
Celebrities, Consumerism, Empowerment #FeminismForChildren

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Introductory Remarks

The main goal of the article is to identify some of the most prominent moments that help define feminism at the present moment, to explore, to a certain extent, both the feminist and post-feminist thematic they might contain and to reflect on their influence on children and young adults. It seems that there are two interconnected anchor-points at the forefront: (1) celebrities-as-feminists and (2) consumerism (in no particular pecking order). There seems to be a shift towards personal battles and independence of women; collective endeavours (as the “essence” of feminism as we know it from the past, at least nominally) are swept aside and the principle of individualizing social problems (“If you cannot, it is entirely your fault.”) is put at the forefront.

I am well aware that this “collectiveness” of feminism was often very exclusive and that the “campaign for suffrage, for example, despite ostensibly striking a universal tone intended to benefit all women, was in fact marked by a complex and conflicted relationship with intersections of race and class” (Rivers, 2017: p. 2). There are of course other examples available from the history of feminism.¹

Additionally, I would like to pay some attention to the tendency to fabricate new feminist heroines. This is a highly problematic trend as it

¹ For example, such as theorized by the postcolonial feminist theory that has shed light on the essentialist Third World Woman. As Uma Narayan puts it, generalisations about women are hegemonic: they “represent the problems of privileged women /.../ as paradigmatic ‘women’s issues’” (Narayan, 1998: p. 86).

often, says Rosi Braidotti (2005: p. 4), “flattens out all other political considerations in order to stress the individual value of women like Margaret Thatcher or Condoleeza Rice”. (Neither could be said to particularly care for women’s cause—or the cause of disenfranchised, for that matter.) In other words, “the post-feminist master narrative of neo-liberalism has re-introduced the syndrome of ‘the exceptional woman’, which was a recognised topos before the women’s movement introduced more egalitarian principles of inter-connection, solidarity and teamwork” (Braidotti, 2005: p. 4). In this vein, according to Rosi Braidotti (*ibid.*), women who had explicitly (or, let me add, implicitly) chosen to keep distant from the women’s movements are transformed into feminist heroines.² So a *posteriori* feminist credentials are granted to strong individual personalities, no matter what their world-views or inclinations.³

Therefore, my aim is to explore the definitions of (post)feminism, especially as presented to children and young adults. As already conveyed by the title of this contribution, there might be three key words that decisively colour the understanding of feminism in the present moment, and they are: Celebrities, Empowerment, Consumerism, all three firmly planted in the readily available mediascapes.

Finally, there is another thing that needs to be mentioned preliminary regarding the terminology used here. I still, somewhat out-of-dately, think of feminism as emancipatory collective activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests, together with the theory of the political, economic, and social equality.⁴ Any other use of the word feminism should perhaps be put in quotation marks. But, since this is a work in progress, I expect the terminology to gradually evolve (together with conceptual changes).

2 I do see the need to “showcase” women who could, to illustrate the point that there *were* women in history, but we can soon clash into problems.

3 Hilary Mantel, two times Booker prized winner, similarly acknowledges problems that arise when modern ethical mores are placed in the mouths of historical figures. In her Reith Lectures, she said: “This is a persistent difficulty for women writers, who want to write about women in the past, but can’t resist retrospectively empowering them” (Furness, 2017).

4 This is a very (very!) working definition, used only to pinpoint some of the differences with today’s media-induced usage, formulated with the help of Merriam-Webster’s. Let us remember that Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2017 was *feminism*. Of course the rise in the lookups of the word was driven by turbulent events in the wider social sphere (e.g., Women’s March on Washington, #MeToo movement, etc.). In addition to that, interest in the dictionary definition of *feminism* was also driven by entertainment (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, TV series, based on a novel by Margaret Atwood; or *Wonder Woman*, superhero film based on the comics’ character). See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2017-feminism/feminism>.

Celebrities, Individualism and Consumerism

Feminism changed pop culture and media and it even, as writes Andy Zeisler, got cool and, perhaps even more importantly, sellable. It is no longer dismissed “in the realm of the angry, the cynical, the man-hating, and the off-puttingly hairy” (Zeisler, 2017).⁵ This is a recent development indeed, as some years ago we were still hearing the somehow hidden but nevertheless present aversion and/or unease with the word itself.

These changes might be, at least partly, attributable to the so called “celebrity feminism”, which—yes—did put the word feminism on the map, but often in a much watered-down form, like one of the best known celebrity feminists, Beyoncé⁶ and some others who were previously perhaps better known for

their expression of postfeminist attitudes and disavowal of the need for or importance of feminism, now publically embrace the label “feminist”. Each have gone from expressing their concerns over what being a “feminist” entails, whilst simultaneously extolling the virtues of “girl power” or women’s economic success and independence and thus aligning themselves with a distinctly postfeminist sentiment, to publicly embracing and promoting, if not entirely unproblematically, a feminist cause (Rivers, 2017: p. 7).⁷

It hardly requires mentioning that the main hue of this kind of feminism is economic success (which is indeed important), but, at the same time, feminism is becoming a marketing tool and a trademark, not available to all.⁸ This is, by the way, the point where Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work has gone wrong: her book *We Should all be Feminists*

5 I am unable to give page numbers because I am using the Kindle edition. This goes for all references to Andi Zeisler and Sara Ahmed.

6 The theme of Beyoncé and feminism is present in virtually every single debate on celebrity feminism: is she or isn’t she a true/good enough/etc. feminist or is she just a “feminist lite”? I cannot go deeper into this because it would need a separate essay and is well beyond the scope of this article.

7 This is not to say that individual celebrities might not genuinely care about feminism, it is just that “their knowledge of actual feminist issues is inversely proportional to the reach of their voices”, says Andi Zeisler (2017). It could be also argued, as Nicola Rivers does (2017: p. 59), that there just might be exceptions to this rule and that Andi Zeisler’s view on the role that celebrity feminism is playing in shaping the current resurgence of interest in feminism is somewhat limited. It remains to be seen what kind of image of feminism will emerge from this.

8 As says Nicola Rivers: “Thus the focus of such feminism is invariably on individual experiences and women’s ‘potential’, rather than an analysis of what may limit or restrict such potential, insisting that women adapt to a one-size-fits-all feminism instead of promoting an understanding of feminism and women’s success that is broad enough to accommodate a multiplicity of women” (Rivers, 2017: p. 62).

(Ngozi Adichie, 2014) does not translate well into the T-shirts carrying the same slogan, especially if we consider the fact that those T-shirts could cost over 700 USD (And are made where? In sweatshops where other women are being exploited?), although it has been announced that a percentage of the profits from the sales of these T-shirts will go to a non-profit organisation (Hargrove, 2017). So—and this is perhaps the most important shift—feminism has officially become a thing. It is hot, it is sellable (Zeisler, 2017).

Another term is applicable here: the so called “empowertising” which lightly invokes feminism in acts of independent consuming; it “not only builds on the idea that any choice is a feminist choice if a self-labeled feminist deems it so, but takes it a little bit further to suggest that being female is in itself something that deserves celebration” (Zeisler, 2017). “Marketplace feminism has made equality look attractive, sexy, and cool. It’s transformed everyday behaviours and activities into ‘bold feminist statements’” (Zeisler, 2017). As confirmed by Nicola Rivers, “Zeisler rightly emphasizes the uncomfortable links between ‘marketplace-feminism’, capitalism, and the promotion of a neoliberal vision of the empowered individual, whereby any decision or choice can be presented as feminist, simply by virtue of the fact that a woman chose it” (Rivers, 2017: p. 59). It seems that everything a woman does is empowering —this kind of diluted feminism is obviously more acceptable, more attractive than its more concentrated version.⁹ A new term can be introduced here: instead of “consumer feminism” we are now dealing with “choice feminism”, “but the two ultimately come down to the same thing: that is, if a woman does something of her own free will—whether it’s pole-dancing or buying shoes—then it’s a feminist act” (Freeman, 2016).

The assumption of empowerment, according to Marjorie Fergusson (1990: p. 216), who deals with this and similar assumptions under the title of feminist fallacies,¹⁰ is that a positive shift in the gender balance of power would follow from changes in say media images (i.e., more independent women visible in high positions) and “trickle down”¹¹ as “more women who ‘made it’,—that is, achieved higher-status visibility in the public

9 See Freeman, 2016, for a humorous touch on this. She also says: “But the biggest irony about empowerment is not just how utterly meaningless—disempowered, I guess—it has become as a term, but how those who claim to feel it and those to whom it is sold are the ones who need it least.”

10 Her exploration of the theme is wider, in short, she describes this rhetoric “as fallacious on all three counts: media content, industry-gender structure, and the public imaging and record of powerful women in the public sphere” (Fergusson, 1990: p. 217).

11 The term—coined by Tressie McMillan Cottom (according to Zeisler, 2017)—can be used in economic theory as well. Both, economic theory and feminism, in this way suggest

sphere—passed on their gains, either directly or by acting as role models” (ibid.), which, of course, can hardly be the case. Moreover, the notion of such celebrities offering themselves as role models for their legions of (predominantly) female fans is capitalized on by adopting the language of feminism in order to sell their individual successes as aspirational and within the reach of all women (Rivers, 2017: p. 61).

This also leads us to another related issue: the supposition that women in powerful positions will—being women—do good things for other women. This is an all too simple—and incorrect—equating of women entering the profession with change (Schiebinger, 1999: p. 9; she refers to science, but this thought is applicable in general): “Many women who enter science have no desire to rock the boat. Women who consider themselves ‘old boys’ become the darlings of conservatives [...] Institutions gain respectability by showcasing a few high-profile women while ensuring that fundamentals do not change” (ibid.).

First of all, women are not automatically and in essence feminists. Being a feminist is a political identity, and political identities are “created in the flux of ideology and practice. They are not natural extensions of particular kinds of psyches or bodies” (Felski, 2000: p. 198). Second, the term “female” does not mean “feminist” and feminism is not a factor unifying all women. We cannot presuppose that all women are feminists and/or that it is only “the mystifying veil of male ideology that prevents them from recognizing their true interests” (ibid.).

This is also the problem of a much lauded, “kick-started” book by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo with the title *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* (2016),¹² which features role models as diverse as scientists, politicians, supermodels, empresses, spies, chefs and tennis players (Favilli and Cavallo, 2016). I think I must touch upon this as the book is addressed to young girls. It might not be quite clear if there is a tendency, a will, to create some sort of feminist heroines—if yes, we have said before that it is problematic to stress individual value of a woman, regardless of her political orientation, world-view, and others (e.g., Margaret Thatcher is included in the book). In addition to that, “retrospective empowerment” is, from historical point of view, something one has to be very careful with. The celebrated “feminine” usually represents “little more than the flip side of culturally dominant practices” and in romanticizing femininity, little is done “to overturn conventional stereotypes of men and women” (Schiebinger, 1999: p. 5).

that benefits will eventually flow downward from the richest or most privileged and everybody will benefit.

12 Since 2018 available in Slovenian as *Zgodbe za labko noč za uporniške punce*.

As says Sara Ahmed, here is the postfeminist phantasy, which praises individual success stories, and that is “that an individual woman can bring what blocks her movement to an end”, that there is no more sexism nor sexual oppression as feminism has done away with all this and hence “eliminated its own necessity” (Ahmed, 2017).

Moreover, to head towards conclusion, “defining ‘feminist’ as ‘a woman who lives the life she chooses’ is great if you’re a woman who already has choices” (Zeisler, 2017) —which means if you stand on a certain rung of the social scale. Furthermore, somebody may look as if he or she has made a free choice when in fact he or she enacts powerful cultural norms, hereby the agency of the less powerful is diminished and that of the powerful elite enhanced (Thwaites, 2017: pp. 64, 65). The issue of power and power balance invariably must enter here: the quite appropriate “definition” of feminism is that it is “fundamentally about resetting the balance of power” (Zeisler, 2017), which, in turn, means, that it “makes people who hold that power uncomfortable” (ibid.).

However, most of the problems that have necessitated feminist movements are still very much in place and, at the same time, there is a consumer embrace of feminism: “The fight for gender equality has transmogrified from a collective goal to a consumer brand” (Zeisler, 2017). And, moreover, “substracting misogyny from pop culture is not the same as adding feminism to it” (ibid.) —to which one must agree, although it would require some finer points and insights into the role of the social media and/or internet that are particularly dominant in this regard.

So, we do witness a move towards “feminism” as a part of media discourses, but this does not mean that the media themselves have become feminist, rather, they incorporated some feminism ideas, they emptied them of their radical force, as says Rosalind Gill, and they are selling them back to us as lifestyles (Gill, 2007: p. 41). Gender politics is somehow dislocated, feminist activism has been replaced by less confrontational forms, such as gender mainstreaming. In society at large, “the post-feminist wave gives way to neoconservatism in gender relations. The new generations of corporate-minded businesswomen and show-business icons disavow any debt or allegiance to the collective struggles of the rest of their gender while the differences in status, access and entitlement among women are increasing proportionally” (Braidotti, 2005: p. 3ff). Popular and consumer culture through the lenses of which the success of girls and women is interpreted, brings new (renewed) forms of (post)feminist dependencies. As succinctly put by Andy Zeisler, “there is a very fine line between celebrating feminism and co-opting it” (Zeisler, 2017).

This in turn allowed for the easy slippage between postfeminism as a time after feminism, and postfeminism as a backlash against the movement, whereby Angela McRobbie's theory of "double entanglement" suggests "[t]he 'taken into accountness' permits an all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal" (McRobbie, 2004: p. 28).

It is both overly simplistic and unhelpfully homogenizing to suggest that the arrival of the fourth wave and the resurgence of interest in feminist activism, particularly amongst young women, can be attributed to feminism being rendered more appealing through a form of commercial rebranding. However, it is certainly true that the renewed popularity of feminism(s) has both influenced and been influenced by the commercialization of the movement. In short, currently feminism sells, or at least those strands of feminism uncomplicatedly promoting the neoliberal principles of agency, choice, and empowerment do (Rivers, 2017: p. 57).

That is why, on one hand, wider discussions on feminism and its waves are needed, and, on the other, a certain carefulness in using (co-opting?) the term feminism (postfeminism?) is also required. It might be that this is not a direct response to feminist arguments, some are indeed included, but others are dismissed as no longer important: what matters now is lifestyle, choices, pleasures of being a woman. As Susan Faludi has put it, women do near the finish line, but we are distracted (the way Atalanta was by Hippomenes):¹³ "We have stopped to gather glittery trinkets from an apparent admirer. The admirer is the marketplace, and the trinkets are the bounty of a commercial culture, which has deployed the language of liberation as a new and powerful tool of subjugation" (Faludi, 2006: pp. xi-ii-xiv).¹⁴ Emphasis is put on personal struggles and women's independence rather than collective efforts; social problems are individualized; bodies, beauty, appearance or consumption have come to mean power, and others (Becker et al., 2016: p. 1220). This is all the more valid in the media aimed to younger audiences: "Debate on whether or not children's media contains feminist elements tends to center on the concept of 'girl-power' or 'pro-girl rhetoric' that champions girls and girl-culture by 'reclaiming the feminine and marking it as culturally valued'" (Hains, 2009: p. 98).¹⁵ There, as it seems, a whole lot of issues to be addressed here, among them there is a need "to interrogate how the problematic aspects of girl power's

13 See Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

14 Indeed, "the feminist ethic of economic independence has become the golden apple of buying power" (Faludi, 2006: p. xiv).

15 Even more, "following the rise of television's power feminist icons, power feminist dis-

commercialization reveal problems systemically inherent to power feminism” and “to understand how the politics of commercial media and marketing shape cultural conceptions of feminism” (Hains, 2009: p. 94).

Possible Conclusions

I have not been trying to give some kind of a typology of contemporary sub-forms of “feminism” here, such as “choice feminism”, “power feminism”, “celebrity feminism”, and others, because my main objective was to point that there is something awry with the dominant, media-regulated forms of “feminism” and that often, but not always, those forms pass as the essence of feminism to generations of girls and young women. These forms are, as put by Nancy Fraser, in a cruel twist of fate,

entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society. That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms. Where feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to “lean in”. A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised “care” and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy (Fraser, 2013).

The messages to children and young adults are very often sent in a neoliberal package, although it might be in the name of feminism. As I tried to show, it is important how feminism (or: “feminism”) is understood among younger girls (and, in fact, among children in general), here is where educational interventions are needed (and by that I do not mean “education for entrepreneurship” so popular lately in Slovene schools in various forms). It should be made clear that the gains women acquired in the last century or so are the result of struggles and efforts for equality and, in as much it is possible in the present moment, that feminism is not something unnecessary nor the beacon of the tyranny of political correctness.¹⁶

I cannot give conclusive answers here, but I think it is all the more important to reflect on this in the present moment—via media analyses,

course circuitously found an unexpected home in children’s media. In the late 1990s, the number of children’s television networks increased and the networks competed to stake claims to young viewers. In the process of devising new niche target audiences, the idea of the ‘tween’ girl developed through market research. The tween is a girl negotiating a location between childhood and adolescence, aspiring to be a teenager but still attached to toys and childhood’s trappings” (Hains, 2009: p. 90).

¹⁶ See for example the responses to movements such as #MeToo—men are presented as the true victims (not to mention that feminism is often blamed for all sorts of “aberrant” social phenomena).

curricular interventions and the like. “Along with the perpetuation and reinforcement of hierarchies between, and competition among, girls and women, the challenge to traditional femininities encapsulated by the desire to emulate Britney and Beyoncé—to be the alpha, the ‘it-girl’, the most popular girl – is not a challenge that most feminists would feel comfortable supporting” (Read, 2011: p. 11). I cannot but agree with that. And, to return to the title of this contribution: do we really want the topics of consumerism and celebrities to be hashtagged under “feminism for children”?

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