

Childhood, Gender and Crises: Living at the End of the World

Gender & History: Special Issue

Edited by Katie Barclay and Emily Ward

What is the future of our children? This question troubles contemporary parents, as do the anxieties of children who are displaying higher rates of hopelessness about what lies ahead (Messenger 2021). Such emotion is underpinned not only by anthropogenic climate crisis but changing social, economic and political environments that suggest that emerging generations in many parts of the world will experience a decline in wealth, security and associated wellbeing from that of their parents and may live in extremely challenging environmental conditions. The impact of our changing world on child and youth mental health, and how this is differentiated across children due to gender, race, class, geolocation, amongst other things, is now a topic of considerable concern at all social levels, from families to schools to parliament (Barker et al 2021). Preparing contemporary children, and their parents, to live in a time of crisis is considered critical, often framed through a lens of building resilience (Fenwick-Smith et al 2018).

This is not the first time in history that populations have had to manage living ‘at the end of the world’. Historians of antiquity have debated the ‘so-called’ political crisis of the Roman Empire in the third century, and routinely apply the term to the fall of Rome (Hekster et al 2007). Eurasia and North Africa experienced the catastrophic impact of the Black Death in the fourteenth century, with estimated mortality in parts of Europe being as high as 65% (Benedictow 2021). In addition to the demographic crisis, waves of plague caused both short- and longer-term social transformation. Urban centres in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East suffered depopulation as refugees migrated from areas badly affected by plague (Borsch and Sabraa 2017). Medieval commentators even suggested that some outbreaks of plague targeted children and young people disproportionately; the plague of 1356–66, for instance, became known as the ‘plague of the young’ (*pestilencia puerorum*). Premodern societies, too, witnessed climatic change on a global scale, such as the Little Ice Age across parts of Africa, Asia and Europe between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Death, war, disaster, disease, colonialism and empires, social and economic transformations, and more have therefore shaped the lives of global populations from the far past to the present day. Gender and age have long played important roles in shaping people’s experiences of crisis, but rarely have historians looked across chronologies and geographies to focus on the intersection of these factors in times of particular uncertainty or unrest. For example, while scholars of modern South Asia have shown the deeply gendered nature of experiences of Partitions, the role that age played alongside gender has been far less prominently discussed. There is much to be gained from bringing broad global and historical perspectives to the experience of crisis as, to quote UNESCO, ‘Understanding historical contingency, that things could be other than they are, is valuable for projecting future possibility’. Historical insights support children and families to imagine new worlds, and diversity of research is key to supporting flourishing in a complex world.

Gender is a vital lens through which to understand children’s experiences of crisis. The effects of crises – whether social, economic, political or ecological – are felt variably across different groups, and gender inequality can be a decisive factor influencing the immediate impact of a crisis as well as its longer-term consequences and outcomes, as much in the past as in the present. Gender can, itself, be perceived as something ‘in crisis’ and, in such cases, adults frequently characterise childhood as a contested space for ideas about gender identity and normativity. Feminist approaches have provided new insights into interpretations of crises across various fields, from modern global politics (Sjoberg et al 2015) to international law (Otto 2011) and environmental policy (Detraz 2023). Such studies

have shown, for the modern world, that crises cannot be treated as gender-neutral, and that existing forms of oppression and marginalisation are often only exacerbated by a period of catastrophic disaster. Yet the extent to which gendered frameworks developed primarily in conversation with modernity apply to crises experienced by past societies, and especially to the experiences of children at such times, has been subject to much less scrutiny.

This special issue seeks to bring historical analysis to bear on our contemporary anxieties, and to place gender and childhood more centrally within these analyses. Crisis points to histories of fear and anxiety, risk, danger, health and safety, nuclear disaster, environmental change, colonialism, and more, all areas of established or growing interest. How age and gender together shape these experiences offers promising new directions for research. Living at a time of crisis might also draw attention to how people create conditions to feel safe or support resilience. Safety and security can be defined in multiple ways: economic, social, political, physical, psychological, cultural and emotional (Barron & Langhamer 2017; Åhäll & Gregory 2015). Conditions of security are thus shaped by gender, age, race, class and status, among other factors. The capacity to imagine futures for oneself and one's family can be important here. The ability to envision 'positive' futures, especially by children, is now considered significant to wellbeing and resilience by contemporary psychologists (Carr 2004), but is by no means an exclusively modern impetus. Early modern Europeans thought that the desire to promote family lineage and success over generations was a 'natural' human feeling (Barclay 2019b). What futures are possible reflect the conditions in which we live and what our societies and cultures allow for us as individuals and groups. Compared to that on the difficulties and damaging impact of crisis, a historical scholarship that explores how people 'manage', even thrive, in times of challenge is substantively less well developed. How children are affected by these experiences is still an emerging area of research.

Childhood studies is a growing area of academic and general interest. Importantly, a scholarship of the child has sought to argue against the idea that the child is a passive recipient of adult socialisation and to take seriously both child development (biology and its cultural dimensions, Elder et al 1993) and child agency, recognising children as actors in their own lives (Gleason 2016). This special issue encourages contributions that adopt these insights, seeking to explore how children and youth experience and engage with crisis, and how that impacts on their life course and choices. Who counts as a 'child' is historically contingent (Fass 2012), an unstable category that not only shifts against age over time but with gender, class/status and race. This is particularly critical in an exploration of crises, where children might be classified differently – even denied the right to be a 'child', as innocent, or in need of protection – based on their social characteristics. Gender is especially vital to understanding the child and their experiences, as a central form of identity that impacts on children's treatment, the spaces that they're provided for agency, and the futures they are supported to imagine.

This special issue welcomes contributions that help us better understand children's experiences of living, even thriving, during times of crises. We welcome articles for any part of the globe and any time period, and particularly encourage submissions for populations that have traditionally been under-represented in *Gender & History*. Papers might explore, but are not limited to:

- Concepts of crisis in relation to children and childhood, and the role of the gendered child during times of difficult historical change;
- Children's gendered experience of crisis events, including climate change, war, violence, partition, colonialism and empires, political marginalisation, crime, etc;
- Children as agents of change and crisis;
- Pandemics, illness and medical crises, and the intersections of gender and age;

- Maternity and reproduction as moments of crises;
- Gender normativity as crisis and childhoods of resistance;
- The emotional lives of children during times of crisis;
- Gendered experiences of safety and security within challenging conditions for children;
- Developing ‘resilience’ and other risk management strategies in the care of gendered children;
- Future imaginaries for children in difficult times, and the role gender plays.

Submitting an expression of interest and proposed timeline

If you are interested in contributing an article to this special issue, please send a proposed title and short abstract (max. 250 words) along with your name, affiliation details, and email contact to katie.barclay@mq.edu.au. The closing date for receiving abstracts is 31 May 2026.

If your proposal is accepted, we hope to run a workshop to discuss work-in-progress papers in September/October 2026. The workshop will be hybrid, with online participation possible. There will also be some limited funding available to support in-person attendance.

The deadline for the submission of full papers will be 31 January 2027. The special issue will then go through the usual anonymised peer-review process for *Gender & History*, so acceptance for the workshop is not a guarantee of publication. However, the special issue editors will work closely with all authors throughout the process in order to ensure the highest quality of submissions.