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Observer Woman

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We've never had it so good

They outperform boys at school, university, and work. They're the twentysomething Generation Y women - educated, ambitious, successful. But is life really as good as it looks? Louise Carpenter reports

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Imagine this: as a young girl, you grow up being told by your parents and teachers that you can do anything, be anything. You are the best. You go to university, get a good degree, lay down the foundations for your chosen career, leave, get yourself into your chosen career. You've got a decade of indulgence ahead of you. By your mid-twenties, you're on a six-figure salary forging a path in a previously male-dominated world. You own your own flat, a Mulberry handbag and a Marc Jacobs frock. You look great, you feel great, you sleep with around 40 men, experimenting physically and emotionally, before finally finding the right one (who happens to have been there all along), a man who knows exactly who he is, is talented and creative and who supports you in all your life decisions. You hit 30. You've got it taped. In the next five years, you'll decide you want six babies, but because you can't spare the time, you'll go down to the IVF clinic and ask for a multiple birth. That will be a success, too, and by the age of 35 you'll have your apple-cheeked brood. You'll move to the country, be a fabulous mother while running a couple of successful businesses. Oh, and you'll write a novel.

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This dreamed-of life reads like the delusions of a mad woman, of course, or a Mills & Boon plot for the Noughties generation. Or does it? Maybe that depends on who you are and at what point in your life you are reading it. It is, of course, a description of a fictional woman, but its composite parts are true, which is to say that every element within it is made up of the real-life ambitions and experiences so far of a group of young women who have spent the past month talking to me about their lives and their expectations of their futures. These women are all living in what has become known as 'the decade of indulgence' or the '11-year-gap', that halcyon period between leaving university and settling down which, due to demographic and social change, now lasts longer than ever before.

Twenty-five years ago, for example, the average woman got married at 26; now it is nearly 33. The statistics seem to point to one thing: young women - or at least young, educated women from 21 to 32 - are having a better time of it than ever before. Unburdened by responsibility, they are experiencing true economic, emotional and sexual freedom. My study of them was hardly scientific, nor was it socially or economically comprehensive, since I concentrated mainly on women with degrees, but nevertheless it revealed something quite startling. As far as I could tell, these young, educated women were discernibly different from those of my generation - similarly educated women in their thirties who, let's face it, hardly grew up thinking they would be chained to the kitchen sink.

What makes them so different? The answer is both complex and simple. The overall message was career, career, career. The overall implication was the power of infinite possibility in absolutely every area of their lives. These young women embody the potential of self-belief made possible, perhaps, by growing up in a generation oblivious to the gender struggles of the past. They work hard, play hard, imbued by a sense of acute entitlement that comes from having been given endless opportunity and encouragement from childhood. The world is their world, there for the taking. Doubt, in any form, does not figure. Success is expected rather than hoped for.

Academics have dubbed them 'the Monstrous Army on the March', women who cannot, will not be stopped. They are young, ambitious and gifted - different in every way from the

boob-enhanced trophy Wags who have become, paradoxically, so iconic for doing absolutely nothing but sleeping with a footballer and applying self-tan.

According to the Henley Centre, these women are part of a wider trend, classed as Generation Y, a new wave of twentysomethings who believe that the quality of life in Britain is best improved by putting yourself first. The Association of Graduate Recruiters has gone one step further by saying that many candidates are now proving too self-centred to hire. How did women get to this point?

Let's cut to Jamelia, the 26-year-old internationally acclaimed singer and mother of two, whose own mother is just 42.

'I think our parents grew up in an age where women were expected to provide this home life for everybody, and we're not just becoming more career-orientated, we're becoming more "me"-orientated.

'I feel it's really important to look after yourself, because if you can't do that, you can't look after anybody else, and I mean that in every way. Giving yourself little treats even if you can't afford them. I would say we're more indulgent - we like to look good, and women are looking good more for themselves now, rather than for someone else, which I think is important. We're becoming selfish, but in a positive way.' So there you have it, the power of individualism as expressed by a pop star.

At the end of each day of interviews with the girls, I'd emerge from my study punch-drunk from their undiluted self-confidence; the absolute cast-iron belief in the power of their own will. The statistics help paint a picture, but to understand them, one has to understand their spirit and that is best evoked in their own words.

'There's no doubt that there is now more pressure than ever to succeed,' wrote Laura Brunt, a 24-year-old PR, to me in an email: 'At school and university, it was no longer enough to simply be academically successful. You also had to be in the first 11 for netball and have grade-eight flute. We have to achieve as much as men but in a far shorter space of time. The twentysomething women I know aren't bothered about old-style feminism. We're not interested in trying to feel "empowered", partly because we see ourselves as equal to men now: we can work, vote, sleep around, all without anyone barely batting an eyelid.

'In some ways that's liberating, but at the same time it's as if we've become suffocated by choice: we have nothing to complain about and nothing left to fight for. We don't have to get married to survive, and if we do we can get divorced if it doesn't work out how we hoped. Men now take a substantial share of domestic responsibility and much more of a role in child-rearing. My career choices as a woman starting out on the ladder are endless.'

I loved these women, but they made me feel old. My own so-called halcyon years feel like a distant and rather different affair relatively. I'm 36 - hardly past it.

'I don't remember being like that,' I'd say to my husband after another empowering conversation. 'I remember feeling grateful if somebody asked me to sweep the floor.'

And speaking to them, I was acutely aware of this: there is nothing quite so unpleasant as the whiff of sour grapes. No intelligent woman wants to knock ambition and increased opportunities. No woman, whatever her experience, wants less for her own daughters than she had for herself. I have two, albeit tiny ones, and I want them to grow up to do what makes them happiest. Isn't total freedom of choice what feminists have been fighting for? As one Oxford graduate put it: 'I look around at my friends and think these are incredibly talented women, incredibly smart, and I'm really excited to be part of a generation that I think is going to go forward and do even greater things. What's stopping us? Like let's go out there and take it.'

My snap survey showed other common patterns, too. If you are in your twenties reading this in bed on a Sunday morning, some of the scenarios will no doubt be recognisable to you. All the girls believed they would achieve their goals, which, I guess, is the consequence of unmitigated ambition. All of them professed to disbelieve the myth of 'having it all', although any future compromise seemed an entirely abstract notion. 'You've been given all these chances, by your parents, by your school, at university, you can hardly throw them away,' Clementine Brown, 24, head of PR at Quintessentially, the global private members' club and concierge service, told me.

All of them bore out the theory that girls are easier to educate than boys. Many grew up being told by parents and teachers they were the best, certainly better than boys - which, for some, had caused its own problems.

'I had to go into cognitive therapy when I got to university,' one young and ambitious woman who went to one of the top two universities in Britain told me. 'I'd spent my life being told I was brilliant only to find myself surrounded by women just like me. I started having panic attacks and shaking and being sick. I still strive to be perfect but I'm slightly better.' She told me this before going on to list the ways in which she planned to conquer her profession ('Did I also mention that I wanted to write a novel by the time I was 40?').

Many worked three or four nights a week, either at home or attending functions, to further their careers. Nearly all of them had recently come out of relationships. None of them considered themselves to have been dumped - they'd extricated themselves from relationships either because they wanted to concentrate on their careers or they had the ability and intelligence to see, unclouded by emotion and confusion (so unlike my formative experiences), that ultimately the relationship was going nowhere.

None of them wanted to date 'losers' - men they defined as lacking in ambition or talent; they never cited low pay as a factor. Intelligence and humour were considered overall more important than looks. They all articulated the importance of feeling sexy over looking sexy, although they made the connection between the two. All thought the size-zero issue

was ridiculous and had only vaguely dieted (although none, interestingly, were above a size 12 and most were a 10). Cosmetic surgery was not seen as a real option although I got the impression 'work' for a few of them might at some stage incorporate Botox. They had, on average, a monthly disposable income of between £500 and £1,000. All of them bought something new each month, mostly from Topshop, Zara and Primark with the occasional 'investment' buy. The rest was spent in bars, restaurants and in hair salons (a number of them said 'I don't spend that much on hair' only to tell me they had a cut every six weeks, never mind the money spent on highlights). Most of them did some form of exercise and looked after their bodies by eating good food.

Sex revealed some interesting shifts. They all said they were not that interested in having one-night stands, not out of any moral objection but because, for the most part, it was 'a waste of time'. And yet when I went beyond scraping the surface, it became clear that, for many of them, men were something else to be enjoyed entirely on their own terms and that did not necessarily equate with monogamy: 'I think I am aware that this is the one time when I can truly play the field,' one young woman told me, 'and so I want to make the most of it. There are so many amazing people out there.'

Another admitted that between the age of 17 and 24 she'd had 40 partners - not because she was vulnerable or mistreated, waiting on the end of a phone for them to call back, but because she was in control: 'You learn,' she explained. 'I learnt what I wanted and what I didn't want. I was trying things out. It was like a sport to me, a bit male, the thrill of the chase.'

The more I talked to them about it, the more I understood this: they were like the men of old, sampling what they might or might not want, unhindered by their own emotional expectation or need, before moving on, not necessarily to the next man - those who were single were single by choice ('needing' a man was anathema) - but to the next excitement, the next opportunity. Enjoying men was not promiscuity, just another example of the endless possibilities of life. It was also about not settling for anything but the best.

All of them emphasised the importance of safe sex so vehemently that I believed them. A few said they even 'doubled up' on the pill and condoms (a practice unheard of when I was in my twenties; we were all more terrified of pregnancy than STDs). For many of these women, Aids testing was seen as a healthy, intelligent precaution rather than something terrifying and last-resort.

Attitudes to drink reflected the same kind of carpe diem spirit. In 2005, 22 per cent of women binge-drank and a fifth of young women broke the government's recommended alcohol-intake limit. None of my sample group went that far - a good few were extremely moderate - but even for those who admitted to drinking a lot, it was controlled: 'I never drink so much that I make myself ill or don't know what I'm doing or who I'm with.'

Pretty much all of them identified their mothers as their inspiration and role models. 'My mother was the first woman to go to the bar in Southern Australia,' said Sarah Hunter, 29,

Harper's Bazaar Young Businesswoman of the Year 2006 - the youngest-ever head of investor relations for a FTSE 100 company and now finance and property director of Gatwick Airport (she of the six-figure salary). 'My mother was fighting those battles. I know the sacrifices my mother chose to make to achieve that and I respect her for them.'

But what exactly were the sacrifices they witnessed at close quarters? For most of the Generation Y-ers, certainly those born to a generation of working mothers, they saw sacrifice as not seeing enough of the children because of the demands of a good career, or not rising to the zenith of that career because of the children. For my generation, however, the Bridget Jones generation if you will, a new crisis is presenting itself - infertility. Thirtysomething women have spent so much time on their careers that growing numbers are finding they have left it too late to have a baby.

It is sobering to consider that, in 1971, for women in their twenties, there were 154.5 live births per 1,000 women. Recent statistics show a dramatic fall to 84.75 per 1,000 and researchers point to the downward trend getting even worse, with childlessness increasing dramatically for people born more recently, particularly the highly qualified.

During a recent Radio Four Analysis programme, chaired by Professor Alison Wolf, an academic who specialises in changes in the labour market with particular interest in young women, Peter Baude, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at King's College, London, said of my generation of women: 'You can wish as much as you like and you can pay as much as you like; you can dream as much as you like, but you can't change the biology. What we see that's the most distressing is the loss of assumption - people who come along to us who've been able to get everything they want in their lives by hard work, and for the first time they hit a barrier.'

So how will it be for Generation Y? Will they march through their thirties conquering the world, only to reach their forties to be faced with infertility and a single life? Or will they have learned from my generation? Who knows. Ask most young women and they do not envisage a life of childlessness.

'I am really surprised when I hear of girls my age getting married and having kids only because I'm nowhere near that stage yet,' says Camilla Arfwedson, a 25-year-old actress. 'The strange thing is I know it's absolutely normal for girls to have children now and it really makes me wonder whether we are being "unnatural" putting off the body clock. I often get broody when I see babies, but then the sensible voice at the back of my head says, "No! Not yet. It's you and your career now. Chill out."'

Professor Wolf thinks there is another option. 'Deferring motherhood is risky,' she says. Instead, she strongly advocates having children younger so that you can re-enter the labour market in your thirties, with 30 or 40 years in front of you. 'Most of these women will catch up by the time they hit their forties,' she said.

But one 31-year-old woman, still single and enjoying the 11-year gap without concern for the future, told me this: 'I know of

two women, both my age, who have just had babies they sort of regret. Both gave the same reason: after reading Daily Mail-style scare stories, they were convinced that, even at 30 they were leaving it too late and now wish they'd waited until they were 36. Personally, I don't have the fear yet, mainly because my own mother was 38 when she had me.'

And for the young women who have already found their life partner? Well, all things are possible, of course.

'I want loads,' said 31-year-old Sarah Sutton, a board director and a young woman who, as it happens, can fly a plane, sail a boat and has two degrees. 'But I haven't quite added up how I'm going to do it. I don't want to resent the time I take out and I don't want to spend six years at home having children. I might become depressed. Maybe I could get a multiple birth and have them all at once? Or maybe I could have a couple and adopt the rest? I want a very relaxed lifestyle, too, maybe have my own business.'

Are you serious? I asked her. Six babies? Multiple births? Your own business? A relaxed lifestyle? 'And I'd really like to sail round the Pacific with them for four months. I have dreams of taking them out of school. I couldn't bear the idea of not being able to do that.' Right you are, then.

Emily Murray, a writer on Condé Nast Brides magazine, is planning to have her babies at the age of 32. She planned to get married at 28, which she has just done and, in fact, she picked her Cambridge college because of the ratio of men to women and because she wanted to find her husband there, which, in a roundabout way, she did: 'Not bad, huh,' she says. 'I find that, with a bit of good luck, things usually work out. I feel I will stay at home with my child for as long as I can bear it, but definitely not more than a year.'

When my interviewees did contemplate future motherhood, phrases like 'bear to stay at home', 'go back to work, of course' and 'can't spare the time' were a leitmotif. It will come as no surprise that not a single one of them could conceive of the idea that they might, one day, want to give up work altogether.

Heather Joshi is professor of economic and developmental demography and director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education at the University of London. She is unequivocal about her concerns over the problems faced by these young women.

'These ambitions we are seeing are in the mould of what used to be masculine,' she said. 'They are rat-race ambitions rather than community-orientated.' She raises a key point which many of the women I spoke to also articulated:

'It's difficult to know how men fit into these scenarios,' she told me. 'We are all bemoaning the lack of symmetry in gender roles but the emerging script is not well charted.'

'I do think it must suck to be a guy in this day and age,' says one successful public-relations consultant. 'Masculinity is such a complex role to carry off nowadays and I think that's in

part influenced by the fact that women are so demanding. At the turn of the millennium there were all these songs by groups like Destiny's Child and Missy Elliott about how women no longer need a man to pay their bills, to look after them or fulfil any of those traditional roles. I think there has definitely been a change in the zeitgeist and I think women do have the upper hand, in a sense.'

'I'm one of three sisters,' 24-year-old Laura Brunt told me. 'We are all in our twenties and had an idyllic childhood, are certainly not unattractive and are even capable of being quite decent company - and yet it's a running joke among our friends that we never seem to have a boyfriend, that we're too picky or intimidating. My friends are always moaning about the lack of decent available men out there but I always seem to be looking for the next Mr Unobtainable and Mr Arrogant, and I admit I enjoy the games, the conquering of the bad guy and moving on. I also know how cold it is making me and how hard I make it for men to get close to me.'

This was not an uncommon experience. 'Mediocre' men were simply not on the agenda as long-term partners, and knowing they were outstripping their male counterparts, many of the Generation Y-ers admitted to being increasingly attracted to older men, who are perceived as having more to offer. 'Older men are very inspiring,' comments Camilla Arfwedson. 'They are great for providing support and good advice.'

'I sometimes wonder if men are more comfortable going out with women who are a bit less clever than they are,' muses Sarah Scougal, 26, who works for Working Title films. 'I suppose boys do prefer to assert their sense of superiority.'

'Women are becoming more like the old-style men,' Professor Wolf said, 'men who felt failures if they weren't made CEOs, or admirals. Historically, one of the plus sides of being a woman was that there was a reputable alternative and, if society values bringing up a family well, being a good mother, creating a home to which everybody enjoys returning - and let's be honest, that includes the man you love - then surely that's a worthwhile choice to make for your life?'

'I'm not sure what the answer is,' says Professor Joshi. 'It's not a question of holding them down, but we need to find ways for us to have fulfilling lives that aren't just about careers.'

Laura Brunt agrees that, while the possibilities are endless, so too are the pressures. 'We're expected to have an impressive full-time job, a decent relationship, a mixed group of loyal friends, a house (which is tidy), the right clothes (and be thin enough to wear them) but still be able to eat in all the right restaurants. I may not be doing all this just yet but it certainly feels like this is the path I need to follow over the next few years.'

The recent emphasis on blatant consumerism has been largely directed at Generation Y.

'You go into Primark and see a pair of shoes for £5 and you think, "That's cheap". But then you buy a top and something else, and you end up spending £50. I am trying to stop myself doing that,' says Poppy Lloyd, a 26-year-old radio producer for

Such blatant consumer manipulation, perpetuated by celebrity magazines and their emphasis on Wags and get-rich-quick reality TV stars, infuriates Jamelia, particularly in regard to the pervasive influence on her own young daughters.

'In the current climate, these are the people who are inspiring 18-year-olds to get their boobs done and hang about in a club in order to pull a footballer. That is not an ambition and it really irritates me to death. And the way the celebrity is celebrated, even if you've just sat in a room for a month. It used to be about having made some sort of difference. Actually, that'll be my job in 10 years' time - getting the scum out of the celeb world! Money doesn't make you happy. I know, with Darren [her partner] and my girls, I'll still be happy without cash.'

Sarah Scougal again: 'I find it profoundly confusing. I went to St Paul's Girls School and to Oxford and I feel I need to do well as a woman, and yet there is this reality-celebrity phenomenon where people get rich quickly, which is sending out a strange, totally opposite message. So on the one hand you have this post-feminist message about achievement and on the other, there's the message that the quickest, most secure route to wealth is going on Big Brother and having your boobs done.' She pauses and sounds perplexed. 'Maybe that's just yet another aspirational drive of my generation.'

So what's the future? Nobody has the answer, probably because there isn't an easy one. For what it's worth, here's what I think. The glass ceiling is disappearing. Overt sexual discrimination could become a thing of the past, thank God, due to tribunals and court cases.

But I do agree with Peninah Thomson, director of Praesta Partners, which runs an international mentoring programme for female City high-fliers. She says that something more subtle prevails, which is to do with who gets paid attention and who doesn't, and the extent to which influence is exercised. Would you be a serious contender for the top job if you're brilliant but on a three-day week to be with your children? Probably not, although nobody would admit to it.

Maybe it is a red herring to compare them to my generation. Maybe we should be comparing them to their male counterparts. After all, the chasm starts early. Girls are outstripping boys at school; 59 per cent get five or more high-grade GCSEs, compared to 49 per cent of boys; 44 per cent compared to only 35 per cent of boys gain two or more A-levels, and last year more than half of first-degree graduates were women. They're gaining a march on previously male-orientated professions - girls make up 62 per cent of law students, for example, 58 per cent of medicine and dentistry graduates, and are holding their own in science, previously a male-dominated subject, which now boasts an equal split between the sexes. They also seem to be more employable. Last year, while, seven per cent of 2005 male graduates were jobless - a relatively tiny percentage - for women, it was almost half that.

Talking to my group, I am sure about one thing though. The future is bright and it is female. Maybe it is the poor, confused

young men we should be worried about. As a friend said: 'You're OK, you've got girls, but as a mother of a boy, I'm just a bit worried.'

Magic numbers: women's rise in figures

73% of young women want to go on working after they have had a child, even if they could afford to stay at home.

154.5 births per 1,000 women was the birth rate in 1971. By 2002, it had fallen to 84.75 per 1,000 women. Fertility levels in women have almost halved since 1971.

20% of young women break the government's alcohol limits.

25% of women under 25 have had more than one partner in the last year.

3x- likelihood of British men to commit suicide, as compared with women.

40% of men in their 20s still live at home, compared to 24% of women of the same age.

33 is the average age for women to get married. Twenty years ago, it was 26.

44% of young women say they would like to set up their own business. Women now outnumber men as newly qualified doctors and solicitors. In 2005, 63% of accountancy apprenticeships were taken by women.

57% of first-degree graduates were women, as were 50% of science graduates last year. Currently, 62% of law students, and 58% of medicine and dentistry students, are women.

96% of female graduates were employed in 2005.

40% of professional jobs in UK are held by women.

59% of girls get five or more high-grade GCSEs, compared to 49% of boys. 44% of girls and 35% of boys gain two or more A-levels.

26 is the average age for women to have children. In 1971 it was 23.



