Foreword

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The copious collection of girls included in *Girlhood: A Global History* stirred recollections of my girlhood, especially of the exquisitely dressed costume dolls I collected in the early 1960s. That was long before we understood that the clothing sewn onto the dolls' bodies signified female identities as immutable, uniform, and uncomplicated by gender, age, race, religion, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity, class, power, and the like. The realization that girlhood is a constructed, changing, and contested category of both experience and expectations only became apparent in the late 1980s and early 1990s as scholars began to chart the history of American girls. Since then historians and other scholars studying children and youth have been teaching, researching, writing monographs, editing journals, and compiling anthologies that place girls at the center of scholarly inquiry. The unprecedented scope of *Girlhood: A Global History*, however, makes it the first work to illuminate how vast, varied, and intricate girlhood is.

This essay collection is noteworthy for its infinite variety across all axes from the methodological to the topical, the disciplinary to the definitional. While some scholars use the diaries, memoirs, and semiautobiographical works of women to reconstruct girlhood, others make use of questionnaires and oral histories of girls themselves. Some essays rely on traditional historical evidence (e.g., archival material, interviews, official records) and qualitative research, whereas others "read" the body as a historical text. The volume also includes an enormous variety of girl-centered subjects (e.g., cultures, politics, love, sexuality, education, clothes, music, parties, dances, diary writing, talking, family, friends) and sites of study (e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, boarding schools, youth meetings, community clubs and centers, the streets, and shopping centers).

Vastly expanding the field of study across borders and boundaries, over time, and around the world, this collection, with its broad focus, also challenges standard definitions and traditional assumptions about girlhood as a uniform category of experience and expectation. By examining girls as students, citizens, sexual beings, and workers, and in numerous other social roles, the essays in this pioneering collection are significant for the opportunities they provide for the transnational study of girls. The numerous regional studies of girls from Mexico to Malaysia illuminate not only the

multiplicity of girlhoods but their complexity as well. Principally written by the most recent generation of girlhood scholars in the United States, United Kingdom, and around the world, these historical examinations make visible the continuities, changes, and challenges of girlhoods.

The contributors analyze varieties of girls' experiences and the range of girlhood ideals within numerous and new historical contexts. Represented here are many different "dominant" or "mainstream" cultures ("decent culture") shaped by racial, national, ethnic, and religious elites with varying cultural ideals, expectations, and hegemonic strategies. Girlhood is also examined within religious (Jewish, Muslim, Catholic), ethnic, class, and political contexts. The use of a girl-focused lens permits examination of varieties of girlhoods under an array of systems from slavery to colonialism and dictatorships to democracies. Moreover, these essays provide opportunities to examine changes in the social construction of girlhood over time and place. For instance, in one essay we learn how the Great War politicized African American workers who became actors on larger political stages and in broader labor conflicts. The Second World War similarly led girls in the United States and the United Kingdom to assume new social roles. A handful of essays focus on the politicization of girlhoods by investigating ordinary girls as well as exceptional ones. One essay examines the gendering of Soviet celebrity gymnasts in a broader international arena.

While Soviet gymnasts symbolized the superiority of nationalist ideals, other girls manifested more heterogeneous identities. Shaped by an assortment of racial, religious, class, ethnic, and national influences, many girls laid claim to such complex identities as Arab Muslim, Arab Christian, Surinamese Dutch, French Algerian, and African Caribbean. For many, the intersections and contradictions made girlhood a particularly distinctive as well as disputed category. For Muslim girls such as Assia Djebar, her French colonial education isolated her from her cousins and other female peers with different girlhood principles and practices. Despite the differences among girls, there are striking similarities among those who struggled to construct independent identities. From the Soviet Union to the United States, girls negotiated among conflicting cultural scripts and indigenous codes as they shaped their own identities and collective subcultures. For many, personal empowerment, autonomy, individuality, was frequently achieved through diaries, books, and music often with feminist themes.

Unlike mute and immobile costume dolls, the girls from Argentina to Zimbabwe included in this collection exhibit enormous personal agency. Many contested the limitations of their gender and age by creating opportunities and claiming space. While repressive regimes often proved perilous, wars, revolutions, and immigration provided girls with greater chances for mobility, both spatial and monetary. Through numerous acts of resistance and the creation of autonomous spaces, spirited girls resisted confinement and militant ones challenged containment. Girls'

many transgressive acts represented here include writing secret love letters, swinging to see over confining walls, using their voices, or suing the state. Whether enslaved or colonized, real or representations, girls used a variety of strategies to correct injustices and protect themselves from cruelty and coercion. Girls resisted indoctrination, exploitation, and commercialization as they claimed their rights and struggled for redemption, restitution, and self-determination.

Amid the diversity of cultural practices, religious beliefs, and languages, however, similarities between girls' subcultural practices are evident in the many different counternarratives that serve as sources of evidence. Whether playing, singing, dancing, dating, reading, romancing, learning, or writing (especially in diaries), girls such as those in nineteenth-century Palestine, interwar Iraq, and colonial Mombassa made the most of practices that served mediating functions. Heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian girls carved out protected spaces, shaped interests, and constructed identities. At the end of the twentieth century, girls in Taiwan resisted the homogenization of globalized popular culture and created a hybridized subculture and sexual identity.

In ongoing tension with the changes are continuities in notions of girlhood and girls' lived experiences across time and place. While feminine training empowered American, Arab, African, and Australian Aboriginal female youth, it also served to impose severe limitations. Everywhere girls of different ages, ethnicities, and races faced discrimination because they were young females. Studies of schools (mission and public), clubs, seminaries, camps, colleges, and movements in different local contexts reveal that social institutions often served as sites of traditional female socialization and aggressive assimilation to dominant colonial cultures in Palestine, India, Mombassa, and Australia. A familiar cast of characters often hindered and sometimes helped the transformation of girlhood worldwide. These included families (nuclear and matrifocal), parents (Arab, Indian, African, Muslim, and Christian fathers), teachers, reformers, missionaries, and girl-friends. While some adults discouraged girls' defiance, and others fostered girls' negotiation among dominant, indigenous, and subcultural values, many encouraged girls' independence.

By focusing historical inquiry on girls from a global perspective, *Girlhood: A Global History* provides those in the fields of girls' studies, youth studies, children's studies, and women's studies with fresh opportunities to reevaluate and recenter girlhood, the notion long assumed to be uniform and unchanging.