THE HOOKUP CULTURE that has largely replaced dating on college campuses has been viewed, in many quarters, as socially corrosive and ultimately toxic to women, who seemingly have little choice but to participate. Actually, it is an engine of female progress—one being harnessed and driven by women themselves.

HE PORN PIC being passed around on the students’ cellphones at an Ivy League business-school party last fall was more prank than smut: a woman in a wool pom-pom hat giving a snowman with a snow penis a blow job. Snowblowing, it’s called, or snowman fellatio, terms everyone at this midweek happy hour seemed to know (except me). The men at the party flashed the snapshot at the women, and the women barely bothered to roll their eyes. These were not women’s-studies types, for sure; they were already several years out of college and proud veterans of the much maligned hookup culture that, over the past 15 years or so, has largely replaced dating on college campuses and beyond.

One of the women had already seen the photo five times before her boyfriend showed it to her, so she just moved her pitcher of beer in front of his phone and kept on talking. He’d already suggested twice that night that they go to a strip club, and when their mutual friend asked if the two of them were getting married, he gave the friend the finger and made sure his girlfriend could see it, so she wouldn’t get any ideas about a forthcoming ring. She remained unfazed. She was used to his “juvenile thing,” she told me.
I had gone to visit the business school because a friend had described the women there as the most sexually aggressive he had ever met. Many of them had been molded on trading floors or in investment banks with male-female ratios as terrifying as 50-to-1, so they had learned to keep pace with the boys. Women told me stories of being hit on at work by “FDBs” (finance douche bags) who hadn’t even bothered to take off their wedding rings, or sitting through Monday-morning meetings that started with stories about who had banged whom (or what) that weekend. In their decade or so of working, they had been routinely hazed by male colleagues showing them ever more baroque porn downloaded on cellphones. Snowblowing was nothing to them.

In fact, I found barely anyone who even noticed the vulgarity anymore, until I came across a new student. She had arrived two weeks earlier, from Argentina. She and I stood by the bar at one point and watched a woman put her hand on a guy’s inner thigh, shortly before they disappeared together. In another corner of the room, a beautiful Asian woman in her second year at school was entertaining the six guys around her with her best imitation of an Asian prostitute—“Oooo, you so big. Me love you long time”—winning the liberation, goes the argument, primarily liberated men—to act as cads, using women for their own pleasures and taking a sexual revolution that persuaded them to trade away the argument holds that women have effectively been duped by well as in her nostalgia-drenched new book.

Like Girl Land.

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“Here in America, the girls, they give up their mouth, their ass, their tits,” the Argentinean said to me, punctuating each with the appropriate hand motion, “before they even know the guy. It’s like, ‘Hello,’ ‘Hello.’ ‘You wanna hook up?’ ‘Sure.’ They are so aggressive! Do they have hearts of steel or something? In my country, a girl like this would be desperate. Or a prostitute.”

So there we have it. America has unseated the Scandinavian countries for the title of Easiest Lay. We are, in the world’s estimation, a nation of prostitutes. And not even prostitutes with hearts of gold.

Is that so bad? Or is there, maybe, a different way to analyze the scene that had just unfolded? Admittedly, what the Argentinean and I had just witnessed fills the nightmares of those who lament the evil hookup culture: ubiquitous porn, young women so inured to ubiquitous porn that they don’t bother to protest, young women behaving exactly like frat boys, and no one guarding the virtues of honor, chivalry, or even lasting love. It’s a sexual culture lamented by, among others, Caitlin Flanagan, in the pages of this magazine as well as in her nostalgia-drenched new book, Girl Land. Like many other critics, Flanagan pines for an earlier time, when fathers protected “innocent” girls from “punks” and predators, and when girls understood it was their role to also protect themselves.

Girl Land, like so much writing about young women and sexuality, concentrates on what has been lost. The central argument holds that women have effectively been duped by a sexual revolution that persuaded them to trade away the protections of (and from) young men. In return, they were left even more vulnerable and exploited than before. Sexual liberation, goes the argument, primarily liberated men—to act as cads, using women for their own pleasures and taking no responsibility for the emotional wreckage that their behavior created. The men hold all the cards, and the women put up with it because now it’s too late to zip it back up, so they don’t have a choice.

But this analysis downplays the unbelievable gains women have lately made, and, more important, it forgets how much those gains depend on sexual liberation. Single young women in their sexual prime—that is, their 20s and early 30s, the same age as the women at the business-school party—are for the first time in history more successful, on average, than the single young men around them. They are more likely to have a college degree and, in aggregate, they make more money. What makes this remarkable development possible is not just the pill or legal abortion but the whole new landscape of sexual freedom—the ability to delay marriage and have temporary relationships that don’t derail education or career. To put it crudely, feminist progress right now largely depends on the existence of the hookup culture. And to a surprising degree, it is women—not men—who are perpetuating the culture, especially in school, cannily manipulating it to make space for their success, always keeping their own ends in mind. For college girls these days, an overly serious suitor fills the same role an accidental pregnancy did in the 19th century: a danger to be avoided at all costs, lest it get in the way of a promising future.

T he business-school women I met were in an extreme situation. Wall Street culture had socialized them to tolerate high degrees of sexual crudeness, and they were also a decade past the tentative explorations of their freshman year. But they are merely the most purified sample of a much larger group of empowered college-age women. Even freshmen and sophomores are not nearly as vulnerable as we imagine them to be.

On a mild fall afternoon in 2011, I sat in a courtyard with some undergraduates at Yale to ask about their romantic lives. A few months earlier, a group of mostly feminist-minded students had filed a Title IX complaint against the university for tolerating a “hostile sexual environment on campus.” The students specifically cited a 2010 incident when members of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity stood outside freshman dorms chanting “No means yes! Yes means anal!” I’d heard this phrase before, from the business-school students, of course: on spring break, they had played a game called “dirty rounds”—something like charades, except instead of acting out movie or book titles, they acted out sex slogans like the one above, or terms like pink sock (what your anus looks like after too much anal sex). But the Yale undergraduates had not reached that level of blitheness. They were incensed. The week before I arrived, an unrelated group of students ran a letter in the campus paper complaining that the heart of the problem was “Yale’s...
sexual culture” itself, that the “hookup culture is fertile ground for acts of sexual selfishness, insensitivity, cruelty and malice.”

At Yale I heard stories like the ones I had read in many journalistic accounts of the hookup culture. One sorority girl, a junior with a beautiful tan, long dark hair, and a great figure, whom I’ll call Tali, told me that freshman year she, like many of her peers, was high on her first taste of the hookup culture and didn’t want a boyfriend. “It was empowering, to have that kind of control,” she recalls. “Guys were texting and calling me all the time, and I was turning them down. I really enjoyed it! I had these options to hook up if I wanted them, and no one would judge me for it.” But then, sometime during sophomore year, her feelings changed. She got tired of relationships that just faded away, “no end, no beginning.” Like many of the other college women I talked with, Tali and her friends seemed much more sexually experienced and knowing than my friends at college. They were as blasé about blow jobs and anal sex as the one girl I remember from my junior year whom we all considered destined for a tragic early marriage or an asylum. But they were also more innocent. When I asked Tali what she really wanted, she didn’t say anything about commitment or marriage or a return to a more chivalrous age. “Some guy to ask me out on a date to the frozen-yogurt place,” she said. That’s it. A $3 date.

But the soda-fountain nostalgia of this answer quickly dissipated when I asked Tali and her peers a related question: Did they want the hookup culture to go away—might they prefer the mores of an earlier age, with formal dating and slightly more obvious rules? This question, each time, prompted a look of horror. Reform the culture, maybe, teach women to “advocate for themselves”—a phrase I heard many times—but end it? Never. Even one of the women who had initiated the Title IX complaint, Alexandra Brodsky, felt this way. “I would never come down on the hookup culture,” she said. “Plenty of women enjoy having casual sex.”

Some women had fake boyfriends, whom they considered sub-marriage quality. “I don’t want anyone else to influence what I do after I graduate.”

Books about the hookup culture tend to emphasize the frustration that results from transient sexual encounters, stripped of true intimacy: “A lot of [boys] just want to hook up with you and then never talk to you again ... and they don’t care!” one woman complains to Kathleen Bogle in Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus. “That might not stop you [from hooking up], because you think: ‘This time it might be different.’” From her interviews with 76 college students, Bogle also deduces that the double standard is alive and well. Men tally “f*ck points” on their frat-house bulletin boards. Women who sleep with “too many” men are called “houserats” or “laxtitutes” (a term of art denoting women who sleep with several guys on the lacrosse team) or are deemed “HHF,” meaning “hot for a hook-up” but definitely not for anything more. The hookup culture, writes Bogle, is a “battle of the sexes” in which women want relationships and men want “no strings attached.”

But it turns out that these sorts of spotlight interviews can be misleading. Talk to an individual 19-year-old woman such as Tali on a given day, and she may give you an earful of girl trouble. But as her girlfriend might tell her after a teary night, you have to get some perspective. Zoom out, and you see that for most women, the hookup culture is like an island they visit, mostly during their college years and even then only when they are bored or experimenting or don’t know any better. But it is not a place where they drown. The sexual culture may be more coarse these days, but young women are more than adequately equipped to handle it, because unlike the women in earlier ages, they have more-important things on their minds, such as good grades and internships and job interviews and a financial future of their own. The most patient and thorough research about the hookup culture shows that over the long run, women benefit greatly from living in a world where they can have sexual adventure without commitment or all that much shame, and where they can enter into temporary relationships that don’t get in the way of future success.

In 2004, Elizabeth Armstrong, then a sociologist at Indiana University, and Laura Hamilton, a young graduate student, set out to do a study on sexual abuse in college students’ relationships. They applied for permission to interview women on a single floor of what was known as a “party dorm” at a state university in the Midwest. About two-thirds of the students came from what they called “more privileged” backgrounds, meaning they had financial support from their parents, who were probably college-educated themselves. A third came from less privileged families; they supported themselves and were probably the first in their family to go to college. The researchers found their first day of interviewing so enlightening that they decided to ask the administration if they could stay on campus for four years and track the 53 women’s romantic lives.

Women in the dorm complained to the researchers about the double standard, about being called sluts, about not being treated with respect. But what emerged from four years of research was the sense that hooking up was part of a larger romantic strategy, part of what Armstrong came to think of as a “sexual career.” For an upwardly mobile, ambitious young woman, hookups were a way to dip into relationships without disrupting her self-development or schoolwork. Hookups functioned as a “delay tactic,” Armstrong writes, because the immediate priority, for the privileged women at least, was setting themselves up for a career. “If I want to maintain the lifestyle that I’ve grown up with,” one woman told Armstrong, “I have to work. I just don’t see myself being someone who marries young and lives off of some boy’s money.” Or from another woman: “I want to get secure in a city and in a job ... I’m not in any hurry at all. As long as I’m married by 30, I’m good.”

The women still had to deal with the old-fashioned burden of protecting their personal reputations, but in the long view, what they really wanted to protect was their future professional reputations. “Rather than struggling to get into
relationships,” Armstrong reported, women “had to work to avoid them.” (One woman lied to an interested guy, portraying herself as “extremely conservative” to avoid dating him.) Many did not want a relationship to steal time away from their friendships or studying.

Armstrong and Hamilton had come looking for sexual victims. Instead, at this university, and even more so at other, more prestigious universities they studied, they found the opposite: women who were managing their romantic lives like savvy headhunters. “The ambitious women calculate that having a relationship would be like a four-credit class, and they don’t always have time for it, so instead they opt for a lighter hookup,” Armstrong told me.

The women described boyfriends as “too greedy” and relationships as “too involved.” One woman “with no shortage of admirers” explained, “I know this sounds really pathetic and you probably think I am lying, but there are so many other things going on right now that it's really not something high up on my list … I know that’s such a lame-ass excuse, but it’s true.” The women wanted to study or hang out with friends or just be “100 percent selfish,” as one said. “I have the rest of my life to devote to a husband or kids or my job.” Some even purposely had what one might think of as fake boyfriends, whom they considered sub-marriage quality, and weren't genuinely attached to. “He fits my needs now, because I don’t want to get married now,” one said. “I don’t want anyone else to influence what I do after I graduate.”

The most revealing parts of the study emerge from the interviews with the less privileged women. They came to college mostly with boyfriends back home and the expectation of living a life similar to their parents’, piloting toward an early marriage. They were still fairly conservative and found the hookup culture initially alienating (“Those rich bitches are way slutty” is how Armstrong summarizes their attitude). They felt trapped between the choice of marrying the kind of disastrous hometown guy who never gets off control and planning. Since 2005, Paula England, a sociologist at New York University, has been collecting data from an online survey about hookups. She is up to about 20,000 responses—the largest sample to date. In her survey, college seniors report an average of 7.9 hookups over four years, but a median of only five. (“Hookups” do not necessarily involve sex; students are instructed to use whatever definition their friends use.) This confirms what other surveys have found: people at either end of the scale are skewing the numbers. Researchers guess that about a quarter of college kids skip out on the hookup culture altogether, while a similar number participate with gusto—about 10 hookups or more (the laxtitutes?). For the majority in the middle, the hookup culture is a place to visit freshman year, or whenever you feel like it, or after you’ve been through a breakup, says England. Most important, hookups haven’t wrecked the capacity for intimacy. In England’s survey, 74 percent of women and about an equal number of men say they’ve had a relationship in college that lasted at least six months.

When they do hook up, the weepy-woman stereotype doesn’t hold. Equal numbers of men and women—about half—report to England that they enjoyed their latest hookup “very much.” About 66 percent of women say they wanted their most recent hookup to turn into something more, but 58 percent of men say they wanted their hookup to turn into something more, but 58 percent of men say the same—not a vast difference, considering the cultural panic about the demise of chivalry and its consequences for women. And in fact, the broad inference that young people are having more sex—and not just coarser sex—is just wrong; teenagers today are far less likely than their parents were to have sex or get pregnant.

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She could find her way to professional success, and then get married.

Does this mean that in the interim years, women are living a depraved, libertine existence, contributing to the breakdown of social order? Hardly. In fact, women have vastly more control over their actions and appetites than we have been led to believe. You could even say that what defines this era is an unusual amount of sexual control and planning. Since 2005, Paula England, a sociologist at New York University, has been collecting data from an online survey about hookups. She is up to about 20,000 responses—the largest sample to date. In her survey, college seniors report an average of 7.9 hookups over four years, but a median of only five. (“Hookups” do not necessarily involve sex; students are instructed to use whatever definition their friends use.) This confirms what other surveys have found: people at either end of the scale are skewing the numbers. Researchers guess that about a quarter of college kids skip out on the hookup culture altogether, while a similar number participate with gusto—about 10 hookups or more (the laxtitutes?). For the majority in the middle, the hookup culture is a place to visit freshman year, or whenever you feel like it, or after you’ve been through a breakup, says England. Most important, hookups haven’t wrecked the capacity for intimacy. In England’s survey, 74 percent of women and about an equal number of men say they’ve had a relationship in college that lasted at least six months.

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Almost all of the college women Armstrong and Hamilton interviewed assumed they would get married, and were looking forward to it. In England’s survey, about 90 percent of the college kids, male and female, have said they want to get married.

One of the great crime stories of the past 20 years,
meanwhile, is the dramatic decline of rape and sexual assault. Between 1993 and 2008, the rate of those crimes against females dropped by 70 percent nationally. When women were financially dependent on men, leaving an abusive situation was much harder for them. But now women who in earlier eras might have stayed in such relationships can leave or, more often, kick men out of the house. Women, argues Mike Males, a criminologist at the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, “have achieved a great deal more power. And that makes them a lot harder to victimize.”

We’ve landed in an era that has produced a new breed of female sexual creature, one who acknowledges the eternal vulnerability of women but, rather than cave in or trap herself in the bell jar, instead looks that vulnerability square in the face and then manipulates it in unexpected, and sometimes hilarious, ways. In the fall of 2010, Karen Owen, a recent graduate of Duke University, became momentarily famous when her friends leaked her pornographic PowerPoint presentation cataloging her sexual exploits with 13 Duke athletes, whom she identified by name, skill, and penis size (“While he had girth on his side, the subject was severely lacking in length”). In Owen’s hands, scenes of potential humiliation were transformed into punch lines. (“Mmm tell me about how much you like big, black cocks,” Subject 6, a baseball player, told her. “But, I’ve never even hooked up with a black man!” she told him. “Oh ... well, just pretend like you have,” he responded. “Umm ok ... I like big, black ... cocks?”

The 2012 successor to the iconic single-girl show of a decade ago, Sex and the City, is Girls, a new HBO series created by the indie actress/filmmaker Lena Dunham, who plays the main character, Hannah. When Hannah has sex, she is not wearing a Carrie Bradshaw–style $200 couture bra and rolling in silk sheets, but hiking her shirt up over belly flesh loose enough that her boyfriend, Adam, can grab it by the fistful. In one scene, they attempt anal sex: “That feels awful.” In another, Adam spins a ridiculously degrading fantasy about Hannah as an 11-year-old hooker with a “fucking Cabbage Patch lunch box.” Hannah plays along, reluctantly. But when they’re done, she doesn’t feel deep remorse or have to detox with her girlfriends or call the police. She makes a joke about the 11-year-old, which he doesn’t get, and then goes home to rock out with her roommate to Swedish pop star Robyn’s “Dancing on My Own.”

In Hannah’s charmed but falling-apart life, her encounters with Adam count as “experience,” fodder for the memoir she half-jokingly tells her parents will make her “the voice of [her] generation.” She is our era’s Portnoy, entitled and narcissistic enough to obsess about precisely how she gets off. (Adam, meanwhile, plays the role of the Pumpkin, or the Pilgrim, or the Monkey, the love or lust objects from Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint—all merely props in Portnoy’s long and comical sexual journey.) The suspense in the series is not driven by the usual rom-com framework—will she or won’t she get her man?—because she snags him pretty early in the series. Instead it’s driven by the uncertainty of Hannah’s career—will she or won’t she fulfill her potential and become a great writer? When, in the season finale, Adam asks to move in, she rejects him. We’re left to believe that one reason is because she’s afraid he might get in the way of her bigger plans to be a writer.

There is no retreating from the hookup culture to an earlier age, when a young man showed up at the front door with a box of chocolates for his sweetheart, and her father eyed him warily. Even the women most frustrated by the hookup culture don’t really want that. The hookup culture is too bound up with everything that’s fabulous about being a young woman in 2012—the freedom, the confidence, the knowledge that you can always depend on yourself.

The only option is what Hannah’s friends always tell her—stop doing what feels awful, and figure out what doesn’t.

Young men and women have discovered a sexual freedom unbridled by the conventions of marriage, or any conventions. But that’s not how the story ends. They will need time, as one young woman at Yale told me, to figure out what they want and how to ask for it. Ultimately, the desire for a deeper human connection always wins out, for both men and women. Even for those business-school women, their hookup years are likely to end up as a series of photographs, buried somewhere on their Facebook page, that they do or don’t share with their husband—a memory that they recall fondly or sourly, but that hardly defines them.

Hanna Rosin is an Atlantic national correspondent. This story is adapted from her new book, The End of Men, out this month.