Bombing the Patriarchy or Outfitting a Cab:

Challenges Facing the Next Generation of Feminist Activists[1]

by Sarah Maddison

The very different concerns of two young women's groups in Australia today are the focus of this article. The first group is the Cross Campus Women's Network (CCWN), a network of feminist students belonging to women's collectives across the state of New South Wales. The second is the Young Women Who Are Parents Network (YWWAPN) operating in Campbelltown, a low-income suburb in Macarthur region south-west of Sydney. The two groups illustrate the dilemmas of ideology, strategy and the practice of feminism that are challenging the women's movement, not only in Australia, but around the world.

As a result of its engagement with the global anti-capital movement and its revolutionary focus, the CCWN's call is to "bomb the patriarchy!" In stark contrast, the YWWAPN is calling for the increase in taxis fitted with child restraints in the Macarthur region. At present there are only two such taxis, which means that on social security payment day, many poor women, their small children and the week's shopping in tow, are unable to find transport home.

In June 2002, Australia celebrated the centenary of white women's suffrage.[2] The transformation in the status of women in Australia, as in most of the western world, has been hard fought, won only through the struggles of feminists over several generations. But much still needs to change for Australian women to achieve gender equality.

The contemporary context of the women's movement in Australia is a political climate where conservatism has been successful in setting back the achievements of feminism combined with a discourse of backlash that derides the collectivity of Australian feminist activists. Policy changes such as the 1999 de-funding of the majority of Australian women's organisations by the federal Office of the Status of Women, the application of a consumption tax on tampons and breast pads in 2000,[3] devastating changes in child care funding[4] and Prime Minister John Howard's efforts to undermine federal sex discrimination laws[5] have made many women angry. But a resurgence of feminist activism appears remote, with women's non-government organisations struggling to sustain membership and maintain their organisational structures and processes.

Of concern to many feminists, too, is the question of who will continue the struggle because many believe that the women's movement has lost its impetus, and that there is no 'next generation' of Australian feminists. But the suggestion that young women are not active, or that the actions of contemporary young feminists are not important or not the right kind of feminism overlooks the importance of the work of young feminists, such as those in the CCWN and the YWWAPN.

While it is clear that the activism of young women today bears little resemblance to 1970s feminist activism, the tendency has been either to dismiss young women's feminism for lacking instrumental aims (Summers 1993), or to exalt it for its creative individualism (Bail 1996). As in the United States and Britain, Australian feminists engaged in a high-profile "generational debate" in the 1990s that produced two apparently homogenous, anonymous and universalised camps, determined primarily by age, and eclipsing other differences such as location, class or ethnicity. The accompanying media beat-up reduced debates between women of different ages to "trashing, countertrashing and metatrashing" (Bulbeck 2000:7), and the real significance of inter-generational feminist discourse was lost. Also lost was the actual work that young women were doing in maintaining the Australian women's movement and creating its future.

Second-wave Legacies

As in other parts of the world, the second wave of feminism in Australia that began in the 1970s was inspired by the theories and activism of the women's movements in the United States and Britain (Reade 1994). Many women responded to the specific insights of feminist theory, rather

than a purely Marxist analysis, to explain the oppression of women and to propose revolutionary actions to bring about its end. Feminist writing, including the texts of de Beauvoir (1953), Friedan (1963) Millett (1972), Greer (1970), Firestone (1970) and Mitchell (1974) provided a new framework that "bound the women's movement together, across Australia and around the world" (Lake 1999:233). These new discourses spread through the Australian women's movement via discussions, newsletters and journals, sparking the process of determining the shared definitions that became part of second-wave Australian feminist collective identity. Even in those days, however, there was no real consensus surrounding these processes. Instead, ideas were argued and debated in the dynamic and passionate style that has become a hallmark of the processes of contemporary feminist collective identity.

> Any analysis of contemporary young feminist activism must therefore *not* focus on the discursive struggles and articulations of difference alone, but must also acknowledge that contemporary feminism has orientations that are materialist and strategic.

What distinguished the collective identity of second-wave feminism from the feminism practised up until the late 1960s was the language and aims of "liberation." Gisela Kaplan (1994:34) notes that the Australian women's liberation groups of the 1970s spurned the word 'feminist' as something "inherited from emancipationist predecessors." Anne Summers recalls the mid-1970s:

> To our consternation the term 'feminist' was starting to appear more and more in the American publications. It was not one we could identify with. We were liberationists...'Feminist' was so old-fashioned: to us it conjured up elderly ladies with umbrellas who had fought for the vote and then campaigned to close the pubs. In our ignorance we believed that they were all wowsers and puritans, nothing like us (1999:265).

This is interesting because much of criticism of contemporary young women is directed toward their use of the phrase "I'm not a feminist but..." Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, the women's movement was the women's *liberation* movement, *not* the feminist movement. Clearly, however, changes in the processes of collective identity were taking place and by the second half of the 1970s, 'women's liberation' was dislodged by "the more comprehensive and less left-influenced" term 'feminism' (Curthoys 1992:441). Again the ramifications of this can be seen in the current generation of feminist activists, one of whom was emphatic in describing herself and her colleagues as belonging to the women's *liberation* movement, not just the women's movement.

Central to this debate over strategy and ideology was the question of whether or not to enter into a relationship with the State. Elizabeth Reid, the woman appointed in 1973—amid much controversy—as the first adviser on women's issues to then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, notes that the opposition to her appointment, and indeed to state engagement as a whole, stemmed, in part, from the concern of the women's liberation groups that the movement was suffering a "lack of awareness" of the possible impact of such a relationship. Reid agrees:

> History has proven this concern to be justified. The invitation to storm the political arena came at too early a stage of our formation. We had not formulated the details of our program and had certainly not come to grips with the question of acceptable and appropriate means of achieving it (1987:12-13).

In other words, at the time the movement chose to engage with the State, feminist processes of collective identity were not yet sufficiently developed to withstand the pressures that came with the relationship. The reformist strand of the movement came to dominate the discourse of the women's movement as a whole, over time virtually silencing the revolutionary liberationists. According to Jean Curthoys (1997:5), it became imperative that the theory and ideas of liberation "not be articulated" as the movement's relationship with the State evolved. The effects of this narrowing of focus to the politics of representation are still felt by young feminist activists today.

The movement's management of the differences between women was also significant in the processes of collective identity. Issues of 'race' and cultural difference were

profoundly divisive in the second-wave Australian women's movement and significantly impeded its processes of collective identity. The feminist commitment to developing new understandings of the nature of women's oppression often led to a "colour blindness" regarding the oppression, exclusion and discrimination suffered specifically by the Aboriginal women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The membership of women's liberation was predominantly Anglo-Celtic (Reade 1994:217), and many women who had just learned how to articulate their own status as the oppressed were unable to see themselves in the role of "the oppressors" of other groups of women. But for many women who were "more interested in liberating their own people" (Lake 1999:250) the women's movement was simply irrelevant.

These second-wave legacies affect the processes of collective identity of contemporary young Australian feminists because, while they may have three decades of feminist collective identity to build upon, there is also a lot of unravelling and reconstructing needed. As essential parts of feminist processes of collective identity, the conflicts and dilemmas over theory, ideology, strategy and difference are not finished.

For contemporary young Australian feminists these challenges are further complicated by 'post-socialism.' Nancy Fraser defines "postsocialism" as the absence of a credible, progressive alternative to the current order. This condition occurs within the context of an economic liberalism that is "marketizing social relations, eroding social protections, and worsening the life-chances of billions" (Fraser 1997:3). Central to Fraser's argument is the notion that what has essentially been constructed as an either/or choice between the social politics of class or equality (redistribution) and the cultural politics of identity or difference (recognition) is not only unnecessary but also evades the "post-socialist" tasks of understanding how culture and economy work together to produce injustices.

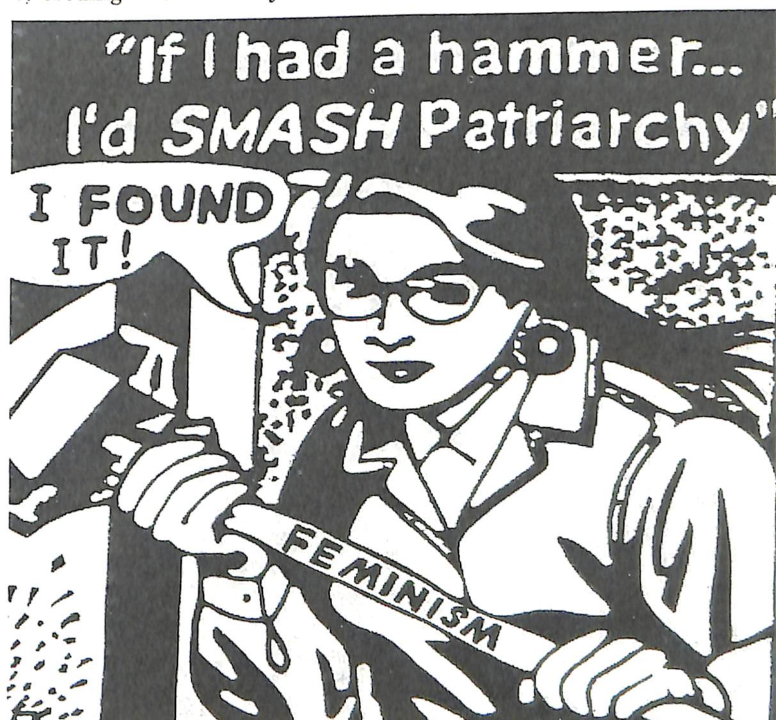
Two Models of Activism

The YWWAPN and the CCWN represent two very different models of feminist organising and activism. The members of the YWWAPN, young disadvantaged women who are parents, are offered structured support, including the Opportunity and Choices training programme. The training offers them many benefits, including the opportunity to spend time each week with other women to exchange experiences, and to learn a wide range of skills needed in activism and advocacy. Moreover, the training is project-based, allowing members to practice their new skills before applying them to their advocacy work in the community. The process is transformative, and the worldview of members is fundamentally changed. As Suszy, one long-term member, describes:

> In a lot of...cases, it's the first time any of them has been in...[an] environment full of intelligent, supportive women willing to listen to what they say and...to support them to follow through on what it is that they want. It's amazing to watch new young women grow and turn into these people who want to do something for the community and want to make a difference for themselves and for their kids.

In contrast, the CCWN, whose members are from university campuses across New South Wales, operates as an open collective with the aim of organising campus-based feminist campaigns at a state level. The network is strongly tied to the student union movement, and is in fact convened by the elected NSW women's officer of the National Union of Students. It also has links to many left organisations.

The two groups approach questions of recognition and redistribution quite differently. Despite the fundamental material disadvantage experienced by the young women in Campbelltown, the YWWAPN deals primarily with issues of representation and practical concerns like the availability of child restraints in taxis, rather than more



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transformative calls for redistribution. These young women consider their primary goal to be the reversal of typically negative attitudes toward young parents, such as the perception that young women decide to have children so that they can qualify social welfare payments, that they are drug users, or that each of their children has a different father. For these young women, these attitudes suggest a basic suspiciousness toward their competency as parents. As Kerry describes:

> A lot of people...focus on our age and...think that we're less capable. And also the way that we're treated when we're just trying to do our normal everyday things—like get milk and bread for the kids, look after them...I guess the way that people respond to us...means the difference between whether you have the energy to face that when you walk out the door or whether you'd rather just stay home.

So, in a sense, the issue of representation has a direct impact on these women's material circumstances. They believe that if they are able to change the community's attitudes toward young women parents, they will have better access to housing and better education and employment opportunities. However, in another sense, the network misses the fundamental issues that regulate their lives. In avoiding the political-economy issues and choosing not to engage in the more direct politics of redistribution, YWWAPN cannot hope to address the structural concerns that marginalise and disadvantage women. Campaigns dealing with social security support or the availability and quality of public housing more clearly prove the need for the transformative politics of redistribution, rather than the politics of representation.

It should be noted, though, that unlike other groups that may be trying to be active 'on behalf of' a broader category of women, the YWWAPN speaks only for the young women who are parents in the Macarthur region. Despite internal differences, the group's processes of collective identity are strong and allow the members to speak with a unified voice.

The CCWN's politics of recognition, on the other hand, pose an almost paralysing challenge. Although the members are all students and feminists, they do not necessarily speak on behalf of this specific group. Instead, their attention is more diffused, from campaigns for all women students (e.g., to improve safety on campus) to actions on behalf of women outworkers in developing countries. The matter of differences keeps manifesting itself, proving to be deeply personal for some, and provoking complex responses including guilt and anxiety for many. The question of voice, a dilemma that has been a part of a reflexive feminism since the 1970s, remains unresolved for these young activists, and their processes of collective identity are stalled by tensions in feminist praxis regarding race, whiteness, class and privilege. These young women have tremendous personal integrity—they desperately want to do the right thing. But, without the support and authority coming either from a broader women's movement or from more experience of their own, these young women are often silenced when they are uncertain of the 'correct' position.

The two groups also demonstrate significant differences in their approach to the politics of redistribution, particularly the question of State engagement. The YWWAPN is engaged with the State in two different relationships. The first involves funding as, almost from their inception, the group has relied on government funding to some extent. For any organisation working for social change, such a funding relationship poses a risk as the danger of state co-optation is high. Indeed, over the past three years, the conservative federal government has attempted to tie its funding agreements with several social welfare organisations to a right to veto any public statement the organisation wants to make. While YWWAPN has not been "restricted" by this veto right, its directions and focus have been affected by the funding that has been available to them. For example, in 2001 the YWWAP was funded through the Young Women and Tobacco Project of the NSW Health Department, which required the group to focus on women and tobacco—something it would not have done absent the government funding. The other relationship with the State is more positive for these young activists as it involves the "consultant" status of some YWWAPN members in state agencies that provide services to young women who are parents. This relationship has proved to be a powerful experience because the reputation of these members as articulate advocates has helped change the way services are provided to this group.

In contrast, CCWN is strongly opposed to State engagement and more closely aligns itself with the anti-capital movement. As one member, Pru, explains:

> I think that one thing that the anti-capitalist movement has shown is the preparedness of the State to undertake...violent suppression. And also with the war [in Afghanistan] now, that's going to escalate pretty significantly. So what's the answer to that? It's really hard to see how the State, at this current point, is likely to grant anything to us. It's quite difficult to engage a State [not prepared] to give concessions to movements.

For some participants in the CCWN, the more important goal is to politicise women in the community

http://www.jofreeman.com/buttons/fembuttons.html

The particular politics of redistribution practised by the CCWN, which is neither local nor specific, and has goals that are both overarching and diffused, highlights the dilemmas these young women have inherited from earlier feminist generations.

rather than to lobby governments for specific reforms. Others, however, are not necessarily comfortable with the strategies that the anti-capital movement employs, some of which they see as being decidedly anti-feminist. They are disturbed by the 'fight' mentality and what they see as an unnecessary focus on violence at the expense of feminist commitments to pacifism and non-violent protest.

Another dilemma for the CCWN is whether feminists should organise autonomously or simply join the bigger socialist organisations leading the charge. But this runs the risk that women will be ignored, due to the entrenched sexism in broad left organisations that are not specifically feminist, as Mari suggests:

> In the context of the anti-capitalist movement one of the reasons why we want to organise autonomously is because there is great danger of women being forgotten. You could just say that if women are involved in the anti-capitalist movement then it will be all right, but we've experienced that and it's not the case.

One young woman believes women's involvement in the anti-capitalist movement could be a precursor for a third wave of activism because, as with the anti-Vietnam war movement from which 1970s feminism sprang, women will begin to realise that men on the left are as sexist as ever.

Supporting Young Feminist Activists

The young women belonging to these two very different networks are engaged in important work for the Australian women's movement. As they grapple with the "post-socialist" dilemmas of recognition and redistribution, they maintain a political space for feminist activism in Australia. As they continue negotiating their collective identities as feminists,[6] they discursively create and maintain the entity called 'the women's movement.' Of course they are not the only women engaged in these tasks; many other women's organisations continue to promote feminist agendas that influence, with varying degrees of success, the policy environment and social and cultural practices. However, the roles that these young women play are vital for the future of the Australian women's movement and, more generally, indicate the ways contemporary social movements are functioning.

The spate of publishing in the 1990s that attempted to articulate what feminism means to contemporary young women is an example of what Stacey Young (1997) calls the "feminist strategy of discursive struggle." These authors "[p]ublish their work in an effort to bring their insights to bear on other women's lives, and on the women's movement's analyses and agendas" (1997:13). Discursive struggle is as important to feminist activism as policy-oriented or electoral politics are in the struggle to transform power relations and social structures. As Young (1997:23) argues:

> Discursive production is...an especially important site in struggles to expand our understanding of differences among women, their relationship to the construction of women's subjectivity and identity, and their relationship to feminist resistance (1997:23).

The emphasis on "how to practice feminism differently" means that the work of contemporary young feminists "places differences among women at the centre of the project," (Siegel 1997:69) in contrast to the second-wave

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emphasis on unity and sisterhood. Such emphasis on difference also helps to articulate the "post-socialist" context in which contemporary young feminists are working. In their desire to express their individualism, their difference from previous forms of feminist activism, and their attention to difference and multiplicity, young feminists risk obscuring their fundamental commitment to achieving social, cultural and political change.

Any analysis of contemporary young feminist activism must therefore *not* focus on the discursive struggles and articulations of difference alone, but must also acknowledge that contemporary feminism has orientations that are materialist (Walter 1999) and strategic (Schubert 1998). By examining these young feminists' cognitive definitions of the ends, means, and fields of action; their networks of relationships; and their emotional investment in their activism (Melucci 1995: 44-45), it is possible to avoid the noose of generationalism. Such analyses of the processes of collective identity could guide the tracing of specific trajectories and capture the diversity of activism practised by contemporary young feminists, instead of settling for monolithic, universalised generations. This approach also allows for an exploration of Australian debates between different groups of feminists that do not get "beached on the need to find fault" (Trioli 1996:51), as the debates of the 1990s did. The concept of generations may still be usefully deployed, however, in developing a model of what D'Arcens calls "intergenerational reciprocity" (1998:113) to replace "conflict between generations." While the differences between (and among) contemporary generations of Australian feminists may be significant, understanding the processes of collective identity of these diverse groups could bring about a model of "conflictual sisterhood" that D'Arcens (1998:114-5) proposes as a replacement for the generational model. This suggestion recognises the necessity of conflict between feminists as a part of their ongoing processes of collective identity. "Conflict is as much a part of sisterhood as harmony or shared interests" (D'Arcens 1998:114).

One key to a 'third wave' of feminist activism is support for those young women struggling to be active in a time hardly conducive to success. Contemporary young feminist activists are managing a multi-layered struggle, an inheritance of complex feminist theory, a sophisticated understanding of the need to respect difference, continuing and unresolved tensions about strategy, new challenges to old questions of redistribution brought about by globalisation, and the need to bring these concerns together in a way that facilitates both instrumental material goals and expressive cultural demands for the recognition of the many worlds and ways of being that women and girls inhabit. Older, more experienced activists have a role to play in smoothing the way for their younger counterparts, without patronising them or taking over.

The model of structured support provided the YWWAPN is an example of such practice as it allows these young women a successful experience of activism, even though it is focused on representation and recognition rather than other, perhaps more pressing, material concerns. I am left with a sense that many of these young women will grow and develop as activists, and find opportunities to apply the skills they have learned to other areas of concern. As the programme co-ordinator points out, the skills, knowledge and resources gained from the network are things they will "never not have again."

In contrast, the young women in the CCWN often find their experience of activism to be frustrating, paralysing and full of conflict. They battle continuously with ideological and strategic dilemmas, many of which would sound familiar to feminists of a generation ago. They struggle to find ways of making their actions meaningful to a broad category of women, without support, even as their heightened awareness of the debates around difference, and inclusion and exclusion sometimes threaten to silence them altogether. My fear is that, were I to come back in ten years, many of these young women will no longer be politically active. They will burn out from sheer frustration or not find any pathways available to them when they leave university.

The challenge for older, more experienced activists is to find ways of supporting the activism being practised by contemporary young women. For these 'older sisters,' the test is whether they can listen to concerns that are different from their own and provide support in ways that meet the real and expressed needs of younger activists. The false generational antitheses constructed in the 1990s do not reflect the realities of young women's activism. Setting up one group as radically and dichotomously opposed to the other does little more than generate media rhetoric. That both younger and older women are engaged in a wide variety of activism is a sign of a vibrant women's movement. Understanding their processes of collective identity as "space provided to discuss these differences" does not mean that the movement is on the verge of self-destruction. Looking for these differences, and embracing them when we find them will ensure that young women's engagement with the broader women's movements is valued rather than overlooked.

Source: *Outskirts: Feminisms Along The Edge* 10, November/December 2002, <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/article3.html>

Footnotes

[1] Earlier versions of this article were presented at the conference "A New Girl Order: Young Women and the Future of Feminist Inquiry," King's College, London, 14-16 November 2001; and at the 15th ISA World Congress of Sociology, Brisbane, Australia, 7-13 July 2002. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Outskirts* for their constructive feedback, which helped me through the revision process.

[2] The Commonwealth Franchise Act came into force on 12 June 1902, giving all women the right to vote in federal elections but excluding "aboriginal natives of Australia, Asia, Africa or the Islands of the Pacific except New Zealand," unless they already had the vote at State level (as stipulated in sec. 41 of the Constitution). It was not until 1962 that the federal franchise was extended to Indigenous Australians although their enrolment was not made compulsory (Sawer 2002).

[3] The government of Prime Minister John Howard introduced its controversial goods and services tax on 1 July 2000. Along with widespread opposition to the tax as a whole was a specific concern about the imposition of a consumption tax on tampons and breast pads, which many women felt were a health product and should therefore qualify for an exemption. Despite surveys showed that up to 73 percent of women found these products should be exempted (Metherell 2000), the Howard government refused to compromise and prices of these products rose by around 10 percent.

[4] In 1997, the Howard government removed the operational subsidy from community-based childcare centres, forcing centres to increase their fees in order to continue operations. In low-income areas where families could not afford an increase in fees, childcare centres were forced to close and, in some areas, women subsequently lost their access to the labour force. A comprehensive report by the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC), released in 2001, found that in two socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs of Sydney, an estimated 1,547 women were forced to leave their jobs or prevented from seeking full-time work due to rising childcare costs following the change in funding arrangements (WSROC 2001).

[5] The federal "Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill" went through its second reading on 28 June 2002. The amendment bill was announced on 1 August 2000, shortly after the Federal Court decision McBain v State of Victoria [2000] FCA 109 (28 July 2000). This case concerned the Infertility Treatment Act 1995, which restricted access to Assisted Reproductive Technology to women who were married or in heterosexual de facto relationships. A subsequent appeal to the High Court of Australia by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (which was granted a special fiat by the federal Attorney-General to submit the appeal) was dismissed; the High Court ruled that the bishops had no standing in the matter. If passed, the amendment bill will allow states to discriminate against single women and lesbians in the provision of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and other fertility services. Prime Minister Howard has been vocal in his support of the bill.

[6] Not all members of both networks of young women identify themselves as feminists—or at least not without some qualification. Some members of the CCWN, for example, prefer the term "libertarian socialist feminist." Members of the YWWAPN, on the other hand, are hesitant about the term due to their exposure to negative media stereotypes. I could argue whether a woman engaged in what I call "feminist activism" chooses to identify herself as a feminist or not is irrelevant, but that is not the scope of this article.

Note: Due to lack of space, we are not able to publish the bibliography for this article. If you would like to have a copy of it, please write to <communications@isiswomen.org>.