

---

Citation:

Day, K and Wray, R (2018) Fourth-wave feminism and postfeminism: Successes and failures. *Transform: A Journal of the Radical Left*, 4. pp. 113-137. ISSN 2514-3387

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7735/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

---

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

This is a pre-publication version of the following article:

Day, K. and Wray, R. (2018). Fourth-wave feminism and postfeminism: Successes and failures. *Transform: A Journal of the Radical Left*. 4: 113-137.

## **Fourth-wave feminism and postfeminism: The successes and failures**

Katy Day & Rebecca Wray

### *Abstract:*

Despite the proclamations of the media from the late 1980s onwards that feminism is 'over' and that we were living in a postfeminist era of gender equality<sup>1</sup>, many commentators argue that there has been a more recent, resurgent interest in feminism in the UK<sup>2</sup>. This 'fourth-wave' has been characterised by growing numbers of new feminist organisations, online communities and activist campaigns<sup>3</sup>. However, to date, there is a lack of critical work on this 'fourth-wave'<sup>4</sup>. This article aims to address this. We consider some contemporary trends within feminist theory and activism and scrutinise some of the socio-cultural, historical and political changes that have given rise to these. We also lend our own thoughts as to whether more recent developments are something to celebrate, for example, as arguably constituting progress from previous 'waves', or whether these should be a cause for concern. In particular, we examine the encroachment of neo-liberal values on feminism, the role of technology, intersectionality and so-called 'identity politics'. We conclude by considering what the major challenges and questions facing feminists now are and what the goals of the feminist movement should be.

### *Waves of feminism: A (very) brief historical overview:*

Feminism, as a group of political and social movements, is said to date back to the seventeenth century in Britain<sup>5</sup>. Accounts differ as to when the 'first-wave' of feminism began and this is believed to differ globally. In the eighteenth century, British women's political activity is said to be relatively muted in comparison to their sisters in France and the United States, where the American and French revolutions had given rise to a rhetoric of emancipation. However, this is said to have changed in the mid 1850s when activists began to challenge British law for its unequal treatment of women and led to the campaign for women's suffrage as well as other citizenship rights for women<sup>6</sup>. Although first-wave feminism – which is believed by some to have been marked in Britain by the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903 – was a diverse movement, it is typically characterised as being principally concerned with the material conditions of women's lives and with legal, educational and economic reforms in an effort to improve these<sup>7</sup>.

Most authors seem to agree that this first-wave 'gave way' to 'second-wave' feminism (also known as the Women's Liberation Movement) in the mid twentieth century with the publication of texts such as de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*<sup>8</sup>. In many ways, this was a more expansive movement which acknowledged that gender inequality is not only located in the public sphere, but permeates interpersonal relationships and everyday experience, epitomized by the phrase 'the personal is political'<sup>6</sup>. Second-wave feminists tackled a wide range of issues including

reproductive rights, sexual and domestic violence, the sexual objectification of women's bodies, equal employment opportunities, paid maternity leave and the provision of adequate child-care facilities<sup>7</sup>. According to Walters, a distinguishing feature of second-wave feminism was its level of organisation, with women regularly meeting in small, locally-based groups to discuss their experiences (coined as 'consciousness-raising')<sup>5</sup>.

In the 1990s, activists such as Rebecca Walker and Shannon Liss proclaimed themselves to be 'third-wave feminists'. Since then, the 'third-wave' has been used to describe a period of feminist activity that began in the early 1990s. Defining precisely what constitutes third-wave feminism is complicated and the term often came to denote young feminists at the time in general. The wave analogy as denoting succession and continuity is arguably problematic here as many saw third-wave feminism as a deliberate break with the second-wave which was seen by some third-wavers as too radical, puritanical and as 'victim-feminism' which denied women's agency<sup>9</sup>. This occurred alongside speculation that feminism was now 'over' and young women became the "*postfeminist generation*"<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, the terms 'third-wave feminism' and 'postfeminism' were often used interchangeably. 'Postfeminism' has been described as being comprised of the contradictory elements of both feminism and anti-feminism or the 'double-entanglement'<sup>11</sup>. The key features of this double-entanglement are an acknowledgment that women need to speak up against sexism, but the solutions proposed tend to be individual and consumerist-based with an emphasis upon *personal* responsibility and empowerment. The 'third-wave' was largely played out in the realms of media and popular culture as opposed to academia<sup>6</sup>. One example is the feminist 'zines' of the early 1990s which provided a space for young women to articulate their anger and to politicise the category 'girl' or 'grrl'<sup>12</sup>. It was also characterized, in some quarters, by an embracing of 'raunch' culture<sup>13</sup>. This is described by Levy as the way that Western culture is becoming increasingly hyper-sexual and women's so-called growing interest in pornography, pole-dancing, lap-dancing, stripping and exhibitionism. This embracing of raunch culture has been framed as a deliberate departure from what Denfeld<sup>14</sup> refers to as the 'new Victorian' second-wave feminists who saw themselves as 'chaste victims' of 'male predators'<sup>15</sup>.

Despite postfeminism and the political apathy of the 1980s and 1990s<sup>16</sup>, many argue that the early 2000s saw a resurgent interest in feminism. Young feminists began to recognize that women still face inequality in every aspect of their lives and that feminism is still relevant and urgently needed<sup>17</sup>. In short, there was a recognition that 'the battle had not been won'<sup>18</sup>. The early twenty-first century has been deemed an interesting and important time for feminist activism in the UK and Western Europe as there has been a notable increase in the visibility, popularity and influence of a variety of autonomous feminist practices during this period<sup>18</sup>. For example, numerous feminist campaigns either emerged or were resurrected including Object, No More Page 3, SlutWalk, Ladyfest and Reclaim the Night. Not only was there a significant rise in new feminist activity, but this period also witnessed important ongoing work by more established groups such as Southall Black Sisters, Women's AID and the Women's Resource Centre. This has been deemed the 'fourth-wave' of feminism.

As indicated above, the wave analogy is not unproblematic. As well as perhaps underplaying the extent of departure<sup>9</sup>, others have critiqued the analogy, conversely, for implying the abandonment of one set of goals and concerns to embrace a new set of goals and concerns when in reality, there is considerable overlap between these different 'waves'<sup>6</sup>. Many struggles that characterised the second-wave of feminism are still very much ongoing, such as the fight for reproductive rights and equal pay and tackling violence against women. It would therefore be misleading to suggest that the different waves of feminism come in neat package form and can be clearly delineated from one another. An additional problem is that there is no one, universally agreed definition of what is meant by 'fourth-wave feminism'. In this article, we discuss a number of themes and issues of concern that have become associated with recent waves. However, this is not a complete and definitive account as there will undoubtedly be omissions, such as the role of 'raunch culture' and the inclusion/exclusion of sex workers in the movement.

### *Cyber-feminism: The role of technology:*

One characteristic of fourth-wave feminism has been its online presence, thus underscoring the internet as an increasingly important site where young women are engaged in political activity<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, there has been an explosion of feminist blogging and recent years have seen the emergence of a number of new online communities and campaigns such as the Everyday Sexism Project, Feminist Fightback, UK Feminista, Pink Stinks and Fourth Wave London Feminist Activists. This has arguably opened up new spaces for feminist debate and activism and facilitated the spread of feminist ideas and the establishment of links between formerly disparate groups of feminists (e.g. academics versus activists) and individuals<sup>18</sup>. Some commentators have contested the existence of the 'fourth-wave' arguing that increased online activity on its own is not enough to delineate a new wave<sup>20</sup>. Yet it would appear that this has made feminism more accessible to a younger, more technology 'savvy' generation as well as women who cannot attend meetings and rallies because of childcare responsibilities, health problems, disabilities and so forth. In the 2010 'Reclaiming the F Word' survey, 70% of the feminists surveyed agreed that *"the Internet has been instrumental to today's feminist movement"*<sup>21</sup>.

Conversely, the online nature of fourth-wave feminism can mean that scores of women are actually excluded, such as those who are too poor to afford the technology and/or lack the knowledge, skills and/or abilities to be able to use this, thus making this (albeit unintentionally) classist and ableist. In addition, research has found that older women are often unaware of the political activity young women are putting into online communities and social media rendering feminist activity within these spaces invisible to some and contributing to a generational divide between feminists<sup>22</sup>. Yet, this problem may be one that is more widespread. One of the authors (Wray) found in her research on why young women did or did not identify with feminism that, despite an almost universal commitment to gender equality, many felt that they could not claim the feminist label because they did not 'attend

rallies and wave placards' and because they would not know where to start in terms of engaging with other feminists and learning about the movement<sup>23</sup>. The young women who took part in the research (despite being 'tech savvy') were unfamiliar with online feminist groups and communities, suggesting that these are perhaps 'echo-chambers' that are failing to engage those who are not already politically informed and active. In addition, the findings suggest that 'off-line' activity is still regarded by many as 'real' activism. For instance, derogatory terms such as 'Slacktivism' are used to dismiss the value of internet-based campaigns as 'feel-good' stunts, alongside scepticism with regards to the extent to which these can really lead to transformative political action<sup>20</sup>. It is important to note however that such movements and campaigns do not always stay online only, even if they begin this way. Laura Bates, a British feminist writer, has described how since setting up the Everyday Sexism Project in 2012, she has worked with schools, universities, businesses and police forces in tackling sexist discrimination.

Another feature or consequence of the online nature of fourth-wave feminism is what has been described as 'call out culture'. This entails the exposure of sexist and misogynist behaviour quickly and with ease by posting about it online. This is a key feature of the Everyday Sexism Project which primarily exists in the form of a website and Twitter group that invites women to describe instances of sexism experienced on a day-to-day basis. It is easy to see how this may be empowering for many women who want to document their experiences, see that they are not alone and gain emotional support from other women in a manner that affords them anonymity and limited risk. Such surveillance has also had a positive impact on the practices of those who may come under scrutiny. For example, this has led to companies thinking more carefully about how they market products after a number have been 'called out' on social media for running sexist campaigns<sup>24</sup>.

However, the 'safety' of the online environment must not be over-stated. Laura Bates has described how she has been subjected to graphic rape and death threats, as have a number of other feminist bloggers and tweeters such as Caroline Criado-Perez and Anita Sarkeesian. 'Call out culture' has also been criticised for the tendency to focus on minor transgressions, such as so-called 'cat-calling' in the street. Journalist Levenson has described 'wolf whistles' and 'cat calls' as innocent and objections to them as a hang-over of second-wave 'prudishness'<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, this has been accused of leading to a focus on individual 'bad men' (e.g. sportsmen and celebrities who have physically and sexually abused women) rather than concentrating on collective endeavours such as the fight against the gender pay gap. It is important to point out though that women who have posted about their experiences on online forums such as the Everyday Sexism Project have described more extreme cases of gendered violence. Forms of gender discrimination and violence are also interconnected – they are underpinned by similar gender ideologies (e.g. that women are second-class citizens who can be objectified) and the 'less extreme' forms of gender discrimination open the door for and make more extreme forms of this more likely. We therefore argue that it is important to challenge 'minor transgressions' also.

### *Intersectionality: Inclusivity or fragmentation?*

Another key characteristic of fourth-wave feminism is that this reflects the current popularity of intersectionality as a framework for analysis<sup>20</sup>. This is the notion that different social categories and identities intersect with one another, such as those based on gender, race, class, sexual identity and so forth and likewise, that different axes of oppression intersect or interlock (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism etc.). Of course, intersectionality is not something that was 'invented' by fourth or third-wave feminists. Black feminists have long drawn attention to the simultaneity of both sexist and racist oppression experienced by black women<sup>26</sup>. In addition, the idea that social class and modes of production might be systematically gendered rather than the dualistic notion that gender and class division represent two parallel systems is one that has long been embraced by Marxist and socialist feminists<sup>27</sup>. Because working-class women were seen as uniquely positioned in their experiences of the sexual division of labour at both work and at home it was contended that the success of socialist feminism was largely dependent upon a movement of working-class women<sup>28</sup>. More generally, consciousness-raising groups which explored what women had in common as well as what divided them were popular during the second-wave of feminism<sup>5</sup>.

What has perhaps contributed to the current popularity of intersectionality is another important fourth-wave trend described by Attwood - the disruption and confusion of categories of gender<sup>29</sup>. A feminist theorist of particular note here is Judith Butler who drew upon poststructuralist theoretical approaches to argue that gender is socially constructed and performative as opposed to biologically rooted<sup>30</sup>. Butler and other similar gender theorists have sought to deconstruct essentialist, universalising and binary understandings of gender in order to 'trouble' this. This wasn't merely an academic exercise, but was considered an important step in challenging patriarchal oppression which is underpinned by notions of male and female difference. Within our own discipline of psychology, women have and continue to be treated as a unitary group who have certain shared traits, tendencies, characteristics and experiences in common, whether the result of nature (biology) or nurture (socialisation). Even in cases where women are said to possess positive characteristics such as being more caring, empathetic, more connected with others and less aggressive than men, it has been pointed out many times that these are characteristics that are consistent with traditional sex role expectations. Therefore, many feminists in the social sciences have embraced poststructuralist approaches in an effort to deconstruct such beliefs, expose these as politically motivated and problematise the practices that these inform and support. Examples include the belief that it is 'natural' that men occupy a higher economic position than women in the labour market because they are 'naturally' more instrumentally-orientated, competitive and dominant<sup>31</sup> and that women are 'naturally' more suited to low-paid and unpaid caring and domestic roles because of their greater capacity for nurturance<sup>32</sup>. Those making such claims have drawn explicitly on 'psychological science' as evidence to support these. Whilst 'wages for housework', as advocated

by feminists such as Sylvia Federici would recognise the latter example as valid labour and attribute more financial independence to women, it is also important to fundamentally challenge the assumption that this is 'women's work' in the first place.

The link with intersectionality is that because such theorising around gender has resulted in the deconstruction of the category 'women' as a homogenous and unitary one, it ushers in analyses of women's experiences and identities as multiple and diverse, drawing attention to the impact that social location and social positioning has upon these. This embracing and theorising of diversity within the category 'women' is considered by many to be important in order to avoid feminism being dominated by hegemonic white, middle-class, able-bodied voices<sup>33</sup>. Many criticised second-wave feminism for being 'too white' and 'too middle-class'<sup>34</sup> and pointed out that this resulted in what Erica Burman describes as "*non-normative cultural and sexual identities*" being excluded from debates and conversations<sup>35</sup>. This has included (amongst others) working-class women, BME women, trans women and women with disabilities.

However, some feminists have been sceptical about the value of such theoretical developments and the extent to which these have genuinely advanced intersectionality. For example, Raquel Rosario Sanchez argues that the decoupling of biological sex and gender and the increasing widespread usage of language such as 'genderfluid' and 'genderqueer' (indicating that the person does not identify with any conventional gender distinctions) means very little to girls and women experiencing exploitation and violence in many parts of the world and reflects a position of Western privilege<sup>36</sup>. She presents a number of examples relating to female children including the Dominican Republic which has the highest rate of child marriage in the Latin American and Caribbean region, Kenya where 12 year old girls are sold into prostitution by families desperate for money amidst regional droughts and Nepal, where girls confined to menstruation huts often die from snake bites and low temperatures. Her point is that these girls face structural oppression due their biology and that this has little or nothing to do with gender identity. Indeed, she contends that, historically and globally, the oppression of girls and women is sex-based, particularly for those of colour and those living in poverty. However, she does acknowledge that such forms of oppression and violence are often underpinned by beliefs about femininity (e.g. as inherently nurturing; menstruation as 'dirty'), thus suggesting that the basis of such oppression is not biology per se, but the meanings that are attached to biological difference. This is not inconsistent with arguments presented by poststructuralist feminists. The examples that she presents also relate to children, and so there is the added dimension of the idea that children are the property of parents/fathers. Her key point in the article is that rather than such theoretical developments (which she refers to as 'gender identity ideology') genuinely advancing intersectionality, that these epitomise 'white feminism' because of the ignorance displayed towards the material realities of many women positioned outside of Western privilege.

In addition, radical feminism (which is closely associated with the second-wave) has held as a central premise that women's oppression affects *all* women as a class of people regardless of social location<sup>6</sup>. Radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin



have pointed to sexual and domestic violence in particular as impacting upon women across different social groups. Another key argument is that sexual oppression is sturdier and more enduring than other forms of domination<sup>37</sup> and that patriarchy is the paradigm par excellence for all modes of oppression<sup>38</sup>. This means that as long as male dominance and female submission is the norm in something as fundamental as gender and sexual relations, this will be the norm in other contexts as well<sup>39</sup>. From this perspective, intersectionality potentially compromises collective struggle against patriarchal domination by encouraging women to focus upon our differences as opposed to what we have in common, often leading to 'infighting' amongst feminists. As such, many second-wave feminists sought to minimise the differences between women<sup>40</sup>. One concern is that the end point is that there will no longer be a single, coherent feminine identity around which to organise struggle<sup>41</sup>. Some believe that this has already occurred. For example, feminist writers have claimed that the movement is no longer a unified one and that modern day feminism is so splintered and lacking in any clear universally-agreed goals that it has ceased to be of any practical use<sup>21</sup>.

We agree that the oppression of women is ubiquitous and we agree with Raquel Rosario Sanchez that many theoretical debates around gender and forms of activism taking place in the West are of little immediate benefit, not just to girls and women suffering exploitation and violence in other parts of the world, but to many girls and women in the West who live with poverty and violence on a daily basis. For us, this strengthens rather than undermines the argument for intersectionality - it is important to acknowledge that not all women have equal amounts of power or access to the same opportunities or the same amount of freedom to make decisions about how they live their lives. This is often related to global location, race, class, able-bodiedness and so forth (or how these physical attributes and social locations are read). Solidarity is imperative for any movement on the left to have any chance of success, but this solidarity will be compromised if left-wing movements exclude groups of people or these groups feel that their voices are not being heard or that they do not belong. Young women's reluctance to engage with feminism is often believed to be related to negative stereotypes of feminists, backlash discourse and/or because of representations of this as unfashionable and outdated<sup>42</sup>. However, others contend that many young women still see feminism as non-inclusive because the image of this as a movement for white, middle-class, middle-aged, non-disabled, heterosexual women had not shifted significantly<sup>42</sup>. A true intersectional approach to feminism must centre women and girls who are marginalised by the axes of oppression of sex, race and class; those who are the most disadvantaged and oppressed rather than those who are the most privileged<sup>36</sup>. In the words of Flavia Dzodan, feminism will be intersectional *"or it will be bullshit"*<sup>43</sup>.

### *'Identity politics' and 'choice feminism'*

Intersectionality is also associated with what is known as 'identity politics', a fuzzy term (typically used in a derogatory manner) to refer to a range of things including (as well as intersectionality), movements against police and border violence, cuts to

domestic violence services, trans access to healthcare and trans bathroom access laws<sup>44</sup>. Often, this is used to refer to movements which fight violence and discrimination on the grounds of race or gender (rather than class). A key consideration in discussions and debates around 'identity politics' is whether we are referring to *individual* identity (e.g. a sense of individuality, agency and uniqueness) or *social* identity (e.g. selfhood as constituted by the social groups to which we belong). We would contend that whilst the former is often problematic for feminist politics, the latter is not.

Third and fourth-wave feminists have been criticised for focussing too much on identity at the expense of critiquing social structures<sup>45</sup>. For instance, the feminist zines produced in the 1990s have been accused of being motivated by a desire to articulate a version of the self rather than a desire to enact collective resistance<sup>46</sup>. More recently, in her analysis of feminist blogs, Wray found that these were saturated with individualist, postfeminist discourse. Calls were often made for women to stop 'self-abusing' (e.g. by calling themselves 'fat') and to dress, do their make-up and generally express themselves however they wish<sup>23</sup>. Whilst such messages are generally positive, what is missing is any analysis or discussion of the socio-cultural barriers to loving yourself no matter what your body shape or size and to presenting yourself however you wish. It does not acknowledge the power of what Wolf calls the 'beauty myth'<sup>47</sup>. Instead, women themselves are the source of the problem and simply need to 'stop worrying' what other people think. The pressures to which women are subjected to perform certain beauty rituals and to look a certain way are recast as 'liberating' and 'empowering'<sup>48</sup>. In postfeminist discourse, the body is presented as a source of women's power and as a key source of her identity<sup>48</sup>, an idea which Wray found many contemporary feminist bloggers bought into<sup>23</sup>. This preoccupation with the self and individual empowerment has led to accusations that contemporary feminists are self-absorbed and uninterested in the struggles of working-class women and women in other parts of the world<sup>16</sup>. This is described by *The New Statesman's* Hannah Mudge as 'choice feminism' which is ultimately about "*me, me, me – whatever I think is good*"<sup>49</sup>. This focus on the individual, choice and personal empowerment has been described as a 'postfeminist' sensibility<sup>50</sup>.

This so-called lack of interest in collective struggle has been blamed (e.g. by an older generation of activists) on the internalisation of neo-liberal and capitalist values such as a focus on the self and personal development at the expense of a commitment to the community<sup>12</sup>. Foucauldian notions of neoliberalism, that is, those that draw upon the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, refer to the contemporary socio-cultural and discursive context in which state and collective responsibility is de-emphasised and the individual is located as fully responsible for their life biography<sup>51</sup>. In other words, neoliberalism entails a downloading of responsibility (for economic success, happiness, good health and so on) onto the individual which absolves communities, institutions and the state of any responsibility. Neo-liberal discourse emphasises that women must take personal responsibility for their actions in order to avoid the possibility of victimhood<sup>6</sup>. Jowett describes how the British cultural imagery that the young women in her study grew up with was saturated with the rhetoric of the then New Labour government –

rhetoric which focussed on personal progress, achievement and optimism. This undermined the critical engagement of young women with feminism and instead ushered in understandings of feminists (and in particular, second-wave feminists) as passé. Similarly, Budgeon found that whilst young women did recognise gender inequality and articulated a commitment to tackling this, the solutions that they came up with were individual rather than collective in nature<sup>53</sup>.

The ways in which Western capitalism has attempted to co-opt liberation movements in order to demobilise these is well-documented. In the late 1990s, the discourse of 'girl power' was deployed by mainstream media to construct a version of girlhood which was essentially apolitical and instead placed an emphasis on meritocracy, consumerism and the autonomous individual, and which constructed women's agency merely in terms of 'choice'<sup>54</sup>. This discourse was seized upon by both consumer capitalism and the media to essentially sell a product to young women<sup>55</sup>. Recent years have witnessed a number of highly-marketised, 'feminism-lite'<sup>56</sup> books which have been criticised for being a "*tepid call for women's right to make their own choices*"<sup>57</sup>. Examples include Caitlin Moran's (2011) *How To Be A Woman* and Polly Vernon's (2015) *Hot Feminist*. There have also been numerous attempts to 'rebrand' feminism launched by women's magazines such as ELLE and Stylist in the UK and the We Are XX campaign in the US. The key assumptions underpinning such endeavours are that, first, only the application of marketing principles within the framework of capitalism can make feminism appealing again. Second, efforts to rebrand feminism are typically focussed on its 'image problem' and characterised by attempts to dismantle stereotypes of feminists as masculine, angry and aggressive which simply reinforces the patriarchal notion that women should never be any of these things<sup>58</sup>. Thus, rebranding feminism is more about capitulating to the dominant culture rather than social change and feminism is reduced to a marketing strategy that can be capitalised upon by selling tee-shirts featuring feminist slogans or popular books.

However, a choice is not necessarily feminist simply because a woman has made that choice<sup>59</sup>, especially if it is one that impacts negatively on other women or fails to advance the collective rights of women or challenge their subordination. Further, notions of choice must be treated critically. We agree with social constructionists that there can be no 'authentic experience' that is disconnected from language and discourse and so our experiences, however personal and 'real' these may seem, are always constituted socially<sup>60</sup>. For example, we may experience the use of make-up as 'empowering', not because of any kind of inherent properties of femininity, but because women and girls are surrounded with messages that their physical attractiveness is an important currency and that make-up enhances this. Further, the framing of such practices by some third and fourth-wave feminists as liberating and rebellious dovetails with a desired self-conception, in line with Western, neo-liberal ideology, as independent and powerful subjects<sup>61</sup>. The appeal of such cultural narratives is therefore unsurprising. The problem is that buying into these requires very little of women in terms of confronting real male power<sup>61</sup>. Such critiques don't necessarily mean abandoning a discourse of rights such as a woman's right to choose. However, these do highlight how the extent to which women have the

freedom to choose in contemporary patriarchal, capitalist societies has been overstated<sup>62</sup>. This is not benign or incidental, but politically motivated and situated within the current (neo-liberal) socio-political context.

In relation to gender identity, radical feminists such as Raquel Rosario Sanchez have criticised 'gender identity ideology' for casting this as a 'choice' in that one can simply choose which gender to identify (or dis-identify) with<sup>36</sup>. Trans-identities are typically presented as an example of this, as biological males, for example, 'choosing' to identify as women but who are not subjected to the same kinds of structural oppression as cis women (women identified as female at birth and who continue to identify with this biological categorisation). However, this undermines the experiences of many who identify as trans who feel that their gender identity is not a choice. In addition, given the number of trans women murdered this year alone, the majority of whom were black<sup>63</sup> and the shocking statistics that 79% of trans people have experienced a hate crime and in 32% of such cases this was a violent hate crime<sup>64</sup>, then identifying with a gender for some people means literally risking their lives. Trans women are likely to experience sexism and misogyny, particularly those who are fully transitioned and/or are able to pass successfully as women, often in addition to transphobia. As such, many feminists (ourselves included) believe that the feminist movement should be trans-inclusionary. We concur with Sara Ahmed in setting out what she means by 'women' in the first chapter of her book *Living a Feminist Life*:

*"What do I mean by women here? I am referring to all those who travel under the sign women. No feminism worthy of its name would use the sexist idea 'women born women' to create the edges of feminist community, to render trans women into 'not women' or 'not born women' or into men"*<sup>65</sup>

We are mindful that this is a particularly controversial issue at present that has divided feminists and that this has been dealt with fairly briefly here. For us, trans-inclusion is consistent with a focus on intersectionality and an embracing of the now fairly widespread idea that gender is not equal to biological sex. Moreover, a movement that is concerned with tackling oppression and discrimination on the basis of gender should not, as Sarah Ahmed argues, prioritise demarcating who is and who is not 'in the club'. Finally, as previously argued, the foregrounding of *social* identity has been an important component of intersectionality because certain identities and not others have largely represented the feminist movement. Likewise, women workers and activists have found it necessary to struggle against structural inequality and abuse within trade unions and revolutionary organisations<sup>44</sup>. As Harman points out, accusations of 'divisiveness' and 'identity politics' are hurled at those who challenge sexual violence on the left, however, it is the violence itself which blocks unifying struggles<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, dismissing the concerns of those such as trans women regarding the inclusivity of the feminist movement as 'identity politics' is ultimately unhelpful.

*Summary and concluding remarks:*

Critics of third and fourth-wave feminism often treat 'feminism' as an object that is owned by the previous generation and should only be passed on to the appropriate 'heirs'<sup>42</sup>. We do not wish to adopt such a position and police the boundaries of feminism. It is important for feminism to evolve and change as gender relations and forms of patriarchy are not static<sup>66</sup> and each generation of feminists needs to find their own voice. There is also a danger that any pursuit of a 'feminist purity', rather than embracing fragmentary forms of feminist theory and activism, will bring closure to feminist debates and exclude certain voices<sup>32</sup>. The emergence of tensions and conflict is not always necessarily a bad thing. It can bring into view important issues and spark a critical examination of concepts and ideas central to feminism, ensuring that this remains inclusive and up-to-date. As argued in the article, fourth-wave feminists can be commended for (amongst other things), the embracing of diversity and intersectional analysis (although some feminists have argued that contemporary forms of feminism have not yet gone far enough in including different groups of women<sup>58</sup>) and for further questioning and challenging problematic, biologically essentialist views of gender. There has also been an explosion of online feminist activity in recent years and we have seen the emergence of a number of vibrant campaigns and activist groups. There is much to be optimistic about.

However, at the same time, the commercialisation and marketisation of feminism and the capitulation to neo-liberal ideologies is a cause for concern. In addition, efforts on the part of third and fourth-wave feminists to make feminism more accessible, although admirable and important, have sometimes resulted in a 'watering down' of this. Popular voices such as those of Caitlin Moran and Sheryl Sandberg need to be counterbalanced with other feminist voices and feminist scholars need to attempt to communicate in a clear and accessible way in order to enable this<sup>67</sup>. In addition, a focus on individual identity and personal agency can hinder feminist activism, which should always ultimately be about social transformation. Feminism should be about tackling the systematic and structural oppression of women and asking difficult questions about gender and power. It should not be about, as Hannah Mudge puts it, "*me, me, me – whatever I think is good*". This does not have to entail denying women's agency entirely or positioning them simplistically as passive dupes or victims of patriarchy. But we would argue that it is crucial that women's agency and choices are not divorced from the socio-political context, but must always be considered as situated within this. It is also important to acknowledge that women's freedoms and choices are closely associated with social location and the opportunities and resources available to them. Feminist struggles can be concentrated within specific sites or locations and focus upon the issues affecting particular groups of women such as trans women, BME women and working-class women. However, such efforts should not collapse into a focus on individual empowerment, particularly at the expense of other women. After all, any form of 'feminism' which fails to critique sexism or patriarchy is hardly feminism at all<sup>57</sup>.

Bibliography:

<sup>1</sup>Faludi, S., 1992, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London, Chatto & Windus.

<sup>2</sup>Mackay, F., 2011, A movement of their own: Voices of young feminist activists in the London Feminist Network, *Interface: A Journal For and About Social Movements*, 3 (2), 152-179.

<sup>3</sup>Redfern, C. & Aune, K., 2010, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement*, London, Zed Books.

<sup>4</sup>Evans, E. & Chamberlain, P., 2014, Critical waves: Exploring feminist identity, discourse and praxis in Western feminism, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2014.964199.

<sup>5</sup>Walters, M., 2005, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup>Stainton-Rogers, R. & Stainton-Rogers, W., 2001, *The Psychology of Gender and Sexuality*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

<sup>7</sup>Tong, R., 2009, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction (Third Edition)*, Colorado, Westview Press.

<sup>8</sup>De Beauvoir, S., 1949, *The Second Sex*, New York, Random House Inc.

<sup>9</sup>Coleman, J., 2009, An introduction to feminisms in a postfeminist age, *Women's Studies Journal*, 23 (2): 3-13.

<sup>10</sup>Aronson, P., 2003, Feminists or "postfeminists"? Young women's attitudes toward feminism and gender relations, *Gender & Society*, 17 (6), p. 904.

<sup>11</sup>McRobbie, A., 2009, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London, Sage Publications.

<sup>12</sup>Harris, A., 2004, *All About The Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, New York, Routledge.

<sup>13</sup>Levy, A., 2005, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, London, Pocket Books.

<sup>14</sup>Denfeld, R., 1995, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order*, New York, Warner Books.

<sup>15</sup>Gill, R. & Scharff, C., 2011, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>16</sup>Kiraly, M. & Tyler, M., 2015, *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism*, Ballarat, Victoria, Connor Court Publishing.

<sup>17</sup>Banyard, K., 2010, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women & Men Today*, London, Faber and Faber.

<sup>18</sup>Dean, J., 2010, *Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

- <sup>19</sup>Harris, A., 2010, Mind the gap: Attitudes and emergent feminist politics since the third-wave, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25 (66): 475-484. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2010.520684.
- <sup>20</sup>Munro, E., 2013, Feminism: A fourth-wave? *Political Insight*, 4 (2), 22-25. DOI: 10.1111/2041-9066.12021.
- <sup>21</sup>Redfern, C. & Aune, K., 2010, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement*, London, Zed Books.
- <sup>22</sup>Schuster, J., 2013, Invisible feminists? Social media and young women's political participation, *Political Science*, 65 (1), 8-24.
- <sup>23</sup>Wray, R., 2018, Young women's engagement with feminism in a postfeminist and neoliberal cultural context, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Leeds Beckett University.
- <sup>24</sup>Bold, B., 2016, Feb. 9, Gender stereotyping: Can brands fight sexism or merely dabble in tokenism? *Campaign*. Retrieved from: <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/gender-stereotyping-brands-fight-sexism-merely-dabble-tokenism/1382469>.
- <sup>25</sup>Levenson, E., 2009, *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism*, Oxford, Oneworld Publications.
- <sup>26</sup>Crenshaw, K., 1989, Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139-67.
- <sup>27</sup> Beechey, V., 1979, On patriarchy, *Feminist Review*, 3: 78.
- <sup>28</sup>Rowbotham, S., 1973, *Women's Consciousness, Man's World*, Baltimore, Md., Penguin Books.
- <sup>29</sup>Attwood, F., 2007, No money shot? Pornography and new sex taste culture, *Sexualities*, 10 (4): 441-456. Retrieved from: <http://sexualities.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/4/441>.
- <sup>30</sup>Butler, J., 1990, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge.
- <sup>31</sup>Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N., 1990, Contextualising feminism: Gender, ethnic and class divisions, In T. Lovell (ed.) *British Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- <sup>32</sup>Skeggs, B., 1997, *Formations of Class and Gender*, London, Sage.
- <sup>33</sup>Wilkinson, S. & Kitzinger, C., 1996, *Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, London, Sage.
- <sup>34</sup>Burr, V., 1998, *Gender and Social Psychology*, London & New York, Routledge.
- <sup>35</sup>Burman, E., 1998, *Deconstructing Feminist Psychology*, London, Sage, p. 1.

- <sup>36</sup>Sanchez, R.R., 2017, July 26, If 'white feminism' is a thing, gender identity ideology epitomizes it, *Feminist Current*, retrieved from: <http://www.feministcurrent.com/2017/07/26/white-feminism-thing-gender-identity-ideology-epitomizes/>.
- <sup>37</sup>Millett, K., 1971, *Sexual Politics*, New York, Avon Books.
- <sup>38</sup>French, M., 1985, *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals*, New York, Summit Books.
- <sup>39</sup>Tong, R., 1989, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, London, Routledge.
- <sup>40</sup>Humm, M., 1992, *Feminism: A Reader*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- <sup>41</sup>Wilkinson, S. & Kitzinger, C., 1995, *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*, London, Sage.
- <sup>42</sup>Aapola, S., Gonick, M. & Harris, A., 2004, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>43</sup>Dzodan, F., 2011, Oct. 10, My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit! *Tiger Beatdown*, retrieved from: <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/>.
- <sup>44</sup>Harman, M., 2017, Aug. 22, Identity crisis: Leftist anti-wokeness is bullshit, *Libcom.org.*, retrieved from: <https://libcom.org/blog/identity-crisis-leftist-anti-wokeness-bullshit-22082017>.
- <sup>45</sup>Siegel, D., 2007, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>46</sup>Kempson, M., 2014, 'My version of feminism': Subjectivity, DIY and the feminist zine, *Social Movement Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2014.945157.
- <sup>47</sup>Wolf, N., 1990, *The Beauty Myth*, London, Vintage.
- <sup>48</sup>Gill, R., 2007, Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (2): 147-166.
- <sup>49</sup>Mudge, H., 2012, Oct. 19, The rise of the feMEnist and why it must stop, *bitchbuzz*, p. 1, retrieved from: <http://bitchbuzz.com/news/the-rise-of-the-femenist-and-why-it-must-stop.html>.
- <sup>50</sup>Scharff, C., 2010, Young women's negotiations of heterosexual conventions: Theorizing sexuality in constructions of 'the feminist', *Sociology*, 44 (5): 827-842.
- <sup>51</sup>Scharff, C., 2015, The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33 (6): 107-122, DOI: 10.1177/0263276415590164.
- <sup>52</sup>Jowett, M., 2004, "I don't see feminists as you see feminists": Young women negotiating feminism in contemporary Britain, In A. Harris (ed.) *All About The Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, pp. 91-100, New York, Routledge.



- <sup>53</sup>Budgeon, S., 2011, The contradictions of successful femininity: Third-wave feminism, postfeminism and 'new' femininities, In R. Gill and C. Scharff (eds.) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, pp. 279-292, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>54</sup>Taft, J., 2001, Girl power politics: Pop culture barriers and organizational resistance, unpublished paper presented at *A New Girl Order?* Conference, London, Nov. 14-16.
- <sup>55</sup>Blackmore, J., 2001, Achieving more in education but earning less in work: Girls, boys and gender equality in schooling, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22 (1): 123-129.
- <sup>56</sup>Tasker, Y. & Negra, D., 2007, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and The Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- <sup>57</sup>Aune, K., 2010, Oct. 9, Don't rebrand feminism, reclaim it, *The Scavenger*, p. 1, retrieved from: <http://www.thescavenger.net/feminism-a-pop-culture-sp-9560/57-fem2/477-dont-rebrand-feminism-reclaim-it-65783.html>.
- <sup>58</sup>Beusman, C., 2013, Oct. 1, New issue of ELLE UK tries its darnedest to 'rebrand' feminism, *Jezebel*, retrieved from: <http://jezebel.com/new-issue-of-elle-u-k-tries-its-darnedest-to-rebrand-1435416217>.
- <sup>59</sup>Kinser, A. E., 2005, Negotiating spaces for/through third-wave feminism, *NWSA Journal*, 16 (3): 124-53.
- <sup>60</sup>Burr, V., 1995, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, USA & Canada, Routledge.
- <sup>61</sup>Whisnant, R., 2015, Not your father's *Playboy*, not your mother's feminist movement: Feminism in porn culture, In M. Kiraly and M. Tyler (Eds.) *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism*, pp. 3-16, Ballarat, Victoria, Connor Court Publishing.
- <sup>62</sup>Day, K., 2010, Pro-anorexia and 'binge-drinking': Conformity to damaging ideals or 'new', resistant femininities? *Feminism & Psychology*, 20 (2): 242-248.
- <sup>63</sup>Campbell, S., 2017, Sept., Gender Recognition Act: Trans rights versus feminism? *Socialist Review*, retrieved from: <http://socialistreview.org.uk/427/gender-recognition-act-trans-rights-versus-feminism>.
- <sup>64</sup>Galop, 2016, Oct. 7, The-hate-crime-report-2016, retrieved from: <http://www.galop.org.uk/the-hate-crime-report-2016/the-hate-crime-report-2016/>.
- <sup>65</sup>Ahmed, S., 2017, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, pp. 14-15.
- <sup>66</sup>Walby, S., 1990, *Theorising Patriarchy*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- <sup>67</sup>Negra, D., 2013, April, Claiming feminism: Commentary, autobiography, and advice literature for women in the recession, unpublished conference paper presented at

the *The F Word in Contemporary Women's Writing* conference, Queen's University, Belfast.

#### Notes:

<sup>10</sup>The term 'postfeminism' was first used in 1919 in a journal called *Judy* to denote the need to move on from the 'gender war' and transcend gender binaries. However, the term appears to have come into circulation again in the 1980s, notably within the media.