She had had a sexual experience with a guy, and she wasn't being pleased. The guy got upset with his performance, and she felt the need to console him and apologize as if it was her fault. She expressed her confusion with her own actions, asking us, "Why am I feeling bad that he can't make me feel good?" The truth is, young women are conditioned to devalue their own sexual enjoyment. Movies, television shows, and even sex ed classes often put more focus on male sexual pleasure than female sexual pleasure, and it is easier to measure male sexual pleasure because their erections and orgasms are visible. Peggy Orenstein aims to give women's sexual pleasure more worth in her lecture "What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure" which confronts issues surrounding female sexual pleasure, the taboos of female genitalia, and sexuality.

Orenstein discusses the idea of "intimate justice," psychologist Sara McClelland's term to describe a subject of sexual social politics¹³. It suggests that sex is both personal and political and raises issues of inequality that deal with economic disparity, violence, and physical and mental health. Intimate justice pushes us to consider who is entitled to engage in a sexual experience, who is entitled to enjoy it, who is the primary beneficiary, and how each person defines a good experience. These questions are complex and often intimidating to think about, but Orenstein justifies the importance of intimate justice by saying, "when we're talking about girls, I just kept coming back to the idea that their sexual experience shouldn't be something that they get over." Orenstein challenges people to think about the message being sent to young girls about sexual experiences and the value of their pleasure. We need to teach girls that they have the right to enjoy themselves.

Even when women professed satisfaction with a sexual experience, McClelland found that "young women were more likely than young men to use their partner's pleasure as a measure of their satisfaction. So, they'd say things like 'If he's sexually satisfied, then I'm sexually satisfied'.¹⁴" Young men on the other hand were more likely to use their own orgasm as a measure of their sexual satisfaction. Young women also described "bad sex" using words like painful, depressing, and humiliating, whereas young men rarely think of any sex as bad, and if

¹³ Orenstein, Peggy. "What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure." TED. October 2016. Lecture.

¹⁴ Orenstein, Peggy. "What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure." TED. October 2016. Lecture.

they do, it is because they did not orgasm. It seems that young women have extremely low expectations for their sexual experiences, putting less focus on their own pleasure. If we want young women to have fulfilling sexual experiences, we should encourage them figure out their preferences and boundaries and make their own sexual experiences about them.

Unfortunately, to most girls, exploring their own sexual pleasure through personal experimentation is unheard of. Peggy Orenstein expresses her opinion on this issue, stating, “No surprise, fewer than half of teenage girls age 14 to 17 have ever masturbated. And then they go into their partnered experience and we expect that somehow they’ll think sex is about them, that they’ll be able to articulate their needs, their desires, their limits. It’s unrealistic.” Girls do not learn about sexual pleasure the way that boys do in sexual education classes or from their parents. Our culture raises girls to be uncomfortable and unfamiliar with their bodies. They think that masturbation is dirty or unnecessary, so they never take the time to explore their genitals. We then expect them to go out into the world to have fulfilling sexual relationships, to know what they want, and what sex should feel like. We take this opportunity for experimentation from young girls, yet we encourage it and normalize it in boys, further widening the gender gap in all areas of society, including the bedroom.

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Recently when looking through old journals and notebooks, I found a list titled “To-Do When We Turn 16” that I had made with my friend when we were around twelve years old. It included driving, going to the beach and into the city alone, getting a job, and, to my surprise, having sex. I was shocked that such an intimate sexual act was sandwiched between “grow 3 inches” and “wear makeup” on a checklist. It made me realize how I had thought, like so many young women think, that sex was just another thing to get over, something with strict boundaries and a deadline. I wasn’t worried about why or how it happened or if I enjoyed it, I just wanted to do it and let it be done. I’ve subconsciously held onto that mentality in some way throughout my life. Even though I no longer think of sex as an obstacle to conquer, I do undervalue my own sexual pleasure. I feel pushed to engage in sexual acts that are uncomfortable and that I would be too embarrassed about to have reciprocated. My own personal pleasure takes the backseat in these situations, and I become twelve again, just trying to get things over with.

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Section IV: Sexual Assault

When I go to parties, my parents always tell me to watch my drink, stick with my girlfriends, text them if I decide to go somewhere else, never get in an Uber alone, and make smart decisions. When my brother goes to parties, he is only told to make smart decisions. The difference in our pre-party prep is derived from a concern for my safety which is a sad reality for my gender. Ninety-one percent of victims of rape and sexual assault are female.¹⁵ This is a matter of safety.

¹⁵ Rennison, C. A. (2002). Rape and sexual assault: Reporting to police and medical attention, 1992-2000 [NCJ 194530]. Retrieved from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics

Generally, sexual assault is defined as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient.”¹⁶ This can include forced sexual intercourse, forced sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape. I can think back to stories shared between my close friends of guys grabbing and kissing girls as they said stop, or pushing girls down and holding their heads in place as they were forced to perform oral sex. Of course, many men are also the victims of sexual assault, but 98% of female victims and 93% of male victims are raped by men.¹⁷ There is no avoiding the fact that rape, sexual assault, and sexual violence are gendered problems. It is dumbfounding that after the hundreds of thousands of rapes that occur every year, we teach girls all the methods to avoid rape but don’t teach boys not to rape. Only twenty-four states require public schools to teach sex education, and these curricula rarely, if at all, teach consent.

One in five women will be raped in their lives.¹⁸ One in four girls will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old.¹⁹ Eight out of ten rape victims knew the person who sexually assaulted them.²⁰ Though these statistics may seem harsh and blunt, I don’t know a better way to illustrate the gravity of rape culture. Even though it is such a prevalent issue, rape is still not treated with the attention of a real, pressing problem. Rebecca Solnit illustrates this point in her essay, *Men Explain Things to Me*, stating, “there is a backlog of about four hundred thousand untested rape kits in this country” (Solnit 32). Each untested sexual assault evidence kit is a lost opportunity for justice and closure for a rape victim, and the enormous backlog sends the message that our justice system does not care about these victims.

The trauma of sexual assault and sexual abuse can haunt victims for years. Survivors often experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation, and flashbacks to the incident. Many survivors would benefit from counseling, but the stigma surrounding sexual assault prevents many survivors from stepping forward. It is believed that only 15.8 to 35 percent²¹ of all sexual assaults are reported because of shame, fear of not being believed, and the cultural perception that the victim is to blame.²²

Victim-blaming is when the actions of the accuser are used to move fault from the assaulter to the assaulted.²³ Wearing revealing clothing, consuming alcohol or drugs, just being at a party, or being alone on the street at night can be used against a victim. The phrase “asking for it” is often used in situations of sexual assault to move fault toward the victim and away from

¹⁶ “Sexual Assault.” *The United States Department of Justice*, 16 June 2017, www.justice.gov/ovw/sexual-assault. Accessed 26 Nov. 2017.

¹⁷ Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., ... Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

¹⁸ Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., ... Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

¹⁹ Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I. A., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics and risk factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 14, 19-28.

²⁰ Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S. C., & Cote, A. M. (2010). False allegations of sexual assault: An analysis of ten years of reported cases. *Violence Against Women*, 16, 1318-1334.

²¹ Due to the difficulty in collecting reliable data, the statistics of unreported sexual assaults can only be estimated.

²² U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, M. Planty and L. Langton, “Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010,” 2013; Wolitzky-Taylor et al, “Is Reporting of Rape on the Rise? A Comparison of Women with Reported Versus Unreported Rape Experiences in the National Women’s StudyReplication,” 2010

²³ “Rape Culture, Victim Blaming, and The Facts.” *Southern Connecticut State University*, www.southernct.edu/sexual-misconduct/facts.html.

the sexual predator, even though the very definition of sexual assault is that it is a nonconsensual sexual act performed by an offender.

Sexual assault a terrifyingly real issue that women must be aware of everywhere they go. It is a pressure that women deal with their entire lives but that becomes especially real and prevalent when young women are teenagers and start gaining independence and freedom. At some point, we must go out into the world and protect ourselves from the harsh reality of sexual assault, supporting our women who are survivors, and trying not to become one of them.

It was three am, the moonlight illuminated the silhouette of my best friend as she slipped into our bedroom door. I remember the feeling of her arms heavy around my neck, the sound of her soft sobs muffled by my t-shirt. My stomach still twists when I think about her voice, cracking and quivering as she recounts the night to me. The image of her sitting by my side, a suddenly frail mess of tears and shame, is burned into my mind, branded into my memory by the boy who broke her. I have never felt so much sorrow and so much hatred. I wanted to tell her that I understand, really. One day I will.



This research opened up new questions that I had not previously considered, such as do boys experience this, how can I create an outlet for women to connect on these issues, and what can I do to initiate change in the way these pressures develop in our society.

The pressures that young women face make their adolescent years especially challenging; girls grow up and take on the responsibility of being a woman while still searching for who they are. Our society should address these issues and work to erase the stigmas they carry. I hope that sharing my experiences and the experiences of other women will both educate people and build connections with those who also deal with these issues.



“Dear God," she prayed, "let me be something every minute of every hour of my life. Let me be gay; let me be sad. Let me be cold; let me be warm. Let me be hungry...have too much to eat. Let me be ragged or well dressed. Let me be sincere - be deceitful. Let me be truthful; let me be a liar. Let me be honorable and let me sin. Only let me be something every blessed minute. And when I sleep, let me dream all the time so that not one little piece of living is ever lost.”

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

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