People often think of politics as electoral cycles, Democrats and Republicans, and bills becoming laws. But this exhibition takes a broader view: girls remind us that the personal is political. It's political to speak up, to support a cause, or to use social media to change minds. Although they have often been overlooked, girls have been on the frontlines of political and social change. They have both amplified change and been disrupters in their own right.

The “News and Politics” subsection is the first gallery that visitors will walk through as they enter the exhibition. The section comprises a short film narrated by one of the museum’s curators, several pieces of custom artwork, and a display case highlighting youth-led social movements.

Story spotlight: Naomi Wadler’s scarf (2018)

At age 11, Naomi Wadler spoke before hundreds of thousands of people at the 2018 March for Our Lives to end gun violence. She gave an eloquent speech on the disproportionate effect of gun violence on black women and girls. Naomi had just one day to write her speech for March for Our Lives. The March for Our Lives, and other contemporary student-led social movements, are spearheaded by girls like Naomi who demand a better and safer country in which to grow up.
In school, girls are taught how to fit in. In classrooms, on the playground, at lunch, and even in the bathroom, girls learn how to behave, what to wear, what to say, and what to study. Not all girlhoods are alike—many girls are schooled to work, and society decides who they are and what they can become before they even set foot in a classroom. But like anyone being “schooled,” girls have learned to talk back. This section highlights stories of girls who confront what society expects from them.

The “Education” subsection comprises dozens of objects, custom illustrations and a 3D sculpture of flying butterflies, and a film compilation of student-led school walk-outs.

Story spotlight: Minnijean Brown’s graduation dress (1959)

Minnijean Brown was one of the “Little Rock Nine” who desegregated Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Brown thought she would receive a superior education there, but white students opposed to school integration terrorized her and the other Black students. The exhibition asks, who gets to go to school and stay in school? Even today, Black girls are suspended at almost twice the rate of white girls.

Story spotlight: Dress code violations (1905-2019)

Dress codes enforce specific expectations of girlhood by telling girls what to wear. For generations, girls have been sent home—and denied education—for violating a dress code. The rules have changed over time, but the belief that girls’ bodies are trouble remains constant. Some girls’ bodies are treated as more trouble than others—dress codes are especially policed for girls of color and working-class girls. Breaking barriers, girls have continually fought back for the right to love their bodies in all shapes, colors, and sizes.
Work *(Hey, where’s my girlhood?)*

Who gets a girlhood? Not all girls had a childhood—many had to work. Girls’ labor gave other women leisure time and made industries more profitable. Their cheap labor sparked a consumer revolution, and their activism reshaped labor laws. Through these efforts, girls made workplaces safer for everyone.

The “Work” subsection comprises dozens of objects, including a full-sized factory textile spinner, an interactive clock, and custom illustrations.

Story spotlight: Portrait of domestic worker girl with child (c. 1840)

From slavery to Jim Crow segregation, black girls found themselves serving families and becoming lifelong nursemaidens and domestic workers. Girls as young as three carried babies, scrubbed dirty diapers, and stayed up late to mend clothing. Girls who were enslaved as domestic servants could be the “property” of the younger children they cared for. Photos like this one were popular because including the little girl showed the family’s wealth.

Story spotlight: Radium watches (1910s-1930s)

Radium was discovered in 1898 by Pierre and Marie Curie, and by the 1910s, the glowing element was all the rage. People didn’t understand the negative effects of radioactivity, and doctors even prescribed “radium water” as a cure-all for anything from acne to (ironically) cancer. The watches, used by the Army in World War I, became popular after the war because the glowing faces allowed people to tell time in the dark. In factories, girls painted watch faces and dials with glowing radium paint. Unaware that the paint was harmful, they were told to place the brush tip between their lips to achieve a fine point. After suffering radium poisoning, several young women sued their employers and brought national attention to the safety of workers. These young women helped create new laws to protect all workers.
Americans have claimed girls’ bodies as community property. Girls have carried the expectations of parents, peers, communities, experts, and society on their shoulders. Body talk—everything from advice books to advertising—has centered on the ways girls’ bodies are different. Such talk often, but not always, determines what it means to be a girl and steers girls toward certain ideas of womanhood. But throughout American history, girls have talked back and taken control of their bodies.

The “Wellness” subsection comprises dozens of objects, custom illustrations and a 3D sculpture of a tornado filled with advice books, and two video compilations about sex education and menstruation that show how advice to girls has changed over time.

Story spotlight: Miss America’s tiara and scepter (1951)

Yolanda Betbeze donned this tiara and scepter during her reign as Miss America. She accepted the crown but refused to wear the swimsuit, saying that people should see her talents and not just her body. “I’m a singer, not a pinup,” she said. Why do we talk about girls’ bodies so much? How do girls become symbols for community and national aspirations?

Story spotlight: Cindy Whitehead’s skateboard (2013) and Judi Oyama’s helmet and trophy (1979)

Girls have taken skateboarding by storm, defying gender expectations. Growing up, Cindy Whitehead aspired to be a professional skateboarder but found few female role models. In 1977, at age 15, she was the first girl skateboarder featured in the centerfold of a skateboard magazine. One year later, she became a professional “vert” skateboarder. Judi Oyama, one of the few Asian American women in professional skateboarding, made her debut that same year at age 16. In 2013, Cindy designed this board and founded the brand “Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word” to make girls more visible in a male-dominated sport.
Fashion (Remix)

Girls produce culture. Taking cues from style icons in movies and music, as well as each other, girls have used fashion to transform themselves, markets, and ideas about gender and growing up. Girls made fashion their own and used style to express themselves without having to speak.

The “Fashion” subsection comprises dozens of objects, including many rarely-seen pieces from the museum’s costume collection, custom illustrations, and a short film about the history of makeup. Twenty costumes from the exhibition were 3D-digitized and can be accessed at https://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/girlhood-its-complicated.

Story spotlight: Makeup table (c. 1820)

Dressing tables from the early 1800s hid cosmetics so women and girls could pretend they didn’t use them. Makeup reinforced racist ideas about whiteness by lightening skin with toxic ingredients like arsenic and lead powder. The process of getting “made up” has long reflected hidden agendas related to gender and race.

Story spotlight: Political prom dress (2019)

Prom is a rite of passage dating to the 1920s, and what girls wear matters. Bella Aiukli Cornell, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, enlisted Indigenous designer Della Bighair Stump (Crow) to design this prom dress to draw attention to the systemic violence and abuse faced by Indigenous women. She chose the color red in solidarity for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s movement, and the bodice incorporates traditional Choctaw symbols.
“A Girl's Life” comprises five biographical interactives around the themes “Embracing yourself,” “Getting organized,” “Coming of age,” “Breaking barriers,” and “Making an impact.” They feature girls from activist Helen Keller to Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes. The cases are placed throughout the exhibition and invite visitors to consider how these themes have played out in their own lives.

Story spotlight: Helen Keller’s touch watch (1865)

There was a popular tendency to depict Helen Keller as a demure and ladylike Southern girl, but she grew up to write fiery speeches and became a powerful advocate for workers’ rights. “I think the degree of a nation’s civilization may be measured by the degree of enlightenment of its women,” she wrote in 1912. Helen received this watch as a gift from a retired diplomat and treasured it for her entire life. Raised pins along the outside allowed her to tell time by touch.

Story spotlight: Louise Davis’ Girl Scout sash and Golden Eaglet pin (c. 1930)

Louise Davis embraced scouting from an early age. With her love of the outdoors and many achievements (as recorded in the badges on her sash) she embodied the five requirements of the Golden Eaglet: character, health, handicraft, happiness, and service. Louise and her troopmates broke with tradition and moved their patches from the sleeves of their uniforms to a sash, similar to Boy Scouts.

Story spotlight: Jazz Jennings’ mermaid tail (2013)

Jazz always knew she “was a girl trapped inside a boy’s body.” As a toddler, she felt a roar of emotions at not being able to communicate what she was experiencing. But Jazz was lucky because her family listened and supported her. Together, they work to support all transgender children through the TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation. The summer after sixth grade, Jazz designed, engineered, and manufactured this mermaid tail. Her fascination with mermaids began young: “A lot of transgender individuals are attracted to mermaids and I think it’s because they don’t have any genitals, just a beautiful tail.”