

# HBO's "Girls": What should the voice of this generation say?

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The HBO television comedy-drama "Girls" recently concluded its fifth season. Since its 2012 debut, the show has received widespread praise from media critics and commentators, and it has gained a degree of popularity among an audience of young people. Praise for the show generally lauds its "frankness" and "realism" about the unpleasant, even ugly, aspects of life for American youth.

Such aspects certainly exist in abundance. Young people face a reality dominated by ceaseless war, growing poverty and unemployment and underemployment, suffocating debt, and, in many cases, social despair. A recent Pew report revealed that, for the first time in 130 years, Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 are more likely to be living with their parents than with a spouse or partner.

Such social instability inevitably wreaks havoc on the personal lives of this new American "lost generation." The characteristics of millennials in the US so often mocked in the media—anxiety in regard to the future, a reluctance to commit to jobs or romantic partners, reliance on financial help from parents and relatives, an increased use of social media due to the fraying of traditional social bonds—are not subjective "failings," but rather the objective consequences of the social disaster that has engulfed millions.

"Girls" has been presented, both by its champions and its detractors, as a truthful, "warts and all" representation of the experiences and outlook of American millennials. Indeed, in fits and starts, the show manages to capture certain truthful elements of this generation's experience. Ultimately, however, the show's creators are unable to probe the source of social difficulty to its source, and their fixation on a complacent layer of the upper middle class severely limits the series.

HBO's "Girls" follows Hannah Horvath (show creator Lena Dunham), a 24-year-old aspiring writer living in Brooklyn, New York. At the show's outset, Hannah has been working as an unpaid intern at a literary agency and receiving financial help from her parents to make ends meet. In the pilot episode, Hannah's parents inform her that they will be cutting off financial support. This sets off something of a personal crisis, as Hannah must now "grow up" and find a way to support herself, financially and emotionally, in notoriously expensive and pressure-filled New York City.

Hannah is joined by a group of female friends apparently intended to represent a kind of cross-section of American youth: the "uptight" and micromanaging Marnie (Allison Williams) who often chastises the others for not behaving more responsibly; the "free-spirited" and reckless Jessa (Jemima Kirke) who operates largely on thoughtless emotional impulse; and the preposterously naive and inexperienced Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) who is often overwhelmed by the emotional and sexual circumstances that the young women find themselves in.

The characters wander somewhat aimlessly from job to job, and from one sexual encounter to the next, all presumably as part of some ill-defined process of "finding themselves." Hannah struggles to find work that meets her financial needs while giving her a sense of fulfillment, at various points working in an office run by a sexual harasser, joining—and then leaving—the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop, and taking a job as a private elementary school teacher. Her on-again off-again relationship with the self-righteous and bizarre Adam (Adam Driver, once again playing an enigmatic misfit) forms something of an emotional throughline for the series.

In the first episode, Hannah remarks to her parents that “I think that I may be the voice of my generation; or at least a voice of a generation.” Countless reviews and media pieces have made a similar case for Dunham. The *New York Times*, for example, remarked in a 2014 profile that “[Dunham] is perhaps to the millennials what J. D. Salinger was to the post-World War II generation and Woody Allen was to the baby boomers.”

For an artist lauded as being a voice of one of the most economically embattled generations in American history, Dunham has remarkably little to say. The show fixates on the personal lives and sexual relationships of its characters, with long stretches of runtime spent in bedrooms, and graphic sex scenes taking center stage in nearly every episode. The instability in the characters’ work lives is presented as being almost entirely the result of personal ambivalence and poor individual choices.

As noted, small morsels of truth do stand out. The friendships and romantic relationships contain a degree of complexity that resembles life more closely than one finds in current Hollywood fare. The various job interview scenes, in which Hanna and others squirm as they seek to fit in, simultaneously desperate for work and resentful of vacuous corporate jobs that appear to be their only options, are among the series’ strongest. Yet, the financial anxiety that comes from un- and underemployment, so central to the lives of millions of youth, finds little expression.

There is more to creating an authentic portrait of life than just including copious amounts of profanity and graphic sex. An honest and thoughtful portrait of the millennial generation would concretely and forthrightly depict a generation under attack, beset on all sides, yet increasingly determined to fight for better conditions. It would trace the social desperation and malaise that suffuses the outlook of many young people back, above all, to their material conditions.

“Girls,” by contrast, reduces the problems of society and history to individual, personal issues. The show’s fifth season is particularly empty-headed in this regard. Hannah’s earlier financial insecurity has largely disappeared from the show—and with it, any pretense that the series represented the experiences of a wide section of young people instead of merely the layer responsible for its creation. One feels the self-

satisfaction of this social stratum in the clichéd, self-consciously “snappy” dialogue that makes reference to Democratic Party politician Dennis Kucinich, public radio personality Ira Glass, the *New York Times*’s Michiko Kakutani and the various manufactured controversies of concern to the identity-politics crowd.

Dunham herself is a vocal supporter of Hillary Clinton, remarking in an interview that Clinton has been “a really important figure in the cultural conversation around feminism and politics for a long time,” and that “Women’s rights are the area where I’m most focused, and her track record of protecting women—as first lady, as a senator, as secretary of state—is impressive.” Except, of course, for the thousands of women incinerated by the US bombing campaigns in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. ...

If Dunham ever genuinely aspired to become the voice of a generation, she has failed badly. Instead, she has become the voice of a self-absorbed group within that generation whose financial insecurities are assuaged by the knowledge they are only an inheritance away in many cases from taking their rightful place in the upper echelons of society. No matter Dunham’s intentions, she and others in her milieu are separated from the most profound social problems by a gulf of wealth and privilege. Try as they might, they can see only small parts of the problem, not the whole.



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