

## **A movement of their own: voices of young feminist activists in the London Feminist Network**

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### **Abstract**

*A so-called "resurgence" of feminist activism in the UK is currently being reported by journalists, commentators and academics, with young women seemingly at the fore. This is remarkable given the reported backlash against feminism and the widely held view of young people in general, and young women in particular, as politically apathetic. In this qualitative study I focus on eight young feminist activists who arguably form part of this resurgence. All are members of the London Feminist Network, a grassroots, women-only, feminist activist organisation in London, England, UK. Through qualitative interviews I explored their motivations for becoming involved in feminist activism and their perception of the benefits that they gained, including political efficacy. The findings highlight the significance of women-only space in providing such benefits, and expose the impact of sexism in mixed social movements. Sociability and the opportunity to engage in collective political activism emerged as key motivations for joining LFN. Inspirations for joining were often negative, such as the mainstreaming of pornography, and the sexual objectification of women in the media. These were identified as barriers to the equal engagement of women in all political spheres, including social movements.*

### **Introduction**

From 1971 to 1978 the women's liberation movement in the UK formulated seven demands, agreed at national conferences. While great strides have been made in all these areas, the demands have not yet been met.

The gender pay gap is still around twenty percent (Redfern and Aune, 2010). Male violence claims, on average, the lives of two women every week in the UK and an estimated one in four women are victim to sexual violence (EVAW, 2007; HO, 2010).

The women's liberation movement arguably offered the best chance of changing the above statistics. Perhaps it still does. This potential and hope increasingly rests in the hands of the younger women who will shape this future; just as the aspirations and anxieties of society generally are often invested in youth as a whole.

For several decades young people in Britain, and many other democratic states, have been viewed as politically apathetic, and blamed for leading falling voter turnout and a general rejection of formal politics evident since the 1960s. In terms of voting, young people are indeed disengaged; though whether this is proof of a general rejection of politics is of course debateable (Kimberlee, 2002).

This supposed tide of youth apathy is often perceived to reach further than the polling booth; it is commonly and frequently asserted that young people are bored with politics generally, turned off by current affairs and uninterested in movements for social change (Henn et al, 2007; Pirie and Worcester, 2000; White et al, 2000). Young women are found to be even less interested in politics than their male peers, and less knowledgeable about political affairs; a gender gap which has also been observed in research on the political participation of older adults (*Electoral Commission*, 2003). Given such evidence it is perhaps not surprising that within debates on the future of feminism, young women are often found lacking. "Young women particularly are frequently dismissed as insufficiently political, as being interested more in shopping than in social change" (Redfern and Aune, 2010: 11).

This context, plus the aggressive cultural and political reaction to the previous threats posed by feminism in the 1970s, what Faludi (1992) calls a "backlash", makes it all the more remarkable that over recent months journalists, authors and academics have begun to comment on a so-called "resurgence" of feminism in the UK, allegedly being led by young women (Cochrane, 2011, 2010; Banyard, 2010; Redfern and Aune, 2010; Walter, 2010; Woodward and Woodward, 2009). Any such resurgence goes some way to troubling negativity about the state of the women's liberation movement in the UK today, and could also challenge the predominant view of youth in general, and female youth in particular, as politically apathetic.

In this article I shall consider the motivations and experiences of some young women who have sought out and pursued involvement in contemporary feminist activism by joining the London Feminist Network (LFN). I shall draw on my findings from qualitative interviews with eight young LFN activists, which I conducted as part of an MSc dissertation in 2010. While academic research has tended to focus on young women who do not identify as feminists (Scharff, 2010; Budgeon, 2001), I am interested in the growing number who do.

These activists have overcome many barriers on the journey to their political identification. The young women I interviewed are alert to the obstructions that

#### The 7 Demands

1. Equal pay
2. Equal education and job opportunities
3. Free contraception and abortion on demand
4. Free 24hr nurseries
5. Financial and legal independence
6. An end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality
7. Freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status; and an end to all laws, assumptions and practices which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women

kept or alienated them from activism in other political spheres, including formal party politics, socialist or anarchist groups and the expanding social movements around environmentalism and globalisation. Thus their stories provide useful insights for scholars and activists who are concerned with the democratisation of all political arenas, from the formal to the informal. Such stories also speak to activists and researchers in the global feminist movement and may echo experiences and challenges elsewhere, contributing to debates on mixed organising and the involvement of men in feminism for example. I hope that presenting and celebrating the insights and contributions of these young activists can draw attention to what social movements may be missing, when women are missed out.

## **Youth, politics and feminism**

### **Feminism and young women**

Feminism is considered to have last been at its height in the UK in the late 1960s and 1970s; what is known as the “second wave” of the women’s liberation movement (Coote and Campbell, 1987). This movement is often described as one of the first of the “new” social movements to emerge in that period, which opened up new avenues for political participation, outside traditional arenas such as political parties or trade unions (Hague et al, 2003). Yet this uprising of women built on a much older history, including what is known as the “first wave” of feminism in the UK in the 1900s (Marx Ferree and McClurg Mueller, 2007; Hester, 1992).

Alongside legislative successes in the mid-1970s such as the Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act, the movement brought male violence against women into the public domain, establishing a legacy of support services and building campaigns against pornography and prostitution (Hague et al, 2003; Bagilhole, 1997). Different schools of feminism emerged, with their own groups and publications, such as socialist feminism, Black feminism, revolutionary and radical feminism (Walby, 1990). Around the country women’s Consciousness Raising (CR) groups were set up, following the lead of the US (Peskalis, 1970). Such women-only groups were also partly a reaction and solution to experiences of sexism in the mixed social movements of the time, as Eschle (2001) points out:

The more radical women of the so-called second wave of feminism in the West were stimulated in part by the trivialisation of women’s concerns and their confinement to lower-status roles within the “New Left” movement, despite its rhetoric of egalitarian democracy (Eschle, 2001:5).

The growth and successes of the second wave are considered to have mobilised a concerted attack, or backlash, against it, which many people believe is still in force today. In her seminal work, Faludi (1992) describes the backlash as “a pre-emptive strike that stops women long before they reach the finishing line” (1992: 14). Largely considered to have taken effect from the 1980s, a climate of increased consumerism and the pervasive influence of neo-liberal economics,

alongside many years of conservative government is seen to have contributed to the strength of this backlash as the women's movement began to fracture (McRobbie, 2009). Since then it has often only been mentioned in claims of its demise, with many commentators happy to declare feminism dead (Redfern and Aune, 2010).

McRobbie (2009) argues that the backlash now takes the form of post-feminism, creating an environment where feminism is only invoked to bedisavowed. In this climate, girls and young women are keen to present as liberated and empowered, so seek to distance themselves from a movement portrayed as necessary for women who are *not*. This is partly made possible due to the success of feminism, in education, employment and legal protection for example. The mainstreaming of the gains that were won mean that many young women have grown up with advantages bestowed by their sisters before them, which appear to them to be common sense, not hard won battles in a liberatory struggle (Budgeon, 2001). Young feminists Baumgardner and Richards elaborate, "the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it's simply in the water" (2000:17). This success can then be used against feminism, as proof that it is no longer needed; that society is post-feminism. Against this backdrop a new feminism emerged, originating in the US in the 1990s and calling itself the "third wave".

Third wave feminism is usually credited to Rebecca Walker who founded the Third Wave Foundation in the US in 1993 (Henry, 2004). Third wave is often portrayed as a reaction to what went before, sometimes seen to be based on simplistic critiques of second wave feminism as racist, prudish, restrictive and focussed on women as victims (Scanlon, 2009). As Henry asserts, "third wavers have frequently created a feminism of their own by pitting their wave against the second wave" (2004:37).

It should be pointed out however, that the notion of waves of feminism is disputed. In chronological terms, it is difficult to identify a starting point for feminism. Though here in the UK the suffrage campaigns of the 1900s are usually identified as the "first wave", women resisted the brutality of male supremacy long before then (Hester, 1992). Likewise, between the so-called waves, women were still resisting, including in organised ways (Caine, 1997; Bashkevin, 1996; Byrne, 1996). The term "third wave" can be used purely chronologically, to describe the current observed increases in feminist activism amongst a new generation too young to have been active in the 1970s. However, the term can also be ideological, as explained above, to describe a perceived (often welcomed) shift away from the politics associated with the second wave. As I will explain in my findings, the majority of young activists in my small study did not identify with the term third-wave.

## **The struggle continues**

Recent years have seen a number of books published on the subject of contemporary feminism in the UK (Banyard, 2010; Dean, 2010; Redfern and Aune, 2010; Walter, 2010; Woodward and Woodward, 2009). In November 2009 an *Independent* newspaper article proclaimed that women's groups were thriving in Britain again, as the "Topshop generation" added women's rights to their agenda of shopping, partying and looking pretty (Measure, 2009). Redfern and Aune's (2010) recent book is based on their survey of 1300 feminist activists, nearly half of whom were under 25 and the majority of whom reported being feminists since their teens. In July 2010 the newspaper *The Guardian* ran an article titled "Feminism is not finished" on the "resurgence" of feminist activism across the country, noting young women's involvement in new campaigns against pornography, lap-dancing clubs, rape and all forms of male violence against women (Cochrane, 2010).

These activities that younger feminists are apparently involved in highlight some continuity with the second wave women's liberation movement, as Redfern and Aune's research showed: "85% of our survey respondents think that the important feminist issues today are 'quite similar' or 'very similar' to those of the 1970s" (2010:16). There are also signs of a broad adoption of agendas previously associated more with radical feminism, for example mobilisations against pornography and prostitution, a feature that also emerged in my study (Crow, 2000).

New feminist groups have begun to appear across the UK since the early 2000s. London Feminist Network formed in 2004 and has inspired numerous other Feminist Networks to form across the country. The tradition of Reclaim the Night marching, founded in Britain in 1977, which declined from the late 1980s, was revived in London in 2004 and again, this has inspired towns and cities from Aberdeen to Devon to organise their own local marches against rape and male violence ([www.reclaimthenight.org](http://www.reclaimthenight.org)).

## **The youth problem in feminism**

It still appears that any such resurgence is far from a majority pursuit however, with evidence suggesting that most young women today, in line with McRobbie's (2009) thesis, do not identify as feminist. Supporting the charge of individualism that has often been fired at young women, and indeed youth generally, Budgeon's (2001) research with young women in the UK found that although they had sympathy with feminist aims, and expected equal pay, equal access to education and work for example, they saw these as individual achievements and had no identification with the idea of a collective feminist movement. Scharff's (2010) research in Britain and Germany also found that most young women did not identify as feminist, associating the word with homophobic and misogynist stereotypes that have long been used against feminism, namely the spectre of the man-hating, masculine, hairy, lesbian

feminist (see also Rudolfsdottir and Jolliffe, 2008; Sharpe, 2001). Such findings over the years have fuelled a focus on younger women as emblematic of the changing, and possibly declining, women's liberation movement (Greer, 2000).

In the West the media has encouraged this view by often presenting debates on the changing form of feminism as "a generational cat-fight" (Bulbeck and Harris, 2007: 221), pitting older feminists against younger women, and young feminists in particular; or simply asserting that feminism is dead for young women today, as Griffin (2001) explains. "Feminism is constructed as irrelevant to young women, and/or young women are represented as antagonistic or apathetic towards feminism, at least in contemporary Western societies" (Griffin, 2001: 182). Segal for example bemoans the "frank rejection of feminism by many young women" (1999: 2). Even when young women do take action, it is often viewed as frivolous and individualistic, more about lifestyle and consumerism than collective social change, as Aapola et al (2005) summarise:

Young women have therefore been depicted as a problem for feminism, either because they are reluctant to call themselves feminists, or because the feminism they are seen to enact is not familiar to those who may feel they are the true torch bearers of the movement (2005: 201).

### **It's not the winning, it's the taking part – benefits of participation**

When people *are* politically engaged in various ways, there is evidence that such activity is beneficial, and good for the democratic health of society, as Parry et al (1992) suggested in their foundational study of political engagement in Britain. "The experience of participation, not only of the results, but of the process itself, is crucial to the vitality of democracy itself" (Parry et al, 1992: 15).

There are of course many different understandings of democracy; the term is widely used but rarely defined (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). At its most basic, it is often used to refer to electoral or political democracy: the presence of political elections – ideally fair and transparent – within nation states (ibid). It can also refer to opportunities for local and national political participation, between intermittent elections, such as the everyday ability for citizens to be heard by accountable decision makers, and to be welcomed and facilitated to play a role in economic and social debate and decision-making; particularly in relation to their community, wellbeing or livelihood, but also in shaping and directing their country and its role in the world. Such participation is what Evans (2003) identifies as the main ingredient of democracy: "The decisive test of a democracy is its capacity to encourage its population to play an active role in its government" (2003: 91).

It is in this sense that I use the term also, while acknowledging the many critiques of the idea and reality of claims to democracy, not least from feminist scholars. Historically and currently, women and other oppressed groups have been barred from the vote and continue to be underrepresented in governments around the world. As Pateman (1989) points out: "For feminists, democracy has *never* existed; women have never been and still are not admitted as full and

equal members and citizens in any country known as a democracy" (Pateman, 1989:210). Ideally, a democratic system should allow "citizens a collective voice and a point of peaceful negotiation over the issues that affect them" (Power Inquiry, 2006: 270). Unfortunately, ideals are often not reality; perhaps the notion of democracy is, as Gandhi said of the civilised West, nothing more than a nice idea, but it is arguably one worth aspiring towards.

Political participation by individuals, either alone, or through organised groups, facilitates a multiplicity of issues onto the public agenda, through formal politics or via social movements. This can be especially important for marginalised groups who do not see themselves represented in their government and who are therefore reluctant to rely on their representatives to represent their voice without some encouragement. Political participation is considered to benefit the individual as well as society, by increasing individual activists' confidence, lifeskills, networks and political experience; a political efficacy which in turn, can increase the likelihood of continuing political engagement into the future (Kimberlee, 2002; Youniss et al, 2002; Parry et al, 1992). Early political experiences are thus seen as highly influential, with the suggestion that such experiences during youth increase the chances of continuing involvement. As Youniss et al (2002) assert, "service and participation in youth organisations during adolescence is found to predict adult political behaviour", suggesting such people are more likely to be politically engaged into adulthood (2002: 125).

Involvement in social movements could be *particularly* beneficial therefore for women, of all ages, who often score lower than men on measures of political efficacy. Large-scale surveys of adults in the UK, such as the British Election Studies and the 2003 Audit of Political Engagement, found women less likely than men to report knowledge about politics, to talk about politics with peers or take leadership roles in political groups (Norris et al, 2004; Rappoport, 1981). Women who are active in social movements, and benefiting in terms of gaining confidence, political awareness and campaigner skills, may therefore be expected to report high levels of political efficacy, and this is something I explore in the case of young feminist activists. Before presenting some of these findings, I shall briefly outline how my research was conducted.

### **An insider researcher's perspective**

As well as researching contemporary feminism in the form of LFN, I am also a participant in this movement. I identify as a Radical Feminist, I founded LFN and the revived London Reclaim the Night in 2004 and played a significant leadership role in the Network until 2010, when I backed away from some of the more direct organisation to focus on my current PhD studies.

There are many different understandings of radical feminism (Gunew, 1991; Walby, 1990; Marychild Claire, 1981). I suggest some recognisable defining features are an analysis of patriarchy, a focus on the significance of male violence against women as both a cause and consequence of women's inequality relative to men, the extension of this focus to pornography and prostitution as

additional forms of male violence against women, a critique of socially constructed gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality and a promotion of women-only political organising. Many attempted simpler definitions of what is a loose, informal and shifting political identity have been far from favourable, with radical feminists commonly maligned as man-haters, biological determinists and ultimately redundant (Byrne, 1996; Gelb, 1986; Campbell, 1980).

As there is no one radical feminist manifesto, no organised political party, no set of demands to sign up to, it is impossible to provide any overarching definition of this identity. My own radical feminism is concerned with all the (arguably) defining features I have outlined above, as well as with how this analysis fits into a broader critique of global capitalism, intersects with oppressions based on categories other than sex, and contributes to anti-racism, anti-imperialism and a concern for the environment and non-human animals.

Being a feminist activist myself, and a participant within LFN, makes this a piece of insider research. Kanuha (2000) defines insider research as "conducting research with communities or identity groups of which one is a member" (Kanuha, 2000: 440). Like any method of social research, insider research has both strengths and weaknesses, but is often viewed as particularly vulnerable to charges of bias. The unique positionality of the insider researcher necessitates an awareness of the challenges this dual role can bring, such as a sense of conflicted loyalties, an unwillingness to publicise negative aspects of one's own community or the difficulties of spotting nuance and significance in beliefs and practices that seem commonplace (Walsh, 2004; Edwards, 2003).

The insider researcher is far from the positivist ideal of an objective and impartial social scientist (Law, 2004; Bryman, 2001). From a feminist perspective this is not necessarily negative. Feminist researchers have contributed to well-known critiques of positivism and objectivity and to reformulations of methodological validity and rigour (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991). It has been pointed out that no social research is unbiased (Taylor, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1983). As Maynard argues, all researchers are always present within, and influence their research, "no research is carried out in a vacuum" (1994: 48).

During the course of my research, while being alert to the challenges outlined above, I was also able to benefit from my insider position. For example, I did not have to go through "gatekeepers" to access research participants (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1988). I was also familiar with the culture, codes and language of LFN, giving me some commonality with the research participants, what feminist ethnographer Naples refers to as "a greater linguistic competence" (2003: 46). In short, I experienced my insider position only as a benefit and did not encounter any tensions. This may be partly because LFN is such a large group, few attend every meeting or event and it is possible to attend events and not see the same activists twice; I have not seen most of my interviewees since conducting their interviews. In addition, as none of the interviewees were close



friends or colleagues I did not have to deal with any changes of relationship at the undertaking of a researcher position (Kanuha, 2000).

### **Study design**

I used the qualitative method of semi-structured interviewing, to allow a structured yet flexible interview conversation (Flick, 2006). Interviews lasted one to two hours. Interview transcripts were then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ritchie et al, 2003). The interview method suited my project as I was determined to facilitate the participants to define their own politics and activism, in their own words, rather than limit their responses in a closed, pre-coded questionnaire for example; though this quantitative approach has often been used in studies of youth political participation, and is often critiqued for being reductionist (O'Toole et al, 2003).

### **The study**

I recruited research participants through an initial advertisement on the LFN e.forum in April 2010. Membership of this forum was just over 1600 as of June 2011. LFN describes itself as a women-only, feminist activist organisation, actively working against patriarchy and to end violence against women (VAW) in all its forms. The group uses a broad definition of VAW, including pornography and prostitution as well as rape and domestic violence, while also making links between patriarchy and poverty, racism and war and militarism. Regarding abortion, the group is pro-choice. Patriarchy is defined as a system of male supremacy, in line with Walby's definition as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (1990:20).

Eleven women responded to the initial advert. The selection of interviewees was mainly based on convenience sampling – those who were available for interview during June – July 2010. I did some purposive sampling in that I selected the youngest respondents and also actively targeted Black women in an effort to diversify the sample. I also selected new activists and those who had not been highly active thus far, again to diversify the sample. However, I was not aiming for a statistically representative sample of all feminist activists within LFN, nor can I claim this for my research (Gomm, 2004). As a piece of qualitative research, I attempt only to relay the voices of these young feminist activists and to treat their accounts as valid in their own right. Each account provides an insight into what made these young women join LFN, how they came to identify as feminists and as feminist activists, what motivates their activism and how they contextualise this in their broader political and social landscape.

The eight activists interviewed were all between 17 and 28 years old; the majority (six) identified as white British, one as British Indian and one as Bangladeshi. Five were in full time university education, one was still at school completing sixth form, the remaining two were both in full time employment in the charity sector. None reported having parenting or caring responsibilities.

Names have been replaced with fictionalised names in order to protect anonymity.

## **“Guys are told they can create change, but women aren’t” – young feminists speak out**

### **Motivations for becoming interested in feminism**

The eight young women I interviewed had diverse routes into LFN and it was often impossible for them to identify when they first became aware of feminism, or when they began to call themselves feminist. They described a variety of influential experiences, what I call feminist triggers.

These were not always the experiences one might expect, the main example being in the case of domestic or sexual violence. The majority (five) had direct experiences of male violence. Two were survivors of rape, two had witnessed domestic violence in childhood, one had lost a family member to domestic homicide and one had recently left an abusive heterosexual relationship. Two recounted experiences that may not appear to be direct forms of violence: one had briefly been involved in pornography and one in modelling as a teenager – however, both described these as forms of male violence. It may be easy to assume that such experiences were prime motivations for becoming involved in feminism, yet each of the interviewees affected insisted that their feminism did not begin with these incidents, but was formed much earlier, often in childhood or their early teens; though they could rarely pinpoint an exact year or age. Indeed, it was common for interviewees to claim that their feminist politics were almost inherent or biological, as if the calibre of political identity can be judged in years, and they did not want to be found lacking.

This desire to claim feminism from an early age sometimes resulted in contradictory accounts. For example, twenty four year old white British student Grace, recalled that she did not openly identify as a feminist until sixth form college, an environment she found radical and alternative compared to her previous school. Despite this, she went on to state that somehow, she had always been a feminist:

I didn't really understand at this point that there were different kinds of feminists at all, but I just knew I was a feminist, there was never a point I didn't call myself a feminist.

Annie, a white twenty two year old NGO worker, also claimed an intrinsic feminist identity:

I was definitely always a feminist, there's degrees of understanding and it just increased incrementally over the years, I don't think there's any one monumental event.

These contradictory accounts perhaps reflect the difficulty of identifying a personal “start date”, for a political identity that is attached to a largely informal movement, with fluid and informal boundaries, as Norris (2002) highlights:

(I)t is far more difficult to pin down evidence for the more informal sense of belonging and identification with social movements – feminists, pacifist groups, environmentalists – where it is often difficult to know what it means to ‘join’ even for the most committed (how many feminists who sympathise with the women’s movement can be counted as card carrying members of NOW or equivalent bodies?) (2002: 142).

Some of the activists did acknowledge a time when they were not feminist, or not aware of feminism, and they highlighted their feminist triggers in their feminist awakening. Two cited politicised female school teachers who influenced them and Bella, the youngest at 17 years old, had benefited from studying feminism in A-Level politics at her sixth form college. One of the activists, Catriona, a white British, 18 year old politics student, felt she was drawn to feminism before other social movements because gender inequality was most obvious to her, being female and experiencing it herself:

I’d become aware of a lot of other social issues through feminism, because I’m the one that’s disadvantaged, so that’s about feminism, whereas I’m advantaged in other ways, so, I think that was the one that I realised.

Only one activist spoke of being influenced by a feminist mother. Deepti, a twenty one year old MA student, who identified as British Indian, recounted that she had always been familiar with the term “feminist” but it took her own feminist trigger to make it resonate with her. In her case it was reading Ariel Levy’s book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2006) when she was eighteen:

She [her mother] called herself a feminist, so, like, I always heard that word. But then I read *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and I just loved it ‘cos it was so accessible, ‘cos there was a whole group of us and we were 18, and we were, like, oh my god I’m acting like a female chauvinist pig, so it took a little trigger. But I just think, throughout, my mother’s always said the word “feminist”, but, like, I thought I was a feminist, but now I think I know I’m a feminist.

Supporting Inglehart’s (1977) theory of a shift to postmaterialist values, one of the interviewees, Hirni, a 28 year old lesbian working in the women’s sector who identified as Bangladeshi, stated that she was involved in feminism, as well as other social movements, because she felt she could be, and therefore should. She felt that her comfortable living standards freed her to join political campaigns, which were often linked to her own identity – lesbian and gay rights, women’s rights and anti-racism. As she put it, she felt it was a privilege to be able to take political action on issues she cared about:

‘Cos, like, I feel quite privileged in my life, like, living in the West we don’t have to worry about water, food, you know, the basic things... I don’t want to do nothing, and I’m lucky ‘cos I can do something, so, like, I want to. Those two things motivated me.

Two activists, unknown to one another, described similar feminist triggers, and were unusual in being able to pinpoint the motivating incident and year. Catriona identified a particular incident while watching MTV some time in 2006:

Obviously I'd always watched music videos, but, like, one day I was just looking at them and I was thinking, really, that's just not right, the women are hardly dressed. And, I guess it was just like a clicking sort of thing; and there were other things, like the pay gap and stuff, and I just thought: wait a minute, you never see women politicians and managers and stuff, but you see lots of naked women, and I thought, well why is this? And you know, I think I would have identified as a feminist at that time.

Eleanor, also aged 18 and a white British student, reported a similar feminist trigger:

I can remember actually, a particular incident. I was just watching TV, and it was something like "Home and Away" or one of those teen things, and just at the end they had this thing with pole dancing, and it was just, like, really disgusting.

When Eleanor discovered that her peers did not share her discomfort, and that many of her male friends admitted to using pornography, she was motivated to seek out feminist groups through the internet, hoping to find others who shared her views; believing that feminism generally was opposed to pornography:

Yeah, I googled "feminism" because, I think it was after that incident, I just thought, I really hope I'm not the only one who thinks like this.

It is interesting that Eleanor associated feminism with an anti-pornography stance, since this is not a universal view within feminism (Assiter and Carol, 1993). Where did she get this view? She reported having no feminist role models, and unlike some of the other interviewees did not claim a life-long feminism. She explained that she became interested in feminism while at secondary school through reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2009). When asked what being a feminist meant to her she replied,

It's just like, being really passionate about women's rights and wanting equality and being against all this sexualisation and degradation of women in the media and believing women should have the right to have an abortion and be equal.

Searching for feminist groups on the internet, Eleanor found LFN and another UK activist organisation called "Object", who explicitly campaign against pornography: these discoveries confirmed her view that feminism was against pornography and thus that it was a movement she wanted to be part of.

Pornography was an important issue for all but one of my interviewees, a parallel with the second wave, when feminist anti-pornography groups were at their height (Long, 2011). Perhaps related to this, as mentioned earlier in this article, none of the activists identified as third-wave feminists; some said they did not know what the term meant, but most associated it with a post-feminist ideology and so were opposed to it, as illustrated by this quote from Deepti:

I hate all this bullshit about the third wave, saying that there's a wave means that, like, everything's changed, like we've got our rights and now we'll just go onto the next thing, but we're nowhere near the next stage, like, we're still trying to get basic rights from the 70s. And people saying "oh we're the third wave", like it's all won and this is the lipstick generation, and it's like they've forgotten what feminism's all about.

Eleanor stated that she did not know much about third-wave feminism, but she believed it did not take a strong stance against pornography and the “sex industry”.

I definitely, like, I don't get these, like, “pro-sex feminists” who are like, pro-prostitution, and I'm like, that's not sex.

This viewpoint led these activists away from third-wave feminist groups, and their politics around the “sex industry” led them to search for groups that explicitly took a stance against those issues.

As Eleanor stated of pornography,

I don't hear many people speaking out about it, it's, like, just accepted.

They found the stance they were looking for in LFN and the majority (6) did so through searching on the internet, emphasising the importance of an online presence for LFN in terms of recruiting new members and also, the relevance of taking, and publicly stating on the group website, an oppositional position to the “sex industry”.

The activists welcomed the opportunity to express their views on what they saw as the mainstreaming of pornography in youth culture. They were relieved to find others who shared their views, making them feel less isolated and this drew them to become further active within LFN, as Grace described:

You don't feel isolated, you're not completely crazy, you know, ranting and raving. Because it always happens when I have a conversation with a group of people who don't believe me, and I think – hang on, am I saying something wrong. And then, like, I go back to the group and I say – is what I'm saying unreasonable? And they say – no, you're absolutely right. And that kind of encouragement and support is really important.

All the activists were overt about their feminist identity and although they were proud feminists, they were aware of negative stereotypes associated with feminism (Scharff, 2010; Budgeon, 2001). In line with the perception of young women as reticent or hostile towards feminism, some of the activists had no feminist friends and had to deal with anti-feminism from peers on a regular basis.

### **I am a feminist, but... : resisting negative stereotypes**

Given the backlash against feminism, and the reported rejection of the women's liberation movement by younger women, it is interesting that none of the activists associated feminism with negative connotations, though they were often affected by them, as school student Bella described:

everyone already called me the crazy feminist.

Why had these young women not believed the stereotypes? As indicated earlier, they all recounted early feelings of attachment to feminism and they associated it positively with women's rights.

I would have called myself a feminist around my 20s because I knew what that was, and that was fighting for women's rights, and I'd always associated that with feminism (Hirni).

As the activists read more about feminism and became engaged with LFN and other feminist groups, they became aware of different types of feminism and began to shape or reinforce their own distinct feminist identity. For example, three activists identified as Radical Feminists, often alongside an identity as a Socialist or "Leftie". Two identified as Socialist Feminists and one as a Liberal Feminist. They gave a variety of accounts as to what drew them to identify with identities such as these. Socialist or left-wing family members were mentioned as an influence, but so were conservative parents, who motivated an interest in alternative lifestyles and politics. All but one of the activists identified as "left-wing".

Several of the activists believed that their lack of investment or interest in mainstream young femininity might also have freed them to pursue their feminist politics.

Maybe 'cos I'm less of a stereotypically girly girl, like I never read those girl's magazines, I don't watch "Twilight" or those teen rom coms (Eleanor).

I didn't want to be like the other girls, like, wearing pink and stuff (Bella).

Seemingly the activists understood that identifying as a feminist may provoke others to question their femininity, and they had second-guessed this, in a way, by claiming that they did not care to identify with mainstream versions of femininity anyway – so had nothing to lose.

Once identifying as feminists, all the interviewees sought out and joined feminist groups, including LFN. The most significant motivation recounted for joining groups was to meet like-minded people; but these activists also wanted to take action, beyond merely internet chat.

I quite openly say to anyone I am a feminist, and I sort of felt I was the only one, and I wanted to meet someone else sort of like-minded, I really just wanted to be a part of something, I thought if I care about it this much and get into arguments and stuff everyday about it then I really want to do something and help and well, at least do something you know (Bella).

Fiona, a white twenty two year old student, noted the importance of meeting like-minded others too, and of having the opportunity to engage in collective political activism:

Meeting others is important, erm, and also, 'cos, for political activism, and learning more things (Fiona).

### **The political is social, and other benefits of activism**

As indicated, all the activists described experiences of isolation due to their feminist views and opinions:

sometimes I can feel really, really alone and depressed, like I was the only one that thought like this (Eleanor).

Being involved in feminist activism countered these experiences, as Catriona described when asked what was best about LFN:

I'd say meeting people, definitely. And just talking to people who have similar views in a world where not a lot of people do is kind of quite empowering and just nice.

As well as sociability, all the activists, like Fiona above, mentioned their thirst for knowledge as a motivation for involvement, and increased knowledge as a benefit. They did recount some negative aspects to this, particularly around violence against women, as Annie explained:

There are days when, you know, I wish I never knew about stuff, but there's no going back, once the light's turned on, there's no going back.

However, all said they would rather be aware than ignorant, and they experienced their knowledge and awareness as another motivation for their activism, describing the sense of responsibility it brought:

The more you know, sometimes the more responsibility you feel (Hirni).

All the activists noted that as well as increased knowledge, their confidence had also grown and in many cases they gained experience they felt would benefit them in their lives, such as working with the media, doing public speaking or designing leaflets for example.

Like, now I feel more powerful in my life, 'cos of my involvement. I've got involved in more things and I feel more positive (Hirni).

The activists also felt involvement had increased their political knowledge and experience, as well as their appreciation and understanding of the role of formal party politics. All the activists of voting age reported having voted in every general election since they were eighteen; all expressed a deep commitment to doing so. Several used feminist blogs and comments on the LFN e.forum to help them make sense of political current affairs. They also found out about other political campaigns through LFN meetings and the e.forum, joining LFN delegations to demonstrations in defence of Gaza, or against cuts to public services for example.

It's definitely improved my knowledge of politics to a huge level, without a doubt, to a level that people that aren't in activism just don't have (Catriona).

The activists stated that it was easier to gain political knowledge, skills and experience in the feminist movement, partly because it is often a women-only space, which I shall address in more detail later. Perhaps because of their involvement in activism, the interviewees did not report feeling politically powerless; quite the opposite.

Despite their individual sense of political empowerment, the activists recognised many ways that politics in general could be alienating for women, including young women, and they specifically identified three interlinking

barriers to women's political participation: images of women in the media and culture, restrictive gender roles in society and sexism in mixed political movements.

## **Barriers to politicisation**

### **Images of women**

One barrier mentioned by all was the mainstreaming of pornography and negative images of women in the media. The activists felt that images of women as sex-objects reduced women's aspirations generally, not just politically:

The only place where women are overrepresented, is when they're naked; so it's kind of, you know, monkey see, monkey do, kind of thing, on a very basic level (Deepti).

They felt sexual objectification portrayed women as unsuitable for political roles of any form, whether in Westminster or in social movements:

It's just, kind of, makes women take on this role of, erm, mere sexual object. And, erm, sex objects don't normally have brains for politics (Catriona).

### **The limits of gender roles**

Representations of women in popular culture were linked to another barrier: gender roles and stereotypes. All interviewees felt that politics was viewed by society as a masculine domain and that femininity was therefore seen as incompatible, a perception which, as some did discuss, perhaps contributed to their own disavowal of mainstream young femininity as a precursor to their interest in politics. Although they said they did not believe that politics was inherently masculine *themselves*, they thought the assumption could inhibit women from participating in politics, including in social movements, as Grace illustrates:

It's just seen as a male thing, it's seen as unseemly for you to be strident. Like you're militant, but, like, if you're a guy you're just involved, but if you're a girl, you're like, massively militant.

Complying with feminine gender roles was therefore cited as a direct barrier to engaging in collective, organised politics, formal or informal, stopping women from taking visible leadership roles or engaging in confrontational activism in social movements:

The patriarchal system's like, pushing the idea that women have to be this way, and if you're not, then you're unfeminine, or uncouth, and maybe that's why they still aren't as active as they should be. There's still that bird cage restriction, and in that sense, women don't want to be seen as raucous and unfeminine. Which is partly why they do the background stuff, like letter writing (Deepti).

Fiona emphasised the effect of not seeing women in public roles:



When I was younger, there was this, an unwritten thing, that everything was a man thing; like doing talks, and being a musician, and all these kind of things I wanted to do, were man things. Guys are told that they can create change, but women aren't.

### **Sexism within mixed protest movements**

The activists had many critiques of formal party politics, and were well aware of women's underrepresentation in the Westminster government – nearly 80% male after the 2010 general election (parliament.co.uk). But as well as critiques of formal politics, the activists also had criticisms of social movements, commenting on the underrepresentation of women in activist groups for example, where they felt women were also marginalised:

I don't think we're taken seriously, our voice is still, like, only half of a man's. Men have more authority than us, and there's no point pretending that doesn't affect us, it does (Hirni).

Hirni felt that this alienated women already within social movements and discouraged others from joining or aspiring to high profile positions, therefore maintaining their underrepresentation. She gave the example of experiences in environmental groups:

In the environmental movement, like, how men just assume power, like, without no question, like, without no argument. And so women don't want to be involved, of course they don't. But, like, there are women that want to be there, and there are women in the environment movement, but they're just, like, hidden, you know.

Several of the activists spoke of feeling silenced in mixed political groups. As Grace and Fiona explained:

they're run by men, and to get a voice, even if you don't want to be that actively involved, it's literally they don't even take you seriously, you're just the token woman in that group (Grace).

Women aren't generally allowed their own voice, like, in a lot of the groups, women could join, but wouldn't have their voices heard (Fiona).

All the activists recounted experiences of feeling patronised by men in activist groups. Several mentioned anarchist and socialist groups as these were the groups they had most experience with, often through college and university:

With my friendship groups, all my male friends are, like, anarchists or socialists, but, like, their girlfriends aren't involved. But, it's about patronising, like, I've been so patronised. And it's just things like that, like, you're not even invited to take part, or like, if you are, it's like come along and we'll tell you how it is, and like, how socialism solves feminism (Grace).

The activists experiences of sexism within mixed activism meant they appreciated the women-only space of LFN and felt this avoided the slippage into prescribed gender norms that could happen in mixed social movements:

Like on the anarchist scene, or like, "manarchist" scene, the women's jobs like making tea and the men, like, leading (Fiona).

I'm not opposed to mixed groups, but when it turns into, like, guys taking the lead or, like, women making the coffee, you know, I find that very difficult (Annie).

Like me personally, I feel that men can be quite restrictive, like, not 'cos they necessarily intend to be, but just, like, ' cos they are (Eleanor).

Consequently, in women-only space the activists felt that women had more opportunities, motivation and confidence to share a variety of roles, including leadership roles. Partly this was because they felt men dominated such opportunities in mixed groups, but also because they felt that with men present women were more likely to defer to them, and that this gendered, formulaic process was not conducive to women developing their own skills and confidence:

In a whole space of women, everyone is equal I think, so like, leadership, is more likely to happen, definitely within a women-only group more likely. People are starting to see it, and seeing a whole group of women marching, joining it or watching it, it's like wow. I think women need that image right in front of them, to think its ok for them, that there isn't a gender stereotype you have to stick to (Deepti).

LFN has made me see that women, you know, I mean I always knew we could do it, but I felt kind of intimidated, but now, like, you know, maybe I can actually be educated and I can actually do things (Fiona).

In another reference to the politics and organisational tactics of second wave feminism, many of the activists spoke of the importance of consciousness-raising (CR). The opportunity to experience and benefit from CR was another reason the activists valued women-only space and they felt that the same experiences could not be gained in mixed political groups:

I think obviously, like, you know, a lot of people are going to want to talk about, you know, their personal experiences, and a lot of women feel they can there in women-only. So, having men there makes it a harder situation, like, more work, so, like, women-only space is hugely important (Annie).

Even if there's a few men, like, women might be more reserved in what they think and, well, not just what they think, but what they, like, say out loud, and I think there's a lot more, like, willing to go further if there's not men there. And also safer, like, with regard the issues feminism talks about, like rape and porn, they're going to feel safer with just women there and that's really important (Eleanor).

I think, I think sort of, for sharing experiences and stuff like that it can sometimes be important to have a women-only environment (Catriona).

Most of the activists felt that the women's liberation movement should always be led by women and Hirni offered a challenge to men to prove their commitment to feminism; by organising on their own:

I think the good men understand, and allow women to have women-only spaces. It's vital because, I'm sorry, but if we left our liberation in the hands of men we wouldn't really have it, you know, what have men done for women's liberation

here in this country? Like, even in Bangladesh, like, thousands of men marched in the streets against the acid attacks against women, so, like, I haven't seen anything like that here, why don't they do that? So, maybe they'll get there eventually, but, like, I think they've had the chance and they haven't done it. So why would we leave it in their hands? I think it's up to us to do it for ourselves.

Once engaged in LFN, the activists felt there were numerous opportunities to get involved in activism of various sorts, both individually and as a group.

### **Individual and collective political acts**

As research by O'Toole et al (2003) highlighted, what is "political" is highly subjective, and people may be engaged in political activities without calling them that, or engaged in activities that some political scientists would not rate as "political". My interviewees mentioned a broad variety of creative actions and campaigns in the feminist movement that they described as political and as feminist. Several engaged in random acts of subvertising, such as "stickering".

"Stickering" is when activists share template sticker slogans, such as "this degrades women", which can be printed onto address labels and then stuck over posters advertising plastic surgery, diet clubs or any adverts where women are considered to be sexually objectified. The activists saw this as a political act because they believed it might influence others:

The stickering; I do that, I've never been caught or stopped yet; but, you may never know what influences that may start, people maybe think twice about their ideas, like things on magazines and on the tube (Annie).

Another area where they felt they had political power was in influencing their friends and colleagues and they also saw this as a form of political activism:

I know my flat-mate wasn't a feminist before I moved in, and, like, 'cos of the conversations we've had, she's joined all sorts of feminist networks and writes letters (Annie).

The activists all agreed that both individual and collective political acts are important and that both are constructive. They were very reluctant to demean anyone's personal style of political activism and felt that being politically engaged in any way was valuable, whether on one's own or in a group, from writing to an MP to burning down GM crops:

I think definitely both is necessary, like, one person deciding to boycott Israeli goods is still worth it, like, we may not be able to see that, but of course it is (Hirni).

However, perhaps reflecting their positive experiences in feminist groups, and their motivations for seeking out feminist groups in the first place, all the activists felt that ultimately, collective politics were the way forward for them, and had the most potential to change society:

It's really difficult to make a difference by yourself, like, that's why I've always been into the collective, and that's why I, like, really believe in the sisterhood, absolutely (Deepti).

## **Beyond the usual barriers: benefits from engagement in feminist activism**

### **Sociability and collectivity**

My findings support the assertions of Kimberlee (2002), Roker (2007) and Parry et al (1992), that political participation can bring a myriad of personal benefits for those involved, and possibly wider social benefits. The main benefits (and also motivations) noted by the interviewees were the opportunity to socialise and to work collectively with others who shared their politics.

This finding is an exception to trends observed in the literature on social movements regards the increasing individualisation of social movements and political expression. The shift to post-materialist values and a climate of neo-liberalism is considered by many scholars to contribute to a decline in collective political organising, in favour of individual styles of political expression (Stoker, 2006). As discussed at the start of this article, youth are often seen to lead this trend (Coleman, 2005; Haste, 2005; Bentley et al, 1999); thought to result in an environment where, as Stoker warns, "people fail to appreciate the inherent collective characteristics of politics in an individualised world" (2006:188).

Applying these concerns directly to the feminist movement, Rudolfsdottir and Jolliffe (2008) assert that, "the idea of feminism as a collective movement with clear common goals fits uneasily with the rhetoric of individualism, where the focus is on identity politics and self-realization through lifestyle choices" (2008: 269). These fears were not realised in these young interviewees however, who all prioritised collective political organising over individual acts and cited the opportunity for collective organising as a *main* motivation for, and benefit from, participating in feminist groups.

### **The gaining and sharing of knowledge and skills**

As well as the benefits of sociability and collectivity, the activists mentioned gaining new skills, political knowledge and confidence. All interviewees had become involved in other political campaigns through LFN. Roseneil (1995) has argued that the experience of political activism can often make future participation more likely: "past activism provides individuals with political and organisational skills, some sense of political efficacy, and, very often, solidarity networks which draw past activists into new involvements" (1995: 47). Youniss et al (2002) also suggest that activism breeds further activism, and are hopeful about the legacy of early political experiences. "Youth who get engaged in social movements form a select pool of adults from which come many life long civic activists and leaders" (2002: 131). This is perhaps what Parry et al (1992) had in mind when they referred to the benefits for democracy of political efficacy.

Another benefit of political efficacy is that it can aid understanding of the workings of formal politics and perhaps make engagement more likely, albeit to varying degrees. Unusually, compared to the findings of much quantitative data on youth attitudes to formal politics, particularly those of young women (Pirie

and Worcester, 2000; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995), the interviewees were all politically engaged, reporting high levels of political efficacy. All the activists stated that their activism aided, and motivated, understanding of the workings, role and significance of Westminster politics, which was one of the reasons they gave for voting; perhaps the most direct example of a benefit to democracy. Two were undertaking Politics degrees, reportedly, directly inspired by their feminist activism. These young women are therefore at least a part of the select pool that Youniss et al (2002) described.

### **The benefits of women-only space**

All the interviewees spoke positively about women-only space. This is not an issue widely addressed in much of the literature on social movements or on equality of political participation. The activists cited more opportunities to take leadership roles, liaise with the media, organise events and to simply be heard, and treated, as an equal, in women-only space. Sexism in mixed social movements is of course not new; as mentioned at the outset of this article, the adoption of women-only space by second wave feminism was partly a reaction to sexism in the rising social movements of the 1960s (Eschle, 2001).

My interviewees, regrettably, painted a similar picture of mixed political organising today, highlighting the difficulties of overcoming engrained gender roles and expectations. From their accounts, there seems much still to be done to make mixed social movements the truly progressive spaces they seek to be. Arguably, a higher state of alert is needed to the existence and impact of sexism in all political groups and more attention should be paid to this in scholarship on social movements.

In a reference to second wave CR groups, the activists also found women-only space a safe place to share and discuss their experiences of patriarchal oppression, including sexual violence. This is an important strategic consideration for the feminist movement, given that so much of its activism is aimed at such oppression and has always been informed by women's experiences, as Taylor (1998) points out. "The women's movement historically has mobilised out of women's most fundamental everyday experiences of gender oppression" (1998: 365). I would argue that this issue is particularly pertinent today, as more and more feminist organisations and feminist activist groups in the UK become mixed spaces.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have attempted to explore some of the reasons why these young women joined LFN and sought involvement in feminist activism. I have also considered some of the benefits they reported from their involvement. Sociability and collectivity emerged as prime motivations for engagement in feminism, but their activism was more than just a social occasion. They all

spoke of wanting to get active, and several aspired to take an increasing role in LFN organisation and leadership in the future.

The sexual objectification of women in popular culture was a negative motivator to activism, cited as a trigger of feminist consciousness, even above experiences of male violence, which the majority had been affected by. Their understanding of male violence included pornography and prostitution, one of many connections with second wave feminism, particularly radical feminism (Crow, 2000).

Once engaged, their feminist activism took many forms. Particularly appealing were opportunities for individual political expression, often in concert with others, wrapped around a collective core. Pragmatic use of opportunistic, spontaneous individual acts, such as stickering, increased their level of political activity as a whole and did not detract from collective organising, though wider evidence suggests this is unusual (Gallego, 2007; Stoker, 2006). All the activists were clear that their engagement in feminist activism had led to increased political knowledge and broader levels of political activity across other social movements.

Women-only space was considered highly conducive to the development of political efficacy and activists recounted increased opportunities, particularly in leadership roles. Men were felt to dominate these roles in mixed spaces, partly due to direct sexism and partly due to the impact of gender stereotyping, which limited women's aspirations and level of engagement. I have therefore asserted that women-only space is still, and should remain, a relevant and strategic method of organising for the contemporary women's movement. Outside of this movement also, there is arguably a need to investigate the potential benefits of women-only self-organisation, a topic not usually addressed in social movement literature.

The experiences of these young feminists raise many other areas for further research and attention both by social movement scholars and activists. Not least, the presence and impact of sexism, the difficulty of overcoming gender roles and the challenge of ensuring that progressive social movements are welcoming and inclusive. This study suggests that the skills and talents of women are being missed while activist groups remain oblivious or wilfully ignorant of the efforts needed to achieve internal liberation. While progress towards this would be no easy task, it could encourage the contribution of women and challenge injustices closer to home than those many groups are fighting against.

In conclusion, the women's liberation movement appeals to these young women today for many of the same reasons it appealed to their predecessors forty years ago. Experiences of sexism in mixed social movements, the impact of male violence and a resentment of the demeaning portrayal of their sex in the media and wider society, all gradually turned to an anger and political consciousness which led them to feminism as a form of resistance and protest. They described feminist political activism as educational, empowering and a source of friendship and support. Although they gained a lot, they also gave much back, in

their time, energies and commitment to multiple causes and movements. Their passion bodes well for the future of the women's liberation movement, and arguably for society as a whole.

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### **About the author**

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