

RiDinG my oWn tIDal wAVE

YoUng wOMen'S femINist woRk

by Anita Harris

Les filles sont fréquemment représentées comme étant désintéressées du féminisme ou comme formant des petits groupes « jeunes féministes » Dans cet article l'auteure se demande si cette catégorisation contemporaine des jeunes femmes rejoint vraiment la diversité de celles qui sont engagées dans un travail féministe. Elle veut repenser le cadre féministe afin de couvrir l'ensemble des activités politiques de ces jeunes femmes tant au niveau local que régional.

Most of you probably just accept without reflection the world as you find it.

—Anne Summers, from “Letter to the Next Generation” (507)

Perhaps our political motivations cannot be categorized or defined by frameworks of older theories circa 1960. But the revolution is coming—you will smell the fire!

—Melissa, Jade and Tamara, creators of the grrrl comic *Re: Vulva Girl*

In recent times, the most common representation of young women's relationship to feminism is one of disinterest. Girls are frequently seen as disengaged from feminism, as a movement or in its politics, and this is often articulated in terms of a crisis for the future of the women's movement. The most popular response to this has emerged through the appearance of texts outlining a new “third wave” that detail the features of a different kind of young feminism. In this article, I want to challenge the representation of girls as apathetic, not so much by categorizing a single new young feminism, but by talking about the feminist take on the world offered by many young women today; which is not always perceived as feminist, and does not always make it into books and theories. I believe we are at a moment of a paradigm shift in feminist thinking, sparked by the mismatch between traditional definitions of feminist work (which can't account for young women's activism that is “outside the box”) and the practical work to empower women and raise awareness of women's issues that so many girls are involved in today (but which is rarely seen as consistent with a feminist program for change). In short, I believe the problem lies in our definitions of feminist work, rather than in young women's apathy or disinterest. Consequently, I wonder if contemporary categorizations of young feminism really get at the diversity

of young women engaged in feminist work, and how we might re-think the feminist framework in order to embrace the range of young women's commitments. Who is excluded by fixed categorizations of young women as

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either disinterested in feminism or embracing an entirely new version of it? What are other ways of understanding how young women have moved feminism forward? What are the features of an “unbounded” young feminism that can be found in a diverse range of young women's political expressions? How might we re-think feminist frameworks to incorporate this kind of activity? These are the questions that frame my approach to this issue of “where the girls are.” Through this article I look at examples of young women's voices from a large range of sources to understand the kinds of issues that are important these days and the different ways young women express their feminist politics. From this I hope to make some more optimistic evaluations about the state of young feminism today and the future of feminism as a movement for social change.

The Limits of the Categorizations of New “Young Feminism”

Much literature has emerged to challenge the image of young women as apathetic and introduce the notion of the third wave, “power feminism,” or another category of new “young feminism” embraced by young women. However, although there is currently a range of competing definitions of young feminism, many young women's activism and experiences are still not covered by these categories. Many of the texts proclaiming to sum up young feminism are written by academics or journalists, and the vast majority by white middle-class women.¹ These definitions and categories have for the most part not been constructed by young women who are not part of an organized feminist movement. However, many young women around the world are engaged in feminism, but

they are not interested in or do not relate to these categories. To confine all girls' relationships to feminism through these categories is a fairly limited approach. And it certainly overlooks some of the more dynamic and exciting approaches to feminism that girls take. Trying to sum up young feminism in a series of oppositional categories is a good marketing and media ploy, and it helps to sell some people's books, but it does not really get at the diversity of young women's feminism.

If we move beyond the bestseller image of young feminism though, and start to explore the meanings of feminism for ordinary young women who do not have agents and publishing contracts and book tours, a very different picture emerges. A lot of research with young

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women indicates that many find these categorizations of young feminism to be alienating, divisive, too simplistic, and unrepresentative. Examples of these kinds of criticisms from some of my research demonstrates this very point. In the following examples I asked some Australian girls what they thought about categorizations of young feminism:

Yvette: "To me, feminism means so many things, I can't go by what mainstream media's representation is or what they try to present to us because we are all different and are going to have different opinions. I don't know about all these waves of feminism. I'm riding my own personal tidal wave and if anyone wants to join me then they're more than welcome!"

Kylie: "I liked the book (*DIY feminism*) in many ways, but I felt there was a lot of importance placed on the need to name and classify women's activities/feminist activities."

Although each person has a slightly different view, the general message is that any label, whether it is power feminism, third wave, or something else, tends to set women up against each other, focuses too much on categorizing for its own sake, and won't really cover the range of perspectives young women hold. All of these young women want to articulate a different relation to feminism and want to redefine it outside of these limitations. In short, they reject the labels and categories, but they still consider themselves to be feminists.

Thus, if we think much more broadly about how young women articulate and enact feminism we see that the

young feminist membership is much larger than is indicated by the standard texts about the third wave. Part of taking a broader view means expanding our concepts of who is part of this membership. Central to this is looking at girls' issues and activism beyond the familiar, and especially beyond the West. Feminist activism might be girls organizing in children's clubs in Nepal, young women working against prostitution in Thailand and Burma, or girls in unions and associations fighting child labour and sweatshops in Vietnam and India. These are all examples of girls' feminist practice even though they have little to do with young feminist labels. The kinds of issues raised by girls outside the western world also draw attention to the limited focus of the "young feminism" debate and its non-representation of all girls' voices. It is also important to look in places often disregarded as sites for feminist work. The role of zines, webpages, creative writing, and performance in allowing young women to express their views must not be underestimated. Where girls can express themselves is as important as what they have to say, because it demonstrates that the street, the protest march, and courts of law are not the only legitimate places where resistance and consciousness raising occur.

However, if we expand our framework to look at "other" groups of young women and "other" places for feminist expressions, we also have to acknowledge that our old conceptions of feminism as a social movement also need expanding. When we look at the ways young women "do" feminism in this broader sense, we can see that they offer new frameworks for understanding social movements and social change appropriate to current times. Uncategorized, unlabelled young feminisms challenge old conceptions of feminist social change, as well as show up the limitations of the categories we currently have for young women's voices. By "uncategorized" or "unbounded" young feminism, I mean the feminism that is practised every day by young women around the world in different sites, but largely overlooked by western commentators eager to seize on the one true young feminism that can be neatly packaged, analyzed, and marketed.

I would suggest there are three key features of "uncategorized" young feminism. These are:

- It is diverse, multiple, and open to a range of viewpoints;
- It uses technology, popular culture and the media in savvy ways;
- It is "do-it-yourself" (DIY) rather than leader-focussed.

Diversity and Multiplicity

The critique that young women offer of the standard categorizations of young feminism demonstrates an important way in which they have moved feminism forward, namely, that young women are much more attentive to diversity than either they are given credit for in these categorizations or than feminists have perhaps been in the

past. Young women embrace multiplicity and diversity by refusing to claim one single body of thought as the only true feminism. Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli says that this feature of young women's feminism is demonstrated by the following characteristics: acknowledging differences within and between groups of people, seeing racism, homophobia, and sexism as interconnected, seeing definitions and identities as changing rather than fixed, and resisting externally imposed labels. Below are some examples from a range of girls around the world that show how this interest manifests itself in young women's views and activism around the issues of race, religion, and culture:

From the U.S., the *problackgrrrlfesto* written by the blackgrrrlrevolution Incorporation reminds us that the blackgrrrlrevolution is necessary,

Because of all the existing political movements where the rights of black grrrls are considered secondary, an afterthought, or not considered at all. (www.blackgrrrlrevolution.org)

From Australia, Ayse UygunteMur, a young Turkish-Australian Muslim woman writes,

I could never have imagined that a one metre square piece of chiffon could have made such a dramatic difference, not only to myself, but to the attitudes of people around me.... This will be me shouting and pleading with every western woman. That I am a woman. That I believe in rights for women. That I am a feminist. (205)

And a 14-year-old from the Child to Child Network in Nigeria offers an important reminder of the ways religion can be used against women, with her submission to the UNICEF online debate on girls' rights:

In the northern part of Nigeria, there has been crazy adoption of the *Sharia* law by the Islamic states, denying the girls and women right to participate... we should be more concerned in tackling the Islamic sharia law because they reduce girls and women to babysitters. (www.unicef.org)

We can see in all of these examples that young women themselves are expanding the concept of feminism to include, as a matter of course, very careful and sophisticated analyses of racism, and meanings of culture and religion that do not deny difference and the complexity of contradictory grounded experience that complicates fixed notions of privilege and discrimination. However, the subtleties and complexities of this interest in diversity, change, and multiplicity are not often attended to in the official versions of young feminism. Whereas as once these differences would have been disastrous in terms of feminist activism, or made subject to an homogenizing pro-

cess initiated by the most vociferous and privileged, these days difference results in the formation of networks rather than a single movement.

Technology, Popular Culture, and the Media

We can also see that there are new sites and strategies for feminism developed by young women around technology, popular culture, and the media. Young women who do not have access to publishers and cannot get their voices heard in the mainstream have been responsible for creating new feminist activism and networks through alternative media. Some examples of this are grrrlzines, girls' use of cyberspace and performance.

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Grrrlzines

"Zines," short for fanzines, are independently produced informal newsletters. They can range from handwritten, photocopied and stapled pieces of paper to typeset, glossy—covered A4 "magazines" or electronic (e-zines) web pages. All are produced on little or no budget, provide social commentary of a critical nature, and usually include reviews, information sharing, editorials and creative writing around issues relevant to young women. They are distributed through wide networks for the purposes of sharing information and building a community of young feminists. However, because girls who make zines are not part of mainstream culture, they are often overlooked in analyses of young feminism. Zines are seen by young women involved as an important way to get their voices heard. In an interview with me, Michelle, a young woman who makes a zine called *A Show of Hands*, says that,

women doing zines is a very political thing, because it's usually men's voices that are heard. Particularly white men's voices. And so for women to make a forum for themselves in which to speak is really a political act.

Comics

Many zines are also in the form of comics, often ridiculing the stereotypes of being a girl. Comics are also used by young women as a way of sharing ideas amongst them for political purposes. The producers of the grrrl comic *Re: Vulva Girl* say that "the political role that grrrl comics provide is a non-academic and non-threatening

way of expression. It is accessible to more people and affordable. It is easier for young women to produce. Comics are easy to relate to and do not alienate the illiterate and appeal to many different age groups." Comics can be used to raise awareness, share information and mock the common representations of girls' "bedroom culture."

Cyberspace

A third example of innovative use of networks is girls' use of cyberspace. Many young women use the web as a frontier for political action (see Scott-Dixon). Colonizing this space for young women and the creation of webpages and e-zines by and for them is particularly important in light of the proliferation of "girlie" sites, where the most common matches to a query based around the term "girl" or "grrrl" are pornography pages. One filtering method is the use of code words, such as "grrrls"/"gurls": as Chrystal of *Pop Tart* says, "(we) use these code words in the titles of our site to make clear that we're not naked and waiting for a hot chat with you!" (qtd. in Leonard 111). A more proactive approach is taken by others, who deliberately lead surfers into dead ends when searching for "girls" on the web.²

These kinds of feminist politics—zines, e-zines, comics and webpages, have often been misinterpreted as girls just mucking around or doing art. But young women today are obliged to negotiate popular culture in ways not familiar to older generations. The commodification of so many elements of their lives, as well as the complex communications networks that currently exist mean that they interact with information networks differently. A feature of society today is that those who have power don't so much control natural and human resources but rather control information systems and symbols. It is in this realm that young women are obliged to conduct their feminism, as well as in those other areas we are perhaps more familiar with, such as the workplace, family relations and so on.

Furthermore, girlhood and girls' cultures have become saleable products in new ways. Young women's resistance to the commercial representations of girlhood is often very amusing. Mimi Nguyen, in her web page "Exoticize My Fist/Exoticize This," gives a good example of how young women are resisting stereotyped and particularly racialized images of girls in popular culture. She says,

i want substantive and feminist girlie action. i want heavy theory mixed in with radical lesbianics, museum art installations and grubby print zines, and i want to find them all in one place! [The site] "exoticize this!" is in some small way my attempt to create a "virtual" community for asian american feminists—as well as act as a coalition-building tool to create networks with asian feminists abroad. (Nguyen).

Sabrina in her zine *Bamboo Girl* does similar work, and even in her title plays with stereotyped images of young "Asian" women.

Of course, we are now in an interesting situation where a struggle over the meaning and image of girlhood, and girl power in particular, is evident. Recent times have seen the appropriation of "girl power" as a marketing device for commercial products, programs, or policies. For example, typing in "girl" or even "girl power" to a search engine can bring up a vast array of sites with a range of agendas, interests and target audiences, all drawing on the same symbolic capital. Many young women are starting to ask what this term has come to mean. Who is using it and to what ends? Kylie, who makes the zine *Personality Liberation Front*, reminds us that it is worth keeping in mind what this phenomenon is about, warning that appropriation is often on the agenda: She says,

Now I see Spice Girls and supermodels and sparkly slogan shirts—their version of lame "girl power" is so far away from our original vision of "grrrl power"; co-opted, watered down, marketable, profitable—all style and not a fuck of a lot of content. I walk through the mall and I see a chain store clothes shop is selling me some "girl power" in the form of furry winter jackets.

DIY: Local and Global

Another feature of everyday young women's feminism is that there is no single leader, or as pointed out before, single agenda. This is in spite of those texts that herald particular individuals as leaders of the third wave. The DIY ethic has become an important way to enact feminist change within particular communities on specific issues relevant to that place. This DIY approach is not selfish individualism and greed, as is often portrayed, but a taking charge and making a difference in the context of creating real change. Young women are engaged in both specific issues that affect them in their own communities and in wider concerns that reach across the world. There is no requirement put on them to choose one or the other, or to try to homogenize issues into one big movement that might involve silencing or excluding some over others. Given the range of issues facing girls worldwide, many young feminists are attuned to a "think globally, act locally" kind of approach. Although DIY is often associated with western punk activism, it is well-illustrated by girls' global action. The UNICEF online discussion of girls' rights demonstrates much of the activism girls are engaged with worldwide that starts with individual commitment rather than following a leader or joining an established movement. For example, a 15-year-old self-described slum dweller in Bangladesh writes:

I am a group leader which is formed with 15 girls.

We try to share our problems with each other weekly. My friends and I are trying to make our group more strong, so that we will be able to lobby with our Government to ensure our rights by making a policy.

A 14-year-old girl in Pakistan writes,

I can form a group of girls. We will talk and educate ourselves about the rights of girl child. We will initiate a dialogue about the rights of girl child with our parents and with our community.

A young Dutch woman adds to the conversation: "All the girls in the world are 1 chain who can survive when we stick together."³

Conclusion

When we look at these examples we can see it is true that there has been an explosion of young women's voices over the last few years, and I think that this enables us to be optimistic about the future of feminism and think creatively about social change in a changing world. Many of the feminist practices that young women are involved in do not look like the representations of young feminism in books, but this means that perhaps we need to re-think feminist frameworks rather than try to cram girls' voices back into the boxes we have constructed for them. Certainly when we expand our focus to include girls globally, we can see how inappropriate some of these categories are. To try to make young feminism fit into the categories we are familiar with is to some degree an attempt to contain it, and particularly to contain some of the most exciting work being done by young women. Rather than being fixated on what kind of young feminism any particular girl subscribes to, perhaps we would be better off asking questions like: What are girls actually doing that exceeds the existing categories of young feminism? Do young women today offer new modes of feminist politics? How do these modes differ from those used in the past? Has this meant the loss of a coherent feminist movement? How might feminism need to be re-thought if the voices and practices of a diversity of young women are taken into account? And are we perhaps witnessing a nascent girl revolution?

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¹See, for example, Wolf; Trioli; Walter.

²Check out the mock mail order bride site <http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com>).

³See the online forum at <http://www.unicef.org>.

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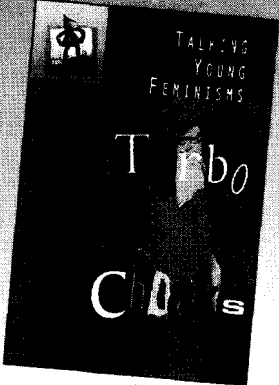
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