

Girlhood, Sexualities, and Generational Modernity

Ida Fadzillah Leggett, PhD (Middle Tennessee State University)

Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu

I am honored to write this column for the *NEOS* issue centered on “Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations.” The topic fits my own research that spans fieldwork conducted from 1996-1998 on teenage girls in Thailand to my current focus on Western girls’ imaginaries as shaped by fictions and fantasies of their future. What these research foci have in common is the emphasis on girls’ own words, capturing girls’ agency in their interpretations and performance of identity in situations of everyday violence and powerful institutional forces.

Beginning with my dissertation fieldwork in rural Northern Thailand, my work is informed by “generational modernity,” based on Lisa Rofel’s idea of multiple modernities (1999) and Castro’s concept of “generation” emphasizing that “generational power differentials between girls and boys must be specifically investigated within hegemonic, patriarchal societies to truly understand the intersection of gender with generation in the girlhoods and boyhoods of childhood” (2019, 265-266). It refers to girls not just as a sex/gender and age category, but also a category that is tagged to a specific historical/political moment in time. Thus, the generational modernity of the current generation of girls — the generation of my daughter — is different from the generation of my mother. This concept emphasizes that history is important, and technology is important, as are the cultural assumptions about gender of the day.

In my research, traditional studies on gender in Thailand had tended to categorize women as “good” (mothers, factory workers, wives) or “bad” (cosmopolitan, sexually active, with boyfriends). But this image reflected adult ideas very different from those held by girls who — unlike previous generations — were being exposed daily to images of the wider world through stories and goods sent to the village from relatives working abroad. Girls perceived new standards and possibilities and now desired lives more previously associated with “bad” women than with “good.” Girls now wanted to be able (socially and economically) to wear the clothes, make-up, hairstyles, and jewelry they see in international media images and to have foreign lovers and husbands and beautiful *luuk-khrung* (half-white) children (Fadzillah 2003, 217). Placing the narratives of girls’ desirable sexuality within the politics both of the day and society help us better understand how issues like violence, care, consent, and success are embedded within a specific cultural moment.

Importantly, sexuality influences both the interpretations about girlhood as well as the actual experience of girls. Female sexuality has been vigilantly monitored in many societies, and the “pure” female has long been held by many as the sign of morality not just for the individual but also symbolically for the culture as a whole. Some examples include the surveillance of young women’s behavior in wartime in Hegarty’s (2008) *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and*

Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II; Tolman's (2011) exploration of how not long after the concept of adolescence came into being, adolescent girls' sexuality came under heavy surveillance; and Sur's (2021) example of surveillance of girls' sexuality in Indian schools. In my Thailand research girls were routinely criticized by the community for exhibiting inappropriate behavior, especially girls seen in "inappropriate" situations with boys. For example, in an announcement at the secondary school morning assembly the principal blared over the loudspeaker, "Yesterday, one of our female students was observed sitting on the back of a motorbike with a boy not from the school. She had her skirt hitched up, and she was holding on to the boy. This is not proper conduct for a girl. All of you here should not engage in this behavior, it is immoral. Do not ride on motorbikes with boys who are not your relatives." Thus, girlhood sexuality need not be actually "sexual" to be judged and condemned.

Girls who are expressing interest in sex, romance, and relationships, and who are exploring gender identities different from the cultural norm, are seen as treading dangerously towards disgrace and disaster and need to be controlled. Given these societal fears of girlhood sexuality, as well the acts of sexualized violence performed against girls, it is imperative to recognize girls as individuals who are thoughtful and articulate about their own lives, who have their own stories, who are able to tell their own stories, who express their own empowerment, and who participate in their own emancipatory projects. And, it is more important than ever to collect and understand girls' own words about their own opinions and experiences of sexuality, violence, consent, and identity. How are today's girls navigating this new world? Through the examples of the articles in this issue, we are provided with a good place to start answering this complex question.

References

- Castro, Ingrid E. 2019. "The Spirit and the Witch: Hayao Miyazaki's Agentic Girls and their (Intra)Independent Generational Childhoods" in *Representing Agency in Popular Culture: Children and Youth in Page, Screen, and in Between*. Edited by Ingrid E. Castro and Jessica Clark, 255-282. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Fadzillah, Ida. 2003. *You Take the Good and Leave the Rest Behind: Northern Thai Adolescent Girls and their Narratives of Future Possibilities*. Dissertation submitted to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Hegarty, Marilyn E. 2008. *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sur, Piyali. 2021. "Discipline and Surveillance: Adolescent Girls Talk about Body and Sexuality: A Case Study from Kolkata, India" in *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22 (1): 401-416.

Tolman, Deborah L. 2011. "Adolescent Girls' Sexuality: The More it Changes, the More it Stays the Same" in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Nancy Fischer, Laurel Westbrook, and Steven Seidman, 153-158. London: Routledge Press.

Author Biography

Ida Fadzillah Leggett is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Middle Tennessee State University. Originally from Malaysia, her research focuses on girl cultures, experiences of refugee youth, the intersection of cultures and fictional worlds, and anthropological narratives on affect and emotion. Her publications include "Negotiating Dangerous Spaces: Encounters with Prostitution and AIDS in Northern Thailand," (2008), "Girls' Agency through Supermobility: The Power of Imagined Futures in Young Adult Fantasy Literature," (2021) and the co-edited volume on "Field Stories: Experiences, Affect, and the Lessons of Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century" (2021).

Author contact: Ida Fadzillah Leggett, PhD (Middle Tennessee University),
Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu

To cite this article: Leggett, Ida Fadzillah. 2023. "Girlhood, Sexualities, and Generational Modernity." *NEOS* (15) 1.

To link this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol15iss1spring23/leggett/>