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## Ladette and anti-social behaviors of girls and young women

**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the reconstruction of the extremely interesting, from the point of view of contemporary social rehabilitation and femininity/masculinity studies, phenomenon of emergence of a new type of female identity – functioning on the border of the law and often transgressing it. She is referred to as the “ladette,” standing in opposition to the modest, polite and traditional female role. It refers to the lads subculture, contesting school, practicing hedonistic forms of behavior, such as having fun, binge drinking, as well as destructive activities and objectification of women. The article undertakes a multi-context analysis of the Ladette culture, which is obviously involved in a controversial way in the process of women’s emancipation, in the context of their anti-social behaviors.

**Key words:** Ladette, girls’/young women identity, antisocial behaviors, sexuality, binge drinking.

### Ladette as a theoretical category and social phenomenon

The aim of my article is to reconstruct an extremely interesting, from the point of view of both contemporary rehabilitation and the study of femininity/masculinity, phenomenon of the emergence of a new type of girls’ identity – functioning on the border of the law and often exceeding it. She is referred to as a “ladette”, representing an opposition to the modest and polite girl of the past, destined for traditional female roles. I will, however, start with the male prototype of the “ladette”.

The subculture of lads (hooligans) was the focus of researchers in the 1980s and 1990s. The term was used to describe students considered the worst in school, contesting learning, cultivating hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity (Warrinton, Younger 2003, p. 339). Characteristics of this subculture included a heavy emphasis on competitive sports and competing for girls (Epstein 1998, p. 106). It has also been defined, in relation to a slightly older age group, as an action-oriented anti-social culture of “young, exclusively male individuals (...) who practice hedonistic forms of behavior such as partying, alcohol consumption, as well as destructive activities and the objectification of women (...) with only topics considered masculine being discussed” (Francis 1999, p. 357). This culture was particularly present among white, heterosexual working-class boys and young men (although it was adopted by some middle-class boys and men in the 1990s) (Francis 1999, p. 357).

In the last two decades, however, the term *ladette* has come to be used to refer to the subculture described above when describing risky behavior among girls and young women. It was first used by the British version of the men’s magazine *FHM* in 1994, in the context of sexually promiscuous, hard drinking women being boisterous and behaving in ways typical of young men traditionally displaying their masculinity and sexuality (Smith 2013, p. 139). In doing so, many authors point to the normalization of *ladette* culture not only among girls and women from working-class families but also among the upper classes (Carrington 2015, p. 5), and also in school settings (Jackson 2006b). This last trend is to be confirmed by the declining image of the already mentioned modest and polite student who diligently devotes herself to her studies, who is empathetic and passive. This aggressive new girl curses, can be rude and vulgar, truants and succumbs to addictions. In addition, she “gets into fights (...) disrupts lessons, is insolent and rude to teachers, open to sexual propositions, loud and crazy” (Jackson 2006a, p. 343). She is also antisocial, assertive and aggressive, and does not hesitate to use drugs, smoke cigarettes or get drunk in public. The *ladette* should not be expected to have a moderating effect on colleagues (Clark 2004, p. 15).

*Ladette*-typical behaviors among young upper-class women, in the context of the lifestyle they lead, are a particularly new phenomenon. It is not without reason that they are called the Bridget Jones generation – unknowingly getting drunk, experiencing casual sexual encounters as a result, remembering little of the party night that sometimes ends in getting into fights or vandalism (Muncer et al. 2001). According to the studies, these are most often young singles in excellent financial shape (Women Behaving Badly 2002), living in good neighborhoods in large cities (Chesney-Lindt, Irwin 2004, p. 49).

Many authors point out that these women are adopting a so-called “bad girl” lifestyle in which anti-social behavior (previously considered the domain of men from marginalized backgrounds) is supposed to be a sign of women’s strength and independence (Whelehan 2000, p. 9). “The *ladette* knows what she wants and

knows how to get it; for her, the vulgarity and sexual objectification of men is evidence of self-determination in matters of her own sexuality” (Whelehan 2000, p. 9). Her lifestyle is an attempt to redefine femininity, in which assertiveness and aggression become desirable elements of identity, as well as sources of confidence and pleasure. And this is not so much placed in the context of incorporation into one’s biography of gender characteristics associated with a hegemonic version of masculinity, but rather in an effort to shatter past stereotypes of the passive and polite girl.

This is also manifested in the reconstruction of how aggression is manifested. In the past, physical aggression by girls was a rare occurrence. A. L. Cummings argued that girls’ lower involvement in strictly physical aggressive behaviors is due to gender socialization specific to this group, which limits the opportunities to show feelings of aggression openly. Consequently, this aggression is transferable and expresses itself through behaviors that are seemingly less aggressive, but equally (if not more severe) to the victim. Thus, for example, it involves ruthless exclusion of a colleague from the group, locking the victim “into a network of gossip,” causing her to be rejected by others, emotional blackmail, the essence of which is to “withdraw the friendship” if the victim does not “comply” (Cummings et al. 2004, p. 286). This form of aggression is also called “relational” or “indirect” – the goal here is to “destroy the self-respect or social standing of a peer through rejection of a verbal nature (...) or social ostracism” (Talbot et al. 2002, p. 204). The ladette does not hesitate to visualize her aggression also through acts of direct physical violence or imitations thereof. At the same time it is argued that the ladette is not a manifestation of masculinization of women but a new type of female identity.

## Ladette culture, feminism and postfeminism

The rise of ladette culture is linked to the achievements of feminism, breaking away from gender stereotypes and achieving equality. Thus, there is a return, albeit in a slightly different version, of the thesis propagated in the United States and Western Europe in the second half of the 1970s, coming from Freda Adler’s books “Sisters in Crime” (1975) and Rita James Simon’s “Women in Crime” (1975). The constations from both of these monographs referred to women’s crime rates rising rapidly at the time (although, just as today in absolute numbers, women commit significantly less crime than men). Here were women, wishing to achieve emancipation in many spheres of life, and who began to obtain paradoxical “equality” with men also in the criminal sphere. Their criminality also stemmed from the frustrations of dependence on men, the stereotypical image of femininity as passive and lacking in self-will, and finally the restriction of women’s activities to the private sphere and the marginalization that this entailed. Such

new antisocial behaviors in girls have also been linked to a general increase in aggression, confidence, courage, and entrepreneurship among this gender (Hartman, Sundt 2010, pp. 3–4).

Popular culture promoting images of assertive and “ready for anything” superheroines has also been cited as a source of aggressive and deviant behavior in girls and young women. These new strong girls are also a reflection of the changing role of women in a society where: “there is a gradual increase in tolerance for women taking on non-traditional roles. And this is true regardless if they ride unbridled horses at rodeos, whip ass as police officers, drive semi trucks, or engage in yet other activities historically perceived as exclusively male” (McRobbie 2004, p. 7). The identification of girls with idols associated with the Girl Power ideology: Matilda in *Leon: The Professional*, Thelma and Louise, Nikita, the Bride from *Kill Bill*, Lara Croft, Mrs. Smith or Catwoman from *Batman* is probably due to the fact that they propose a model of identity that essentially breaks away from the ideal of the passive, sentimental, and ready-for-sacrifice woman. They are the heroines of their lives.

Not surprisingly, the forerunner of the ladette style is considered to be the extravagant second-wave feminist, author of the famous book *The Female Eunuch* (dealing with the repression of female sexuality), Germaine Greer, who, according to Letts, challenged the modesty and decency of British girls and women (Letts 2009). Ladettes are girls and women who reject traditional gender roles, are sexually liberated, and do as they please. Of course, media images of the ladette are framed negatively, in terms of the decline of women’s morality and dignity. Although on the other hand they are also an attractive media image/commodity (paradoxically, what is anti-social is presented as socially attractive).

In public discussions, a moral double standard is applied to ladette girls – what is acceptable in men is difficult to accept in women, and ladettes question the established gender order. For a woman becomes a participant in a culture that for centuries was exclusively male. However, it is not only criticized by opponents of emancipation but also by many feminists. For the ladette not only contradicts the traditional version of femininity, but is also a visible sign of a crisis of feminism and a reaffirmation of the primacy of male identity in society. This is why hedonistic behavior, including excessive alcohol consumption, manifesting the use of stimulants, and living a sexually liberated lifestyle has earned the term “phallic girl”. According to Angela McRobbie, “she (the ladette) tries to emulate masculine behavior as a post-feminist gesture. She seems to have achieved equality by being able to play with them, at their own game, she challenges feminism, and by having a few rights belonging to men, she sees no reason to challenge masculinity” (McRobbie 2009, p. 93).

It is hard to disagree with this claim, especially since the Ladette style offers the most superficial model of gender equality, equality in terms of to anti-social behavior. It undoubtedly fits in with post-feminism and its associated culture

of consumption. Thus, she refers to the belief that the old feminist ideals have been realized, hence have become obsolete, and a period has come in which a woman can focus her attention on self-realization and lifestyle choices. Advocates of postfeminism assume that there are more and more women who see no limits to who they can be or what they can do in life. A truly emancipated woman, according to postfeminist ideology, should enjoy her liberation. Girls are supposed to feel pleasure, and achieve it through shopping, an entertaining lifestyle based on partying and drinking alcohol (even if it is just prosecco), and ultimately consuming adventures, including sexual ones. And such are the media representations of the ladette – highly provocative and symbolizing – through “exaggerated femininity” – expressive makeup, sexual attire, high heels – liberated femininity. In doing so, they break away from the dominant representations of femininity within sexist patriarchal culture that emphasize submissiveness and good manners, as well as women’s assumption of the role of a passive sexual object. The ladettes’ sexual power gives them confidence and boosts their self-esteem. Paula Kamen writes in this context about the so-called superrats – sexually aggressive women taking on the male style of liberated sexuality, predatory and ready for sexual adventures with casual partners (Kamen 2000, p. 17). Ladettes are also referred to as “chauvinist female pigs,” participating in a “culture of lewdness” – in this context, Ariel Levy cites the example of girls competing with each other over which of them is more sexually defiant (Levy 2005).

On the other hand, however, there is no denying that the ladette’s body is sexualized in hundreds of commercialized media messages, where it is visualized as simultaneously “sadistic and seductive” (Carrington 2015, p. 143). For many, however, she remains solely a heterosexual girl seeking recognition in the eyes of boys. Hence, the ladette’s style of being is called the “pink rebellion.” Thus, there is nothing in common, as Ann Smith notes, with the tomboy who, by making herself look like a boy, wants to be one ( Smith 2013, p. 142). Let me say again, the ladette is not a masculinized woman, she is a new version of femininity. Because we are already equal, post-feminists and aggressive ladette girls seem to say, we can return to femininity – exposing breasts, wearing sexy lingerie and short skirts; we are allowed to drink large amounts of alcohol and enjoy sexual freedom. Thus, femininity appears as a form of power, defining and realizing oneself. Postfeminism thus proposes an ideal of the liberated woman, aware of her sexuality and independent. However, as critics argue, such an ideal only creates a myth of progress and reduces socio-political problems to the personal sphere (especially since post-feminists in practice orient themselves mainly towards consumption and the body) (Coppock et al. 1995, p. 3), as well as the aggression, violent acts, and antisocial behavior that often lead to crime.

The ladette phenomenon can be reconstructed in the context of two opposing analytical perspectives relating to the situation of women. The first one called victim feminism promotes the image of women as victims of men and patriarchal

human relations. Girls and young women, according to the dominant belief within this trend, function in conditions of extreme risk, symbolized by drugs, sex, and crime. Hence, ladette-type girls, wanting to move beyond the victim role, conform to the prevailing anti-social rules of the game. Ladette culture is also placed here in the context of the negative effects of the emancipation of women, who, it is argued, have historically been secure in their traditional gender roles, respected by men and protected by them. Nowadays, girls are no longer portrayed here as vulnerable and prone to hurt, but as mean and immoral (Gonick 2004, p. 395).

The second analytical perspective is referred to as power feminism and is based on the idea that a woman's life and destiny depend on herself. In this sense, she has potential power over her identity and the reality in which she lives (Harris 2001). A young woman or girl is seen here as assertive, without complexes, confident and determined – she becomes a symbol of social change. Her image breaks away from stepping into the role of victim in the areas of pornography, sexual violence and sexual objectification.

However, criticisms of this trend refer to a misconceived emancipation that leads to the reduction of young women's life goals to sexual gratification and maximum entertainment. It is claimed here that women's acceptance of power feminism slogans results in alcohol abuse, casual sex, and the resulting problems. This style of functioning, according to critics, promotes the victimization of girls and young women and exposes them to situations that threaten their health and lives.

## **The ladette – a media construct or a real threat?**

For at least two decades, there have been press reports with increasing intensity about the rise in antisocial, deviant, and criminal behavior in girls that is definitely part of the ladette culture. Undoubtedly, also in Poland the percentage of girls addicted to alcohol and drugs and often getting drunk has increased (Sierosławski 2011; Ostaszewski 200; Nikodemska 2002). Girls can be arrogant and vulgar, referring to peers and elders in an abusive manner. Some of them get into fights and steal, fitting the image of the “violent, aggressive bad girl” (Brown, Tappan 2008, 49). Police reports say they behaved aggressively while giving testimony.

In doing so, they are, due to the dominant traditional image of femininity as empathetic, passive and modest, much more negatively perceived than boys and men behaving in the same way. The new generation of girls has even become known as the “female tsunami” (Kokoszycska 2007) or “Generation T” – the generation of the systemic transformation (Kokoszycska 2007).

This raises the question of whether the ladette is a real threat or just a media construct emerging from headlines and TV shows? Does creating this version of “anti-social girlhood” not cause it to become a source of deviant behavior in itself?

(Brown, Tappan 2008 p. 51). Undoubtedly, it is one of the commonly used slogans used in media messages and academic texts to explain deviant, aggressive and delinquent behaviors of girls and young women (Silvestri, Crowther-Dowey 2008, p.4). The increase in such behavior is believed to be a result of ladette culture – characterized by compulsive binge drinking and the adoption of elements of a culture of hegemonic masculinity, and the consequent loss of control over one's actions (Clout 2008, p. 13).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, one may ask whether the concept of the ladette is to some extent an abstract sociological and psychopedagogical category that is entangled (only in the case of a very small group of women) in an obviously controversial way in the process of women's emancipation? Or, perhaps, is it related to a real-world social phenomenon? Indeed, not so long ago (a few decades ago) it referred to rebellious individuals, small youth or women's subcultures, or, relatively, a temporary adolescent rebellion or reaction to family or school problems. However, the opposite seems to be true. The poststructural concept of Michel Foucault, who writes about the phenomena of normalization or naturalization, can be used here (Foucault 1985). What was astonishing, extraordinarily extravagant, and quite rare has turned into a distinct social trend in recent decades. It is no longer just rebellious teenagers, pop-feminists or masculinized aggressive women who break the rules of society. There are clear statistical trends here. The ladette category takes on a different meaning today. Almost any young woman can become one if the conditions of society or the meanderings of her own identity provoke her to do so.

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