

Chapter 2

Feminism in the Third Wave

‘Unlike power feminism, [the third-wave feminism] is committed to a view of the personal (sexuality, body image, relationships, the impact of cultural representations) as political ... it seeks to represent young women as angry, in charge and taking action.’ (Aapola et al. 2005: 203)

‘The kind of feminism which is taken into account in this context is liberal, equal opportunities feminism, where elsewhere what is invoked more negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order.’ (McRobbie 2009: 14)

The ‘third-wave feminism’ emerged around the 1990s in the Western world, seeing itself as building on and expanding previous waves of feminism in contemporary times. It marks a shift away from second wave feminisms adherence to the notions of shared interests among women.¹ Feminists in the third wave are particularly careful to acknowledge and thank second wave feminists, but in the same breath, they argue that young people today live in times and under conditions that make political activity and cultural critique difficult to engender. Instead, they consider that the politics of issues such as beauty, sexuality, fashion and popular culture are more complex than what has been presented by earlier feminist analyses. Therefore, they work outside the power/victim framework, aiming to investigate the complicated picture of young feminism and to re-theorise gender (see for example Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Harris 2001, 2004; Aapola et al. 2005). As Aapola et al. (2005: 205) described, this wave is ‘more individual, complex and “imperfect” than previous waves. It is not as strictly defined or all-encompassing ... especially about personal choices.’

Truly, girls are now having more control over their lives, bodies and sexuality. They may have more freedom when it comes to education, employment and the management of their own finances, but they still face the age-old ‘double-standards’ of sexual morality. In her latest book *Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women*, Dyhouse (2013: 3) argues that it seems that women expressing their sexuality as freely as their male counterpart is still very much

¹Feminist educationalist Weiner (2006) provides an excellent and succinct articulation of ‘third-wave feminism.’

taboo. A disproportionate number of girls suffer more from bullying and sexual violence than boys, and face an ostensibly more insidious threat; a crushing social pressure to be perfect in every way (Dyhouse 2013: 1). She refers to the literature on how the language of ‘empowerment’ used in an attempt to mobilise young women today is something of a double-edged sword; liberal discourse that promotes ‘girl power’ and ‘choice’ is merely a smoke-screen by which deep-seated inequalities and oppressions can be obscured.

Bringing such a debate into discussion, this chapter aims to provide new perspectives and directions for feminism by exploring the diversity, tolerance for difference and contradiction, and multi-level praxis. I build up my conceptual framework of ‘third-wave feminism’ on the basis of Western feminist studies and theorising of young women’s activism in current times. By revisiting these studies, I attempt to portray new images of young women as the victors in late modern, globalised economies. In particular, I focus on the following four aspects to examine young women’s life experiences:

- (a) young women’s experience of the female body expression and sexuality;
- (b) young women’s experience in education and labour market;
- (c) young women’s position and power negotiation in their parental families;
- (d) young women’s political engagement and citizenship awareness.

The purposes here are twofold: Firstly, rather than simply reproducing the generational split that has characterised much of the framing of the feminist debate, I would like to call the issue of ‘young women’ into question whilst I explore it critically. I suggest that we should expand the concept of feminism: ‘feminism’ ought not to be seen only as legitimate when it takes the form of recognised activism; rather, it can have an important place in the ‘micropolitics’ of contemporary young women’s everyday lives. Secondly, by reviewing how girls and young women in many Western societies get involved with the contemporary feminism, I structure an analytical framework for comparatively understanding the ways in which how young Chinese women construct their meanings of young womanhood and how they engage in feminist activism. I do not intend to draw a shape dichotomy between China and the West, but what I would like to emphasise and to suggest here is that we should provide very careful and sophisticated analysis of the meaning of culture and religion in order not to deny difference with fixed notion of privilege and discrimination.

Bodily Practice and Sexuality

In feminist debates, sexuality and embodiment are one of the most contested spheres in young women’s lives. On the one hand, traditional discourses of female chastity and sexual vulnerability, even danger, are still very powerful in discussions of young women’s sexuality. On the other hand, there are new and conflicting discourses in circulation. These new discourses emphasise the centrality and

positivity of sexuality and a range of possible ways in which sexuality might be expressed for both (young) women and men. In psychological and sociological terms, the process of young people achieving sexual, physical and emotional maturity is deeply gendered. Therefore, for girls and young women, they attempt to delineate these gendered experiences in order to establish normative understandings of what it means to be a girl. If a young woman cannot meet, or reject these norms, she will often be excluded from prevailing definitions of femininity on the basis of their race, class, ethnicity, ability and sexuality (Aapola et al. 2005). Often these norms set up binaries to set young women apart, such as good/bad, virgin/slut, straight/gay and popular/nerd. The widespread anxiety and stress focused on girls' body images has reinforced the coercion of these norms and therefore affecting the lives of girls and young women.

Since the 1960s, Western feminist discourses have emphasised the rights of women to have control over issues that are related to female embodiment, such as sexual relationships, including those that are non-heterosexual, as well as contraception, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth (see Oakley 1981). Some Western feminists strongly criticise the way in which women's bodies are objectified, commodified and sexualised in the media and advertisements. For example, Lloyd (1996) argues that popular media always tends to reify dominant cultural standards of feminine beauty, rather than supporting the diversification of images of femininity when they circulate the images of women. Thin, perfect female bodies are repeatedly emphasised by media as the ideal images of young women. This has already resulted in young women's problems with self-esteem, severe psychological problems and eating disorders. Therefore, female embodiment produced by young women, in fact, has been distorted (Bordo 1993; Frost 2001).

For those slim and beautiful young women, they can always reap the economic and other benefits of the ever-increasing demand of the visual media for appealing images. Accordingly, they become more anxious of the passing age, facing growing pressures to modify their appearance in order to fulfill ever-changing feminine beauty ideals, which are practically impossible to attain. These ideas could be highly problematic in terms of reproducing Eurocentric, imperialist notions of beauty. As Mirza (1992) argued, the predominant belief that only white women are attractive will marginalise girls and women of colour to the place of 'the other' in the process of defining hegemonic notions of female beauty.

Studies have also shown that girls and young women in many developed First World societies are facing more choices of expressing their individualities through their bodies (i.e., Turner 1999; Frost 2001). This can be seen as a very positive site of self-expression, identity-creation and enjoyment. For example, Turner (1999) argues that today's Western culture is preoccupied with the body: its health, fitness, appearance and many other aspects. Yet, it is the questions of how to get it 'right' in relation to the female body that are often contradictory. On the one hand, young women are encouraged to overindulge themselves; on the other hand, they are expected to restrict themselves. They are told to diet as well as to enjoy consumption; to stop smoking as well as to try to drink alcohol; to feel good about one's body as it is, as well as to try to modify it through exercise and so on. It has

become increasingly confusing regarding how to maintain a balance of one's body since some young women's bodies are changing so rapidly.

According to Ganetz (1995: 78), the body is one of the most accessible sites for the experimentation to discover what feels best for oneself. For girls and young women, body is essential to the new cultural forms of expression. Young women will spend considerable energy on different types of 'beauty projects' that require various forms of body modification and adornment. While for many young women the careful application of cosmetic products such as make-up and hair colours, as well as conscious choices regarding clothing and hairstyles are an essential part of their style experimentation; for some, there are even more enhanced forms of body modification such as cosmetic surgeries (McRobbie 2000).

While girls' bodies may still often be objects of the gaze of others, they are also an increasingly important source of their own pleasure. For example, Ganetz (1995: 78) argues that girls and young women find 'personal enjoyment in their own embodied skills and strength.' They try to negotiate ways to express their sexuality, in which they do not need to compromise their independence and agency. They look for ways in which to enjoy their bodies regardless of the beauty norms surrounding them. Frost (2001) further provides a fuller claim, arguing that while maintaining their agency as individuals and citizens, girls and young women also constantly struggle to express their feminine sexuality in socially accepted ways.

Moreover, Western feminists argue that the freedom of expressing female sexuality is also associated with women's equal rights to enjoy sexual pleasure. By studying female sexual pleasure, McClelland and Fine (2008) argue that young women's expression of sexuality always exists at the very line of excess. Female sexuality has historically been linked with excess and fears of what lurks over the border of what is required, necessary and sufficient. Because young women are fundamentally and inherently sexually active, their sexuality always flaunts itself as 'much larger than is needed,' goes way 'beyond sufficient or permitted limits' and therefore is consistently cast as overindulgent. This has captured wider cultural attention and aroused feminist anxieties. Geronimus (1997) has offered an important critique of young women's free pursuit of sexual pleasure by arguing that although the sex young women want and the sex they have are typically intended to be decoupled from reproduction, they are considered too young to reproduce; too young to know enough about their bodies and their capacity; and too young to be sexually pleased and pleasurable.

In fact, as early as the nineteenth century, fear of excessive female sexuality had accelerated into a moral panic when large segments of the medical community believed that masturbation and sexual excess caused insanity and disease (Whorton 2001). However, the claim of the excessive sexuality in women has also been considered suspect because of its potential to undermine patriarchy—it reveals that women do not depend on men for sexual release and that procreative possibilities are not the only outcome of sexual activity (McClelland and Fine 2008).

Generally speaking, rescuing pursuits of pleasure has occupied Western feminist scholars for the much of the last thirty years (i.e., Hite 1987; Willis 1992). This has meant consistently decoupling female pleasure from reproductive capacities and

staking out women's rights to orgasms, contraception, reproductive choice, and relations with other women. Issues of pleasure have also, to a large degree, been supplanted in political organising by issues of sexual freedom—freedom from violence, coercion, homophobia, sterilisation, abuse and so on. Presently, feminists and reproductive rights activists have come to understand that women's sexuality and reproductive freedom must be fundamentally integrated into human rights campaigns. For example, Willis (1992) argues that women's access to abortion, contraception, condoms, childcare, employment and freedom from violence are increasingly recognised (if not enacted) as foundational to global social welfare.

The Education-Work Dilemma

In current times, globalisation, information technology, and a shift to a casual, flexible labour force have fundamentally changed employment practices and opportunities. These conditions have had particular effects on young people living in the West across the socioeconomic scale.

On the one hand, de-industrialisation and deregulation have brought massive, global youth unemployment and underemployment. For example, Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 16–17) argue that 'changing labour market structures have not simply provided positive incentives for young people to improve their qualifications; the sharp decline in opportunities for minimum-aged school-leavers in many areas has produced an army of reluctant conscripts to post-compulsory education.' Many Western countries have added other incentives, such as cutting unemployment benefits and other welfare measures for those under eighteen, to enable their young people to stay in school or join a training programme. They have also expanded tertiary education as another kind of post-secondary training (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

However, more and more of young people who go on to tertiary education or professional training are encountering circumstances where no amount of credentialing seems enough. Along with the rising number of university graduate students, many of these young people are finding that such emphasis on credentials and lifelong learning of transferable and flexible skills does not actually translate into security of employment. For example, based on many East and West European contexts, British youth researchers Wallace and Kovatcheva (1999: 88) argue that 'the outcome of education and training [has become] uncertain, unemployment is a risk and the proliferation of routes and opportunities through education and training has resulted in a very complex and rather open-ended situation for young people.' This is a finding also consistent throughout the United States, Australia and Canada (see Dwyer and Wyn 2001).

On the other hand, middle-class youth who may have always got the opportunity to go to university are perceived as the real beneficiaries of the new economy. Among the middle-class youth, young women have been seen as being more capable of seizing their opportunities when compared with young men.

Unsurprisingly, middle-class youth can rely on their families for a home, financial support, career modeling, professional contacts and advice, and even investments in their businesses. They can also draw on their status as well as their social circles for cultural capital, self-esteem and support. Yet, for those youth without these kinds of resources, flexibility is more difficult to operationalise. As the European Group for Integrated Social Research (2001) reported,

'In terms of the heterogeneity of the phenomenon of young adults according to social origin, educational level and employment situation, we...might distinguish between young people following 'choice biographies' ... and those who are marginali[s]ed through education and labour market processes and have no prospect of achieving an autonomous life-project.' (European Group for Integrated Social Research 2001: 105)

For young women in general, they are experiencing both the best and the worst of these conditions. In other words, they are to be found on the fringes of the formal economy, in part-time, casual, insecure, and unprotected labour; however, they are also found among the highest levels of the new professions, enjoying the very flexibility that limits many other of their generation. For example, labour sociologists Probert and Macdonald (1999: 22) have studied the impact of the changing labour market on the loss of full-time job for both young women and young men, finding that new education and employment opportunities have, in fact, grown enormously for young women than young men. With few remaining formal barriers in their way, young women are free to pursue a wide variety of education, training and work possibilities under the labour market dynamics. Rattansi and Phoenix (1997: 139) also suggest that the possibilities of the changed labour market have created greater self-confidence and independence in young women. The success of young women in outperforming young men in school and attaining high positions in the workplace has often been noted as evidence that these young women are the real winners in a changed economic world.

Dwyer and Wyn (2001) also find that young women are better able to incorporate change and redirection into their life plans. They are seen as more psychologically robust and able to both adapt and 'grow up' more quickly. Young women tend to leave home earlier and are less likely to return once they have made this break. They are sometimes perceived to be more ambitious than young men, and also more optimistic about their futures generally and about their employment prospects in particular (Jones 1995; Helve 1997; Rudd and Evans 1998; Miles 2000).

A large-scale Australian research project carried out in 1998 involved 14,804 young women, found that 75 % of those surveyed aspired to more educational qualifications (with only 7 % stating they definitely would not want this), and 91 % wanted children by the time they were thirty-five with 60 % desiring full-time paid work at the same time, and only 4 % desiring no paid work outside the home at the same time (Wicks and Mishra 1998). In an Australian Women's Studies Association conference, feminist theorist Bulbeck (2001) has reflected some of these results in her important comparative research looking at how young Australian women in 1970 and today imagined their future lives. She found that

nowadays the majority of young women imagine entering higher education and then having a lifetime of paid work. They are fairly optimistic about combining work and motherhood. Yet, in 1970 the majority of young women did no mention having a job or progressing to higher education when discussing their aspirations.

Canadian sociologists Looker and Magee (2000) have also carried out a large-scale project with a diversity of respondents, finding that young Canadian women have somewhat higher expectations than young men by stating more frequently that they realistically expect to enter fairly high-status positions. The vast majorities expect to go into professional, semiprofessional, or managerial jobs; 21 % anticipate a service or sales job; very few expect to end up in unskilled or low-status jobs.

While the Australian study asked what work the respondents would like, the Canadian research inquired about what they 'realistically expect.' Interestingly, these studies show a similarity in their response rates, which suggest that young women do expect to get what they hope for. Hughes-Bond's (1998) qualitative research with working-class, rural, Canadian young women rounds out this picture. She argues that '[young women] want jobs which they enjoy, and which offer them the opportunity for creativity, skill development, financial autonomy and stability, and an expanding degree of responsibility and power' (Hughes-Bond 1998: 289).

In other contexts, education researcher Basit (1996: 231) studies working-class, British-Asian, Muslim young women, offering some insights into the specific nature of a preferred career. She describes the participants in her research as 'aspired to a wide range of lucrative careers with high status. Some mentioned the jobs of doctors, lawyers, accountants and pharmacists ... A few girls wanted to start their own businesses, and one girl wished to be a pilot.'

Apparently, class, ethnicity, and rurality do not cut across these aspirations in straightforward ways. As Walkerdine et al. (2001: 78) noted, while more privileged young women may have access to knowledge about the requirements of professional work, and expectations of higher rewards, structural disadvantage does not mean one 'could not hope for a secure and interesting job.' So while family migration experiences might strengthen aspirational resolve (Basit 1996; Wicks and Mishra 1998), or geographical isolation might make prospects more traditional (Warner-Smith and Lee 2001), it seems that a diverse group of young women in a range of locations imagine themselves to have better work options than previous generations, and they take employment seriously as part of their identity work.

Therefore, there is a need for a critical ideological shift to accompany these massive changes to youth education and employment. This ideology seeks to construct a new subject for these circumstances. Traditional ways of being a worker, being young, or being a student are no longer relevant. De-industrialisation, globalisation, and widespread labour force insecurity require new ways of speaking, thinking and acting for youth. Most importantly, the current market demands young people who are not only highly skilled, but are also flexible. Those most able to succeed in this climate are young people who can turn tremendous insecurity into freedom and autonomy. These are youth who are qualified, skilled, and well-supported enough to secure highly paid work (or create their own business) in

new, risky industries, survive company collapses, and reinvent themselves as markets and industries shift.

Being Daughter and Being Wife

The changing patterns of schooling and the protraction of the education to work transitions which have been discussed so far have led to an extension of the period during which young people remain dependent on their families or on the state. As financial independence through employment provides young people with the resources to leave the parental home and establish more autonomous patterns of residence, extended school to work transitions and fragmented patterns of involvement in the labour market also have an impact on patterns of young people's dependency on their parental families.

In many Western societies, adult status tends not to be conferred solely on the basis of successful completion of the school to work transition, but can be linked to the completion of a series of linked transitions. For example, Coles (1995) suggests that there are three inter-related transitions made by young people, some of which must be achieved before being accepted into adult society. Aside from the transition from school to work, young people may make a 'domestic transition,' involving a move from the family of origin to the family of destination, and a 'housing transition' involving a move to residence away from the parental (or surrogate parental) home. These three transitions are inter-related in young people's life experiences. One dimension impacts on other life events: for example, an education to work transition which is interrupted by unemployment is likely to affect the stage at which young people make domestic and housing transition. The extension of transitions, together with changes in typical sequences of events has implications for the establishment of identity and for processes of individualisation and risk (Coles 1995).

For example, recent social changes, which have led to an enforced increase in the period of youth dependency, have resulted in a situation in which the future is often seen as filled with risk and uncertainty: in such circumstances, it can be difficult for young people to maintain a stable identity (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Changes in family structures in some developed Western countries together with the introduction of social policies that reduce young people's access to housing support, have represented a new set of hazards to be negotiated by today's youth. While those with access to the appropriate social and economic resources remain less vulnerable to the consequences of failure, others who lack family support can face extreme difficulty. In this context, it can be seen that young people's ability to make successful transitions to adulthood is still powerfully conditioned by 'traditional' inequalities such as class and gender (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Thus, studying young people's family models and their relation with their families will be helpful in understanding young person's (especially young girl's) subjectivities and their changing positions in society.

Firstly, the provision of the material, cultural and social resources within a particular family environment will have a strong impact on a young person's access to choices. Without such resources, it will be very difficult for young people, even those ambitious ones, to negotiate their way towards adulthood. Any changes in the family sphere might change the current cultural understandings and formulations of youth (Thomson et al. 2003).

Secondly, the composition of family relationships has been central in defining young people's development. According to traditional psychological theories on adolescent development (i.e., Erikson 1968), girls have been seen as more dependent on other people, particularly their families, than boys. It is also commonly believed that it is necessary for a young person to 'rebel' against adult authorities, such as his/her parents, in order to demonstrate a sufficient level of independence.

Yet, these presuppositions about the necessity of rebellion for reaching a successful adulthood are highly problematic. Feminist critiques claim that there are serious problems within traditional developmental theories since they actually refer mainly to white, male, middle-class young people. Girls, young women and working-class youth have been shown as curious exceptions in the male-centered model, and cultural differences have not usually been taken into account (Aapola et al. 2005). For example, ethnic background will make a difference in young women's attitudes towards their own autonomy. Woollett and Marshall's (1996) study in the British context finds that girls from Asian backgrounds would take their whole family community more into consideration when making decisions, rather than only emphasising their own individualistic goals. Jordan et al. (1991) argue that girls could indicate a high score on levels of independence, but they also emphasise the importance and warmth of their relationships with their families, particularly with their mothers. Their independence has not been gained by rebelling against their parents. Their study also suggested that girls tend to internalise their control, and try to take into account the feelings of others in estimating the consequences of their actions (Jordan et al. 1991).

Certainly, families play a particularly important role in the construction of young womanhood. Being of primary importance in determining the futures of their children, family has historically interacted with other social institutions in the process of shaping youth transitions of girls and young women (Wyn and White 1997). During the past few decades, when family patterns in many Western societies have experienced considerable changes, these changes would inevitably influence young women's exercise of power. For example, social change theorists have summarised that the percentage of full-time homemakers has decreased considerably (Gerson 1991); divorce rates have multiplied compared to the first part of the twentieth century (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995); many young people are postponing marriage (Gordon 1994); the proportion of single people has increased considerably, particularly within urban areas; and there are also more single parents, and many of them are young women (Gordon 1994). All these changes indicate that there has no longer been a single culturally dominant family model, and the diversification of family models is re-positioning young women in the societies under the social changes.

Furthermore, marriage and parenthood is another important factor in young women's identity construction and youth-adulthood transition. Although marriage and parenthood has traditionally been regarded as the 'definitive step to adulthood' (Kiernan 2001: 11), in recent years there has been a greater separation of housing and domestic transitions. Wyn and White (1997) argue that domestic transitions remain a particularly significant step in the attainment of full adult status due to an underlying shift in responsibilities: the young adult is no longer the responsibility of their parents and comes to assume responsibility for others. It has also been suggested that the idea of a clear shift from dependence to independence is an oversimplification. A pattern of reciprocity is often established before young adults leave home and is continued after the marriage (Wyn and White 1997).

For most young people living in the West, marriage can serve as a principle reason for leaving home. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was even 'almost unheard of for young people to leave home prior to marriage' in many working class communities (Leonard 1998: 61). However, in recent years, increased number of young married couple began to live with their parents, and the link between leaving the parental home and marriage, as well as between marriage and their own parenthood, has weakened (Jones and Bell 2000; Heath and Cleaver 2003).

In the UK, for example, Haskey (2005) argues that around three in ten 16- to 59-year-olds (about 4 million people) can be described as people who are living apart together (LAT), with about half of these being in the 16-24 age group. Around six in ten LAT couples say that they are happy to maintain these arrangements permanently (Heath and Cleaver 2003). Heath and Cleaver (2003) also show that in the UK, rates of cohabitation doubled between 1980 and 2000 so that the majority of young people experience cohabitation during their 20s. They refer this as a key change over the last few decades, especially in northern Europe, North America and Australia.

Cohabitation can be temporary, experimental relationships, or may be the first stage in a long-term relationship leading to marriage or may signal a rejection of marriage as an institution (One plus One 2004). To take the case of Britain (which is fairly typical of the northern European countries), of those living with partners for the first time, around seven in ten will be cohabiting for an average of two years with such relationship as experimental (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). Cohabitation (often a second or third cohabitation) is often a prelude to marriage: in the late 1990s around 80 % of married women had cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage (Haskey 2001).

Protracted transitions and the increased popularity of cohabitation have resulted in a delay in the age of marriage and led to a reduction in rates of marriage. In the European Union between 1971 and 2002, the average age of first marriage rose from 26 to 30 for men and from 23 to 28 for women. While women have tended to marry at an earlier age than men, those whose parents have divorced and those who live with step-parents tend to marry early (Kiernan 2004) and class-based differences in the average age of marriage have been observed in a wide range of countries, partly due to the tendency of the middle classes to remain in education for longer periods of time.

Similar differentials exist in terms of childbearing with the longer transitions to work, which are more characteristic of the middle classes, tending to result in delays in family formation. On average, in Europe there is a gap of three to seven years between a female entering their first full-time job and having their first child (Nicoletti and Tanturri 2005), although overall fertility rates have fallen and significant variations still exist between countries. For example, in Italy and Greece, late labour market entry significantly delays family formation while in the UK, Denmark and Finland the impact is relatively small, partly due to a greater tendency for childbirth to precede marriage (Iacovou and Berthoud 2001).

Across all social classes, the average period of time between marriage and birth of the first child has increased. Among women in Europe, just 5 % of 20-year-olds have children, rising to 28 % of 25-year-olds (Iacovou and Berthoud 2001). There are strong variations between countries with around one in four 21- to 25-year-olds having children in the UK, Sweden, Greece and Austria, compared to little more than one in ten in Italy, Netherlands and Spain (Iacovou and Berthoud 2001). Along with all-age fertility rates, the numbers of teenage mothers has declined in all advanced societies, although the USA, some Eastern European countries and the UK still have levels of teenage pregnancy that are far higher than countries that are similar in other respects (Selman 2003). In all those Western countries, those from lower social classes and those without advanced educational qualifications are more likely to have children at an early age (Nicoletti and Tanturri 2005). For example, in the UK, the average age at birth of the first child was 23.7 among those from semi- and unskilled backgrounds, compared to 27.9 among those from professional and managerial families. Rates of teenage pregnancy were ten times higher in the lowest social class as compared to the highest (Social Exclusion Unit 1999).

Political Engagement, Young Citizens and Feminist Agenda

In many Western countries, it has been observed that young people has shown relatively low levels of interest in party politics with the evidence that they tend to be less likely than adults to register a vote and have a weaker commitment to any political party (see Buckingham 2000).

For example, in Australia, where registration and voting is compulsory with non-compliance leading to an automatic fine, young people are still less likely than adults to register or vote. In 2004, 82 % of 17- to 25-year-olds were registered to vote compared to 95 % of the overall adult population. In a survey of senior school students, Print et al. (2004) asked respondents if they intended to vote in Federal elections when they reached the age of 18, 87 % said that they would definitely or probably vote, with females being more inclined to vote than males. Asked if they would vote if it were not compulsory, one in two said that they were not.

In the UK, of those eligible to vote, just 36 % said that they were 'absolutely certain' to vote in the next General Election (Haste 2005). According to the UK Electoral Commission (MORI 2005), 31 % of 18- to 24-year-olds said that they

never or rarely vote in General Elections compared to 9 % of the voting age population. Bynner et al. (2003) research has indicated a similar finding of young people's disinterest in politics, showing that while levels of voting tend to be similar among males and females, rates of participation are higher among mid-aged non-manual employees compared to manual workers and lowest among the younger ones who had never had a job. In particular, levels of voting in the UK are very low among 18- to 24-year-old African Caribbeans and members of ethnic minority groups swayed by politicians' willingness to address minority issues (Sagger 2000).

In Canada, around seven in ten 18- to 24-year-olds typically voted in the 1970s; however, turnout was down to around four in ten by the mid-1980s (Gauthier 2003). Gauthier continues that such decline has reflected the end of a political era in Canada, where there had long been a relatively weak government and a strong opposition of calling for lively and responsive party politics. The 1984 election of the Progressive Conservatives signaled the emergence of neoliberalism, a preoccupation with the economy and a shift away from concerns with social justice. With young people being attracted by issues of equality and alienated by fiscal matters, these changes were directly responsible for a reduction in the youth vote.

In terms of participation in the formal political process, young people's professed lack of interest in politics is reflected in levels of party membership and their voting behaviour. Taking the UK as an example, statistics on the membership of its main political parties show that young people's impression that party politics is largely the preserve of the middle aged is correct. In 2004, less than 8 % of UK members of Parliament were under the age of 40 with the median age having remained fairly stable since 1951. In Australia and some Eastern European countries, the age profile of elected representatives is more balanced, although there is no direct evidence of a link between the ages of elected representatives and young people's interest in politics.

By observing young people's increasing disinterest in politics in the West, Furlong and Cartmel (2007) express their concerns that low levels of participation in elections among younger members of the electorate may reflect a lack of knowledge about contemporary political issues for Western youth. As they argued, '[i]n many respects, the biggest incentive to vote comes from a belief in the ability to influence a political agenda: it is the main opportunity for citizens to have their voices heard and to affect policy. Yet, young people were often cynical about the chances of their having an impact on national agendas.' (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 130) Findings of young people's voting behaviour in these Western contexts seem to suggest that it has been witnessed the ending of a political era in contemporary Western countries. The evidence also suggests that changes in the current political agenda in the West could re-mobilise young people in general.

Among contemporary Western youth, young women nowadays are also facing radical changes in their opportunities for livelihood, community affiliations and political engagements from those that existed a generation ago. These opportunities are central to the meanings and practices of citizenship.

Thomas Marshall (1950) is considered to be the foundational thinker in the area of citizenship studies in the West. He argues that citizenship encompasses three kinds of rights that are conferred on individuals in society in exchange for their responsibility to that society. These include civil rights, such as freedom of thought and religion, social rights such as economic security and political rights, such as voting and standing for office. Marshall expects that the state would be central in guaranteeing people's social rights, and from this strong state support would develop a responsible citizenry engaged fully in their communities. Although civil rights and political rights are also safeguarded by the state, social rights is seen to be a more strong grounding. The traditional theorising of citizenship also emphasises on the balance between rights and responsibilities. Implicit in the contract between citizen and state is mutual obligation.

However, the traditional conceptualisation of citizenship has been fundamentally challenged by both Western feminists and youth theorists. Both of them point out that the citizen imagined by this framework is an adult male of privilege who is recognised as a rational actor in the public sphere (i.e., Lister 2003; Richardson 1998). Young women are often concerned that opportunities for assertiveness and the political impact of a new emphasis on girls' power have become reduced to empty marketing slogan (Harris 2001). Arguing that both women and youth have been excluded from the public sphere, feminists draw their critique to this conceptualisation of citizenship, suggesting that it is required to assess gendered power within family, marriage and sexuality in order to provide an alternative to the public/private split (Lees 2000).

In her book *The Sexual Contract*, British feminist and political theorist Pateman (1988) powerfully analyses how the social contract, on which democratic governance rests, is premised on the sexual control of women by men. She traces the development of relationships which are based upon equality—the *social* contract—and discusses the distinction between social contracts that are typical of labour relations and sexual contracts that are typical of marriage relationships. She also attempts to demonstrate how sexual contracts are based upon relationships which have been grounded in female subordination and slavery. By critically analysing New Right educational reforms in many Western industrialised nations (especially in the UK, Australia and the US), Western feminist scholars have expressed their concerns about the role of education in the construction of national identity (see for example, Arnot and Dillabourgh 2000). They argue that these reform initiatives should serve to reconstitute the professional teacher as the moral authority on issues of 'nationhood' and national identity. Yet, questions of gender, race, class, and/or sexuality and disability and the kinds of national identities s/he is expected to shape are not addressed in the context of the 'standards/competent' teachers and therefore women's roles remain to be the margins in many national curriculum agendas.

In this sense, what feminists interested are not only in women's citizenship in relation to men's, but also in relation to women's affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups, their ethnicity, origin, urban or rural residence, global and transnational positioning. They will always trace the discursive shifts in the meanings of the concepts, rights, needs, justice, dependency, entitlements and

responsibility to expose the relations of power which configure the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the polity (see Kenway and Langmead 2000).

If young people are to be regarded as a vanguard of social change (Fine and Mechling 1991), then the evidence of their political engagement in many Western socio-cultural contexts suggests that the future is essentially conservative. The family remains central to processes of political socialisation and to a large extent young people come to share the political concerns of their parents (Haerpfer and Wallace 2002). At the same time, with a wakening of the link between class and voting (which has been encouraged by the main political parties who appreciate the need to secure the votes of the 'centre') young people often want to know what issues they are supporting and may be reluctant to buy into packages of policies. However, although there is some evidence that the younger generation has a weaker commitment to traditional party politics, existing evidence does not necessarily support the conclusion that political orientations among the young have become individualised. Young people still express collective concerns, although they frequently seek personal solutions to problems which are largely a consequence of their socio-economic positions and expect politicians to act in accord with their interests and values.

An associated matter is the feminist label. In recent days, young women living in many societies have also indicated some similar characteristics in their engagement with feminism. For example, Gemzoe (2003) studies young women in Sweden, pointing out that young Swedish women believe that they are equal when they are still in education, but will only start to see the need of feminism when they get older and enter the job market and/or start family. They may espouse feminist ideals, such as equal pay for work, but they are reluctant to use the term 'feminist' to describe themselves.

Based on the context of Australia, O'Brien (1999) argues that young Australian women will separate themselves from the 'feminist' label, but in the meantime, they are engaged in developing support, solidarity and a cultural space for young women, as well as constructing a feminist critique of gender inequality. Also, these young women distance themselves from the stereotypes of feminists as 'man-haters,' lesbians, and masculine-looking women with hairy armpits and big boots. In the words of O'Brien (1999: 102), 'they simply engaged in local feminist practice without using the title in order to avoid being perceived in a negative and one-dimensional manner.'

In these contexts, young women find the label of 'feminist' problematic, but this does not mean that they are not engaged in feminist practice. They are still drawing on feminist resources and strategies, shaping its agenda and grappling with its unfinished business. The principles and aims espoused by young women are feminist in nature, and their identities and worldviews are deeply shaped by feminist frameworks (Baumgardner and Richards 2000). Griffin (2001: 184) comments that when it comes to the feminist discussion of young people's lives, second wave feminist scholars will always rest on a distinction between 'us' (adult women and 'feminism') and 'them' (young women). On the one hand, adult women want to acknowledge the feminist practices which they feel young women are engaging in,

but on the other hand, they feel they have to be critical of their new kinds of approaches.

In the second wave feminists' eyes, being a feminist must mean being part of a pre-defined political movement; yet, these young self-proclaimed feminists sometimes want the kudos, or the benefits, without the collective work. For example, Summers (1994) criticises young women for being 'ungrateful,' in that they claim feminism as something that is owned by the previous generation and can only be passed on to appropriate heirs. Garner (1995: 99) also argues that their special ways of feminist work (for example, when young women enact feminism by pressing the charge of sexual harassment) actually represents the 'creation of a political position based on the virtue of helplessness.' The development of a feminist identity among young women is actually 'problematic' because it is based on 'priggishness,' 'a fear of sexuality' and 'disempowerment' (Garner 1995: 99). Garner (1995) further argues that this kind of activism is in fact a misunderstanding of the politics of feminism laid out by the second wave.

By observing young women in these neo-liberal Western societies, many scholars have all noticed that 'feminist' labels have no longer referred to 'power and pleasure,' but brought constraints among young women. Thus, some pioneer scholars pointed out that contemporary young women may face problems as they attempt to put second wave gains into action (such as 'going to the cops' and using new laws and policies), or they may confront with obstacles that are less structural but just as real, such as ideological barriers. As Harris (2004) argued, young women think they have already been empowered, or so deeply in crisis that they struggle to come up with even personal solutions to their problems. In fact, on the one hand, the rejection of the label amongst young women bespeaks a conservative or perhaps reactionary fear of the radical-lesbian-man-hating-militant stigma, as in, 'I'm not a feminist, but I support women's right to social, political and economic equality.' However, on the other hand, the rejection of the label 'feminist' is often code for a rejection of an elitist practice perpetuated by some of feminism's middle-class, heterosexual, white female founders (and their daughters). Here the refusal of the label is a politicised gesture critiquing a feminism that restricts itself to the discussion of a singular idea of oppression derived from the perception of sexual difference as its primary cause.

Conclusion: Feminism Becomes Young

Nowadays, parenting ideologies have changed dramatically in terms of their family education towards their children, particularly towards girls. More parents are likely to negotiate with their children over decisions that affect them, rather than dictating unequivocally what they can or cannot do. The changing parental attitudes have meant that generational positions within families have been redefined. Individuals are required to make continuous decisions about various aspects of their lives even at a relatively young age. Viewing their children as autonomous subjects, many

parents are willing to encourage their children's individual agency, letting them construct their own lives in an increasingly confusing web of choices. Therefore, it seems to be good for girls since the traditional patriarchal family model and the monolithic family ideology as disadvantageous for daughters have been challenged.

Yet, the process of developing a more egalitarian family model is still slow. And gender-related power also exists in the public sphere. For example, young mothers, even when they have full-time jobs outside of the home, have to continue to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities. Meanwhile, most fathers, however, only 'help out' with the household chores. Thus, for feminists, this unequal gender division of housework and the invisibility of domestic violence against women and its dire consequence still need to be criticised.

As what I have reviewed above, this chapter has sketched the 'third wave' feminist agenda on the basis of girls and young women in many affluent First World societies. By outlining young women's expression of body and sexuality, their experience of education and work, their changing positions within parental families and their expectations of their future families as well as their increasing engagement with political affairs and citizenship development within these contexts, I argue that today's girls and young women have regarded feminism as a plain fact of their daily life.

Compared with older generations of women, contemporary young women reject what they deem the 'victim feminism' of their elders (see Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Budgeon 2001; Rich 2005) but feel confident enough to measure feminist positions against their lived experiences. While claiming natural entitlement to freedom from sexual and racial violence, they are also shifting themselves from traditional feminist activism to something more diffuse and less organised. In this sense, feminism is increasingly demanded to be endorsed as a source of personal identity than a tool for political activism at once. And this indicates that the birth of 'young feminism' discourse is becoming more and more closely relates to young women's cultural and political actions providing them with differentiation and emancipation.

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