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## **“She Could Be Anything She Wants to Be” Mothers and Daughters and Feminist Identity**

*Much of the recent research on feminist self-labeling has been limited to young women—the majority of whom are white, middle-class post-secondary students. This research suggests that young women embrace the politics of feminism but reject the label. There has been little research investigating the extent to which midlife women, who came of age with the women’s movement, identify as feminists. As part of a larger study, Ontario midlife women were asked to reflect on their family, friendship and work lives; to talk about their health and well-being and their connection to feminism and the Women’s Movement. These women were in their 50s and early 60s at the time of the interviews in 2002. Sixty-six women spoke about the impact of the women’s movement or feminism on their lives. They also spoke about their precarious, hesitant, complex relationship to feminist identity. Two-thirds (43) of the women expressed a favourable identification with feminism, although ten of these women qualified their answers in the context of their personal reservations with the label. Two themes emerged to explain the presence of a feminist self-identity among midlife women. The first was being the mother of a daughter. The second was the exposure to women’s studies courses and feminist theory in post-secondary education.*

Women who are now at midlife came of age with second-wave feminism. By the time these midlife women were old enough to go to university, the universities were expanding. By the time they graduated, jobs were opening up in nursing, teaching and office work and they became part of a dramatic surge in women’s employment. They were the first generation of Canadian women to stay in the labour force after children were born. While employment opportunities opened for this generation of women, attitudes regarding family responsibilities were slow to change. The structure of work organizations, or

schools did not change to accommodate family care, and men and women were left to negotiate responsibilities for childcare and housework individually. Men's pay and opportunity advantage served to reinforce the traditional division of labour. For the most part these baby boomers have spent their adult lives overburdened by the need to combine family responsibilities and paid work.

As part of a larger study, Ontario midlife women were asked to reflect on their family, friendship and work lives; to talk about their health and well-being and their connection to feminism and the Women's Movement. We wanted to know whether women born during or after World War II saw themselves as feminists. Did these women, who grew up with the women's movement, who struggled, by virtue of the timing of their entry into the labour force to raise families and work for pay, who felt the economic insecurities of lone parenthood, or struggled to assert their sexual identity think of themselves as feminists as they reflected on their lives at midlife?

Most of the recent research on feminist self-labeling has been limited to young women—the majority of whom are white, middle-class post-secondary students. This research suggests that young women embrace the politics of feminism but reject the label. Indeed the label may have become a bit of an anachronism. The popular disclaimer—"I'm not a feminist, but..." appears to characterize the feelings of many contemporary young Western women (see Buschman and Lenart, 1996; Williams and Wittig, 1997; Zucker, 2004). Some argue that young women have become complacent with the gains of the women's movement (see Rebeck, 2005). For example, abortion rights have been assured, however precariously, for a generation. In this context, identification with feminism is no longer associated with the struggle to attain personally important rights and opportunities. Young women have grown up in a social context in which the achievements of the feminist movement have been part of the taken-for-granted social fabric. Furthermore, young people, particularly post-secondary students, understand their lives in terms of personal ambitions and individual struggles. Culturally, it is preferable to construct their achievement in individual rather than collective terms (Bushman and Lenart, 1996; Williams and Wittig, 1997). Research which targets "minority" or "othered" women suggests that these women are more likely to self-label as feminist and support feminism (see Reid, 1984; Lavender, 1986; Chow, 1993; Dufour, 2000). Older women have not been the subjects of study regarding feminist identity.

Some researchers have looked at the intergenerational influence of a feminist identity, particularly between mothers and daughters. The (often contested) assumption is that second wave feminists will "pass along" their politics and the narrative of the women's movement, and that feminist identity is "inherited" from one generation to the next (Adkins, 2004). The responses in this study indicate support for a more complex acknowledgement of feminism, connected to one's political "coming of age." Intergenerational

impact is bi-directional, and the likelihood of self-identifying as feminist is influenced by the presence of female children (or close relatives). Having a daughter may provide a window for mid-life women to see themselves in terms of a collective, as more than just one woman—the idea that there exists a “common fate with women” (Reid and Purcell, 2004: 766). The opportunity to witness the achievements of the women’s movement play out in their daughters’ lives has a significant impact on the participants in our study. Their daughters provided these women with an impetus for (re)connecting the personal to the political, and being emotionally attached to the gains of the women’s movement, as well as the remaining obstacles, and the hope for the future, as embodied by their daughters’ choices and experiences.

The data reported here lets us look at feminist identity among Canadian women who grew up with the women’s movement. These women were in their 50s and early 60s at the time of the interviews in 2002. We used a two stage sampling strategy, contacting women through groups and organizations across metropolitan Toronto and the Niagara region. Some of the sample were contacted through women-based social groups or organizations, although these were not specifically feminist in nature. For example, some organizations that agreed to help recruit our sample were primarily concerned with addressing the needs of immigrant women or poor women. Others in the sample were contacted through religious groups. The research population was constructed through postering, snowball sampling, and direct contact with women’s organization and groups. Every effort was made to sample intentionally in order to provide representation from marginalized women, including racial or ethnic minority women, lesbian and women living with low income.

Women in the study engaged in in-depth face-to-face interviews concerning their reflections about their intimate lives, their economic and employment experiences, and their health and well-being. As part of the interviews (which ranged from one to three hours in length) women were asked to describe the impact of the women’s movement or feminism on their lives and to indicate whether or not they would describe themselves as “feminists.” Sixty-six women responded to this question.

Women in this study spoke about their precarious, hesitant, complex relationship to feminist identity. Most (43) of the women expressed a favourable identification with feminism. Ten of the 43 respondents self-identified as “feminist,” *but* qualified their answers in the context of their personal reservations with the label, or referred to other common perceptions of the term. For example, when asked, “Would you consider yourself a feminist?” one woman in her early sixties answered, “probably, if I knew what the real definition was” (B54). Another response from a 53-year-old single mother illustrates some of the hesitation over the meaning of “feminist”: “I believe I’m leaning more towards feminism than I ever have been in my life, but I don’t know whether I would actually describe myself as a ‘feminist’” (B10).

A Muslim woman in the sample who moved to Canada in adulthood did not feel a connection to what she called “western” feminism. Her interview describes the negotiation of identity that she faced:

*You know it's a little bit difficult to be a (country of origin) feminist, or to be a western feminist, or to be a black feminist. I think all of these feminists have (a) different definition for themselves. I consider myself as a feminist regarding to the (country of origin) culture. Regarding western culture, I think I need to work still. Because I don't get the western culture yet. (B9)*

Twenty-three women respondents did not self-identify as feminist. Seven of these answered simply “No,” when asked. Fourteen women qualified their responses by saying “No, but...” or “I don’t think so, but...”:

*I don't think I'd describe myself as a feminist, but certainly I am glad for the moves that women have made. (A13)*

*No, I don't think I'm a feminist, because I was raised in a setting, or a family setting where the man was the breadwinner, and the mother was the homemaker, but I certainly applaud the feminists to a certain degree. (A8)*

*No, I wouldn't call myself that... I have always maintained that women should have equal rights... I was brought up in a culture where women were subservient to men. (B15)*

*Well, I believe in equality absolutely, but I like having the door opened for me and I like somebody to sit my chair under me and pour me a glass of wine and... (Laughs) So if you look at that, no, then I'm not a feminist. (B20)*

Some women talked about not being a part of the women’s movement in the past because of their privilege, or because they felt excluded or disconnected from it: “I probably came kicking and screaming into feminism until I finally made the connection. And I think a lot of that had to do with my past, my privilege, I didn’t connect it” (B11).

A mid-life married mother of two, (who is now active in both religious and feminist communities), recalled the importance of having the language to identify the issues she was facing: “I couldn’t be a part of the movement because I didn’t feel I fit in, I couldn’t talk the language” (B2). She went on to discuss some of the barriers to participation in a movement that was seen as mostly upper-middle class and white, excluding women from marginalized or lower income backgrounds, and who instead were “largely focusing on survival.”

Two central themes emerged in the interviews that are of particular interest here. First, there was a strong connection to positive feminist identification among mothers of daughters. As these women elaborated on the

meaning of feminism in their lives, they also referred to the impact of the movement on the lives of their daughters. They described feelings of pride in their daughter's accomplishments, respect and admiration for their daughter's feminist politics, or appreciation for the increased opportunities available to their daughters as a result of the women's movement, and their hope for their daughter's future. Second, many of these midlife women who identified as feminist (and embrace the politics behind this label) credit this political consciousness to their educational experiences in women's studies courses and/or exposure to feminist theory in post-secondary education.

### **Mothers and daughters**

Forty-nine of the 66 participants were mothers, and 35 of those were mothers of daughters. Most of the mothers of daughters (28, or 80 percent) said they identified as feminists. While this was not a question specifically raised in the interviews, their comments about feminism connected their relationships with their daughters to their thoughts about (and experiences with) the women's movement. Twenty respondents made explicit mention of their feminist identity as it relates to a daughter's life, or to their relationship with their daughter. (Two women also referred to feminism in the context of their nieces, and one woman discussed her sons in this context.)

These mid-life mothers framed their comments about feminism around the notion of increased educational and career opportunities for their daughters, particularly in contrast to their own experiences growing up:

*... to think my daughters were able to go to university and to graduate school and this wasn't allowed 50, 60 years ago. (B41)*

*When I was going to college, you know like you were a teacher, nurse, or secretary; it didn't seem like there was a whole world out there for us... There is a whole world out there, I think, for our daughters. (B19)*

*... it's great for my daughters coming along. I've got a daughter who wants to be a teacher—I mean she could be a doctor, she could be anything she wants to be, and in the past that wasn't quite as open for her to do; and I think that's terrific.... There are more opportunities. (B8)*

*I see my nieces playing hockey—their choice...I played hockey in a more casual thing, but they're on a team. I see my other niece; she works in the forestry and fisheries. She's capturing bears and doing this and doing that, and has this whole outdoor sort of thing happening. And I'm thinking, "who would have thought?" She's 25 years younger.... It's wonderful to see what she's doing...this is good, it's just more doors. But whether it's engineering, it's just things women never ventured into before. There's choices now. Not that it's easy, but there's choices. (B47)*

Many women also referred to their daughters as feminists. One feminist mother proudly referred to her daughter as “a fierce feminist” (B2). A 58-year-old mother of four indicated the impact her daughter has had on her life, saying that her daughter “is a strong feminist—a very strong woman, and really inculcated the importance of being who you are” (B63). Another mother who immigrated to Canada from Africa talked about body image and politics surrounding her daughter’s “liberated” generation in Canada, and added: “I’m very proud of my daughter” (B15).

Women also referred to the impact of feminism on their ability to raise their daughters with an awareness and consciousness of women’s issues and the women’s movement. This was proudly noted by one respondent, who remarked: “I have raised three wonderful feminist daughters” (B16). Another participant echoed this sentiment: “The movement and feminism have allowed me to have a more satisfying life. It helped me raise daughters to have a feminist consciousness” (B50). The Women’s Movement offered mid-life women a mirror to their world, and a chance to develop their relationship to feminist identity while also cultivating a relationship with a female child. In this sense, participating in the growth and development of a daughter allowed women to see the contrast of “how far we’ve come,” and “how far we still need to go”:

*I think that the issues for women are still the same; I think that we haven't made enough changes. I really don't know sometimes if it's because I'm an old fart or not. You know because ... I have teenage daughters.... They still (think) ... "God I should be beautiful." ... Yes, you should be beautiful, don't get me wrong, of course you should be beautiful, but you shouldn't centre your life around people with penises. It just doesn't work. And yet ... it's shocking for me for them to live in a house with an outspoken mother who's the economic provider, the social convener, the wonder woman, and they're still believing in this, "one day the prince will come." I mean their favourite woman is "Pretty Woman." So I ask: have we made a substantial change? I think the answer is yes. But is there still a long way to go? Absolutely. That's how I see it. (B12)*

The following narrative recounts a third-generation consciousness, where a grandmother acknowledges the impact of interactions with her two female grandchildren:

*I'm very aware of that when I speak to my grandchildren ... I was noticing that if it was the robin ... I noticed it in myself, "he's on the birdbath." Well it's not "he," right? It's the robin, but I saw that masculinization of all those sorts of things. So I would point that out to them, "Well it might be a male, well it might be a female; it's not always a male." (B13)*

In addition, two respondents referred to the gains of the movement as

something that they feel their daughters "would just take for granted" (B45), or as something not understood by their daughter's generation. (It is particularly interesting to note the use of the past-tense in this quote): "There was a women's movement ... but the next generation will have it as second nature to them" (B35).

### **Women's studies and feminist theory in education**

The midlife women in this study reported that access to learning and education was one of the important benefits of the women's movement in their lives, and/or in the lives of their sisters, daughters, and nieces. Specifically, these women mentioned the impact of women's studies courses and exposure to feminist theory as significant to their evolving belief system, consciousness-raising, and politicization.

Women referred to the importance of exposure to women's voices, women authors, and female perspectives in general in literature, research and education. One summary of the importance of women's studies came from a sixty-two year old divorced mother:

*When I was growing up, I don't remember taking books in school written by women. Then, to hear women speak, of course women have thoughts, ideas, and leadership qualities that we need in our community and work life. So, I think it was very important to me. I didn't take formal courses, but I read a lot, and I did audit some courses, but I really felt that to hear women speak and formulate their ideas, I felt I was becoming more of an individual, of a person. I didn't have to be in a relationship. My experience was other people's experience. Even to help me identify that I could feel angry about being cheated, to identify that the things that helped form and develop me were from a masculine point of view. Things were imposed, even how I thought of women and women's lives. The possibility of leading a different kind of life was satisfying. (B50)*

A West-Indian immigrant mother in her late fifties expressed the ongoing influence of the movement in both "public" and "private" aspects of her life:

*It had a strong impact on my life—feminism. It's influenced me to go to school to begin with. And it influenced me also—well it influenced me to stay with my obligations with the family, but now it's influencing me in another direction, and that's to become a person on my own, to become an individual, to self-actualize. (B63)*

Respondents talked about the importance of the framework and historical context that women's studies provided, which was the foundation of their understanding of feminism in general. Women's studies were an "eye-opener" to many women. Remembering her first exposure to these ideas, one respond-

ent stated simply, “I am a feminist because of women’s studies” (B9). Women also expressed a feeling of vigilance, respect, and even frustration for their (lost) history:

*I think the one thing that’s important to me is not to lose the sense of our history ... the history of the feminist movement. There are young people who didn’t understand that it used to be against the law to be queer, who don’t know anybody who died of AIDS, who didn’t live through the gross inequities between women and men in the work environment. They know nothing about any of that stuff... They’re not taught the history; they don’t understand the struggle (and the) place that we came from. (B59)*

### Conclusion

Although the literature, and the responses here, are evidence of a fundamental struggle regarding the problematic definition of feminism today, we have not found a lack of support for feminism and contributions of the movement to women’s lives. In spite of the confusion and hesitation surrounding the term feminism, the mid-life women in this study understood their lives in terms of the qualitative and quantitative achievements of feminists from the 1960s onward, and saw this played out—rather poignantly—as they watched their daughters cross the threshold into adulthood, and as they were exposed to the language of feminism in the curriculum of women’s studies courses.

A feminist identity requires a fertile seedbed: for example, a women’s studies class, the cultivation of mother/daughter relationships, or connection with female mentors; or negatively, the experience of sex discrimination or violence, or hardship based on the extra responsibilities of career/children/care-taking etc. (see Williams and Wittig, 1997; Reid and Purcell, 2004; Buschman and Lenart, 1996) In sum, there must be an exposure to the context of the issues and gains made by the feminist movement in the first and second waves, either through the eyes of mothering daughters, and/or through the mobilizing experiences of women’s studies courses, in order to (re)connect the political to the personal in the belief systems and identity-structures of mid-life women.

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