Rolling Wave or Raging Fire? Clashing Activism from the Second to Fourth Waves of Feminism

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origins

Ten black and white photos hang in the conference room, two neat rows of five along the right wall. In them, women hold posters, push baby carriages and march down the streets of Washington in the first suffragist parade.

On our first day, we interns walked into the conference room and saw these images. We are taken back to the first roars of feminism, to the 1913 march that changed the way the suffragette movement was discussed and accepted. Seven strangers, we each see each other in a rose-colored tint, the way history remembers the first wave: intelligent and powerful, unproblematic and pure, all bound together by the common goal of feminism.

Eight thousand protesters, 20 grand floats, nine bands, one musical performance.

On March 3rd, 1913, the Women Suffrage Parade marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C., the day before Woodrow Wilson’s presidential inauguration. Organized by Alice Paul through the National American Woman Suffrage Association, this march was led by labor lawyer Inez Milholland dressed in white and on top of a white horse. At the time of the march, women had been fighting for the right to vote since the 1840s and had only successfully received voting rights in six states.

This first wave of feminism fought for the tangible rights that have become an accepted part of American life. The thought of women, as a cohesive bloc, not being able to vote or own property is one that we, in 2015, cannot truly fathom. The women who marched in 1913 had been fighting for suffrage for at least 60 years. But the fight was almost over. In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, making it the law of the land that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” (The word “woman” does not appear anywhere in the Constitution to this day.)

In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote her famous book The Feminine Mystique about the “problem that has no name.” She conducted interviews with housewives in the late 1950s about the state of their lives. She found that many of them were truly unhappy and unfulfilled. They were not satisfied with their lives inside the home, taking care of the house, their children and their men. They had material wealth, but no emotional wealth. This book put into words what so many women in America were feeling. Sure, they could vote. But was that all there was to the fight for equality? What about having fulfilling careers? Satisfying sex lives? Control over when or if they could have children? Friedan was the primary inspiration for the second wave of feminism, which spanned from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. With the right to vote now a part of the American lifestyle of certain populations of women (namely, white, wealthy married women), the focus of the movement expanded to include issues that had not been part of earlier feminist activism.

The first and the second wave of U.S. feminism have in common their exclusionary history. During the March for Women’s Suffrage, the organizers told Black women to march at the end of the parade or separately from it. They said the reason was a fear that they would lose Southern support in gaining federal women’s suffrage. The implied message was: we white women won’t get the vote if we’re seen with you black women. The second wave followed the same model of exclusion, both outwardly and subtly.
Protesting at Los Angeles City Hall during the Planned Parenthood scandal.

The issue of not finding joy in being a housewife is a feeling only a minority of the population can relate to. Low-income women, especially women of color, had been working outside of the home for decades. They were never given the choice between staying at home or having a career. The clamoring for jobs outside of the home also raised the question: who will take care of the house and kids when white mothers find careers and fulfillment elsewhere? The “problem that has no name” also reflected the continual oppression of women of color and the labor they are expected to offer.

In 1986, a Newsweek opinion poll reported that 56% of American women self-identified as feminists, even when the pollsters gave no specific definition of the word. When the pollsters gave a more specific definition, the numbers skyrocketed, across gender, age and socioeconomic status. The results of this poll inspired Eleanor Smeal, then President of the National Organization for Women (NOW), to create a new organization that reflected this public sentiment. Thus, in 1987, the name and mission of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was born. Powerful feminists Smeal, Kathy Spillar, Peg Yorkin, Toni Carabillo and Judith Meuli created the foundation with a mission of being a comprehensive source for education, research and political action.

Kathy Spillar, the current executive director of the organization, stated during our orientation: “We don’t need to work to turn the tide to our side or engage with people who don’t identify as feminists. We already are the majority. We just need to have our voices heard.”

Since its creation in 1987, the Feminist Majority Foundation has succeeded in having its voice heard. Its leaders have been visible supporters of crucial legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act (1994) and the (still not yet enacted) Equal Rights Amendment. In 1989, FMF created the National Clinic Access Project, the first and largest project of its kind, that works to protect women’s health clinics from anti-abortion extremists. They organize escort services for clinics across the country, increase security, and brief local law enforcement officers about the potential violence that can befall the clinic. The creation of this project followed directly from the FMF’s founders’ dedication to the spirit of the second-wave of feminism.

Stereotypes of feminists being fat, hairy lesbians came out of backlash from the political right during the second wave. Opponents realized the power of the feminist movement – in message, drive and work ethic – so they quickly and repeatedly moved to shut them down. Their campaigns have worked to distance women, especially young women, from the feminist movement. The fear of being undesirable in a society where female worth is attached to physical appearance and desirability to men is often enough to discourage women from engaging in feminism. I didn’t identify as a feminist until my junior year of high school; I didn’t want to be “one of those girls” because I desperately wanted to be valued by men and male society. I wanted to be worthy in their eyes, and it didn’t matter how miserable I was on the way to attaining that goal.

The word “feminist” has a long and contentious history. It has been everything from an insult to an empowering label. Recently, it feels like every popular female
celebrity is quoted saying they don't believe in feminism or that the word is too strong. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say I am a feminist,” said American Idol star Carrie Underwood. “That can come off as a negative connotation.” Shailene Woodley, star of the Divergent film series, stated in Time Magazine that she isn’t a feminist because she loves men. “I think the idea of ‘raise women to power, take the men away from power’ is never going to work out because you need balance.” The problem is that these women are the ones who are among the most visible, the most heard. These are people who help convince young women and the general public that feminism is dead, its mission accomplished.

The feminist movement today often has to fight invisible or subtle sexism. In the early 1900s, sexism was visible and tangible. It was being denied jobs because of your perceived gender, not being able to vote for your representatives, or not being able to own a house without being married to a man. Today, women can legally do all of those things. But sexism isn’t gone. It is just as pervasive today precisely because people believe that it doesn’t exist.

The second wave began to address some of these issues by drawing attention to the workplace, reproductive rights, sexuality, gender roles and the family structure. Sexual harassment in the workplace and stay home to take care of the children. Trans women are still being murdered for “deceiving” men. While laws aren’t in place that prevent women from achieving their full potential, societal norms and standards are still dangerously in place. It’s the responsibility of the feminist movement today to rectify these inequalities.

The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s as a modern response to the backlash against the earlier waves of feminism. It was a time of Riot Grrl and female punk bands. It was also a shift in the way of thinking about feminism. The 1970s feminist icons were white, wealthy, educated women. They were the forefront of the movement, the ones who were the most visible and the loudest. Other feminists, such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, were considered “fringe” because of their specific interests in black and lesbian feminism. The third wave addressed this issue by focusing more on hyper-marginalized identities and how the White Feminist movement itself oppresses queer women and women of color. This shift from political and legislative activism to critical thinking about societal systems reflected a new way of approaching social change. It didn’t need to be big protests and tangible laws. It could be academic, cultural and personal.

Now, in 2015, we’re on the threshold of something new. The normalization of the Internet in everyday life has radically shifted how people interact with each other and the world around them. Protests don’t happen on the streets anymore: Twitter and Facebook have become the new political battlefield. “Hashtag activism” raises global consciousness and has serious power behind it. Revolutions specific to the millennial generation, such as publicizing self-care and taking selfies, have increased the confidence and self-love of this new wave of feminism. The accessibility of the Internet to anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status and education, has allowed for the voices of hyper-marginalized communities to be heard in a shockingly new way. Feminism isn’t for the white and wealthy anymore; everyone has a say. This powerful shift from focusing on a few ideas to making space to think about all the issues on people’s minds is an incredible way of thinking that hadn’t existed before.

This is the feminism that attracted me. This is the feminism that looked at my sexuality, my heritage, my life and my hobbies and validated every single one. It has opened my eyes to the new ways of thinking about our world, how to help people in other walks of life. It has made me realize that I myself was a complete being, worthy of love and respect.

**first steps**

I chose Brandeis University for the vibrant feminist community that exists here. As a senior in high school, newly in love with feminism, I burst with excitement looking over the majors and clubs offered at Brandeis. Never could I imagine that a school would have both a Women’s and Gender Studies Department and individual Sexuality and Queer Studies courses.
Out of the hundreds of clubs, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) called my name. I made a beeline for them at the activities fair during Orientation. I’ve gone to every meeting since my first and have been on the executive board for four semesters now. FMLA is my constant commitment, my number one priority at Brandeis.

I knew about the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) from a distance, as the big mother organization that gave our club buttons and posters. Our FMLA was a chapter club of FMF’s Choices program that was created to ensure that every college and university campus had a thriving and powerful feminist presence. In the spirit of the second wave, the members of these clubs served as intelligent and passionate grassroots organizers. The Foundation has 12 campaigns that individual campus groups can pick and choose from, covering everything from campus sexual violence to exposing fake abortion clinics to ending sweatshop labor. By participating in FMLA, you tap into a nationwide network of young activists who all operate under the same name. FMF also affiliates itself with existing feminist groups on campuses; its purpose is to get the next generation of feminists engaged, informed, and active, by whatever organizational name.

My first semester on FMLA’s executive board (e-board), I asked the group if we could change the name of the club. “I mean, what does ‘Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance’ even mean? It also kinda sounds like ‘F-My-Life Association’.”

My president at the time looked at me blankly and told me that we were a division of a larger organization so no, we couldn’t change the name.

It’s the summer of 2015: I am slipping my laptop into its case to start organizing FMLAs in the greater Los Angeles area. I had picked Brandeis for its Women’s Studies program and its FMLA; now I’m going to be a professional feminist, organizing on a large scale. Am I ready? I mean, I spend 99% of my life at Brandeis organizing on a large scale. Am I ready? I mean, I spend 99% of my life at Brandeis organizing and doing activist work across a multitude of feminist platforms. But my impostor syndrome constantly holds me back, tells me I’m not as good as everyone says I am, silences my tongue before my experiences are expressed.

The FMF office was all brick accents, glass elements and open air – high ceilings, hidden offices in every cranny. Besides the few office spaces with doors belonging to the executives, everyone worked in the same open-air space. I would come to learn how to curb my voice so I didn’t distract duVergne Gaines, the Director of the National Clinic Access Project, who worked across from the intern space. I was shocked to find out that the office was 15 years old. It was modern, looked brand-new. It was created with intent and reason, but it has not evolved. While beautiful and pure in purpose, it remained unchanged in the roll of time.

The rest of the interns and I are told to meet in the conference room. It is a large space, with gray rolling tables in a “U” formation in the middle of the room. It can be closed off from the rest of the office by sliding the interlocking frosted glass doors. Along the back wall, there is a display of bagels, cream cheese, and coffee. At 10:00 am, this is a welcome surprise. We all nervously chat with each other and write our first names and pronouns on our name tags. Then we take our seats.

The frosted doors opened with as much flourish as thick, heavy glass can. duVergne Gaines (we didn’t know this yet) strode into the room, tall with long blonde hair and imposing authority. She surveyed us, focusing on our name tags. "Here at the Feminist Majority Foundation,” she said, “We want women to know they are complete people. Using just your first name reduces you to a child, which is what women have been seen as forever. My name is duVergne Gaines. Go write your last names on your name tags and introduce yourself with your full name.” Then she left. Admiration welled inside.
of me. We all looked at each other, flabbergasted. Is this what our summer will be like?

Every executive member of the West Coast office of the Feminist Majority Foundation was at the intern orientation. I sat next to Kathy Spillar and felt pressure to impress. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I answered the question “what do you hope to get out of this summer” with enough clarity to make her nod her head and say “yes.” I said that I wanted to learn how to organize powerfully and efficiently so that I could bring back those tools to my FMLA. When it came time to talk about the Choices Campus program during Orientation, I asked the creators of the program if we could change the name. They chuckled and said, “We’ve been thinking about it.”

A small part of me thought that I might have to do office work like filing papers, cleaning up or forwarding calls. The thick “Intern Orientation Packet” folder in front of all seven of us told a different story. Inside was every campaign that FMF was currently running through its Choices project (which created and supported FMLAs and other groups like it) across America. Kathy Spillar spoke to us about the history of the organization, its purpose from 1987 to now, and its adoption of Ms. Magazine in the early 2000s. It’s crazy; here are the people who have been doing the work I’ve read about and discussed in academic spaces, right here in flesh and blood. I was about to do activist work with my role models, interacting with humans who have shaped my feminism and my personhood. These were the women who had worked before me and proved that change was possible on every level. My heart swelled with the possibilities of what I would learn this summer. If I were sitting with legends, what would stop me from becoming one of them myself?

adjustment

During our second week, Mary rounds up all seven of the interns and herds us into the conference room. She is the National Campus organizer and our direct supervisor. As we take our seats around the table in the middle of the room, Mary slides the frosted glass door shut. She takes her seat at the head of the table, tucking her skirt under her and gathering her waist-long hair to the side. “Okay, so, we’re going to do this activity to bond and get to know each other but we can’t tell...” she hushes her voice “Kathy or duVergne because they don’t believe in this kind of organizing.” We’re new, and do not have a firm understanding of the organization. Right now, the Feminist Majority Foundation is a historical icon, a new experience, a learning tool. We have no reason to distrust them or think they have poor intentions. I had been there for two weeks. Mary had been there for a year. Of course I thought it was special that she made a space just for the interns, separate from the rest of the organization.

Mary sticks out at FMF among the sea of white skin and blonde hair. Her hair is thick and brown and down to the middle of her back. At the beginning of the internship, I found solidarity with her solitariness. She was unique at the organization, the most similar to myself in age, skin tone and ideals. She was loud, like me. The eldest sibling, like me. A Women’s Studies major, like me. Mary was a familiar person in an unfamiliar place. I felt invigorated when she critiqued FMF because that was our discipline. Our feminism was one that never ceased to fight for complete justice, to look at the past and present and analyze them. This was a mode I was used to. Being a student at Brandeis, so much of my work on campus is combating racist, sexist and horrific policies and actions that the administration enacts. I was used to critiquing and complaining about larger-than-life organizations, even ones that shared my most basic values. It was my life’s work.

It soon becomes a habit of the interns to retreat to the conference room, away from the open air office and duVergne Gaines’ cubicle across from the intern space. She often pops her head up and tells us to quiet down. The conference room is also a safe place away from the policing and politics of the office. At 26 years old, Mary is the most junior employee at the West Coast branch of the Feminist Majority Foundation. Her youth immediately causes me to trust her. Within the feminist movement, age has the largest effect on ideology. Self-identified feminists over 50 are typically heavily rooted in the second wave. Primary goals are reproductive rights and policy change. Millennials are on the cusp of the fourth wave. Our goals are total equality and inclusion, our interests vast and varying. Compassion for others rather than legal justice feels like the underlying driving force.

I was enchanted by Mary’s radicalism: her hatred for the state, her drive to create a world without borders and boundaries of any sort. I had wrongly assumed that because she was brown and queer and young and academic that she would be the kind of radical I was accustomed to at
Brandeis. However, her hypermarginalized identity created a radically exclusive brand of activism I wouldn’t even call feminism. Throughout the summer, she would dismiss my identities, asking if I really was brown, straight up saying she hated bisexual women. I was torn. Mary was my supervisor, yet also attempted to be a peer. How could I approach her behavior and her feminism? How could I go to duVergne, whose main focus was reproductive justice, about how Mary was excluding me on the basis of identity?

By my last week, I was surprised by how frustrated I felt. This was supposed to be my opportunity to learn from professional feminists, to build positive relationships with supervisors and explore the world of feminist organizing. Instead, I had learned how to avoid an immature boss. I act confident, but it’s artificial. I look at Mary’s form of activism, all complaining and no action, and am reminded how familiar it is. I often feel like I’m not doing a lot, just talking. Mary’s anger at FMF and defeatist attitude towards their activism pushed me into action. She spends time on Facebook, I organize the entire Feminist Campus Summit. I understood her frustration that there was no radical change happening through this work. I felt it too. How many hours can we spend doing activist work before the systems that are holding us all down disappear? How can we concede not fighting for that greater, radical change by working within the non-profit industrial complex? The difference between Mary and I was that I was willing to do this work, any work, within the system if it meant that change would come. I couldn’t sit on Facebook, idly by, while other people need this change to come. The contradictions embodied in Mary sparked a fire inside of me to organize my conscience; my change is just as valid as anyone else’s.

community (across space)

trigger warning: violence, school shootings.

One of our main assignments over the summer was to conduct campus trips to five colleges in the greater Los Angeles area, to connect with the feminist clubs on campus, catch up, and learn how to best support them. I was conflicted. Who was I, the mere publicity chair for an FMLA in Boston, to comment on how to improve feminist clubs on a coast I knew nothing about? We would conduct classroom presentations in select classes in order to build up the club’s membership base, and meet with the club’s leadership to determine which campaigns and issues they wanted to organize around. The second week at the office, each of the interns was assigned to a school. As Mary read down the list, I had a start when she came to the University of California at Santa Barbara. I was inwardly transported to the previous summer, when the feminist world had been rocked by yet another school shooting. I immediately volunteered to work at UCSB.

On May 23, 2014 (just as I had gotten home from my first year at college), a student at UCSB killed six people, injured 14, and then killed himself. School shootings have become so ubiquitous in my life that I didn’t even think, “What could possess someone to do this?” But then I found out. His motive was to get revenge against all the girls who wouldn’t have sex with him, wouldn’t date him, wouldn’t pay him any attention. He killed six people because the myth of the “friend zone” and the “nice guy” were so ingrained in him. I remember reading about it on BuzzFeed, and the feeling of nausea and horror that overcame me. I sobbed for hours. I felt so powerless, so isolated, so hopeless. It was 2014 and six people were killed because of misogyny. At the time I was home from Brandeis, so I was away from the only feminist community I was a part of. I’d never felt more alone.

end trigger warning

For three weeks, I researched the University of California at Santa Barbara. When I couldn’t find any information about a feminist club on their Student Union website, I called their admissions office and pretended to be a very interested high school senior. I kept coming up against dead ends. There wasn’t an established club, and every student involved in some sort of feminist activism in years past had graduated. It was time to start from the ground up. Our campus visit was going to be during the fifth week of my internship and I needed to get moving. In the first wave of outreach, I emailed and called professors in the Feminist Studies department and the Women’s Center. Then, towards the end of my second week of outreach, I got an email from a rising senior at UCSB. Dani expressed interest in creating a feminist group on campus, one with the specific interest of creating a safe space for women of color to gather and share their experiences.

That email changed me, shifting my feelings about this internship. By this point in the summer, most of my work had been done online. It felt very routine and disconnected from actual change. But here was Dani’s email. She wanted to know if I was going to be doing a classroom presentation because she desperately wanted to be involved. Here was an actual person, with passion and vision, who was reaching out. Tears welled up in my eyes as I responded to her email with enthusiasm.

The Internet was one of the biggest causes for the shift from third wave to fourth wave feminism. In an article about this new fourth wave, The Guardian explains the difference between the waves quite well:

Welcome to the fourth wave of feminism. This movement follows the first-wave campaign for votes for women, which reached its height 100 years ago, the
second wave women’s liberation movement that blazed through the 1970s and 80s, and the third wave declared by Rebecca Walker, Alice Walker’s daughter, and others, in the early 1990s. That shift from second to third wave took many important forms, but often felt broadly generational, with women defining their work as distinct from their mothers’. What’s happening now feels like something new again. It’s defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online. [bold mine]®

Connections and relationships are built online, communities are reinforced online. People who are separated by oceans and landmasses can connect with an ease that didn’t exist in any of the other waves. This shift is absolutely fundamental to recognizing and respecting the fourth wave. Whereas other waves, such as the second and third, might have used technology to organize protests, the fourth wave actually hosts protests online. This wave has the potential to become the most inclusive and radical of the waves, because it is accessible to millions of people it wouldn’t be if the Internet didn’t exist.

I was used to this method of organizing and social change. I have organized through hashtag activism, have seen the power of spreading thinkpieces, have met and worked with activists across the country and the world. For feminists who grew up in the age of the Internet, technology is our common first language. Hashtag activism, online-only protests and organizations, and articles have worth in and of themselves. Websites like Everyday Feminism and Feministing are powerful consciousness raisers and educational sources. You don’t need to have the means to go to a prestigious university to get an intersectional and powerful education in feminism. All you need is access to the Internet, however you can get to it. Feminism is more accessible than ever, which makes it more intersectional than ever. No more are the days when only the privileged had the ability to be heard. Now, anyone can raise their voice and speak their truths.

Activism in the fourth wave doesn’t need to take physical form, like the protests on the streets during the previous waves. Empowering marginalized groups by giving them the space to tell their own stories is perhaps one of the most profound aspects of this new wave. In 2012, Laura Bates established the Everyday Sexism Project, an online project that aims to raise awareness of sexism in our lives. People from all over the world can submit detailed stories to the project’s website or quick quips on Twitter using the hashtag #EverydaySexism. This powerful project validates for women and girls everywhere that their experiences are valid and real. In an interview with the Daily Beast, Bates stated that “Again and again, people told me sexism is no longer a problem—that women are equal now, more or less, and if you can’t take a joke or take a compliment, then you need to stop being so ‘frigid’ and get a sense of humor. Even if I couldn’t solve the problem right away, I was determined that nobody should be able to tell us we couldn’t talk about it anymore.”® This project addresses the very real “subtle sexism” that still exists in our society and how normative it is. After Bates wrote an article about the definition of sexual assault and the experiences it encompasses, hundreds of women wrote to her with their experiences, some not even knowing before that they had been assaulted, or that they had the right to say no to unwanted touching. It was just how the world around them worked. It was what they were used to.

Patriarchy wants marginalized groups to continue feeling powerless. It’s the only way men can keep their unearned superiority. Once the oppressed know how they are oppressed and become aware that it isn’t normal or right, that’s when revolution happens. Everyday Sexism inspired women to speak up against sexism in the workplace because they knew they weren’t alone and that it wasn’t normal. Words and power are being put into the mouths of people who have been silenced for thousands of years. The opportunities for empowerment that technology offers are innumerable and goosebump-inducing exciting. A revolution is brewing and we’re alive to be a part of it.

Which is why I found FMF’s approach to technology very confusing. We worked with diligence to update the database, to research schools, to email about protests. During the Planned Parenthood scandal, Kathy Spillar sent out emails to those on FMF’s listserv to stand in solidarity with the organization. For FMF, technology was a means to an end, not the end itself.
Their goals are also different from those of fourth wave feminists. While FMF might have the savvy of hashtag activism when it comes to Twitter and Facebook (they're certainly trying), they still lobby for legislation with determination and in conventional ways. Since their creation in 1987, they have worked to enact the Equal Rights Amendment, which would guarantee equal rights for women and would be the first time the word “woman” would appear in the American Constitution. They have counteracted many so-called “personhood” bills, which would have given legal rights to fertilized eggs, and ban abortion and some birth control options. One of the interns in my class had worked with FMF to strike down one such bill in her home state of Colorado. Someone reached out to FMF, and FMF rushed to their defense. It was a powerful moment of listening to what people needed and acting on it.

The Feminist Majority Foundation aims for physical change (change we can see and point to) rather than societal change (shifts in mindset and societal norms). Of course, each influences the other. Once Roe v. Wade passed in 1973, public attitudes towards abortion shifted greatly. Instead of being something shameful and abhorrent, abortion become semi-normalized and existed as an option for people who get pregnant. This focus on changing policies and getting politicians into office is a continuation of the second wave where women were legally prohibited from having abortions, couldn’t work in certain places or occupations, and weren’t guaranteed equal pay on the federal level. The organization’s continued focus on policy change is understandable, especially amidst the Planned Parenthood scandal this summer. Abortion rights may have been won in 1973, but they have been under attack ever since. Without the work of the Feminist Majority Foundation, it might have been lost many times over.

There needs to be intergenerational work being done. The feminists from the second wave know how to maneuver politics and protests. The new fourth wave feminists are well-versed in the changing world of technology. Rather than one being more valid than the other, each need to learn from the other and create a working relationship.

Patriarchy is widespread and evil. It is students killing women because they won’t have sex with you. It is elected representatives in an air-conditioned room shutting down abortion clinics state by state. But it can, and will be, dismantled. The only way to destroy it is to work together.

on Tuesday, July 28th, the intern crew went to “counter-protest” an anti-Planned Parenthood protest at Los Angeles City Hall. Technically, it wasn’t a formal counter-protest because Planned Parenthood had told Kathy Spillar that FMF did not need to get involved. But Kathy was adamant. “It’s important that we have a presence at these protests. They need to know that you, the young people who need Planned Parenthood most, will fight for it.”

I felt anxious and nervous as we walked up to the protest. It felt like pre-show jitters. This wasn’t even close to the first protest in my activist career, and was my second one of this nature that summer. I had always imagined protests to come in these big sweeping moments, with people running and yelling up to battle, but we just walked
towards the protest location, casually holding the signs we made that morning during our briefing.

We were heading to a protest organized by #WomenBetrayed, an anti-choice group that came out of the Planned Parenthood scandal that exploded this summer. A couple of interns and I needed to use the restroom, so we went into City Hall nearby. Waiting before us in line was a woman from #WomenBetrayed wearing a shirt in the exact same shade of pink we were wearing. She smiled when she saw us. We exchanged pleasantries and she held the door open for us to enter the restroom. A small moment of common humanity.

There must have been anywhere from 50 to 70 people on the anti-choice side. They made posters, and had speeches, megaphones, and an organizer. There were only 10 of us (eight from FMF and two members of a local FMLA). All of us were under 30 years old. I felt outnumbered and weak. What could I possibly do to counter that many people? Mary and I started to chant, just loud enough to be heard – our personal resistance. All 10 of us moved in front of the crowd of anti-choicers and began to chant. We could have only been chanting the right. “Can I get a clear diameter of what they could be. Through NCAP, we learned how violent and terrifying anti-abortion

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Once again, the police approached us. We challenged them. “We know our rights. We are allowed to protest here. We’re being respectful.” With the same tone of voice you take when a child doesn’t know what they’ve done wrong, the LAPD chastised us. “Come on guys. It’s like they’re having a birthday party and you come and crash it, yelling and screaming. It’s rude.” I was in disbelief. Did actual law enforcement officers just compare hosting a private party on private property to a peaceful protest? Is this what taxes are going to? They looked at me directly. “I’m asking you.” With hard eyes, I said, “I know my rights.”

The police weren’t here to protect us. I was hyper-aware of my white-passing privilege, that I could use it to make my voice heard in a way that other protesters couldn’t. I took my poster that said “Stop The War On Women” and stood on top of a planter. I began to chant, loudly and forcefully, “Pro life, Your name’s a lie. You don’t care if women die!” The rest of my group followed suit and suddenly we weren’t a peaceful group of kids anymore. The anti-choicers shifted quickly, turning on us like vipers. They began to chant “Pro-Life, Pro-Life” over and over again. Some fell to their knees and prayed to us, clutching to rosaries. One woman with crutches kept yelling, “817 women die every day!” She never clarified from what. More police officers came. They told us to quiet down, to get off the planter, to move to the left, the right. “Can I get a clear diameter of where we can stand? How about the highest decibel I can be?” I yelled back, my voice getting hoarse. Our protest was suddenly becoming overwhelming. Our energy was draining. Between engaging with cops and screaming back at people who despised me, it was starting to feel futile. I looked into the crowd of people and felt my heart drop. There were so many young women, young boys, kids who should be watching Nick Jr. instead of half-heartedly chanting “Planned Parenthood sells baby parts.” I wanted to cry. I was fighting for the future, for my generation and for the ones that come after me. But here they are in front of me. Which world am I fighting for?

Just as our energy was about to hit its lowest point, we heard thunder shake behind us. I shifted quickly into flight or fight mode, ready to break out running in case of the worst. Was it more anti-choicers? Extremists? I knew how violent they could be. Through NCAP, we learned how violent and terrifying anti-abortion

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extremist groups have been in the past. They've bombed abortion clinics, stalked escorts to their homes and shot dead abortion doctors. This wasn’t the distant past. Dr. George Tiller was shot in the head by an extremist in 2009. Would the police protect me if anti-abortion extremists were about to shoot me dead?

The thunder was from the roar of the bullhorn from a group called Stop Patriarchy. They are a self-identified anarchist organization that fights to stop the enslavement of women. We had protested with them earlier in the summer in front of a “Crisis Pregnancy Center,” one of a chain of fake women’s health clinics that target vulnerable communities, provide false health information, and advance the anti-choice agenda. Stop Patriarchy’s activists were radical and afraid of nothing. Three of them crossed the street without even looking, one on the bullhorn and two holding a giant banner that read “Abortion On Demand and Without Apology” in bold letters. I was awash in euphoria at their arrival, knowing they were here to support us. Our intern group was suddenly reenergized and ready. There was a sudden crash of noise and movement. From my place on the planter, it looked like a wave of confrontation. The opposition was invigorated as well, clamoring to reach us. They came rolling in and we pushed forward. We followed Stop Patriarchy’s chants, and I screamed with every bit of life that was left in me. Fury boiled inside of me. I was sick of these cops, 12 of them for 13 of us, circling us and gnawing at our ankles like hyenas. I was sick of respectability politics. Audre Lorde’s words filled my brain: my silence will not protect me.

It was a harrowing moment. I was there on behalf of the Feminist Majority Foundation, an organization created by feminists doing exactly what I’m doing now, except when the organization was created, they were doing it for the first time. Without them, I wouldn’t have a Planned Parenthood to fight for. I wouldn’t have knowledge about abortion, why it’s absolutely necessary to have accessible health care for people who can get pregnant, and why we need to keep Planned Parenthood funded. The second wave fought for the reproductive rights my generation gets to enjoy today. Before the scandal broke, I was unsure about my role within FMF and FMF’s role within the modern feminist movement. But this protest proved why they were so vital. The second that we stop fighting for reproductive rights is when the opposition will swoop in and take them from us forever. This constant vigilance is exhausting and terrifying.

At this protest, I never knew when the opposition would escalate, if screaming would turn into gunshots, if “quiet downs” will turn into arrests.

We were just young activists in pink “this is what a feminist looks like” t-shirts, with homemade posters and bullhorns. We were not a threat. Most of us were brown and in our early 20s. We didn’t have financial power. We weren’t wearing blazers or pantsuits like the organizers on the other side. I will never forget the woman in the brown pantsuit who looked at us with such pity and disdain. She must have been the organizer for the event. When we began to protest, she smiled so sweetly and took her permit to the police. She had bureaucracy and legalese on her side. Their protest was wrong, so obviously wrong. But ethics didn’t matter here. All that mattered was who had a paper signed.

* * *

I constantly struggle with the best way to achieve the goals of the feminist movement. Is it through policy change and bureaucracy? Or is it through grassroots activism? Is a formal education necessary for feminist activism or can anyone with passion be a leader? Should the techniques of the past waves be the models we use for the future? These are the questions that fill my mind during my internship at the Feminist Majority Foundation.

The organization is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that aims to better women’s rights in America and across the globe. On the foundation’s website is their definition of feminism: “the policy, practice or advocacy of political, economic, and social equality for women.” This definition
would become a critical boundary in the work we did over the summer. It is specific, with a focus on tangible change. Their feminism is one that needs active work and practice.

The office, located right at the heart of Beverly Hills, looks like it belongs to a tech start-up, not a non-profit feminist organization. With clean lines, exposed brick and glass doors, the cold modernity of it threw me off. Everyone has a professional email, an @feminist.org, had to schedule meetings with one another, and knew the passwords to all of the databases. Our dress attire was business casual but Kathy always wore a dark pantsuit. Our day started at 10:00am and ended at 6:00pm.

I spent a lot more time on my computer than I expected. For the first four weeks, if we weren’t on a campus visit, we were on our individual laptops researching West Coast colleges and universities. If a feminist club on campus wasn’t immediately discoverable, I called the office of Student Life and pretended to be a curious high school senior. When I did find a club, I reached out and inquired about their current leadership, past events and future goals. I was a representative of the Feminist Majority Foundation, my title immediately granting me knowledge and authority. I looked on the database, Campus Wiki, for the Brandeis FMLA and was surprised to see up-to-date information, my own name listed as part of the executive board of a college club. But now, here I was, calling schools thousands of miles away from my own, masquerading as a seasoned and vetted employee of the foundation.

The purpose of all of the research was clear. In order to be able to mobilize quickly and accurately in the future, we needed to be organized now. It made sense. It just didn’t feel genuine. Was this the methodology of Anita Hill? Did Gloria Steinem sit on a computer and just research? I itched to get outside, to get a taste of protesting again. I understood the second wave’s methodology with a clarity I didn’t before. The feeling of screaming and being heard, knowing you’re openly defying the system – it was addicting. Even though the end goals would be different, I felt as if I could be doing data entry for any organization and the feeling would be the same. I could feel my passion slipping.

Out of the second wave came the creators of the Feminist Majority Foundation, Ms. Magazine, and countless scholars. Audre Lorde, one of the most famous black lesbian feminist scholars, challenges how actual change can be made in her famous article, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” The master’s house is any form of oppression, be it misogyny, homophobia, racism or classism; the master’s tools are any of the ways in which these systems are held up. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

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historically been used to keep a select few in power. The tools of bureaucracy, of hierarchy, of business, these are all used within the paradigm of oppression. They are used by the oppressors to “keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns,” to get them to believe that if we adhere to their rules and conditions, that we can change the way they have been operating for hundreds of years. These respectability politics were evident at FMF.

Even though laws are being changed and “good” people are being elected to public office, the question comes up: whose rights are being fought for, and if this the best way of affecting change. FMF’s mission statement says “women’s rights.” bell hooks, another feminist activist to come out of the second wave, expands on Lorde’s thoughts in her piece “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression.” Like Lorde questioned the system we’re using to attain equality, hooks questioned the equality we’re fighting to attain. She argues, “Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to?”13 Do we want to be equal to the men in our individual communities, men who, on the basis of racism, are treated less than men in other communities? Or do we want to be equal to our oppressors, the wealthy white men who have years of blood and hurt on their hands?

The strict meetings, the dark blazers, the set lunch hour…it was all very corporate. I wondered whether or not I would get carpal tunnel syndrome this summer, and if this was the right method of working for change. In the 28 years that the Feminist Majority Foundation has been around, radical change has not come to the United States. The slow waves of progress seem to be at a lull. I wonder about Lorde and hooks, and if a non-profit organization that operates so much like a for-profit corporation could be the answer. FMF’s definition of feminism being “for women” – doesn’t that just create the same boundaries that the patriarchy does? The master’s tools of diplomacy and policy and business casual will not get us (and have not gotten us) the change we need. In so many ways, I realize I am not at home with the calm and proper method of FMF, but rather the angry and loud activism of Lorde and hooks. My feminism might not have a definition yet, or a clear-cut method. But it does have goals. And will not rest until the oppressed are unshackled from the master’s house.

An emerging theory in activism is that of the non-profit industrial complex. Non-profit organizations are working within the structure of governments and corporations, only in a different form. While they don’t enact laws or create revenue, most non-profits work closely with organizations that do. This hazy line upholds the respectability politics that demands that you need to be polite and follow the rules in order to be heard. INCITE! is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color that do grassroots activism in order to end violence against women of color and their communities. They work to combat violence “directed at communities of color,” such as “police violence, war and colonialism” and violence “within communities” such as “sexual and domestic violence.”14 Their book The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex details the issues with non-profit organizing: the state uses non-profits to monitor and control social justice movements, and manage and control dissent in order to make the world safe for capitalism, allowing corporations to mask their exploitative practices through “philanthropic” work. The authors argue that the state “encourages social movements to model themselves after capitalist structures rather than to challenge them,” and that non-profits “redirect activist energies into career-based modes of organizing instead of mass-based organizing.”15 These two points reminded me of the Feminist Majority Foundation. There was so much emphasis and energy on being professional that it often felt like actual change was a secondary thought. As a strategy for advancing the feminist movement generally, FMF’s course of action makes sense. The outside is constantly trying to invalidate feminism through criticizing their methods and their failure to include every possible angle. FMF’s methodology, their choice to be as respectable as possible, makes it impossible for people to devalue them or their work.

The fourth wave of feminism is something radically new. With just a click of a button, you are plugged into a powerful and expansive community of forward-seeking activists. Feminism isn’t exclusive to those who have the ability to dedicate hours of time to it. Just sharing an article or posting a status on Facebook, activities that take minutes at most, can be a radical act. The low time investment and ubiquitous access has made feminism into something that can adapt to thoughts across the globe instantaneously, a movement that criticizes itself constantly. This powerful and inclusive online community can focus on every issue, on every policy change, on every sexist movie, at the moment they happen. It gives voices to people who have been silenced. It validates existences. This feminism, my feminism, is changing lives across the globe. With the momentum of millions of people worldwide, it won’t stop until full equality for everyone is reached.
acceptance
What is a feminist? What is feminism? After three waves (and in a fourth) spanning hundreds of years, these questions are still central to the discourse inside and outside of the feminist movement. In her 2012 TEDx Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave us the simplest definition – the one from the dictionary. Her clear voice stated “feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.” And at it’s heart, isn’t that the truth? That a feminist is a person who looks at the way society is structured globally and is unwilling to accept inequality based solely on sex? The question then becomes, what is equality? And how do we achieve it? I don’t have the answers. I don’t think there is any one answer to the question of how to achieve social change – and constant questioning and investigation of how to achieve change can get in the way of actually doing change.

In the end, feminism is about people – making life as positive and full for everyone on earth, regardless of any factors that prohibit it today. Many take issue with feminism claiming we’re raising women by bringing men down, that the equality we strive for would lower everyone’s quality of life to some quasi-acceptable standard. But the main point of feminism is instead to raise everyone’s quality of living to the same improved standard. That is the focus of the work I do every day.

As with most large-scale movements, the idea of feminism has evolved from individual activists and specific goals to a larger and more abstract movement, with no discernible leaders and no singular goal. Feminism and feminists are criticized and demonized constantly for everything from appearance to lack of consistency. No other movement has to adhere to such strict politics. Feminism is the only movement that is expected to be perfect, to be completely encompassing of everyone, to always know what to do and say. It constantly has to take stances on everything and when, as any movement does, it inevitably messes up, it is demonized.

But feminism is imperfect because people are imperfect. Many of the faults of first and second wave feminism are related to their incredible racism and exclusion of people who do not fall into the white, wealthy, straight, cisgender idea of what a woman is, because those were the ideals of the people who led the movement. As we move into this new wave with new leaders and new activists, feminism has morphed and continues to evolve. It is all about the passionate people behind it.

Feminism is people. Feminism is people of all genders working together to eliminate all forms of oppression from the world. Feminism is individual activists who have exams the next day or a crappy boss at work. Who love going to musicals and playing with their dog. Who will snap or mess up or say something incorrect. It’s no fault of the movement and no fault of their own. Everyone falls down at some point. Feminism just teaches you how to get back up.

The parts of this internship that meant the most were my experiences with other people. Getting to know my supervisors and learn from the people who have been in this movement literally longer than I’ve been alive is incredible. They were at the forefront of the movement when abortion doctor George Tiller was murdered by anti-abortion extremists in 2009. When I didn’t even know about feminism and its revitalizing effects.

Working eight hours a day researching the feminist community at University of Santa Barbara meant nothing compared with meeting with Dani, a passionate senior invested in having an intersectional feminist space on campus. Through her, I have reached out to a community of feminists across the country and given them the tools and know-how to begin their activism.

The shift from theory to practice was never clearer than this summer. Organizing has its place in front of a computer and is vital work. But the theoretical idea of people “out there,” that you are either helping or preventing from hurting others, begins to break down without any interaction with the outside world. At a protest where there were only 10 of us and a hundred of them, the tools of language and thought shift. Different gears come into play, no longer spotting potential threats in the ether, but spotting threats to my life now.

Within the feminist community itself, there is a lot of debate about the merits of academic feminism and feminist activism. Both operate in different spheres (academic in universities and activism on...
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the ground), and it is easy to get swept up in either camp without engaging in the other. What I’ve learned through my studies at Brandeis as both a Women’s Studies major and a board member of FMLA is that the movement needs both to succeed, and that people need to be invested both. The theory is useless without the action, and action is ineffective without the theory. The Feminist Majority Foundation is the culmination of the merging of the two.

*   *   *

Feminism is community.

It’s staying up all night with the executive board of FMLA trying to protect our Women’s Resource Center (WRC) at Brandeis when the administration tried to erase it from campus. It is creating a hashtag (#ProtectTheWRC) that was spread over a hundred times throughout the Brandeis community. It is feeling support from feminists on campus. It is saving the WRC.

Most importantly, feminism is caring. It’s understanding that the other members of this community have their own trauma and hurt and attitudes and personalities and loving them anyway. It’s jumping to help when one of your sisters is hurting. It’s an unbreakable and unspoken bond that keeps each of us bound to each other in a way that patriarchy aims to disable. It’s a choice to unconditionally love your sisters because there is no one else in the world you’d rather be friends with.

Feminism is passion and anger and language and time. It’s an old movement that ebbs and flows with each generation, unearthing unsolved struggles and new adversaries. It’s beautiful because it constantly strives to do better, be better and do the most good. It isn’t selfish and neither are its activists. Feminists care deeply and love intensely. Every battle is not for more rights for ourselves but for our sisters who don’t have the rights we enjoy.

My life was literally saved when I found feminism. I found purpose. I found power within myself. I found community and friendship and a group of badass activists who will go down in history as the change we fought to see in the world.

And I love being a part of this community. One that only has progress on its track list and only altruistic goals for the future. I love this movement because it gave me a community that I had never dreamed about having before. It brought me to the best people I’ve ever met, activists who push me to be more inclusive, to do more reading and to be more confident. I would have never imagined that the people who society told me to demonize my entire teenage life would become the most accepting of all.

Ultimately, feminism is love.

Bibliography

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. (2012, April 12). “We should all be feminists” TEDxEuston


Notes


6. Black women make 64 cents to the white man’s dollar. Latina women make 54 cents. The rhetoric of “77 cents” only refers to white women. The focus on only white women reinforces the erasure of women of color. For more, go to: http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/09/18/3569328/gender-wage-gap-race/

7. At the beginning of the summer, Mary led an identity exercise. The purpose was to be able to recognize areas where we have privilege over someone else. Someone offered straight privilege, being middle class, and having an education. I was about to offer cisgender privilege when Mary looked pointedly at another intern (who is white) and me: “I’m looking at you two because you’re the only white people here.” Awkward silence. I had talked about my heritage before. The other interns and I looked around at each other. I spoke up. “I will claim my white passing privilege. But my entire family is from Morocco. I worry about being ‘randomly’ pulled aside by TSA or being attacked because of Islamophobia.” Mary looked stricken.

These kinds of actions, the continual erasing of my identities and experiences, take a huge toll on me. By taking away aspects of myself that are integral to me, I cease to exist.


10. The whole nature of disturbance is integral to the feminist movement. Feminism itself is a disturbance to the way society operates today. It does not conform to the status quo. If we work within the parameters of “civil society,” with respectability politics and police permits, nothing would get done. We need to disrupt. We need to be loud. We need to be the change.

11. Earlier in the summer, the FMF interns joined a protest organized by Stop Patriarchy at a Crisis Pregnancy Center near Los Angeles City College. CPC’s are fake abortion clinics that use fear tactics to intimidate vulnerable women into keeping their pregnancies. When a patient will ask for an abortion, they will often give baby toys instead, saying “Don’t kill your baby!” Anti-choiceers “crashed” our protest as well, praying at us and yelling that “abortion is murder.” When the police came, they tried to get us off of the sidewalk. They followed us as we walked down the sidewalk away from the CPC, threatening arrest. Flash forward to the #WomenBetrayed protest. I was sick of the police protecting the people who murder abortion doctors and steal my autonomy over my body away. This was my last chance to be loud. To publicly support Planned Parenthood. To show them that they won’t win this battle.


16. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. (2012, April 12). We should all be feminists! Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TEDxEuston

17. Dr. George Tiller was the medical director of the Women’s Health Care Services, one of the only clinics in America that provided late-term abortions, at the time. On May 31, 2009, Tiller was shot in the head by Scott Roeder. Roeder was an anti-abortion extremist part of the group called Operation Rescue. This group still exists. It still threatens abortion clinics and doctors. It still attracts new members.