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Mechal Sobel: Teach Me Dreams

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INTRODUCTION



IN AUGUST 1919, when Johanne Blom turned fifteen, her aunt gave her a diary. At first she thought it an odd gift, but in the years that followed she would fill its delicate cream-colored pages with detailed, and often humorous, descriptions of her family and friends, her work and leisure in a working-class neighborhood in Copenhagen. Occasionally, she would venture from these topics and use her diary as so many other young girls have done—as a place to record her dreams and desires, her hopes and longings. In one such entry, written on January 21, 1923, she noted that “I so look forward to getting married and having my own home. I would like to have children. Three I think. That seems a good number.” A few years later, after she had met the man whom she would later marry, she repeated this vision of the good life. “I can think of nothing better,” she enthused, “than becoming Ejnar’s wife.”

But despite her rather conventional dreams, Johanne thought of herself as anything but traditional. Already as a sixteen-year-old, she was adamant that her life was going to be different from her mother’s. “All mother ever does is work. I don’t know how she can stand it. . . . I will never live like that,” she wrote on October 20, 1920. Obviously, Johanne was hoping for a more pleasurable existence, a life filled with more excitement, fun, and romance. “I am a modern young girl,” she insisted the following year, after a furious fight with her parents over her right to go to a dance hosted by the Social Democratic Youth Club. “I want to go out. Mother and father are so old-fashioned. They always want me to sit at home, never do anything else, but I’m not like that.”¹ Many decades later, as a woman in her late eighties, Johanne Blom still remembered her youthful ambitions. “I grew up at a time when everything was changing,” she explained. “Young girls like us, we wanted things to be different. We wanted to be modern.”²

This book is about women such as Johanne—Danish women who came of age in the 1910s and 1920s, self-consciously seeking to take advantage of the social and sexual upheavals that characterized those years, to reshape female identities and gender relations, and to establish what they perceived to be “modern” lives for themselves. This book follows them from adolescence through early adulthood and into the marriages that almost all of them would eventually enter, arguing that these women’s ideas of what constituted female modernity and their efforts to translate these ideals into practical reality in their daily lives played a central role in the shaping of twentieth-century styles of femininity and womanhood.

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But this study is not just about Denmark. It offers a broader analysis of the reorganization of gender relations that characterized most of Western Europe in the decade following World War I. At the end of the war, it was certainly not only Danes who believed that they were witnessing the collapse of “the world as we knew it,” that “nothing is the same anymore, women are not the same anymore.”³ Across the continent, European observers were struck by the immense changes they seemed to be witnessing in women’s lives. In the course of just a few short decades, virtually every aspect of nineteenth-century womanhood seemed to have come under attack, and by the late 1910s, the time when the housebound Victorian lady reigned as the uncontested feminine ideal seemed nothing but a faint memory.

In part, this perception stemmed from the legal and political gains women had made since the late nineteenth century. Not only had new educational opportunities allowed a small but growing number of university-educated women to make their way into the professions, but the burgeoning feminist and suffrage movements had brought women out of the home and into the public eye. By the end of the 1910s, feminists had even succeeded in many countries in securing women’s suffrage and in pushing through other kinds of reform legislation that gradually improved their legal status. Collectively, these changes all seemed to liberate women from conventional ties and obligations, and even before the war, many contemporaries worried about the emergence of a “new” type of woman, who rejected Victorian concepts of domesticity and instead threw herself into a broad range of public activities previously deemed incompatible with proper womanhood.⁴

On a more immediate level, the sense of sexual upheaval grew from women’s activities during World War I. As millions of European men departed for the front, middle-class women took up white-collar jobs, working-class women moved into better-paid industrial jobs, country girls swarmed into factories, and older rural women took charge of farms. As engineers and administrators, bricklayers and carpenters, railroad conductors and bus drivers, farm hands and munitions workers, women of all classes moved into positions they had never held before, and in the process they proved themselves perfectly capable of handling what had in the past been men’s jobs. As if this was not troubling enough, many women seemed to enjoy their new activities, and young women in particular seemed disturbingly reluctant after the war to relinquish the freedoms and privileges that wartime salaries had afforded them.⁵

Given all this, it is perhaps not surprising that many Europeans concluded that they were witnessing the rapid dismantling of traditional forms of womanhood. But if just about everybody agreed that a profound

breach with the past had taken place and that the old order could not be restored, they differed greatly in their assessments of what would replace the familiar patterns. Had World War I produced a “civilization without sexes,” as French writer Pierre Drieu la Rochelle argued?⁶ Would European societies become a new form of “Amazon republics,” as others predicted?⁷ Would the postwar world be one in which “wives rule their husbands, women leave women’s work, and young girls do their best to ape men?”⁸ Were women really “gaining the upper hand,” as the Danish journalist Søren Pedersen-Tarp concluded after a trip through England and France in 1921?⁹ Or were the postwar years likely to see “the birth of a new world in which man and woman stand side by side as equals,” as many feminists hoped?¹⁰ Would the 1920s mark “the dawn of a new era,” where gender took a back seat to “character and accomplishments?”¹¹ Only one thing seemed certain: Social stability would not be restored before gender issues had been settled.

The 1920s, therefore, witnessed an enormous preoccupation with issues of female identity and women’s proper role. Across Western Europe, politicians and labor leaders debated how best to regulate female employment and restore the sexual division of labor, and practically every national parliament spent considerable time devising legislation that would protect the family as a social institution. Outside the world of politics, teachers and physicians sought to define new standards for female education and health, while psychologists and social workers pontificated on the complexities of the “modern” female psyche. Sociologists threw their energy into surveying women’s behavior, and journalists regularly polled readers on just about every topic, from girls’ education and appropriate child-rearing practices to women’s suffrage and the best use of leisure time. At the same time, a veritable outpouring of prescriptive literature sought to define women’s new duties and responsibilities, and advice columnists and etiquette experts eagerly dispensed their counsel on proper female behavior in books, newspapers, and magazines. Not surprisingly, gender issues also permeated contemporary fiction, and both popular and elite writers offered troubling, and often scandalous, accounts of the consequences of the much-feared blurring of gender distinctions that supposedly was taking place.¹²

Only toward the end of the 1920s did this obsession with women begin to fade. In part, it was the onset of the Great Depression that shifted public attention toward different matters, but the dwindling concern about gender had other causes as well. Even though women’s roles, behavior, and position in society would continue to change, the foundations of a new social and sexual order had by then been sufficiently established for most contemporaries to abandon the issue. While some conservatives

never stopped longing for an idealized past when women supposedly had no ambitions other than marriage and motherhood, and many feminists continued to criticize sexual inequalities, at least the outlines of modern female identities and gender relations had been determined.

The decade following World War I therefore constitutes a pivotal transitional moment in the history of European gender relations during which Victorian gender arrangements met their final demise and a re-formed gender order gradually was established. Focusing less on what was destroyed than on what was put in its place, this study offers a historical analysis of the social, cultural, rhetorical, and political processes through which the creation of new and recognizably “modern” gender arrangements was accomplished in one of these European countries—Denmark.

THE 1920s—A DECADE OF LIBERATION FOR WOMEN?

Until feminist scholars began reexamining history, the 1920s were often described as the decade in which women became “liberated.” The evidence for such an optimistic interpretation seemed plentiful. In most European countries, women’s suffrage was granted by the end of World War I, and reform legislation continued to improve women’s civil and legal status. Many remaining barriers to women’s entry into the professions were dismantled, and employment opportunities expanded. Although still far below those of men, women’s wages were increasing, allowing more women than ever before the pleasures of independent consumer spending. In addition, the granting of legitimacy to female sexual desire allowed women to discard a prudish and repressive sexual morality and engage in various forms of cultural and sexual experimentation.¹³

More recent studies of women’s experiences in Germany, France, and England have forcefully punctured this myth of the Golden Twenties.¹⁴ Historians such as Renate Bridenthal, Karin Hausen, James McMillan, Jane Lewis, and Miriam Glucksmann have all documented striking continuities in women’s subordination in the home as well as in the workplace, their marginal impact on political decision making, and their limited access to resources.¹⁵ Some scholars have even argued that the postwar decade witnessed a direct backlash against the gains women had achieved before and during the war, placing feminists and single, professional women especially on the defensive.¹⁶ Still others have questioned the impact of new sexual ideologies, arguing that they largely functioned to limit women’s control over their own sexuality and discredit any erotic choices other than heterosexual marriage.¹⁷

In light of this research, optimistic assertions about social change in the postwar decade lose much of their credibility. Clearly, women did not

achieve sexual equality in any simple sense in the course of the 1920s, and the strides they made toward “liberation” may well have been so small as not to warrant much feminist attention. But by framing their arguments solely in terms of the long-term impact on women’s lives, these historians have tended to overlook contemporary reports that described, with enthusiasm or anxiety, what many observers believed to be the rapid dismantling of traditional forms of womanhood and the emergence of new social and sexual patterns. While such reports may well, as French historian Mary Louise Roberts has noted, have been “wrong from a purely structural standpoint,” postwar Europeans were nevertheless convinced that they were witnessing a profound upheaval; thus, rather than being dismissed, this cultural reality deserves our attention.¹⁸

As many cultural historians have pointed out, debates about gender such as those that characterized the decade following World War I always mask concerns both about gender and about “something else again”.¹⁹ In the case of the 1920s, the obsession with women’s roles and behavior clearly reflected more general anxieties over social disorder, socioeconomic change, and the collapse of long-standing moral and ideological doctrines. Consequently, the impression that women were discarding all notions of proper female behavior was both fed by and feeding into already existing fears that the world was in disarray. Through analyses of a society’s discourse on gender, we may therefore uncover central aspects of its values and fears, its hopes and conflicts, and its power relations and social dynamics. Adopting this approach, Mary Louise Roberts, Susan Kingsley Kent, and Billie Melman have provided acute insights into the ways in which French and British men and women made sense of and came to terms with a web of social, political, and cultural changes in the wake of World War I.²⁰

Like these studies, this book takes seriously the sense of upheaval that characterized the 1920s, but its analytical focus is somewhat different. As many critics have noted, discourse analysis, no matter how careful and sophisticated, tends to leave us with little knowledge about men’s and women’s actual lives. Surely, the “Modern Woman”—the scantily clad, sexually liberated, economically independent, self-reliant female—was a rhetorical construction, the quintessential symbol of a world in disarray. But “modern women”—women who cut their hair, wore short skirts, worked for wages, and enjoyed themselves outside the home—were not just figments of anxious imaginations, and to read the postwar debates about women as solely, or predominantly, debates about the changes wrought by the war ignores both the social and sexual struggles that characterized the 1920s and the very real changes in women’s behavior that this decade witnessed. The construction of a new gender order was there-

fore not only the product of elite discourses and male-made policies, but also the outcome of a highly contested process of social change, in which the beliefs and practices of a much broader array of actors played a crucial role. And although this process may not ultimately have overturned fundamental power relations between men and women, it transformed many patterns of daily life.

In addition to an analysis of the cultural discourses that developed to make sense of and regulate the emerging styles of modern femininity and womanhood, this book therefore focuses on the agency of “ordinary” working-class and middle-class people in the construction of a new order, and it argues that the young women who figured so prominently in the postwar discourse were not only the object of discourse but also central agents in the charting of new female identities.²¹ When contemporaries struggled to determine how “modern” the “modern woman” would be, which characteristics would define attractive femininity and proper womanhood in the twentieth century, where the boundaries for women’s new freedoms were to be drawn, and which features would characterize male–female relationships, the answers to those questions certainly grew not only from cultural discourses but also from the social practices of the women in question. An examination of social practices and lived experiences therefore promises to add yet another dimension to our understanding of the interrelationship between gender and change in the 1920s.

THE CAUSES OF UPHEAVAL

In the 1920s, virtually all cultural critics were convinced that, while other factors contributed to the destruction of long-standing gender arrangements, World War I played the greatest role in that process. Whether they blamed the absence of men from the home front, the killing of millions of male heads of households, or the return of thousands of crippled war veterans or believed that women’s labor market participation, their experiences of financial independence, and the self-confidence they seemed to have gained were the main culprits, critics generally agreed that the war was a turning point, a transformative event that profoundly and irrevocably changed its survivors.

In the years since then, most studies of European women, men, and gender relations in the 1920s have focused on nations that were directly involved in the war, and they have, by and large, reinforced contemporary beliefs that it was the war that caused the upheavals. According to British historians Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, for example, once women had been let “out of the cage” and permitted to demonstrate their talents and capabilities in the labor market during wartime, the spell of female domesticity was broken, and it took a powerful mixture of ideo-

logical campaigns and coercive political measures to restore the sexual division of labor after 1918.²² Close readings of British and German men's postwar writings have convinced other scholars that the horrors of trench warfare functioned to undercut the heroic image of the male warrior, destabilize masculine identities, and produce both a gulf between men's and women's wartime experiences and a misogyny among returning war veterans so intense as to short-circuit any return to prewar patterns.²³ Still others have argued that the atrocities led to a more general cultural crisis, triggering the re-thinking of all social relationships.²⁴

Among those historians who take a broader look at social and sexual change in early twentieth-century Europe, the importance of World War I as a causal factor for postwar developments is often compounded by more long-term trends. As they point out, lower birthrates, smaller households, and industrially produced household goods had paved the way from the turn of the century for a restructuring of family life and marital relations; also, even before the war, rising wages had lifted many working-class families out of the direst poverty.²⁵ Mass production, rationalization, and a dramatic growth in the service sector—all developments that functioned to draw more women than ever before out of the home, away from agricultural and domestic work, and into shops, factories, and offices—also preceded the war. In their view, World War I thus only accelerated trends that had already begun to alter social and economic life before 1914, and even though women's contributions to the war effort brought them into the public eye, they did not significantly alter social and economic patterns that were already well under way before the war.

Whether historians grant World War I or more long-term social and economic developments the greater significance in their explanations, they generally agree that those two phenomena constitute the *sine qua non*, the foundations without which cultural upheaval in the 1920s would not have occurred. In Germany, England, and France, the countries that have attracted most scholarly attention, this may well be the case, but such explanations do not account for similar turmoil in nations that were neither involved in World War I nor as industrially advanced as the major European powers. Surely, Brazil in the 1920s did not belong in this category, yet concerns about women and gender definitions akin to those of Western Europe reverberated through Brazilian public discourse.²⁶ During those same years, Japan, another country that hardly belonged among the most industrialized nations in the 1920s, was embroiled in similar debates about the controversial appearances and behavior of the *moga*, the Japanese version of the modern girl.²⁷ Even China, among the least industrialized societies in the world, was not exempt from such concerns.²⁸

Obviously, factors other than international warfare and industrial development were contributing to gender upheaval in the early decades of the twentieth century, and analyses of gender change in countries that were less economically developed and not directly involved in the war may therefore shed new light on the causes and dynamics of gender upheaval in the 1910s and 1920s. By focusing on Denmark—a small, non-belligerent and in the early decades of the twentieth century still largely agrarian country—this study offers one such analysis, seeking to explain how and why similar forms of social and sexual change took place in a context quite different from those that historians have typically explored.

GENDER UPHEAVAL AND THE DANISH CASE

In the early years of the twentieth century, Denmark was hardly among the Western nations spearheading social and economic change. With a population of merely three million people, an economy based on agriculture, few natural resources, very little heavy industry, and no colonial possessions to speak of, it belonged among the less powerful, prosperous, and advanced European countries. And despite improvements in farming techniques, the emergence of agricultural cooperatives, and strong commercial ties with other European countries, there were few indications that this was about to change in any significant way.²⁹

Nevertheless, Denmark was still impacted by some of the same social and economic trends that characterized other parts of Western Europe in the early twentieth century. As elsewhere in the Western world, migration from rural to urban areas was beginning to alter demographic patterns.³⁰ Between 1900 and 1920, the proportion of the Danish population living in urban areas increased from 38 percent to 46 percent.³¹ During those same twenty years, the percentage of Danes living in Copenhagen—the nation's capital and largest city—grew from 16 percent to 23 percent.³² Simultaneously, the share of the population that secured its livelihood from farming decreased, dropping from 40 percent in 1901 to 30 percent in 1930.³³ Although the majority of the population would continue to live in the countryside throughout the 1920s, urban life was therefore becoming a more common Danish experience, and as elsewhere, city lights beckoned many country youths.

During these years industrialization was also making its mark on Danish society, although much slower and in a less substantial way than in many other countries. In the early decades of the twentieth century, handicrafts and nonmechanized production for local markets persisted, small workshops remained the norm rather than the exception, and most industrial enterprises were limited in size and not particularly advanced in terms of technology. By 1920, after thirty years of steady growth both in

the number of industrial enterprises and the number of people employed in industry, this sector of the economy still employed only a small minority of the Danish work force.³⁴ Indicative of the Danish economic structure, most export goods, such as butter, cheese, bacon, canned goods, and other food stuffs, came from agriculture, and throughout the interwar years economic growth would continue to spring from agriculture and commerce rather than industry.³⁵

During World War I this economic structure would prove an unexpected advantage. Needing to feed not only expansive armies but also their population on the home front, warring countries purchased great quantities of Danish food products. As a result, small companies exploded into booming businesses, and new enterprises mushroomed across the country, transforming modest merchants and small-scale businesspeople into a new class of *nouveau riches*, or “goulash barons” as they were known at the time.³⁶ In a more limited sense, wartime commerce also affected the lives of working people. In the course of the war, employment rates were high and wages rose. For skilled male workers, hourly wages increased 71 percent between 1914 and 1918, and the income of women workers rose at an a similar rate.³⁷ While shortages of goods, rationing, and inflation certainly limited the rise in living standards that such wage increases might suggest, the purchasing power of workers’ incomes still grew by 60 percent between 1914 and 1920, allowing most Danish working-class families for the first time ever to position themselves, however tenuously, on the safe side of the poverty line.³⁸

In the postwar decade, these very real economic advances were undercut by inflation, bankruptcies, and wildly fluctuating unemployment rates, leaving most Danish families less than financially secure. As elsewhere in Europe, the 1920s were generally years of crisis and instability, not years of economic boom, as was the case in the United States. Nonetheless, the Danish controversies over women and gender, while set in a context of economic insecurity, did not emerge in a situation of rapid industrialization or other fundamental changes in the social or economic structure.

Nor did they spring from experiences of wartime upheavals in the sexual division of labor or from the fear that women were taking over men’s jobs. Because men did not have to leave for the front, Denmark never experienced an influx of women into the labor market as in those countries directly involved in the war. In fact, the percentage of the female population that worked for wages remained virtually unchanged between 1900 and 1930, consistently hovering around 25 percent.³⁹ However, the early decades of the twentieth century did witness a shift in the kind of jobs women held. From the turn of the century, more and more women began to desert agricultural and domestic labor.⁴⁰ During the war, many

of these female workers were recruited into food, beverage, textile, and clothing industries, where they, by 1925, constituted up to 80 percent of the entire labor force.⁴¹ Still, the total number of women employed in industry and manufacturing did not increase in the course of the 1910s and 1920s.⁴² The only area in which any growth in female employment occurred during those years was the expanding service sector, where women were finding jobs mostly as low-level sales and clerical personnel, statistically off-setting the declining number of female agricultural workers and domestic servants.⁴³

In general, then, World War I did not challenge, even temporarily, the sexual division of labor in Denmark, and it did not bring more women into the labor force. Neither did the 1920s. Even though Danish women had access to higher education on an equal footing with men, only very few women pursued professional careers, and throughout the postwar decade, the vast majority of working women remained confined to the kind of unskilled, low-paying jobs deemed appropriate for the female labor force. Since rising wages enabled a growing number of working-class families to realize the ideal of the male bread-winner and the female homemaker, one might even argue that the 1910s and 1920s strengthened the position of working-class husbands vis-à-vis their wives and children, who tended to become more financially dependent on male heads of household than they had been in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Women's political enfranchisement also seemed to impact Danish gender relations relatively little, and it certainly does not explain the widespread sense of upheaval in the postwar decade. Even though many people had warned before the passage of women's suffrage in 1915 that granting women the right to vote would encourage them to abandon marriage and domestic responsibilities, such fears soon proved unfounded. The assumption that an expansion of the electorate to include women would significantly alter the political balance of power, and that female legislators would change parliamentary politics, proved equally mistaken. At the ballot box, women behaved much like men, and throughout the 1920s, female politicians were simply too few to make much of a difference. Besides, not all of the women elected saw themselves as advocates of women's rights, and in most cases it was party affiliation, not gender interests, that determined their political stands.⁴⁵ Presumably, a powerful, vocal, and highly organized feminist movement could still have triggered postwar concerns, but that was not the case, either. As was the case in so many other countries, the Danish women's movement, which had never been particularly strong even at its height during the early years of the twentieth century, was floundering in the postwar years, unable to attract new members to a cause whose purpose and goals seemed increasingly unclear to many women.⁴⁶

In the absence of rapid industrial development, significant wartime upheavals, women's acquisition of substantial political power, or a strong feminist movement, it was obviously other kinds of changes that convinced postwar Danes that they were witnessing the rapid dismantling of established gender arrangements. As this book argues, the Danish sense of upheaval grew from a much more specific and easily identifiable phenomenon—namely, the emergence of a new generation of women who seemed to be waging an all-out attack on conventional notions of femininity and womanhood. Discarding all notions of order, propriety, and respect for their elders—or so it seemed to many contemporaries—they shortened their skirts, wore makeup, played sports, went out at night, danced, and flirted, insisting—like Johanne Blom—with frightening determination on being “modern” and leading “modern” lives. More than anything else, it was, according to one observer who seemed to speak for many of his contemporaries, such young women who were causing “so much of our current trouble.”⁴⁷

DANISH FEMALE YOUTH IN THE 1920s: A GENERATION OF REBELS?

Had contemporaries been able to pin unconventional behavior on a small, or at least a limited, number of young women, they may well have been less concerned. Unfortunately, they were offered no such comfort. On the contrary, young women's rebelliousness seemed to them a widespread, even generational, phenomenon. Young women who refused to follow conventions were not confined to urban areas, and they were not just the spoiled daughters of the elite. Instead, they seemed to come from all class backgrounds. Some were highly educated, others had left school with the most minimal of educations. They held all different kinds of jobs. Some lived in rural areas, others in towns and cities. But across all these divides, women who came of age in the postwar decade seemed to most contemporaries united by their styles, their manners, and their aspirations. As one critic insisted, “They all look the same, behave the same, want the same things.”⁴⁸

Surely, such sweeping generalizations do not accurately reflect reality. Even the most anxious observers had to admit that “young ladies who first and foremost see themselves as future wives and mothers still exist, even though they are becoming a rare species.”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, across class lines, postwar female youths did in fact seem to understand and define themselves as a generation, a separate and distinct cohort with characteristics that set them apart from older women, suggesting that contemporaries may have been more accurate in their assessment than most historians trained to think about class differences would assume.

The strong generational identification among women who came of age in the postwar decade is particularly evident in their contributions to public discourse. In interviews with journalists, for example, and in letters to newspaper and magazine editors and responses to surveys and opinion polls, individuals frequently chose to speak as representatives of a cohesive group, peppering their language with phrases such as “young girls like us,” “we young girls” and “our generation.” While such collective language may well have been adopted for the occasion to give personal claims more weight and significance, other evidence also suggests a remarkably strong generational awareness and identification. When asked many years later to recall their youth in the 1920s, women still tended to answer questions about their own lives using “we” rather than “I.” Significantly, fully fifty-three of the fifty-nine women interviewed for this project used the plural pronoun when describing their youth. The fact that a mixture of farm girls and city girls, working-class and middle-class daughters, unskilled workers and university graduates described themselves—both at the time and in retrospect—in virtually identical terms only reinforces the notion of generational identification.

But what was it that inspired this strong generational identification? Here contemporary observers also seem to have been at least partially right. In many ways, women who came of age in the 1910s seemed to share a set of fundamental hopes and aspirations. Both at the time and in retrospect, they spoke of themselves as being “modern,” and they expressed their desire to have a “modern life.” Even without having experienced the upheavals of war firsthand, and despite the fact that Denmark did not suffer social disruptions caused by rapid industrial development, these women clearly had a sense of the 1920s as a cultural watershed, a historical moment when long-standing gender arrangements were losing their validity and gender relations could be renegotiated; as their comments would suggest, they eagerly jumped at the chance, hoping to create a life for themselves that would be less restrictive and ultimately more gratifying.

But for all their determination to be “modern” and to have “modern” lives, it remained rather unclear throughout much of the 1920s—even to the young women themselves—what that meant, and without a blueprint to work from they had to find answers to a number of complicated questions. What exactly did it take to be “modern”? How “modern” were they going to be? What did a “modern life” look like? What were its key components? What would replace the normative models that had guided older generations?

Other contemporaries had to grapple with equally perplexing questions. If self-identified “modern girls” were no longer willing to play by the old rules, did that mean they would play by no rules at all? Might

there still be ways of maintaining some semblance of gender order, or would young women's rebelliousness lead to chaos and disorder? Did their insistence on female modernity mean that adolescent girls and young women would avoid marriage and motherhood? And how might their desires be contained or at least channeled in appropriate directions?

To understand the complicated social, cultural, and political negotiations that would eventually produce the answers to those and other questions, this study is based on a broad array of archival and published primary sources, ranging from parliamentary transcripts, statistical evidence, and legal records to local and national newspapers, women's magazines, advice manuals, popular fiction, and personal advertisements.

However, in constructing a history of gender changes and gendered experiences in the 1920s, I also rely on personal narratives by women who were young in the decade following World War I. In addition to hundreds of unpublished autobiographical accounts collected by state and local archives, I conducted fifty-nine oral history interviews with women born between 1895 and 1911.⁵⁰ Of these, thirty-six were born in rural areas and small villages, twenty-three in towns and cities across the country. Some grew up in prosperous middle-class and upper-middle-class households and others in comfortable farm families, but most came from lower-middle, working-class, and poor families.⁵¹ Despite these social and cultural differences in their background, they all worked for wages for a number of years during their youth. During these years, the vast majority lived in urban areas, residing either with parents or relatives, in other households as live-in domestic servants, or, in a few cases, in rented rooms and boarding houses. With three exceptions they all went on to marry later in life. And with only two exceptions they described themselves as having been "modern girls" in their youth.⁵²

Exploration of these sources reveal that Danish postwar negotiations over the forms and content of modern womanhood centered on three main issues, which are explored in the following chapters. The first was female fashions and young women's personal styles. In the 1920s, adolescent girls and young women clearly tied female modernity to style and to the body. Modern girls dressed in particular fashions, sported particular haircuts, and looked in particular ways. These styles, and the controversies that surrounded them, are examined in chapter 1. But modern girls did not just favor a distinct look. They also used their bodies in special ways. They walked in particular ways. They sat in particular ways. They even shook hands in particular ways. Chapter 2 explores these aspects of modern young women's self-presentation, focusing not only on the ways in which they defined and sought to acquire "modern" bodies but also on the ways in which they thought to shape their personalities around their perceptions of modernity.

The second issue was female leisure and autonomy. In addition to fashions and the body, young women also tied female modernity to a particular lifestyle that disassociated them from the family. “Modern” girls were independent; they did not sit at home, and they did not confine their lives to family and domesticity. “Modern” girls went out to work, and they went out to play. While their jobs may have been drudgery, their free time was fun-filled and exciting, touched by the glamour of commercial entertainment and consumption. As chapter 3 demonstrates, this locked young women into intense battles with their parents and other older contemporaries over the boundaries of new female freedoms. These conflicts were only heightened by the fact that young women also associated modernity with particular kinds of interactions and relationships with men. “Modern” girls did not live in or appreciate a gender-segregated world. “Modern” girls lived alongside men, and they enjoyed their companionship. Nevertheless, as chapter 4 documents, relations between young women and young men were often fraught with conflict and as difficult to negotiate as cross-generational relationships.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the attention toward the third major issue that dominated postwar debates on gender—namely, the nature of marriage and domestic labor. Because young women never challenged marriage or the financial dependence it typically entailed, these discussions were often less contentious, but because young women were determined to reconcile marriage and domesticity with their identities as “modern” women, these issues still proved difficult to negotiate. Chapter 5 examines the ways in which they sought to do so in relationships with their husbands, while chapter 6 focuses on their efforts to transform housewifery into a “modern” enterprise suitable for “modern” women.

Collectively, these six chapters present the key issues that permeated Danish debates about women and gender in the postwar decade. They also provide insight into young women’s definitions of what it meant to be “modern.” As we shall see, those understandings derived much of their substance from commercialized mass culture in general and from new mass-produced representations of women in particular. It was from sources such as films, fashion magazines, and advertisements that young women culled many of their ideas of female modernity, cross-gender camaraderie, and romantic love. The fact that young women in the 1920s did not “step outside of culture” to construct new styles of womanhood and gender relations does not diminish their role as agents of social and sexual change in the decade following World War I.⁵³ In the face of considerable opposition, these women experimented with new gendered styles, and they pioneered new manners and mores that permitted women more personal freedom, more pleasure, and more self-expression.

But acknowledging the significance of consumer culture and new cultural representations in the creation of a decidedly twentieth-century style of womanhood permits new understandings of the upheaval in gender relations that swept through the Western world, and many other countries around the world, in the 1920s. It allows us, for example, to explain why this upheaval was not confined to highly industrialized countries directly involved in World War I. Recognition of the role played by such cultural forces and acknowledgment of young women's agency in this process of change throw into question the political and economic explanations on which most historians have rested their analyses of change in the 1920s. If it were, to a large extent, new cultural representations that triggered Danish women's desire for change, might that not also be the case among women in other countries, irrespective of those countries' political and economic situation? In this light, it certainly becomes easier to explain why so many young women in the 1920s, living around the globe under very different circumstances, began to imagine female modernity in very similar ways across all national, political, and economic divides.

