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Make Your Move:
What we know and what we need to know about gender, group identity
and the formation of critical consciousness for teen girls' activism

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Which factors contribute to high school-aged young women's participation in feminist or anti-sexist activism, and what does that participation imply for their future collective action against sexism? Work on gender identity, community service, critical consciousness, and feminism suggests intriguing possibilities, but studies making connections between these elements are scarce, particularly for 14-18 year-olds.

I prefer the term anti-sexist activism to feminist activism here because, in light of many young women's reluctance to identify as feminists, (Frith, 2001), I'm more interested in their beliefs about gender equality, their ability to perceive societal sexism, and their willingness to engage in collective action against sexism, than in their use of the feminist label. A term less associated with a particular (white, middle-class) movement leaves more room for multiple identities, potentially incorporating a broader social justice orientation. Still, feminist identity remains important for some young women, as several studies document. I borrow from Leaper and Brown's (2008) definitions of feminism and sexism, as presented to study participants:

As defined in the dictionary, *feminism* refers to the *belief in equality for women and men*. Feminists believe in equality, and point to ways that society and certain individuals treat girls and women in unfair ways. . . . When discrimination like this occurs, it is known as *sexism*. (Original emphasis) p. 690

Deimer, et al. define critical consciousness as "the capacity to critically reflect and act upon one's sociopolitical environment" (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006, p. 445). In this paper this term refers to the ability to recognize, reflect upon, and take action against sexism at the societal level. Finally, in defining anti-sexist action, Liss, et al. include the following indicators in their survey instrument: ". . . participating in a rally or movement for women's rights, . . . contributing to a fund-raiser for a women's cause,. . . attending events at a Women's Center (Liss, Crawford, & Popp, 2004, p. 774).

Their list fails to account for activism that addresses another issue (poverty, racism) with direct implications for women. Finally, community service is not captured here, but is potentially important for adolescent girls' activism and critical consciousness development.

Several scholars have honed in on community service as a sub-set of extra-curricular activities with important implications for critical consciousness development (Seider, 2007) and political action (Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998). Dworkin, Reed, and David (2003) called extra-curricular activities contexts in which "adolescents are active producers of development" (p.17), and which provide opportunities to acquire social skills, initiative, and access to adult networks, as well as fostering identity formation and experimentation. Many scholars have neglected interactions between activity-based identity and gender identity, though Barber, et al. found that perceived efficacy (at completing the task) and (activity) value ratings were predictive of high school students' participation in sports, and that they were highly differentiated by gender (Barber et al., 2005). They suggest the same may hold true in non-athletic activities. Rosenthal, Feiring, and Lewis found that girls were more likely than boys at ages 18 and 21 to be involved in volunteering, including political volunteering¹ (1998).

Galambos, Almeida, and Petersen (1990) found support for sex-role intensification in early adolescence, at least for masculine sex-typed (instrumental) behavior in boys. The authors attribute this difference to the fact that both boys' and girls' notions of feminine behavior broadened over time. They also found that girls became more approving of gender equality over time, while boys became less approving. They suggest that girls in early adolescence may become more aware of the social costs of the feminine gender role, and therefore lessen (or at least not increase) their feminine-typed behavior while becoming more supportive of gender

¹ "Political volunteering was defined as involvement with a political party, a governing body, a political campaign or election, or an organization that attempts to influence legislation" (Rosenthal et al., 1998, p. 482).

equality. If Galambos, et al. are correct, this would suggest an opening for critical consciousness of sexism.

Leaper and Brown (2008) and Volman and ten Dam (1998) attempt to address critical consciousness of sexism directly. Volman and ten Dam compared two large-scale studies² they conducted among white Dutch upper-secondary school students in Women's History and Information and Computer Literacy (ICL) classes. They found that students participated in three contradictory discourses of gender and identity while maintaining a sense of individual consistency: an emancipated or equality discourse, a gender difference discourse, and a feminist or inequality discourse (p. 540).

The emancipated/equality discourse was evident when gender was an explicit topic of discussion. Both boys and girls stated beliefs that gender equality between the sexes was a current, positive state of affairs, calling those who held gender-biased views "old-fashioned" (p. 529). Students thought that both boys and girls were lucky to be able to make of their lives whatever they would, free from past gender restrictions and discrimination. In spite of this belief among students, the authors witnessed a powerful discourse of gender difference in the ICL class when gender was not an explicit part of the curriculum. Boys talked excitedly about their work with computers, often bragging to each other about their abilities, even when the authors noted that they were not as able as they claimed. The girls, on the other hand, often downplayed their high grades, claiming not to understand computers well and even seeming to make great displays of their "helplessness" (p. 536). Boys and girls explained this behavior by asserting that these

² Volman and ten Dam gave open-ended essay questions to 224 Women's History students, asking them to complete sentences that began "I have learnt that . . ." and "I have discovered that . . ." (p. 534). They also collected quantitative data (before/after questionnaires) from 19 classes of ICL students about how students' achievements in and attitudes towards computers had changed over the course. Finally, they did an exploratory analysis of gender-linked ideas about computers/ICL based on interviews and classroom observations of the students in the ICL study.

differences were based on individual preferences, or at most, that boys' purportedly greater skill came from greater interest in computers.

Students used the feminist/inequality discourse sparingly. Girls expressed pride in the accomplishments of women who struggled throughout history, but did not relate this history to themselves, nor did they report discussing contemporary gender differences, or their own experiences, in the Women's History class (p. 540). The feminist discourse was viewed as that of a "deficient" group that was "lagging behind," (*ibid*), a group with which contemporary girls were reluctant to identify. Volman and ten Dam see the use of a gender difference discourse as a solution of a sort: boys and girls attempted continually to construct and reconstruct gender identities that included equality and personal choice in the face of conflicting social discourses and discrepant personal experiences. Though growing up with gender-egalitarian discourses, they lacked the tools to describe and make sense of existing inequality. As Volman and ten Dam put it:

Many students appear unable to make a distinction between identifying differences and sanctioning them They refuse to describe gender differences because they think that gender differences should not exist (p. 542).

The researchers note that in the Women's History class the meanings of women's struggles were "pre-prepared" (*ibid*), while in ICL the problem of gendered beliefs about computers was recognized by teachers but not discussed with students. They recommend that educators work *with* students to deconstruct traditional gender narratives and to reconstruct new ones that take into account students' strong beliefs about their gender identities, allowing students to recognize and name social inequalities while avoiding the role of victim.

Leaper and Brown (2008) examined high school-aged girls' experiences with sexual harassment, athletic sexism, and academic sexism, as well as their exposure to feminism. They

found that SES, ethnicity³, exposure to feminism, and age were all positively correlated with increased reporting of various types of sexism, though these factors affected outcomes differently, and it was not possible to determine causality. It was also unclear whether correlations stemmed from increased experience with, ability to perceive, or willingness to report sexism. For example, SES and ethnicity correlated to reports of sexual harassment in different ways for different groups, suggesting that cultural trends in coping with harassment may emerge in adolescence.

Age was associated with increased perception of sexual harassment, and the authors suggest that this finding could be the result of physical maturation, or of increased cognitive capacity for critical consciousness (or, presumably, both). Learning about feminism through media or known persons (parents, friends, etc.) also contributed to increased reporting of all three types of sexism though again, it is not evident whether experience with sexism leaves girls more open to feminist messages or feminist exposure helps girls identify sexist experiences. Leaper and Brown also found that exposure to feminism had the strongest predictive effect for girls who held at least moderately gender-egalitarian beliefs or expressed at least some discontent with gender norms.

Two main possibilities emerge from this study: that a sexist experience may “prime” girls to receive a feminist message, or that, as the authors suggest, feminism may be a way that girls with gender-egalitarian beliefs can reconcile an experience discrepant with their ideals. The study focuses on an awareness of sexism aimed directly at the respondent, rather than on an awareness of sexist structural and discursive practices. Collective action is also outside the scope of the study.

³ This was one of the very few studies I encountered that had a diverse sample in terms of either ethnicity or SES.

Leaper and Brown's, and Volman and ten Dam's findings suggest that dialogical education and exposure to feminist ideas can contribute to an awareness of societal sexism by giving girls a language with which to name experiences or social discourses that challenge gender-egalitarian values and identities. For girls with these tools and values, personal experiences with sexism may lead to action, though precisely what motivates an adolescent girl to engage in political action against sexism is both little studied and not entirely clear.

Simply possessing gender-egalitarian beliefs or agentic identity traits is clearly not sufficient, nor is critical consciousness in and of itself, though that is a crucial factor (Diemer et al., 2006). Adult involvement plays a role, though the precise mechanism is not identified. Diemer et al. found that adult support for challenging sexism increases the reflective, though not the action component of critical consciousness. Liss, et al. (2004) found that having a feminist mother predicted feminist action for college students, and Rosenthal, et al. (1998) found that having a significant adult involved in community service was correlated with increased community service among teens, though in these two studies it was not clear whether the mechanism was communicating values, being a role model, or logistical support. It seems that three components are necessary, though probably not sufficient, for adolescent girls to recognize sexism and move toward action against it: a sense that anti-sexist or feminist work is consonant with their identity, including their gender or ethnic identity (Barber et al., 2005; Liss et al., 2004); a critical consciousness of sexism as a phenomenon that relates to their lives without negating their sense of agency (Volman & ten Dam, 1998); and a vehicle for action.

Community service activities may be such a vehicle since opportunities are accessible in many high schools, and since girls are more likely than boys to participate in them (Rosenthal et al., 1998). While the co-construction of development, critical reflection, and discussion can

happen in various contexts (Dworkin et al., 2003), community service seems the most likely to help students learn social and instrumental skills that would serve them in political action. Several studies have found that community service, if combined with reflection and discussion, serves as a turning point in students' lives, helping them develop awareness of social problems and a sense of responsibility for addressing them (Seider, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Furthermore, Hart, et al. (2006) found that community service in adolescence predicts future community service (of which the authors call political activism an "extreme form" (p. 648)), suggesting a lasting impact that may direct girls toward collective action. Rosenthal, et al. found that 70% of students involved in political volunteering at age 18 were still involved in political volunteer work at age 21. Moreover, the types of issues they addressed had expanded. This finding highlights a strength and a limitation of volunteering as a catalyst for future political action in adolescence: while service organizations and certain political groups are easy for students to access at school (Rosenthal et al., 1998), other groups and causes are less available to young people who can't yet vote and may not have transportation.

Given that identity formation and critical consciousness play out in many arenas, adults can meet girls where they are, incorporating critical discussion and reflection into many types of activities. It is necessary always to keep in mind the many facets and sources of young people's developing gender, ethnic, sexual, activity-based, and other identities, and to invite young people into the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of gender norms, so that they have the tools to name and analyze sexism while maintaining a positive self-concept that incorporates all of who they are.

If we want girls to make the leap from critical reflection to anti-sexist action, adult anti-sexist activists need to step up as mentors willing to talk about our values, politics, and identities

with girls. Adults involved in similar activities can influence young people's involvement, and socialization into the values of social change can have lasting, intergenerational affects (DeMartini, 1983). Young women and girls *are* involved in social justice work, including anti-sexist activism (Valenti et al.), but may not be able to connect to older activists, and may feel alienated from long-established or explicitly feminist organizations.

Many of the studies reviewed here rely on relatively small sample sizes and focus on white and/or middle class people. Future studies must both expand their sample populations and consider the complex interactions between multiple sources of identity. Also necessary are more studies focusing on young women in high school and the challenges they face, such as living with parents, inability to vote, and restricted access to transportation. Finally, research must turn to adolescent girls who are currently active in anti-sexist work. Their stories of coming to consciousness and moving to action will yield the greatest insight.

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