

A Call for Young Women to Get Mad!

By Delanie Woodlock

I want to believe in the revolution, I need to know it can happen. As I look around me, to my generation, I feel disillusioned and alone. They say we are in a post-feminist era, which seems true if we look at popular culture. There is not much feminism out there. Porn is chic. S/M is sex. "Buffy The Vampire Slayer" is a feminist icon, and young women have girl power to improve their lives. Bad girls, sluts and porn stars are the new elite, the "new girl order."¹ Paralleling girl-power types of feminism is the rise in the number of young women being labelled depressed and suicidal. Young women are also being drugged at an alarming rate. It is no wonder. Sexologists and the sexual revolution of the 1970s gave us a culture where 'any sex was good sex,' even if you had to take muscle relaxants to do it. The legacy lives on with girl-power pop feminisms,² which is giving us a culture where young women are set up for a fall and are fooled into believing there are no obstacles to their freedom. When we discover the reality, that merely believing you are free doesn't make it happen, of course we get even more depressed, unresponsive and suicidal. Then we are told our brains are what make us mad. We have faulty biology, broken brains and out-of-control emotions. Our madness is solved simply by a mind-altering drug and we are not only turned into emotionless robots but also cash cows for pharmaceutical companies. Pathologised. Psychiatrised.³ Duped. We are a generation of young women told we are equal and free, that we have access and opportunity way beyond what our foresisters had. But we are still sad, still depressed, still raped, still abused, still other and still second-class. And I'm pissed. I'm as mad as hell. The handful of radical friends I have from my generation I truly treasure. They inspire me and aid my survival. I look up to my radical feminist sisters who rode earlier waves and are still raging. They amaze me and fuel my fight. But for true freedom, for the possibility of a revolution, we need unity. Sisterhood is powerful. The time is now. Young women, get mad.

Girl Power Makes Me Mad

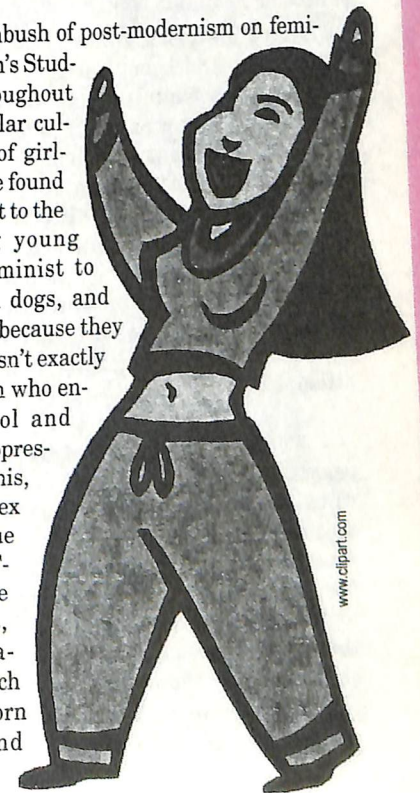
Sarah Michelle Gellar plays the mega-popular character "Buffy Summers" on the (aptly) named television series "Buffy The Vampire Slayer." The blonde, blue-eyed slayer can do no wrong. Loved by men and boys for her "hot" looks and admired by women and girls for her butt-kicking antics, Gellar's impact is far-reaching. The program is now used in university and high school classes as an example of feminism and girl power. The other week, I saw an episode of its second or third season and realised how gaunt the already thin Gellar is now. Her skirts are dangerously short, her breasts are hoisted up around her chin and she topples

around on high heels. No wonder girl power is a form of feminism so widely embraced!

Buffy, the icon for girl power, the new-wave feminist movement, has a hard time with the 'f' word. In an interview with *Detour Magazine* (March 1999), Sarah Michelle said: "I hate the word 'feminist.' It has a bad connotation of women who don't shave their legs or under their arms ... There's no femininity in feminism, which is really weird because it's technically the same word."

The creator of "Buffy," Joss Whedon, claims he does have a feminist agenda, but doesn't believe in being overt about it. "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them feminism" (*Bitch* magazine, Summer 1999). This form of "subliminal feminism" obviously has a limited effect. If men are getting the feminist messages, they sure have a violent way of showing it. An Australian study of reported cases of rape and sexual assault against young women showed an increase of 24 percent between 1998 to 1999.⁴ But the real situation is even worse because only 15 percent of all women who are sexual assaulted actually report the crime.⁵

Much like the ambush of post-modernism on feminist theory and Women's Studies departments throughout universities and popular culture, the popularity of girl-power feminism can be found in its very lack of threat to the status quo. Telling young women that it is feminist to watch porn and fuck dogs, and that women get raped because they put out victim energy isn't exactly going to upset the men who enjoy, promote, control and profit from women's oppression (for examples of this, see *Bust* magazine's sex issue, second sex issue and bad girl issue). T-shirts (must be the regulation baby tees, extra fitted!) emblazoned with slogans such as "pussy power," "porn star," "bad girl" and



"whore goddess" are sold in mainstream stores these days under the guise of girl power.

This isn't feminism. It is slave merchandise. Selling back to us our status as patriarchy's slaves is not liberating, subversive and has nothing to do with young women's power.

Madness? Perhaps. A certain speed of thought, certain wonderful flights of ideas. Certain altered states of perception. Why not hear voices? So what? ... Let us stop being afraid. Of our own thoughts, our own minds. Of madness, our own or others'

Who Cares About Mad?

If young women are apparently having fun kicking butt, rioting and being bad girls, then why are we sad? What the pop feminisms fail to realise is that a huge amount of young women are terribly lost and unhappy. The number of young women and girls labelled depressed, phobic and anxious is rising. According to the Centre for Mental Health Services (CMHS) in the U.S., young women are seven times more likely to be diagnosed as depressed than young men, and twice as likely to attempt suicide. According to the Toronto Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Research, since 1997, girls and young women from age 10 to 20 are making three to four times more suicide attempts than their male counterparts.

We also have a culture of druggies. While my parents' generation had a peace-lovin', pot smoking, acid-dropping culture, I am now part of a generation of young women who drop Prozac, Zanax and Paxil. Prozac (marketed in America under the more feminine name Sarafem) has now been approved for sale in Australia. In the U.S., it is the touted cure for PMS. Zoloft was approved for trauma, as that which takes place after a rape. Paxil is approved for shyness. PMS, trauma, shyness are therefore now all mental illnesses.⁶ Girls kicking butt? When I was drugged, I couldn't even cry, let alone get pissed off! Silencing young

women has lots of benefits: money for the pharmaceutical companies, and emotionless, numb women for patriarchy.

Of course pop feminism is not solely to blame for this. But it certainly doesn't help when we ignore our pain and promote the use of psych drugs. In 1997, *Ms.* magazine called Prozac "an important weapon against women's depression." The revised *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1998) promotes the use of Prozac, claiming that this and similar drugs "have none of the health-threatening side effects of earlier antidepressants."⁷ As the early years of radical feminist analyses suggest, I believe most mental disorders (such as anxiety, phobias, eating disorders, depression) occur not because we are biologically faulty, but because of the society we live in. When we have a world where women are raped, beaten, prostituted and murdered, it is logical that we would all live in varying states of fear.

Phyllis Chesler (1972) saw patriarchy as the creator of women's distress and consequent madness. She also saw that women are rendered powerless by society. And, because of this powerlessness, they are seen as mad. In *Beyond Psychoppression*, Betty McLellan (1995) outlines how oppression is one of the main factors behind women's so-called illnesses:

She is not sick. She does not have a problem that was primarily brought on by herself. She is suffering in the way she is because, as a woman living in patriarchal society, she has been, and continues to be, oppressed. (p. 33)

Radical feminist Kate Millet (1991) spoke out about her drugging and various hospitalisations in *The Loony Bin Trip*. Millet comes to the conclusion that insanity doesn't exist, but perhaps madness does:

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Get Real, Get Radical, Get Mad!

...with true radical feminist optimism, I observe the next waves rolling in, one after the other eternally. And I'm absolutely certain that the next wave of radical women who will revolt (one more time) and reclaim their bodies/their lives/their Selves with passion, will arrive. Do I feel the earth move? (Renate Klein, 1996, p. 358)

In *New Statesman* (5 June 2000), Andrea Dworkin wrote that the day she was drugged and raped, she was ready to die. "I have been tortured and this drug-rape runs

through it, a river of horror. I'm feeling perpetual terror... I'm ready to die."

Then the *Guardian* (16 August 2000) reported that in a debate on child abuse, Andrea Dworkin declared that children sexually abused should have the right to kill their abusers. She was pushed onto the stage in a wheelchair. I cried. And I got mad.

We can't just let a few amazing women take on this battle by themselves. Says a feminist quote: "No woman is required to build the world by destroying herself." Learning about Andrea Dworkin and reading her words have been a call for action for many young women. We need to get mad, we need to re-energise this movement. Not that I expect all feminisms to be radical, but at least let it be feminism. At least, let the mainstream movement be about creating safety for women. Psychiatric drugs are not safety. Porn is not safety. Prostitution is not safety. Sadomasochism is not safety. So let's get radical, get creative, get mad!

Become a 'Slayer'

Programmes like "Buffy The Vampire Slayer" show how young women are fighting back and defending themselves. However, they present Buffy's power as a fighter as her special gift, her birthright. She was born a Slayer, and not all women can fight like her. In addition, she fights only supernatural creatures and demons. Convenient, isn't it? These programmes tell us that the only things we have to fear are bogie men and vampires, when the real dangers to women are usually the men we know.⁸ These programmes also suggest that women aren't really capable of fighting back unless they have some sort of magical "slayer" power. Let's prove them wrong. Learn self-defence or a martial art. Find a feminist self-defence centre and learn how to disarm those bastards. Lift weights and get fit, not to look good but to be able to look after yourself. A good resource for physically disabled women is a group called All Walks of Life,⁹ which offers useful tips on self-defence for blind people, those in wheelchairs, etc., including carrying personal alarms. As much as I hate guns and their power to do harm, I do think that in this kind of world and for some women, guns may be a viable form of self-defence.¹⁰

Mad Action

In a recent on-line discussion concerning the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the U.S., Catherine MacKinnon said that women have a "civil right to be free from gender-motivated violence" and that the fight for these rights is "our Civil War." A continuous theme in Andrea Dworkin's *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women* and the very real war against women, and their of freedom. Many women have taken inspirational action to combat this war.

Nikki Craft and others formed a group called ACLU (Always Causing Legal Unrest), which lives up to its name! For the campaign "Rampage against Penthouse," 85 men and women destroyed hundreds of magazines at seventy bookstores, porn shops and convenience stores. Their actions resulted in 111 arrests.¹¹

The Rote Zora (red zora) from Germany took action and fire-bombed pimps' cars and stores that sold pornography. When one member was asked why she continues to act illegally, she replied:



The legal route is not sufficient because the usual repression and structures of violence are legal... It is legal if women traders buy our Third World sisters and sell them to German men... It is legal when women ruin their health and do monotonous work for subsistence wages. These are all violent conditions which we are no longer willing to accept and tolerate and which can't be changed solely by criticism. ...Oppression is only recognized through resistance. Therefore we sabotage, boycott, damage, and take revenge for experienced violence and humiliation by attacking those who are responsible.¹²

There are many other ways that women get mad. Some place stickers like "Warning: This harms women" or "If you buy this, you will have women's blood on your hands" on pornographic magazines or anything that oppresses women.

Mad Merchandise

Confronted weekly with T-shirts that have images of the porn film "Deep Throat," and a "porn star" T-shirt with a picture of a man standing and a woman kneeling at his

crotch, I think we need more mad feminist merchandise. If oppressive practices such as pornography can be packaged and promoted in hip T-shirts, why can't revolutionary politics? Pop-feminist magazines like *Bust* sell oppression successfully in magazines, books and T-shirts because they package these in such a way that they come out looking hip, trendy, cutting-edge and subversive. Perhaps wrapping radical feminism up in pretty packaging isn't exactly an ideal situation, but it might be something we have to do in order to get some sort of feminism out there. Imagine thousands (millions!) of young women and girls reading a glossy magazine that contained real women's voices, radical truths and revolutionary politics! T-shirts with trendy and hip-looking logos but instead of "whore goddess," they have "women unite," "dead men don't rape" or "mad women fight back."

Embrace Madness

For those of you who have an unruly, mad woman's mind like I do, I urge you to question the mental-illness industry. For years I was bounced around by shrinks who either blamed me, my brain, or my mum for my fears. I have been drugged and gone through terrible withdrawals. I still suffer from bouts of agoraphobia and as long as patriarchy is in power, I probably always will. But I refuse to be silenced. I will not be blamed any longer. I can't live in a constant state of happiness as long as women, animals, and the earth continue to be raped and murdered. Know that it is okay to get into dark, wild moods, to lock yourself away sometimes, and to be scared. If you can, try to reject any form of drugs (some call them chemical lobotomies). I know that some women's pain is so overwhelming that it needs to be soothed by drugs, and that just makes me madder. Question the malestream mind-fuckers¹³ and find an alternative feminist therapist if you need to.

Young women do have power. Not the pseudo-girl power promoted so readily by patriarchy, but a real passionate, mad power fuelled by generation upon generation of women who fought before us. We have within us—between us—a real chance of reclaiming our Selves. Young women, it is our responsibility to continue the fight for women's freedom, to refuse to accept a future of limited control over our own lives. Rise up, connect with your sisters and let them feel our resistance.

Mad women do fight back.

Mad women have power.

Mad women are revolutionary.

Source: <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~yrwimmin/yrw/yrwgm.htm>>.

References

- Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. New York: Avon, 1972.
 Andrea Dworkin. *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women*. Free Press, 1997.
 Renate Klein. "(Dead) Bodies Floating in Cyberspace: Post-Modernism and the Dismemberment of Women," in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, eds. Diane Bell and Renate Klein. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996.
 McLellan, Betty. *Beyond Psychoppression*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1995.
 Millet, Kate. *The Loony Bin Trip*. London: Virago, 1991.

Footnotes

- ¹ Taken from Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (USA: Penguin), 1999. *Bust* is a pop-feminism zine turned magazine widely read by young women in the U.S. Its website is also popular.
- ² I use the term to refer to much of the popular feminisms in circulation now, particularly "girl power," "bad girl" and "bust" feminisms. I also like the word "pop" because it reminds me of what these forms of feminisms do when you attempt any real analysis of their content and theories.
- ³ Meaning abused, violated, re-traumatised and used for profit. The term was used by Sasha Claire McInnes, *The Political Is Personal, Or Why Have A Revolution (From Within or Without) When You Can Have Soma*, <<http://www.madnation.org/essays/mcinnnes.htm>>, accessed 20 August 2000.
- ⁴ Peter Mickelburgh, "Girl Danger," *Herald-Sun*, 6 December 1999.
- ⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Special Article: Violence against Women," *Year Book Australia 1998*, ABS Catalogue No. 1301.0.
- ⁶ Sasha Claire McInnes, <<http://www.madnation.org/essays/mcinnnes.htm>>.
- ⁷ From an unpublished article by Lisa Sciandra, "Prozac Girlz: Women and the Wonder Drug," 1998-99, <<http://www.othersideresource.com>>.
- ⁸ Eighty percent of rape incidences are committed by someone known to the survivor. See Roselyn Payne Epps and Susan Cobb Stewart, *Women's Complete Healthbook* (USA: The American Medical Women's Association), 1995.
- ⁹ All Walks of Life is a U.S. organisation that can be contacted at 9106 Benthos, Houston, TX 77083; Tel: (1-281) 495 9226; website: <<http://www.awol-texas.org>>.
- ¹⁰ For more clarification on the issue of women and guns, see Adriene Sere, "Moms and Guns," *Said It*, June/July 2000.
- ¹¹ For more information, see Nikki Craft's website: <<http://www.nostatusquo.com>>.
- ¹² Interview with two members of Rote Zora, <<http://burn.ucsd.edu/~ats/ROTEZORA/rzora84.html>>, accessed 20 August 2000.
- ¹³ Term used by Mary Daly in "Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage Containing Recollections" from *Logbook of A Radical Feminist Philosopher*, 1993.