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## Born in the Welfare Society: Individualising Gender With Monica Rudberg

### Towards Degendering Work and Care

*They take turns doing it, it depends who is busy, they're very good at ... taking turns. He's mum's dishwasher, as she likes to call him since my dad often does the dishes. He vacuums if he's got time off, or if mum hasn't had time to do it, but ... it's mostly mum who does it since she's at home during the day, she usually works evenings and nights. So during the day the flat is empty and then it's very easy for her to do it while nobody is running around ... My brother and I always have to vacuum and tidy and dust our rooms ourselves, mum doesn't touch them. The only thing she says is, 'you're not allowed out of this house until you tidy your room, because now it looks bloody awful'.*

*Q: Are you thinking about leaving home?*

*It's sort of in the back of my mind ... but ... not something I've sort of gone and wanted to do, because things at home are quite nice and all right, sort of.*  
(Beate, 18)

Beate comes from an urban working-class family. In her family both parents have always worked full-time and they have also shared the care for

their children and the housework in their small city apartment. Beate perceives it as equally shared and mainly as a practical matter, but indirectly conveys that her mother is the main person responsible. She also thinks her mother is the boss at home. Beate does not mention any unequal treatment of her and her younger brother, whereas her mother Berit admitted in the interview we had with her that she tended to ask Beate to help more at home than her brother because she is so much easier to ask. Beate tells us that the family members have a lot of fun together when they go out to eat or on holiday, but also at ordinary weekday dinners at home—which are not every day as some of them may be at work or busy with other activities—when they can all sit and tell jokes and laugh their heads off for hours.

All the 34 informants in this generation are born around 1972 and grew up in Oslo. We do not find any clear class differences in how the parents share work and care. What they describe mirrors the mixed practices that we just heard about from their parents, but with less attention to the gender divisions. Many in the youngest generation have been taken care of outside the home before they started school at seven, reflecting the high prevalence of working mothers. The different variations of private and public care they talk about reflect the lag in daycare facilities in the 1970s. Full-time kindergarten was the most prevalent solution in our middle-class families, whereas being at home with the mother before starting school is seen more often in the working-class families, albeit not in the majority of cases. In some of the more gender traditional middle-class families, the mother also stayed at home for a few years.<sup>1</sup>

How did the parents' historically new gender practices and their struggle with gender equality affect the young generation's experience of work and care in the family? A first observation is that the mothers' work outside the family is as visible in the interviews with this generation as the fathers' role in upbringing and care. Yet there is a tendency for fathers to be more in charge of following up the offspring's sporting activities and

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<sup>1</sup>A radical shift in attitudes to daycare occurred in the 1980s, the decade of mass movement of mothers into the labour market. Whereas in 1979 only 21 per cent of parents with pre-school children thought daycare was good care for children, 50 per cent thought so a decade later. The rise reflects a cohort replacement, but is also related to the mother's education. The fact that a majority of our youngest generation attended daycare in the 1970s reflects the high educational level of mothers and that they grew up in Oslo, where the daycare coverage was best (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007: 663–665).

driving them back and forth to leisure activities, and for mothers to do more of the daily nitty-gritty care work, like checking homework and making sure there are clean clothes to wear to school (see also Holter and Aarseth 1993; Aarseth 2008). Behind the assumed gender neutrality, it is the mothers who in most families are described as having the main responsibility for the housework. Still, for the youngest generation there is nothing strange, comical or special about men doing housework, as was the case in the previous generation. Housework is not per se feminised, even though women do more of it than men. The organisation of work and care in the family may explain the lack of explicit gendering of money and consumption, which we saw in their parents' generation. Even though fathers in general earn more than mothers—because mothers more often work in the public sector and fathers in the private sector, or because there is more part-time work among mothers—this is not associated with and not primarily understood as a gendered pattern.

Having two working parents, or living with a single parent, also means that this generation of children assist much more in the household compared with what most of the parents did at that age. This is also confirmed in studies of time use from the period when this generation grew up.<sup>2</sup> At 18, both women and men in the youngest generation say that they help out at home with things like tidying up, vacuum cleaning, emptying the dishwasher and cutting the grass. Paul, who is upper middle class and the only one with a mother at home (she ran her own business from home), is the sole informant in this generation who says he never helped out at home. At 30, he regretted this as it had taken him so long to learn these necessities of life when he moved out. Daughters more often than sons mention specialised tasks like doing laundry, cooking and baking, and some of them complain about the low level of their brothers' proficiency in housework. However, only one young woman, Tonje, said that she was expected to do more work than her older brother. Sons of fathers who participate on a more equal footing with the mothers tend to give more detailed descriptions of their own chores, which may indicate a higher

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<sup>2</sup>In the mid-1980s, Norwegian 10–12-year-olds helped out in the household nine hours a week on average. Children with working mothers or highly educated mothers did more than children with stay-at-home mothers, and girls did two hours more work a week than boys (Solberg and Vestby 1987).

level of skill: they occasionally may cook dinner, clean windows, clean the bathroom or hang out the laundry. Helge's son Henrik, who is upper middle class, even knows how to knit. But also the 'in principle men' of the middle generation appear to be quite active in making their sons do their household duties. The working-class father Geir, who admitted he did less at home than his wife, monitors his son Glenn on his duty to vacuum the house. In spite of the girls' generally higher level of skill, it seems fair to say that taking part in the housework is relatively degendered for this generation of children. The chores may be felt as more or less boring, but none of the young men describe them as feminine or something they should not do because they are boys.

All this indicates that gender norms with regard to housework have moved, even if practice is lagging behind. Housework has become less gendered partly because mothers now combine it with paid work outside the family and partly because the other family members participate, or think they ought to. This may lead to a masking of practices that are in fact still gendered, but it may also contribute to a degendering on a symbolic level when such gendered practices are interpreted as an expression of individual preferences. In fact, the youngest generation's quite paradoxical feelings of gender reflect both. They praise their mothers' skills (more than their fathers') in gendered areas like cooking, gardening, childcare and interior decoration (in addition to her career), but are very careful to assure us that this is *not* an expression of a gender order. Daughters say that even though their mothers may like housework, they do *not* have 'dust on their brains', and sons describe their mothers' greater share of housework as an expression of their individual likes and dislikes.

Some of the young men and women from middle-class families remember elements of the non-sexist education of the 1970s, for instance, in the kind of toys they were allowed to have (no Barbies for girls, no guns for boys). These rules may testify to the intentions some of the more radical mothers had of giving their own children a more gender-equal upbringing than they had had themselves. Many of the fathers also seem to have adopted this educational goal, for instance, by supporting their daughters in sports and criticising their sons for being too lazy with housework. However, the pressure towards more gender-equal norms in the family may also sometimes come from the children themselves. The gendered

division of work and care has lost legitimacy in the eyes of most of the young women and men, and not to share the housework has become a sign of injustice and being embarrassingly outdated. Mothers who stayed at home with the children when they were little or fathers who do too little around the house are criticised—or explicitly excused by reference to unfortunate circumstances—by their children, or both. It is especially the middle-class girls at 18 who are very sensitive towards the mismatch between norms and practices. They criticise both lazy fathers and inconsequential mothers. Guro, whose parents share the housework relatively equally but do different tasks, remarks caustically that her father ‘*makes himself helpless*’ in the kitchen and has to be told 15 times how to turn on the dishwasher. In the interview at 30, however, she thinks that they were ‘*unusually gender equal for that generation*’. Hilde, whose parents share the work meticulously, is critical of her mother’s limited insight into the family economy and of her father playing more football with her brother than with her when they were younger: ‘*it was because I was a girl, I’m sure of that!*’ Tonje, the daughter of Turid, who finally had to give up getting her husband to participate in household work, tried to make work schedules where all household tasks alternated between the family members. To her indignation, her father just signed the schedule as ‘Sisyphus’. Frequently it is the mother who is made responsible for the lack of gender equality in families with a traditional division of work. Pia says this about her mother, who tried to get her husband to participate more, but eventually gave up:

*I like to call mum a really good gender equality theoretician, but not so good as a practitioner. She has been in the gender equality committee at work and stuff, but I don't think she's been quite as good at it in practice at home. (Pia, 18)*

For most of the men in this generation, and also for those of the women who grew up working-class and later became middle class, the critique of their parents’ gendered division of work is rather formulated as adults and in light of their later experiences. For instance, Morten, who comes from an upper middle-class family with a traditional work division, says at 30 that he had liked the fact that his mother stayed at home when he was little, but that he later realised that it didn’t make him independent

enough. Anders, who grew up working class, had a mother who stayed at home until he was 16. In the interview at 18 he said, with a little laugh, that this was quite nice because *'then you got food'*. In the second interview, at 30, he distances himself from that kind of old-fashioned gender pattern, but also partly excuses it as a possible preference of his mother's:

*There were husband tasks and wife tasks, according to the old standard. She did everything. Can't remember having seen my dad vacuum a single time ... but my mum likes to keep things tidy, so she ... it wasn't exactly terrible. They did the dishes together, otherwise she mostly did everything. (Anders, 30)*

Stine's working-class mother, Solveig, stayed at home with the children for many years, and Solveig emphasised herself in her interview that she was not a housewife in the same restricted way her own mother had been, but was engaged in the local community. At 18, Stine was very supportive of her mother's choice and wanted to do the same. At 30, however, when she has become a preschool teacher, she is more critical of her mother and says that she is a quite controlling figure in the family, and that she is not able to see things outside of her own perspective.

In light of the parents' gender battles and the many divorces, it may be surprising that their children actually describe their families in a much more positive way than the parents described their own stable parents. In this generation the relationship between parents and children has moved towards partnership and support rather than being a relationship of authority.<sup>3</sup> We see this in the many negotiations between parents and children and the exposure to the adults' quarrels, as well as in the allowance for the children's critiques of the parents (for instance, as we have heard, not living up to the standards of modern gender equality). We see it in the children's empathic perspectives on their parents' problems, whether it is divorces, marital problems, difficulties in their jobs or hav-

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<sup>3</sup> Bengtsson also describes this distinctive new kind of relationship between parents and children in her generational study. The young women and men born around 1970 describe an emotionally open family: 'They talk about open conflicts and antagonisms between the generations, but also about much warmth, happiness, freedom and humour between parents and children' (2001: 178, my translation).

ing chosen the wrong profession. Vilde's way of describing her middle-class father, who actively took part in the childcare, exemplifies the tone:

*I feel, and I think dad does too, that he hasn't been able to do what he wanted to do because he hasn't listened to himself. He has done what others, when he was young, advised him to do. [So when he applied for a new job it was] a way of realising his dreams. (Vilde, 18)*

The atmosphere of this new partnership in the family is also present in the way that the daughters especially describe the family first and foremost as a relational universe. It resembles Giddens's concept of "pure relations", a modern logic of love and intimacy between spouses where one stay together not because of practical reasons or moral or material necessity, but because the relationship is experienced as emotionally satisfying in itself (Giddens 1992). The idea of pure relations may also have contributed to the deconstruction of generational borders: as emotional and vulnerable human beings, we are all equal. The marked lack of expressed sibling jealousy in this generation also points in this direction. Some of those with divorced parents feel that the parents are softer and less demanding towards younger half-siblings, but they also '*understand*' that the context has changed and appreciate being seen as grown-up.

The mutual obligations of partnership combined with busy, working parents have also, as we have already seen, brought children's work back into the family, but tasks are related to what is needed in the family rather than gender. In this way one could say that the *mentality of individualism* that we saw emerging in the middle generation has now actually acquired some *traits of collectivity*: everyone should do what they want, but since some work simply has to be done, everyone should also contribute. This does not necessarily work smoothly between children and parents: after the debate about the appropriate time to come home at night, the most frequent topic of quarrels between parents and teenagers is the issue of tidying up. The debate is not about whose responsibility it is, but about who has the right to tell others when and how it should be done. The process of degendering work tasks also leads to the necessity of considering a more general principle of justice.

New norms of gender equality influenced not only families in the 1970s and 1980s, but also, and much more explicitly, schools. Gender researchers in and outside of Scandinavia provided the first descriptions of male dominance in the classroom in the 1970s, and in the Nordic countries the 1980s became the decade with a strong official gender equality policy at school. Girls assumed a stronger and more active position in the classroom in this generation (Öhrn 2002; Nielsen and Davies 2008). In our sample, many of the men in the youngest generation report either being unruly in school or having academic problems (working class) or being too lazy, but still clever (middle class), whereas only a few of the women felt uncomfortable in school. Still, both women and men in this generation share the understanding of the necessity of an education. The young men who experience academic problems at school know that there are few alternative routes to success. For the young women, the necessity of an education is experienced almost as a duty in a context where it is expected for a girl to be autonomous and have a career. The women aim higher than their mothers: they want good educations and good careers, and in this way they display higher ambitions and a stronger achievement orientation. The favourite educational choices of their mothers—secretary, teacher, librarian and nurse—are almost non-existent in the aspirations of their daughters. So are the efforts to adapt their career plans to a future family. When asked why she entered high school, Jorunn's daughter Jenny, who is middle class, answers: *'Well, that's what you do, isn't it? ... and if I was doing it, why not choose the best school?'* Their choices of education after high school are more varied than what we saw in their parents' generation. Nevertheless, the majority still chooses relatively gender-typical or gender-neutral educations and the class difference is clear: both girls and boys from middle-class backgrounds go for more extensive education than working-class girls and boys.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>These patterns of educational choice are also found in national statistics (see, for instance, NOU 15 2012).



## Respect: Identification with Parents as Individuals

The youngest generation's descriptions of their parents are more varied and differentiated, and in some way less emotional than those we heard from the previous generations—there are fewer conflicts and expressions of strong sentiments like admiration or anger. Asked if she admires her mother, Elsa's daughter Eva, who is middle class, says: '*admire and admire, I respect her*'. The parents emerge as fully fledged persons with good and bad sides, as fallible humans rather than idealised or rejected psychological objects in the narratives. Feelings of identification or disidentification with a parent are understood in terms of the parent's personality rather than of his or her gender. Often the young women and men pick and choose different parts of parents and other figures they identify with when they describe their own personalities, without always being quite aware what comes from where. Still, the most marked change compared to the previous generation is that we see less emotional disidentification with the same-sex parent (see also Bengtsson 2001). There are some similarities in the positive way in which the youngest generation relate to their parents with the identification patterns of the eldest generation: not only in the positive attitude to the skill sets of their parents, especially the same-sex parent, but also in some of the men's more muted images of and the women's warmer relationships with the opposite-sex parent. However, less prominent mothers may now also be seen as strong figures and not as victims for whom their sons should feel sorry, and warm fathers are not always the main figure representing a bigger world to their daughters. In any case, both identifications and disidentifications with parents are now filtered through the basic idea of 'being yourself'.

## Sons: Fathers as Doers, Mothers as Talkers

The men in the youngest generation resemble their grandfathers in that they talk much more about their fathers than about their mothers. Almost all of the young men are fond of their fathers and describe in detail their personalities and activities, their good sides and where they have potentials for improvement. For instance, Egil's son Erik, who is lower middle

class, says about his father that: *'He is quite sorted. He pretty much knows what he's doing. He has quite a good temperament, I do too, actually.'* He goes on to describe his father's abilities in sports and how he has supported Erik without putting pressure on him. He thinks their relationship is good, but also that his father works too much and that they could spend more time together.<sup>5</sup> The young men tend to see themselves more on a par with their fathers. Whereas the oldest generation talked about personal traits as being 'transferred' to them down the generational chain and the middle generation used the phrase 'to be like' one's father or mother in a more personalised way, several of the middle-class men in the youngest generation turn the generational hierarchy upside-down. Magne from the middle generation talked about how he inherited moral values from his father, whereas his son Morten says about himself and his father: *'We are different people, but he is quite like me in many ways.'*

Some of the older fathers are targets of much of the same critique as in the previous generation concerning their outdated masculinity and emotional closure, but the critique is more conciliatory because the sons now know them better as persons. Rune, the son of the upper middle-class Ragnar who described a rather distant relationship with his sons, confirms that they do not talk a lot, something Rune wishes they did. He says his father has a certain *'air of a general-director'*, but also that he is *'of the old, kind sort'*. Anders says about his old working-class father Arne:

*He is like the definition of a 1950s–1960s type dad, who likes detective novels, and his car, and fixing things, or building things ... He is a man totally devoid of interests, in a way, I've never understood that about him, I've never quite gotten him ... It is hard to describe him, very kind, very practical, conservative.*  
(Anders, 30)

The fathers are described as much more present than in the previous generation. This presence not only make the sons' critiques of them more

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<sup>5</sup> According to the *Gender Equality and Quality of Life* survey carried out in 2007, men from cohorts that match our middle and youngest generations say that they would have liked their fathers to be more present in the family. For those born from the mid-1980s onwards, the number drops—probably reflecting the fathers' increased presence in childcare from this period of time (Holter et al. 2009). See also Brannen (2015) for similar findings among men in the UK.

balanced, but also allows for a more uninhibited identification with what they feel to be positive sides of their fathers' masculinity. Glenn says that he likes his father's authority and that he has more respect for him than for his mother. When his father sends him or his brothers to their rooms, then he knows who is in charge: '*you just know that he's been there*'. He identifies strongly both with his father Geir and his grandfather Gunnar: '*I belong with them.*' Another father-identified son is the middle-class boy Trond, the son of Trygve, who worked part-time to care for the children in the family. He describes his father through his love for nature and hiking, his rationality and intellectual orientation, and as one who defines happiness as '*having a family*':

*He has many of the traits that I have, I think. He reads this intellectual Danish newspaper [laughs]. He is—I think he is a sort of man of reason. He is halfway intellectual. And ... he is quite wise, I think. He has a lot of wisdom. I have a very positive view of him, he can help me with essays and many weird things ... He has meant a lot. He has maybe—he has influenced me a lot. Many of the thoughts I have, I have probably adopted from him. (Trond, 18)*

The present father is a *doing* father, not a talking one—or if he talks, it is about sports, politics or intellectual issues. The middle-class sons see their father as knowledgeable and intellectually stimulating discussion partners, as we heard from Trond, but they rarely talk about personal or emotional things. At 30, Paul says that he and his father like each other's company and that they discuss a lot of political and moral issues, but he still find the father's emotional intelligence limited. Paul judges himself to be more in touch with his own feelings and better at 'seeing' other people. Even the three young men who grew up with the participating fathers—Trond, Henrik and Vegard—find their fathers somewhat emotionally limited. Henrik, for instance, thinks that his father '*doesn't get to show a lot of his feelings*'.

The lack of communicative skills shown by fathers seems to be relatively unchanged, in spite of the fathers' critique of their own fathers in exactly this respect. For middle-class boys, this is seen as a shortcoming, whereas working-class boys appear more comfortable with it because they see themselves in much the same way. Erik says: '*It's not like—father and*

son sitting down having a father-to-son talk in the evening, we have never done that. Never been big talkers, any of us really.' None of the sons report a negative relationship with their mothers, and the middle-class boys in particular think they resemble her as well in some ways: 'I have gotten a bit from mother and a bit from father', Trond says. This identification with both parents may also be the case in families where the mother has a more traditional role in the family or the father's masculinity is seen as outdated: Morten says that he is 'a dreamer like my father' and that they share many fields of interest, but that he is more like his mother, who was a stay-at-home mum for many years, when it comes to logic, structure and leadership. Anders finds his mother more intelligent and interesting to talk with than his old-fashioned working-class father. Still, the mothers' qualities are seldom elaborated upon and analysed in the same intense way as those of the fathers. The description of the mother is less pronounced and sometimes laced with a somewhat condescending tone. Mothers are more often than fathers described primarily in the context of the sons' needs: she is kind, she may help with school work and she is often the one with whom they can talk about emotional issues. Most of the sons feel emotionally closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Where fathers emerge as the parent who does things, mothers emerge as the communicative ones. On the more negative side comes the mothers' obsession with tidiness or a tiresome tendency towards control and nagging. But in contrast to what we saw among the grandfathers, we do not hear about the subdued mother for whom to feel sorry. In the narratives of the sons, she is rather taken for granted as the kind and understanding person she is. This may be a result of their young age, but it probably also reflects the fact that modern mothers who have their own life outside the family rarely fit easily into the role as victim.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of working mothers and more present fathers in this generation, the different roles of mothers and fathers in the eyes of their sons are surprisingly unchanged. Fathers do, while mothers talk and feel. Even when a father does his half of the childcare and housework, his mascu-

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<sup>6</sup>Margot Bengtsson (2001: 169) finds that the mother is generally seen as the dominant personality in the family in this generation.

line assets of knowledge, wisdom and tough outdoor activities take up most of the description of him. But talking and feeling are not inherently perceived as incompatible with the masculine doing; rather, it is something the young men value and would like to see more of in their fathers. Yet it is something that comes in *addition* to the doing, not something that should replace it.

## Daughters: Responsible Mothers, Warm Fathers

The talking and the doing are not quite as divided by gender in the young women's descriptions of their parents, but the ways in which mothers and fathers combine doing and talking are seen as different. Mothers are described as accessible for talk and practical care, but also as important conversation partners and advisers to their daughters. The mother emerges more as a separate person in the women's narratives compared to the men's. Mothers are seen as competent at their work and in organising the family, as well as responsible and engaged in a lot of things. For instance, two of the women from the middle generation, Jorun and Grete, who reported very angry or difficult relationships with their mothers, have daughters, Jenny and Guro, who relate in a completely different way to them as mothers:

*My mother is very nice when you meet her, and very professional in her work. And she gets very angry when people don't do what they are supposed to do. There is no suffering in silence, or bending down your head; I can be like that too. I admire the way when she is stuck in something, then she really commits herself to carrying it through, not trying to escape from things like my father often chooses to do. But I'm not sure that what is right for her is right for me.* (Jenny, 18)

*Very spirited, not a typical [laughs] stay-at-home housewife, you could say, she doesn't fit being at home, she is the kind of person who needs to be out and about, and she is very young at heart.* (Guro, 18)

Most of the young women say that they take their mothers' combination of career and family as a model for their own lives, but they want better

education, different jobs, less stress, fewer divorces and more equal sharing of housework. Like the eldest generation, and in contrast to the middle generation, the women in the youngest generation place themselves in their mothers' world—however, since it is a world of both talking and doing, it is a world that is no longer so clearly defined by gender. In this way, the young women's identification with their mothers appears to be less gendered than the young men's identification with their fathers. It is also likely that the mothers' own borders vis-à-vis their daughters have become clearer than in the previous generation, not only because of the mothers' lives outside the family, but also because the daughters are allowed to test these borders through quarrelling.

A huge majority of the women in this generation report a good relationship with their mothers, but we still find more women than men who have difficulties with their parents, especially mothers. In these cases the mother is seen as selfish in the sense that she does not meet the needs of the daughter because she has prioritised her own career or a relationship with a new partner at the expense of her children. The daughters experience this as a betrayal and they often express ambivalent feelings of resentment and longing. One of the middle-class daughters feels abandoned by her parents after their divorce, but her sore feelings come up especially in her relationship with her mother:

*Maybe she doesn't care about it—like, doesn't care about my life ... I imagine that ... she has the ability to understand me and I have the ability to understand her because we are quite similar. But at the same time I feel a lot of the time like we don't understand each other too.*

Also in this generation, difficult relationships between mothers and daughters seem to be about boundary conflicts. The daughter feels that the mother is either too controlling or too detached—or both. Inger's daughter Ida said at 18 that she felt her mother overwhelmed her with her own problems. At 30 Ida described her as 'a typically emotional social worker who feels and reacts and thinks afterwards, and I don't really like that type of people, because I like people who don't explode all over other people's boundaries—but of course I love my mother too'. The relative power balance between the parents is also important: if the mother complains about

and is frustrated because of a dominant or non-participating husband, the daughter tends to see the mother as the problem and describe her as nagging and controlling. Other psychological studies of mother–daughter relationships have also found that there is no automatic link between working mothers and autonomous daughters, but that this depends partly on the mother’s capacity to combine autonomy and intimacy with regard to the daughter and partly on an equal relationship with the father in the family (von der Lippe 1988).

Almost all the young women in this generation talk about good relationships with their fathers too. Like the young men, they remember having lots of fun and doing activities with fathers. Middle-class daughters also identify with their fathers’ knowledge. If the father has higher education, he is often the one who emerges as the knowledgeable and intellectual person in the family, even when the mother has the same level of education. Jenny at 18, who is the granddaughter of Johanne who compared her father’s knowledge with an encyclopaedia, identifies strongly with her father’s intellectual skills tells us that she was given the nickname ‘*the encyclopaedia*’ in her class in secondary school. She sees herself and her father as the intellectuals in the family, and her mother and sister as the more social and emotional ones. Ida, who had a difficult relationship with her mother, says at 18: ‘*I am a clone of my dad*—they share a taste in music and are both rational and stubborn.

Quite differently from what we heard from the sons, fathers are often described as emotionally accessible by the daughters. They are more often depicted as warm, emotional, temperamental, generous, fun or a bit charmingly grumpy (see also Bengtsson 2001). This adds a tender tone to the young women’s descriptions of their fathers. Hilde, who otherwise identifies with her more intellectual mother, says: ‘*I have a lot of tenderness for my father, like. I always have. It’s a little strange...*’, whereas the description of her mother is more straightforward: ‘*I’m pretty happy with my mother. To put it like that.*’ Compared with the previous generation, the roles of mothers and fathers seem almost reversed in the eyes of the daughters, but with the important difference that a close father is less threatening to the girl than a close mother. Vilde, who has a father who worked part-time in order to share the care for the children, uses almost the same phrase about her father as Grete in the previous generation did about her housewife

mother: *'I have kind of... been the biggest thing in his life, I'm kind of everything to him, and he does absolutely everything for me.'* But the meaning has changed and now exemplifies how good the relationship is between father and daughter. In some cases the young women describe themselves as *'daddy's girls'* when they were little, but say that they identified more with their mothers when they came of age. Still, the tone is seldom as tender and loving when they talk about their mothers—here we also see a repetition of the experience of the eldest generation. The ambivalence towards the same-sex parent is also present in case of the young women in this generation: while it is always seen as a positive thing to be like one's father, being like one's mother is not always so. Middle-class girls characterise their parents as relatively equal in power and status (even if they may also criticise the father's laziness with regard to housework) or dominant in different areas. Conversely, we heard the working-class girl Beate put it more directly in that *'mum is kind of the boss'* and describe with tender irony her father as *'cowed'* or somebody who *'accepts everything'*. We may here see the return of the fragile masculinity of the grandmothers' stories, this time caused by the competence of mothers and daughters in fields that earlier belonged to men. Especially in the cases where the mother also exceeds the father in terms of education, the daughter describes the father with a mixture of irony and compassion. In cases where the father has little education, the young women often support him when he is criticised by their mother. Hilde feels that her mother tends to use *'dirty tricks'* against her father even if she is often right in terms of the point she is making. Stine says that her working-class father is not so clever in discussions: *'then I end up on mum's side, but other times I kind of feel like dad is so stupid that I have to help him along a bit, right'*. Keeping up dignified masculinity seems to be a project that the daughters and the sons share.

The tenderness towards fathers may to some extent disturb the young women's equality projects, for instance, through producing excuses for fathers' blameworthy neglect of housework or for not following up as divorced fathers. However, when we meet the daughters as 30-year-olds we hear more critical voices towards these fathers, sometimes in parallel with a process of sorting out relational problems with the mother. Only those fathers who were in fact good fathers—even if they did not do their share of the housework—have kept their adult daughters' admiration and



love. The reworking of parental relationships between the first and second interviews is much more salient among the women than among the men. It may of course reflect the fact that more women reported problems in the relationships with their parents at the age of 18. Yet it also applies to some of the girls who thought the relationship was fine when they were 18, but later found out that things were more complicated. As a result of this, we find a majority of women who at 30 either identify with both or with none of their parents.

## Gendering Bodies and Degendering Sexuality

Both women and men in the youngest generation talk a lot and in great detail about their bodies, and this interest in the body is no longer an exclusively female affair. Just like their grandfathers and fathers before them, the men in the youngest generation report that their bodily changes were gradual and that the puberty of girls is probably a much more dramatic affair, but they do actually have narratives of wet dreams, growing hair in the groin and armpits, and change of voice pitch. 'Puberty' is now a commonly used concept and regarded as a relevant topic also among the men and 'flaws' is a term that this generation of young men makes use of without any hesitation. Being small, too fat or having a small penis are frequent complaints—in addition to red hair and freckles, acne, a big nose and a tendency to blush. Anders, who at first denies having any bodily problems, ends up talking for a long time about his acne problems. The list of flaws indicates the relative preoccupation with appearances in the youngest generation of men compared to the previous ones or, perhaps more importantly, it is a preoccupation that they do not perceive as unmasculine. One bodily theme that is recognisable across the generations of men, however, is the matter of size. This obviously includes the size of the penis, where comparisons in the school shower are still mentioned as shameful experiences. But the issue of size is more general: to be '*tall for one's age*' or '*one of the tallest in class*' is referred to as an important asset, almost negating other flaws. Just like their fathers, the young men regard bodybuilding as a form of contemptuous and effeminate self-indulgence. Men who '*feel up their own muscles*' are '*icky*', Joar,

who is lower middle class, says. Vegard, who actually lifts weights and has developed his muscles, hastens to give a 'manly' reason for this activity; it is not in order to look good, but in order to be able to help out in a situation of need: *'I've always been afraid that if there's an emergency or something, this is a little sick ... I wouldn't be able to do anything ... I guess I exercised in order to be strong and to get some use out of it.'* The size and strength of the body is evidently an advantage in the competition between boys, but it is also seen as an asset when it comes to girls. Vegard had at times felt that he was almost objectified by girls: *'when I was 16, I was sort of the bodybuilding type. There were a lot of girls who I kind of dated, who were with me because of how I looked.'*

This fear of being objectified is significant, since it reveals the ambivalence associated with the new trend of bodily preoccupations.<sup>7</sup> Some of the men define—just like the male generations before them—any such interest as feminine, and remain indifferent when it comes to clothes and leave the shopping to their mothers. Others are interested in fashion, studying films and magazines for inspiration. Among the young men who are preoccupied with style, we also find those who are explicitly 'anti-fashion', which in some cases seems to become almost a mania to set oneself apart. Rune has a long coat bought at a flea market, demonstrating his boundaries both against his mother, who wants him to dress nicely, and against the socialists at school by actually putting on a suit, and finally against the conservatives (with whom he is politically aligned) by refusing to wear the expensive and exclusive brands that are their uniform. This is a case where the more general mentality of individualisation seems to be turned into a drive for uniqueness—a drive that is much more prominent among the men than the women in this generation (see also Bordo 1999). The young men in our study seem to be involved in a precarious testing out of the borders of modern masculinity, where a weak and vulnerable body remains problematic. It is therefore remarkable that they actually admit to such vulnerability to a greater extent than the generations before them and even invest in body projects in new ways within

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<sup>7</sup>The idea that men today are metrosexual narcissists is not confirmed by our youngest generation. The concept metrosexual was first used by Mark Simpson (1994), but became a media hype in 2002 when it appropriated by the advertising industry (Pedersen 2005).

some (masculine) limits. Nevertheless, they also seem to experience their bodies as rather self-evident facts. Seen in connection with their parental identifications, it appears that a close and positive relationship with a mother who cares for her son's body (also when it comes to his appearance, giving advice on clothes) and a father who is actively involved, for instance, in his son's sports activities promote a strong embodied sense of masculinity as self-evident.

Among the men of the middle generation, we saw an increased focus on the female body. This is a much more ambivalent issue in the youngest generation: at age 18, Stian stresses that *'boobs and thighs'* were more important to him when he was younger, whereas Henrik at the same age is clearly apologetic about the fact that a nice body on a girl means a lot since *'it shouldn't'*. However, at 30 the men admit that bodily gender differences are important—and that they were important at 18 too: *'you couldn't look like the back end of a bus and have a lovely personality'*, says Anders at 30, looking back at how he and his friends saw girls in high school. This emphasis on bodily difference is not seen among women to the same degree, so it may indicate that it has a specific significance in securing a sense of masculinity. At 30, Henrik does not feel that there are any differences in the skills and capacities of women and men, but at the same time he wants more intensity between women and men, and thinks that women should emphasise their femininity to a greater extent. He finds it difficult to explain what he means by femininity, but feels it has something to do with body, clothes and charisma. According to him, neither men nor women should dress in grey and try to become invisible, but he finds it especially problematic when women think that they have to behave and look like men in order to succeed in a career. Since he is clearly in favour of gender equality both at 18 and 30, this indicates that the issue of bodily and aesthetic difference in this generation of men is experienced as a separate aspect of gender, partly following its own logic, and not necessarily in tension with degendering in other areas, as it was for the men in the middle generation.

Among the young women, the generative body is no straightforward matter. The problem is not lack of knowledge as in the previous generations: they all know what menstruation is and most of them depict the transition as rather undramatic. The young working-class women

are even glad to feel grown-up and 'normal'. For the middle-class girls, however, the bodily transition is more disturbing: Vilde remembers that she was proud *not* to get her period since that meant that she worked out a lot, something her father appreciated. These middle-class girls are even more negative with regard to their menstruation than the women in the eldest generation. The period is characterised as '*a real bother*', '*hellish crap*', '*a little strange*', '*embarrassing*' or directly '*icky*'. Eva, who could shout across the classroom that she needed to borrow a tampon, tells us that she is completely disgusted by the blood. Across all three generations of women, bodily appearances and looks represent an area that is much less surrounded by taboos than generative development and maturing processes. The differences between the two eldest generations were a greater differentiation of flaws and assets, as well as a drastically increased energy (and resources) invested in bodily improvements. In the youngest generation the detailed catalogue of flaws is replaced with a general preoccupation, bordering on obsession, with the body's size, shape and weight (see also Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997). It is an issue that is strongly present in the interviews regardless of whether the women feel overweight or not. The vast majority have been dieting, and quite a few have, as one of them puts it, had '*a touch of anorexia*'. To almost stop eating makes one feel good, in control. Oda, whose mother as a young girl used to compare her weight with that of Miss Norway, first assures us that she does not have a problem with her body and then admits reluctantly that she often gets annoyed with herself if she eats without having worked out. On days like that she throws up:

*I was completely exhausted when I was doing ballet, and I just ate and ate and ate when I was done. I was so exhausted. And that's when I became dissatisfied and threw up. Oh! Yuck [silently].* (Oda, 18)

Others make it a point that they have never been on a diet. The awareness of fat seems to pervade the body images of all the women in this generation, but the experience of the body is still quite varied.<sup>8</sup> There is

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<sup>8</sup>There are specific class, family and generational histories that make some of young women more vulnerable to body norms than others. Studies have shown that they often come from the middle class, where there is the double pressure of being both pretty and clever at school (see Buhl 1990).

a stronger polarisation in the youngest generation where some women experience greater success when it comes to disciplining themselves, since there is hardly any indifference involved. The polarisation is also quite striking when it comes to social background. None of the women from working-class families report a negative relationship with their bodies, and most of the ones with a positive body image are mother-identified and have a positive relationship with an attentive father. Stine describes how she showed off her new dresses in front of her father, since he was '*the only man in the house*'. Reproductive and bodily femininity appears to be more threatening to middle-class girls. They also seem to receive more ambiguous messages from their parents, ranging from feminist celebrations of their first period to hints about watching their weight. Their relationship with their fathers is based on intellectual qualities than a positive evaluation of femininity. Perhaps it does not involve a direct devaluation of femininity, but rather neutralises its embodied aspects? The experience of gendered embodiment may therefore be a greater subjective obstacle for a father-identified girl than it is for a mother-identified boy. Feminine appearance is a demanding act of balance for a middle-class girl: not too little, not too much, and appropriate in time and place (see also Ambjörnsson 2004). The more or less suspect femininity that a young middle-class girl has to avoid in order to become a modern, autonomous girl might also no longer be represented by her own mother in the way it was in the middle generation, but rather might be experienced as a more obscure, inner threat to her perceived identity. The body that is so central to modern self-construction has become a potential enemy, which they either manage to control or that lets them down by being beyond their control (Rudberg 1995). Thus, in spite of the young men taking a much more active interest in their appearance, there are only sparse signs that men and women in the youngest generation have become more similar to each other in the way they talk about and relate to their bodies.

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Among our informants, the 'risk group' with regard to anorexic tendencies seems to be father-identified athletic girls from the middle class, who hate becoming what one of them describes as '*a proper female*'. At the same time, there is a female family heritage involved, sometimes going as far back as the grandmother's generation. Oda remembers how her mother used to stand in front of the mirror and complain about how fat she was, while her daughter who stood beside her clearly saw that *she* was chubbier than her mother.

When it comes to sexuality, there seems to be more degendering going on—both in practice and in norms: at 18, more of the women than the men have had heterosexual intercourse, which coincides with figures in national statistics for their generation (Pedersen et al. 2003). Many of the young women have had one-night stands; others had their sexual debut in a very short relationship that only lasted a few weeks. To have several partners is no longer regarded as a moral problem—although both genders are aware of the fact that girls who ‘*sleep around*’ get a worse reputation than ‘*players*’, which is an exclusively masculine term. The possibility of being the object of negative labelling does not seem to direct the young women’s behaviour to any great extent. They initiate sexual relations more often than their mothers did, or at least they feel that they *should* be able to. In practice it is still rare and is clearly felt as a risky business. The risks are evidently connected with fear of abuse, but even more with the fear of being seen as an ‘exposed girl’ (Nielsen and Rudberg 2007). To the young women in our sample, an ‘exposed girl’ is *not* a girl who has several partners, but rather a girl who has sex to please others, not because she really wants to. They insist that when and how to have sex is seen as an individual choice. The ones who ‘wait’ until they are in a steady relationship do not argue in terms of morality (like their grandmothers) or risk of pregnancy (like their mothers), but in terms of what they felt as right for themselves. The young women still connect love and sex, but not as strongly as the middle generation. We can actually see some signs that love is becoming more problematic than sex for the youngest women. Eva loudly proclaims that ‘*sex is fun!*’ and positions herself as a sexual subject, even asking one of her male friends to ‘*deflower*’ her because she thought she was being left behind at 16. Still, the cheerful facade seems to cover up many painful complications: to have sex with someone you love is definitely risky. Eva gets ‘*uptight*’, ‘*deadly nervous*’ and prays ‘*God, let him want somebody else*’. The fear that she shares with other middle-class girls is to lose herself in a heterosexual relationship (see also Kleven 1992, 1993). To fall in love implies being open and vulnerable, with the danger of being evaluated and rejected on account of something experienced as genuinely one’s own and yet totally out of hand. ‘*In a way I want to have the upper hand, I don’t want to care about them as much as they care about me, if you know what I mean*’, Anja says. This may indicate that the

newly gained autonomy in young women has to be safeguarded and that especially heterosexual relations are still connected with the danger of dependency and asymmetry.

These changes seem to appear somewhat paradoxically at the historical moment when at least some of the men are heading in the opposite direction, striving for an integration of sex and intimacy. The tendency to reject the idea of one-night stands is in our data actually more pronounced among the young men. Emphasised in their arguments is the importance of '*feelings*' in order to have '*good sex*'. The crucial thing is to know your partner well, Kim says, which makes it possible to open up and tell each other about one's needs and desires. One-night stands are therefore condemned as '*a cut between the head and the heart*', as Henrik puts it. Joar and Vegard also describe their own sexual debuts on one-night stands as horrible—Joar got a stomach ache but felt that he had to oblige, while Vegard felt directly attacked:

*Suddenly she's pulling my arm, you know, and she drags me into the room, and you know, I totally panic, right, and then ... we were going to try and stuff, but it didn't work because ... she was a bit tight.* (Vegard, 18)

However, this also reveals that these men are still ambivalent towards female initiatives (see also Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2007). Some of the working-class boys mention girls who are sexually frivolous or unbearable when they get drunk. The middle-class boys think that sexual morals ought to be gender-neutral. Some of them actually prefer active girls, not least because that also reduces the risk of getting rejected. That a girl should be sexually active and initiate a relationship is not only accepted but also even demanded by most of the young men, since sex should be a reciprocal affair:

*I remember once when ... when she just lay down and waited for me to do everything. I just put my trousers back on and went to sleep on the sofa, 'I can't be bothered with this, the doormat belongs outside' ... I don't want it just to be me, only thinking about myself.* (Vegard, 18)

Thus, it seems that sexuality for these young men should be within a relationship in order to be enjoyable. This clearly goes against the trend in the previous generation of men who defined sexuality as an uncontrollable and almost brutal urge when they were the same age. However, the integration of love and sex among the men does not mean that sex gets reduced to intimacy. Vegard, who is among those who most emphatically underline the importance of feelings in order for sex to be good, is also quite certain that it involves two different dimensions:

*Well, I don't feel more attached during the sex act or anything like that. It's more that I feel safer and things like that, if you can hold each other and cuddle and stuff ... I feel like when you sleep with someone, it becomes more ... cold, like, because you don't get the same connection, because then you're busy with something else than thinking about each other ... but of course it is, I don't know [laughs] maybe there's something that you have to get out of your system, kind of [laughs] ... then you can fall asleep in each other's arms afterwards. (Vegard, 18)*

There is much less desire involved in the descriptions of sexual encounters among the women, and their characterisations are actually not so different from the ones given by the women in the middle generation. Many of them depict their first time as a painful affair, involving blood and horror, while others laconically state that it was no great experience. In addition to Eva, who proclaimed that '*sex is fun*', only Stine, who also had a painful first time, actually describes sexual excitement where '*the bodies live together*'. When feelings enter the picture, women still tend to talk about sexual experiences in relational terms, as the ultimate intimacy, sometimes as a testimony to their erotic power over the boyfriend, in addition to being a way to feel grown-up. The sexual experience itself is not highlighted, and we recognise some of the instrumentality from the women of the previous generation, although not as explicitly. The question is whether explicit sexual desire is still defined as a masculine affair even though both norms and practices are more degendered and individualised. Does this imply a gendered inertia when it comes to questions of the body and sexuality that seem to go slower or even resist other degendering processes?



However, neither such inertia nor the emphasis on sexual difference among the men influences the attitudes to non-normative sexualities in this generation. As with Magne in the previous generation, sexual difference and heterosexual choice are seen as a question of one's own individual taste rather than as general norms. It may actually be the other way round—that increased diversity also reduces the heterosexual choice to being one among other possible choices and thus legitimates the talk about experiences of sexual difference. When asked about homosexuality at 30 and whether this was an issue that occupied them in high school, the answers illustrate that the 1990s was the decade when gay and lesbian rights were on the agenda and the first steps were taken towards cultural and political inclusion.<sup>9</sup> At first many of them said that they had neither thought nor talked much about it around 1990. At the ten-year reunion for their high school class, it had turned out that two girls from one of the classes were in a same-sex civil union, which had come as a complete surprise to everyone. Some had, however, known gay people from sports, political organisations or colleagues of their parents', and had whispered with others about it. It was also clear from what some of them said that homosexuality was indeed present in school and among their peers in the late 1980s, sometimes as a bit of a worrying issue. A gym teacher in high school had been openly lesbian and at that time the students thought it was odd, one woman even remembering it as '*icky*'. A few had experienced that a close friend had come out as gay or lesbian and remember the awkwardness they at first felt about it. They had needed time to reinterpret their friendship, but it never led to a break. Those who were late in getting a boyfriend/girlfriend remember wondering silently if they might be gay or lesbian. At 30, this timidity towards the issue had disappeared. Most of them now had gay/lesbian friends and colleagues, or had experienced that a parent or a spouse came out as homosexual or bisexual. They do not condemn non-normative sexualities, but struggle with defining new rules of relationships. One man in our sample had a wife who had come out as bisexual and who had argued that this also made him free to have sexual

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<sup>9</sup>The law on registered partnerships of same-sex couples was adopted in 1993; same-sex marriage was legalised in 2009.

relations with other men. As he did not desire other men, he could not see the great justice in that. They later divorced and he says that: *'I think I'd choke if my next girlfriend reveals that she's bi, that's like ... if she thought I'd think it was really cool, I don't think she'd get the desired reaction.'* One of the women in our sample had had a short affair with another woman in London in her late twenties, but realised that she was not really sexually attracted to women. She finds women more beautiful than men, but she does not desire them. One of the men told us at 30 that he had felt insecure of his sexual identity when he was in high school (something he did not tell anybody at the time) and that he had gone a few times to gay bars in his early twenties to find out if he was sexually attracted to men. He chose to engage in heterosexual relations after that. He says that he now feels secure in his heterosexual identity, but that he knows that it is possible for him to fall in love with a man. Henrik, who emphasises his attraction to sexual difference, also says that he loves to flirt with both women and men, but that Norwegian men are not good at it. Thus, also in their attitudes towards non-normative sexualities, we recognise this generation's combination of attachments to gender difference, gender variability and individual choice.

## Individuality and Gender

The combination of partly degendered, partly still gendered structures and practices, and the belief in individual preferences creates many paradoxes in the reflections on gender in the youngest generation: gender exists, but is irrelevant, or should be irrelevant, or maybe not? Gender is experienced as less of a straitjacket in this generation and a returning claim is that it is really up to each person how he or she wants to be, regardless of gender. This seems to match well with their interpretation of the work division in their families, and also with the feeling of gender we heard about in relationships with their parents: seeing themselves as a combination of their parents' personalities and interpreting identification with same-sex parents as non-gendered. The working-class boy Anders says about his general experience of degendering:

*The roles have become blurrier now. You're not expected to fill a particular role. Earlier it was like that, you were supposed to be and do like your father, it was divided back then, it was boy and girl. Now the roles are much more blurred. You can become what you want and be what you like.*

*Q: Do you find that easy or do you think it's difficult?*

*No, I think it's easy. You can, well, do exactly what you want to do, there's no ... yeah. (Anders, 18)*

The problem of the middle generation—knowing what kind of man/woman they did *not* want to be, but not knowing what they wanted instead—has more or less disappeared. Both women and men in the youngest generation can talk at length about what kind of person they are or want to be, and this is mainly expressed in gender-neutral terms like being open and honest, social, active, easygoing, independent, flexible, stubborn, talkative, depressive or good-natured. The emphasis lies on *'being oneself'*. For the working-class informants, being oneself is most often equivalent to being relaxed and ordinary and not intolerant of others. For middle-class informants, it is elaborated on as being a special person, unique and not easily fitted into predefined identity boxes to do with gender, political opinions, clothing or lifestyles (see also Simonsen and Ulriksen 1998; Jensen 2001). There are gender differences, however, in how this desire for uniqueness is expressed. Among the women, it is about being authentic and coherent, the person you *really* are; among the men, it refers to being different and unpredictable, to be free, courageous and surprising or even provocative. The point of not fitting into a box is stressed by combining identities that others may see as incompatible: to be an intellectual *and* a surfer, to be serious *and* a hedonist, to like music or films that are normally seen as contrasts, or alternately to defend right-wing and left-wing political views to confuse others about one's political stand—*'I don't like being a stereotype'*, Anders says. We saw the same in Rune's ruminations about what to wear. They admire other boys who are *'interesting personalities'* in this way. In only two of the women—both middle class and both strongly identified with their fathers—we find some of the same desire to be special and provocative to others.

Gender also exists on more explicit and quite stereotypical levels. Even though both men and women are at pains to explain that these

stereotypes do not apply to everybody, that people are individually different, the ways in which they describe the positive and negative traits of girls and boys are rather uniform. The good thing with girls is that they are often smart, more social, and can talk about emotions and personal issues (thus, boys should try to be more like this). The bad thing with girls is their tendency to talk behind people's backs and making drama (which girls should try to do less). The bad thing with boys is that they often try to appear tougher than they really are and that they are not good at talking about emotional issues (at which boys ought to be better). The good thing with boys is that they are more active, direct and straightforward, and that they can have more fun (thus, girls should try to be more like this). The only thing women and men seem to disagree on is that the women tend to emphasise girls' greater maturity and responsibility, whereas men find this a myth and an expression of girls being too serious all the time. Compared with the previous generation there is more emphasis on both positive and negative traits in both genders, which makes it easier to pick and choose one's own self-construction or ideals.

Among the women, femininity is extended and redefined in many different ways. Eva, for instance, defines femininity as something that may be combined with independence and dignity. Her ideal woman is '*a liberated woman who does what she wants in life and who doesn't let herself be dominated by other people nagging and stuff, but who is simultaneously feminine and, in a way, keeps her feminine side*'. In their gender-neutral self-descriptions, the middle-class girls tend to stress ambitious and independent aspects, while the working-class girls emphasise the social and outgoing aspects of their personalities. The irrelevance of gender is also seen with regard to sibling rivalry: the girls may feel overlooked in comparison with new siblings, especially half-siblings from their parents' new marriages, but they almost never interpret this in terms of gender, like we saw among the middle generation. Thus, the general picture is that the young women generally perceive themselves and others in terms of individuality, but that gender still occupies secure ground when it comes to looks and appearances. For the working-class girls, dressing in a feminine way is a positive thing—'*to radiate that I am a woman*', as Stine expresses it—and most of them also prefer men who look and behave in masculine ways. Most of the middle-class girls, on the other hand, distance

themselves from an overly feminine style, which they associate with being ‘*dumb and blonde*’: ‘*trousers pulled up, and, like, wearing a lot of make-up, and ... doing the secretary-track, no clue about politics*’ (Ida) or ‘*shopping centre girls, very common, with a lot of make-up, who quit after high school and things like that*’ (Nora). The middle-class girls do not look for dominant men, but rather their ‘equal’, and prefer men who are gentle and emotional—something they tend to think is the case with many men if you just get behind their facade.

When we meet the young women at 30, their experiences were that gender held more significance in the world than they had thought at 18. Some of the middle-class girls—not least those who chose ‘masculine’ educations and jobs—had experienced a contradiction between their educational or occupational choices and their alleged potential as girlfriend material. Ida had found out that ‘*a great way to escape men who harass you is saying that you study physics!*’ Or, conversely, when Tonje goes to a bar and wants to meet someone, she never says that she is a doctor, but just that she ‘*works at the hospital*’. Then the men in the bar automatically assume she is a nurse. But quite a few of them have also experienced that they were more influenced by traditional gender patterns than they had expected, especially when it comes to men. Some had experienced being swept off their feet by infatuations (and ignoring their work in such periods) or they had become submissive to dominant men in ways they hardly understand in retrospect. The majority of them say at 30 that they have experienced life to be more complicated than expected, not least with regard to gender and their trust in their own strength. Guro, who chose to study natural sciences, says:

*I guess I was extremely confident! [laughs]—before I messed up those exams [laughs] ... I had an extremely strong faith in myself, I don't think I was scared of anything, really. I didn't hold back at all, I wasn't very used to being considerate towards others. (Guro, 30)*

These experiences have not made them more gender-conformist—quite the opposite. They understand more about gender as a power structure and how this even permeates their own selves in ways that have been surprising and quite shocking to acknowledge. They have become more

aware of subtle gender oppression both in themselves and in their relationships with others. Only with regard to pregnancy and childbirth do we find some who have become more respectful towards biological gender differences. Ida, who firmly believes that individual variation is more significant than gender group differences, says that it was an ambivalent experience becoming a mother since she has a 'masculine' personality, but that the experience also taught her a lesson about biology:

*I would've loved to be born a man!—my husband would've been a better woman than me ... But at the same time you can't have your cake and eat it too. It would have been much easier for me to choose an academic career had I been born a man, because then I wouldn't have experienced that biological process and all those hormones. Because I'm very academically keen and actually very ambitious and very perfectionist. But that can't be combined with toddlers. I'm born a woman, I've had children, I'm married, so ... yes. (Ida, 30)*

The young men distance themselves from bragging and macho masculinities. To be emotional and open, to do housework and take care of one's children are not seen as unmasculine, but rather as desired qualities in men. Stian says that he is 'not afraid to cry'. Most of them have female friends whom they give credit for having taught them to become better at 'opening up' and talking about feelings. For most of the working-class men at 18, relational talk still tends to be more of a girls' thing, whereas the middle-class men demonstrate a much higher interest in interpersonal relationships and psychological aspects than the majority of their fathers did, their grandfathers notwithstanding. But in contrast to the women, who reflect more on their relationships with others and who have a more ironic view of themselves, the psychological perspective of the men is, as in the middle generation, often centred on their own personal development and taken very seriously. Trond, for instance, tells us at 18 that '*finding yourself ... I feel like I'm constantly developing. I think it's very healthy, I think it's very healthy always to develop, even if it can be very tiring and very hard always to consider yourself*'. Still, gender is more present in the men's self-reflections and the absence of masculinity appears to be more of a threat to them than the absence of femininity in women is to them—or to the women themselves. These limits of degendering

are also reflected in the leisure activities in this generation, where girls have become active in football and hockey, but boys have fewer choices. Henrik, who originally wanted to dance ballet, ended up with flamenco instead because it felt less stigmatising. The mixing of gender traits may still raise the question whether they are seen by others as ‘man enough’:

*I'm not a tough guy like [mentions two boys in his class], that kind of ... a cliché, like—a macho type guy ... I got a comment from [a girl he is interested in] the other day, that she thought that ... that I'm not much of a man, sort of.*

*Q: What did she mean by that?*

*Well, she means that ... that I'm not ... that I'm not very tough. I'm not particularly bothered by masculine ... signalling masculine characteristics, I guess. But I think I'm tough when I'm supposed to be tough, sort of. I can make it through a snow storm ... But then I thought—I figured out—that's what I want to be. I don't have a need to demonstrate that I'm a man, hey ho, and I choose that lifestyle. My mother has always been a member of women's organisations. So I sort of always think of girls as my equals. I mean, she can do the same as me. I can't stand girls who're supposed to be weak ... they annoy me. She should be part of it, everything I want to do, like, all those activities. (Henrik, 18)*

The men who have had fathers who participated in caring for them are those who are most explicitly occupied with the issue of masculinity, and their reflections on gender resemble those of their fathers, but also transgress them. Their own chosen identity combination is understood as ‘masculinity’ plus ‘something else’. The ‘something else’ is not primarily seen as feminine, but as an extension and improvement of masculinity. Vegard describes himself as both ‘*down to earth and serious*’ and as ‘*an emotional person*’ who cares for others and likes to help if anyone has a problem, but still he does not like ‘*to be prevented from doing something I'd like to do*’. Henrik says that the ideal man is one who can ‘*show feelings and still keep some of what makes a man a man*’. This desired manliness is not about male authority, making money or having a career, but about being a physically strong, courageous and playful man. So far they resemble their fathers. However, they also embrace a kind of masculinity that re-emerges on the other side of the addition of soft values to masculinity. Trond says that he thinks gender roles are disappearing, but that

this in itself may lead to men becoming more engaged in doing tough masculine things like parachute jumping. Asked how he thinks a man should be, he says:

*A man ought to know how to bake bread. I don't know how to do that yet, but I'll learn [laughs]. And he ought to be helpful, do the dishes ... So—I don't know. I like to—I think—I find men who are a bit—who support the male ideal in a way—I think that might be healthy too. That you should be a bit—I think a man can be athletic and—I think a man should impress a woman a bit. Not be a completely soft man. I think that role is lost because—I think women might want men like that, but I think women want men who are men too. And men want women who are women too ... Yes, that he embodies some male ideals. He can be ironic about them too. But to show that he is—that a man can be fresh and sporty and that men are decent creatures. (Trond, 18)*

These young men are also those who most strongly expect a parallel gender mixing in girls: they like feminine girls, but in combination with being able to carry a backpack or rise early in the morning to join them skiing at dawn. They detest girls who are weak, passive and dependent: 'I want a grown-up woman, like', Henrik says, and by this he also means a girl who is not dependent on him, but has her own life. The value they put on their personal freedom here seems to work as a support for gender equality. However, it may also be a version where support of gender equality is based on contempt for traditional femininity. Many of them say that they cannot stand 'stupid girls', meaning girls who are too occupied with their looks and with dating. Intelligence and sportiness are more important than looks, but if it can be combined with good looks, even better. Some of the men with gender-traditional fathers instead prefer feminine girls. The girls should have 'a certain capacity' in order not to be boring, but they should not be 'hyper-intelligent', Rune says.

At 30 the men have become clearer in their opinions on bodily and psychological gender differences and see them not only as facts of life, but also as things that make life worth living. They do not see big differences in the skills and capacities of men and women, but there *are* differences related to appearances and preferences, they say, and this should be allowed. Even the middle-class women at 30 are more open to this idea.



Nora, who at 18 spoke with contempt of dumb and blonde working-class girls, asks at 30 why on earth women should have to dress boringly or as men to be taken seriously. It must be possible to look good, even sexy, *and* have brains, she says, and adds that she finds it important to challenge the norms regarding this. Anders has also become aware of femininity through his own daughter. It surprised him—his ex-wife is tough and wears black. He understands this perceived femininity in his little daughter as her inborn individuality, but not as inborn heterosexuality:

*She's this sort of girly-girly girl. She's born that way, we didn't stand a chance, we tried ... to do everything, but she's all in for pink, no boys' stuff, no cars, nothing, it has to be nice and pretty, and ... she's the most girly person I've ever encountered—without having her parents to thank for it ... We actually think she's a lesbian, she's terribly fond of girls and wondered if it was okay to have a girlfriend. Now she claims she's in love with a boy, though, but it doesn't matter to any of us. (Anders, 30)*

Compared with the previous generations where the tensions in the marriages were described as tensions between the life projects of women and men, the youngest generation appears to a larger degree to live out those tensions within themselves, regardless of gender. There are gender differences in terms of how these tensions are expressed, but at the same time it is also the case that the life projects of men and women in this generation have become more similar. The project is to combine work and care and what was earlier seen as feminine and masculine virtues in behaviour and personality—to be social and caring, active and daring—but also to keep up the gender difference when it comes to appearances and sexual attraction. As children in school they have competed on the same level, with the girls often more academically successful than the boys, and in their families both girls and boys have been expected to take part in the household work, with the girls doing somewhat more than the boys. As young adults they enter an educational system and a job market where the degendering has become an unquestionable norm, but where practice sometimes runs counter to theory. In this way the ambiguous practice they experience reflects their own confusing feelings of gender.

## Striving for Work–Family Balance

In the youngest generation we know more about the wishes and expectations of future practice than about actual practices. The main bulk of the data stems from an age where none or only a minority had children of their own, and the analyses and conclusions about the practice of the youngest generation as adults will therefore be more preliminary than for the previous generations.<sup>10</sup> Eight informants, however, were interviewed a third time in 2011, when they were approaching 40. These interviews indicate the changes in life from being 30 to being 40 and may also illuminate what life phases mean for attitudes to gender equality as a practical and political issue. These eight interviews at age 40 will be analysed separately in Chap. 8.

Among the young men there was a clear connection between the work division in the families they grew up in and what they anticipated for their own life when they were 18.<sup>11</sup> The majority of them grew up with fathers who took part (to varying extents) in housework and childcare, and mothers who worked outside the family (part-time or full-time) from early on. At 18, these young men with participating fathers saw children and family as central and sometimes even the most important aspects of their imaginations about the future. They said they would like to stay at home themselves for a period of time with their future babies, and that the children later should attend full-time kindergarten.<sup>12</sup> They wanted to have enough time

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<sup>10</sup> At 30, all informants had completed their secondary education, except for two of the working-class informants, Anders and Beate, who had made their way into the job market without formal qualifications. One man and eight women had children; two of the men were going to be fathers in the near future. Since we re-interviewed 19 of the 22 women and only six of the 12 men, the difference in who had become parents may, in fact, be smaller. However, it may also reflect the age difference between women and men in when they become parents for the first time. In 2000 in Oslo it was at age 30–31 for women and age 33–34 for men (Statistics Norway, Statbank, Table 05530). At 40 we interviewed three men and five women and at this point in time all of them had children.

<sup>11</sup> In a study of Nordic youth, Øia (2011) found that boys with working mothers have a more positive attitude towards gender equality than other groups. Bjørnholt (2015) found that caring fathers do not automatically become models for their adult sons; it depends on the mother's role in the family. In our sample, caring fathers seem to produce sons for whom caring relationships are important, but these men also have a positive relationship with their mothers, who they see as competent and with a life of her own outside the family.

<sup>12</sup> The father's quota was not yet introduced when we interviewed them in 1991 (see Chap. 4).

with their families. Vegard, who was cared for by his father when he was little, said:

*I want a relaxed life where I can enjoy myself with my loved ones and understand, know them, the people around you. Both emotionally and things like that. I don't want a family where everyone sort of runs in separate directions all the time ... I'm not a male chauvinist or anything. I think it's fine that the man cooks dinner at home and vacuums and so on. I don't mind that. (Vegard, 18)*

Trond, who had his father at home part-time, took into consideration that he needed some more skills in household work before he could move out from the parental home, and he saw these skills as essential for taking responsibility for himself:

*I live at home now, so—I feel that I might get better at things like that once I move out and feel that I have to really do those things myself. Then you have to take responsibility for your own life, like, then you have to—then there's nobody to bake bread for you, like, and you don't get your meatballs automatically. (Trond, 18)*

These young men also imagined their future spouses to be working and thought it would be unproblematic if she were more educated or made more money than them. When we met these men ten years later, they held the same views. Anders, the only father among them at that time, had taken the father's quota of the parental leave; he had wanted to take more than the four weeks, but for economic reasons had to go back to work. The couple later divorced and now had shared custody. If he has another child, he wants a 50/50 share of the parental leave and the care—and not to get divorced. Henrik is at 30 a bit worried about the prospect of children because his wife comes from a country where it is unusual for fathers to stay at home and take care of housework and childcare. He says it will be him who will have to insist on sharing.

In contrast to the family-oriented men, the majority of the young men who had grown up in families with more traditional gender roles, where the father did not take much part in the housework and the mother stayed at home before the children attended school, did not include family and children

as central in their plans for the future at 18 (Anders was an exception here—the fact that both of his parents were very old seems to have facilitated his recognition of their outdated gender arrangement, something that was less evident to men with younger gender traditional parents). In their visions of the future, the emphasis was on travelling, education, self-development and careers. They were either sceptical towards or had not yet seriously considered whether they wanted children or not. Rune said he would leave it to his future wife to decide. When asked directly, they had some reservations against the gender-equal vision of future family life. Paul admitted that even though both men and women lose out in traditional gender roles, it has also been a *‘very, very, very long tradition that women have stayed home and men have been out hunting’* and, thus, difficult to change overnight. They were not negative to the idea of sharing the work at home as long as their future wife was not a nag:

*I mean, if I lived with someone, then it’s, one thing is that I did the dishes every other day, and changed diapers and stuff, but if she was to go around and, like, all the time say things like ‘Yes, now you’re doing the dishes because you’re a man, you’re supposed to do it too’, then I’d be annoyed, because then, then they make us feel guilty all the time. (Rune, 18)*

Working wives and kindergarten for children were OK, but they had more reservations: it might be better for children to be taken care of at home during the first years—maybe they could do it themselves, but they had not really thought about it. They would not insist on taking a part of the parental leave if their wives wanted to have it all. They were prepared to share the housework—but if the wife were at home, it would be quite natural that she would take care of it, Morten said at 18 as well as at 30. It was also OK to a certain degree that the wife would earn more than them—as long as it did not make her aloof and they themselves were not expected to stay at home. Rune admitted, however, that *‘at the bottom of his soul’* he probably would feel like that would be a *‘small defeat’*. At 30 these men still retain much of the same attitude. Morten, who is expecting his first child at this point, plans to take the father’s quota, but otherwise he thinks his wife will take the role as the main caretaker. His wife has her own business and earns almost as much as he does. He himself now works

as much as his father did, even though he was critical of this at 18. He does not want any conflicts regarding housework. Should any problems arise, he will take a practical approach, hiring someone to do the cleaning, for instance. In this case the division of work resembles the previous generation, but with some adaptation to the fact that the partner works and to the dominant discourse of work-life balance. In other cases there is more reverence of the discourse of gender equality in the family, but without the subjective conviction and desire of the men who themselves had fathers who had participated more in childcare and housework. At 30 Rune thinks that he had actually been doing most of the housework in his previous relationship, but he also adds '*but I wasn't pussy whipped!*' Paul also had a relationship that included cohabitation behind him when he was interviewed at 30. He had appreciated that his girlfriend had clear ideas about what constituted men's work and what constituted women's work because this meant that both could do what they liked the best. But in the long run he felt suffocated by her nesting. He anticipates problems with combining work and children: if he has a child in a new relationship, he imagines that he cannot continue in such a creative job as he has now. He says he feels split between not wanting to have a family and not wanting to be socially isolated.

The connection between attitudes to gender equality and the division of work in the families in which they grew up is less clear-cut for the women. A traditional division of work may rather boost the young women's critique of their parents, and spur them on to wanting something different for themselves.<sup>13</sup> Anja made it clear that she did not want to marry someone like her own father, who is always busy at work: '*if I ever get a husband and have children, I certainly hope that he too will take care of those children*'. Tonje also expected her future husband to be participating more because '*times change*'. Thus, it seems that the general discourse about gender equality has had a more independent impact on the girls, while the boys to a greater degree need a model in their own family of upbringing to get the point. All the young women wanted to combine

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<sup>13</sup> Øia (2011) found that whereas a positive attitude to gender equality was part of a more general radical political attitude for boys, girls were to a higher degree positive to gender equality independently on their political stand. It may be some of the same phenomena we see surface in our sample.