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## **Girls, Youth Work, Spaces: Resurgent Feminist Approaches**

**Janet Batsleer**

There has – in one thread of youth and community work- been a long-standing desire to link our practice in the most excluded and precaritised neighbourhoods with working-class social movements which also seek to turn back and away from sexism, racism and other oppressive forces (Batsleer 2013). It is in this context- as such movements against neoliberalism are gathering strength again and being reframed – that I was invited in 2017 by two wonderful projects to act as a consultant to their work. The first is based with Youthlink Scotland and has involved an oral history of the links between youth work and the women’s movement in Scotland ([www.scotswummin.org](http://www.scotswummin.org)). The second was the publication by a Brussels NGO called Childcare Activists of a pamphlet called: 'Filles et autres minorises...des jeunes comme les autres? Vers un travail de jeunesse accessible a tou(s) (tes)?' (Girls and other minorities: youth like the others? Towards a youth work accessible to all?' [www.activistchildcare.org](http://www.activistchildcare.org)). Created by Eleanor Miller and Mouhad Reghif, this study highlights sexism, racism and intersectionality as key issues for street work in the current context. At the launch of the booklet In May 2017 I was invited to speak to a Conference of street workers and key figures in Francophone NGO’s from Belgium and France. What follows is a brief extract from my presentation:

‘According to UNICEF (young) girls and women all over the world in the world are using their power, Girl Power, especially during the transition to adolescence, in spite of the many obstacles they face. From an early age, girls are regarded as consumers, but also as citizens. They are however also being pressurised by societal expectations which suggest that one of the fundamental roles of youth is to solve the problems and injustices generated by our capitalist system.

Case studies from my recent research in the UK as project lead for the *Partispace* project ([www.partispace.eu](http://www.partispace.eu)) have led me to re-consider the forms of sexism that adolescent girls and young women face today. In the research data, we see girls’ rejection of injustice, their desire for equality and access to the same activities as boys, and affirmation of their activism and power. I want to highlight four themes:

Firstly, the theme of Equality of Access and Activity:

In one city in the *Partispace* study, a group of young women were offered a ‘separate space’ by social workers because they were considered ‘at risk’ of pregnancy and because of their sexual(ised) behaviour. They rejected this ‘offer’ by social workers saying they wanted to join the same opportunities as boys in the youth club and not be separated to do the ‘girly’ activities outlined for them specially.

In another city, young women were not present at all as local activists in relation to the cultural scene, which was very clearly and positively presented as multicultural in light of the resurgent nationalisms in Europe. However, when the spaces of the musical scene were discussed, some activists stated that it was important to know the darker and more intimate spaces where ‘one could take a girl.’

The persistence of association between being a girl and powerful sexuality continues to limit young women’s access to opportunities and to shape their experience.

Secondly, the theme of young women as the most responsible of citizens:

A group of young women in one of the cities took on the role and title of ‘Young Agents’. Their aim was to take initiatives to support developments within the city. The so-called ‘Young Agents’ is a group of about ten girls between 15 and 17 years of age who have been together for about three years. At first, they liked to sit and talk to each other and participated in different groups in the local youth centres. Then they joined a number of courses, for example in leadership, organized by local youth consultants. Next, they focused their attention on newly arrived refugee children. Youth Agents made contact and tried to find happy, enjoyable and useful activities to do with these children. In this city, many leisure facilities offer ‘welcome’, which means that local youth can accompany young refugees to sessions, skateparks and language learning sessions. Such actions are still strongly associated with the ‘good citizenship’ many young women practice as an aspect of successful caring femininity (Kennelly, 2009; Skourtes, 2015).

Thirdly, the theme of racialised harassment and the focus of this harassment on girls:

Some girls are feeling targeted and harassed ‘as if we are all terrorists’ and they place the blame on the mass media for what is happening to them. One project made a film which showed the experience of a girl who had been harassed because she chose to wear a headscarf and how her friends in the youth club supported her. One of the Somali parents who came to see the film said she did not want her daughter to come to the youth club at first because it

was distracting from her school work but now that she had seen what her daughter was doing in the club, she was very proud of her daughter. All the girls involved had been motivated by a desire to promote the acceptance of Islam. They also discussed how their identification with their religion became stronger as a result of harassment: 'My head covering is my freedom.' One of the girls said: 'I am my scarf.' An audience member replied, 'You are more than your headscarf.' Another young Somali woman did not like school and was always in trouble because 'she could not sit still'. She said she had had anger problems and her mother thought she had Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). However, through the Girltalk club she had taken up boxing and running and football. All of these girls said they liked to be part of the projects that have changed mindsets for them.

This showed how youth work which creates spaces to unsettle media stereotypes can also, through new forms of practice, create new and non-stereotypical understandings and opportunities for girls.

Fourthly, the theme of challenging sexual violence:

One girls group is actively challenging the sexual exploitation of children and is part of a larger Youth network. A young woman, participant Z, cites early experiences at home and in her family as the start of her fight for girls' rights. She says: 'I think that being an activist in the first place I do not start with politics, it starts with personal things. I would always advocate for my own rights in my family life'. She knows that it was always hard, but she always had a very strong sense of justice and right and wrong and she could not ignore that.'

How, then, are young women positioned today? They are seen mainly as consumers and the target of marketing strategies. Examples of 'pinkification' can be seen everywhere. Even objects such as bicycles or Lego have turned pink. There is a proliferation of possible purchases. In the transition to womanhood, these purchases and associated commodification become more intense and they are focused intensely on the young woman's body as it changes and develops into adolescence. Consequently, all these pressures of the market produce intense anxiety and trouble for girls, whose lives and bodies do not fully comply with the standards that are proposed by the market; and whose life and body is it that is precisely and perfectly normal in any case? This normative pressure creates a generalised anxiety. This anxiety is lived with most terror in peer groups, where this anxiety is often transformed by psychological projection into group pressure and intimidation either intragroup or between groups.

Secondly, while being a consumer, the girl /young woman is also considered a very responsible person, an active citizen. She is the 'can-do' girl. The Power of the Girls is being spoken about all over the world. I do not deny the reality that girls are agentic and can change their lives to some extent. I want to highlight how the problems of the system and their resolution are continually being projected onto young people who are seen as hope for the future. So the demands for changes in the system *here and now* are avoided.

Thirdly, the girl remains a sexual figure - she (alone it seems) is the embodiment of sexuality. It is women who must seduce, in order to attract; indeed who do so without even intending to, by their bodily presence alone. This remains the real hypothesis, which sustains both pornography and the niqab at the extremes. I do not want to deny at all the power and importance of sex and sexuality among teenagers. But this sexuality is the target of marketing and control strategies which position all sexualities, masculine and feminine, in limiting and potentially abusive ways.

The three aspects of femininity that girls must encounter: commodification, the responsibility of being an active citizen and solving social problems, and control through sexuality form a foundation for our youth work. We always start with the common experience of being girl, the aspects which create limitations and difficulties for them, and we put these into our work and engagement with girls in a range of creative ways, in order to address them together, in dialogue. The aim of our work is always to develop the potential of young women to support each other, as a group of peers, against the pressure they face and to support them in recognising their potential.

We do not start from a point of view that girls are in deficit. We begin with the strength and power of the girls, of course, without positioning them as the redeemers of society. Youth work is a practice in which the relationships between facilitators and young women are chosen and not imposed. The facilitator should encourage curiosity, and should investigate the themes alongside the young women... she must listen carefully to the ideas as well as the problems of young women.

The word sexism was forged in the second wave of the women's movement and it is interesting to ask the question why it is a word that is not used so much either among researchers or practitioners (Ahmed, 2015). Sometimes those who give a name to the problem themselves become the problem. It seems that they have created the problem they have named. Nevertheless, the act of naming this problem which has no name allows us to

discuss something. The act of naming creates the possibility of new understandings, What is called out when we call out sexism today? Among young women there is a sense of constraint in their lives - in the family, in the domestic domain, in social circles and in the sphere of politics. While most girls' compliance is compensated for in exam results, it appears that they are less noticeable than boys in the classroom and when they are finally noticed they immediately become a problem, they become hyper-visible. If they make noise, and even more if they are violent, they pose a very serious problem. Girls / young women achieve (for the most part) higher exam results than their male counterparts, but this fact does not serve them well when they go to work. They earn less than men, especially after they have children, they do not normally have the same status at work. Of course, girls and young women are more present in social actions than boys. They are most of the volunteers. But at leisure activities, sport, music they are not most often players or DJs but spectators. The meaning of 'the second sex' has not disappeared.

And this reality is also present in cultural associations, clubs, youth work and street work. The girls are often at the side not at the centre of the activities. They are less numerous, less visible and less noisy and, as a result, their needs are less addressed. In early adolescence, bodily changes and psychological developments quickly become a source of pressure. It is at this point that mental health crises emerge. We need to situate these crises in the context of sexism. Anger and the strategies that girls adopt to contain anger are a very significant source of mental health crises. Self-harm and depression are apparently more common among young women than among young men who mostly direct their anger outside. Later in adolescence young women must meet the double standard, when they become sexually active, and especially if they become pregnant as a teenager. Sexism also makes their presence difficult in some employment settings. They are not taken seriously. And they encounter explicit and implicit constraints. Student culture is a feminist target because of the sexual harassment that is expressed everywhere, as much in university as in marginalised and disadvantaged communities. But the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are stigmatized by symbolic violence. It seems that it is impossible to earn funding for work in these communities without the words 'preventing terrorism' or something of that kind. Anti-sexism strategies, promoting equality, destabilizing sexist ideologies and affirming differences and intersectionalities, even though they attract less funding, remain vital therefore and are not to be confused with 'The Girl Effect.'

## References:

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## Endnote

A event is in preparation (in connection with the move of the Feminist Webs archive to the People's History Museum) which will bring together all interested in the themes discussed here. It will also connect with the marking of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's partial enfranchisement in the UK in 1918. Please contact Janet Batsleer ([J.Batsleer@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Batsleer@mmu.ac.uk)) if you would like to be involved with this. Further information will be posted as it develops on the Feminist Webs website and newsletter.