

Preface

In the summer of 1998, I was writing my monograph *One of the Guys* and also teaching a photography class to youths at a local community agency in North St. Louis. I have spent most of my career examining how gender inequality shapes young women's participation in crime, focusing both on structural and situational inequalities and on how ideologies about gender often place young women in the precarious position of upholding such inequalities, even as they stake out interpersonal spaces in which they work to exempt themselves from the broad ideologies that they, their peers, and the broader culture reinforce. But my research on young women's gang involvement had also sharpened my concern about the gendered victimization risks that girls face in disadvantaged community contexts, risks heightened by their participation in gangs and friendships with delinquent peers.

I sent youths out into their communities with cameras to document their daily lives. And week after week, I was struck and saddened by the portraits they produced, which barely resembled the kids I was interacting with. Young men struck poses intended to project an image of street bravado. Occasionally throwing up gang signs, they sent hardened stares into the camera lenses, mimicking the depictions of young Black manhood we see all too often in the media in America. Photographs of their homes and neighborhoods showed signs of the physical decay we have come to know as the contemporary nature of urban poverty. But it was the girls' photos that really stuck with me. Nearly every young woman in my class, solo or in pairs, came away from the course with a portrait of themselves, back turned from the camera, head turned to face it, and bent over, showing their backsides in a sexualized pose. Is this a celebration of female sexuality? Of Black female sexuality specifically? Or do we continue to teach young women that their value lies in their sexual objectification?

We live in a time of *Girls Gone Wild*, in what some have called a

postfeminist era, where young women's newfound right to sexual desire has been too easily coopted and conflated with their sexual desirability, with their participation in the male gaze. And we know that women's sexual desire, and any of their behaviors that—correctly or not—can be read as sexually suggestive, still means they are held accountable for sexual violence against them. “No means no,” but only when there is no evidence, however obscure or misleading, that can be read as an indication of “perhaps,” “maybe,” or “yes.” We know this from social science research, from research on the character and functions of criminal law, and from the media—nearly every time a rape case makes headlines.

Boys will be boys, so women must stand up for themselves and be clear on their sexual intentions. Were you friendly to a young man? Sexual intent. Did you agree to go to a party with him? Sexual intent. To drink? Sexual intent. Did you wear tight clothes, a short skirt, a low-cut blouse? Sexual intent. Of course, not all men, young or old, adhere to such a belief system, and certainly not all would act on such beliefs even when they adhere to them. But in a court of law, let alone the court of public opinion, young women are not victims of sexual violence but culpable participants in sexual encounters they themselves are responsible for.

So what of our young photographers, many of whom were interviewed for this book? As I argue in the pages that follow, we as a society, as scholars, as criminologists have turned our backs on them. Don't get me wrong. Many researchers are dedicated to addressing and ameliorating the problems associated with urban disadvantage: violence, the decimation of communities caused by drugs and incarceration, and societal neglect and entrenched poverty, including the poverty of opportunities. In addition, feminist scholars have made tremendous inroads in recent decades in advancing our understanding of violence against women and improving the services available to the many victims of such violence. But urban African American girls have fallen through the cracks. They don't come to mind as the prototypical victim. They don't garner public sympathy. The roots of these ideologies are as old as the legacy of slavery. Certainly, they were found even in early feminist treatises on sexual violence, and they continue today.

But given the widespread nature of violence against women in American society, why wouldn't such violence be prevalent as well—and in particular—in impoverished community contexts where we know that

violence is endemic, community and personal resources are limited, and the all too available opportunities for boys to become men rely on heightened definitions of masculinity that focus on interpersonal violence, respect, and a willing-to-do-anything persona of toughness and independence? When women aren't spared from gendered violence in the best of social and economic circumstances, why would they be spared in the worst? As I'll document in *Getting Played*, they certainly are not.

This book should not be read as an indictment of young Black men and their treatment of their female peers. My intent is not to further perpetuate the myth of the Black rapist. As feminist scholarship has consistently shown, violence against women is prevalent across all social strata in the United States. It is tied to the persistent nature of gender inequality endemic to our society. However, the particular forms it takes are also structurally and situationally dependent. And we, as a society, have created the circumstances that place young Black women at such heightened risk for gendered victimization. We've perpetuated the structural conditions that lead to the cultural adaptations and situational contexts that shape urban African American young women's risks. The indictment is of all of us.