Feminism Today

The Personal Is Still Political

By Ann Farmer

When registering for her first undergraduate classes at New York University (NYU) in fall 2002, Jill Filipovic discovered that she'd been automatically assigned to a women's studies class. Her uncertainty about taking it grew when she had to fill out a questionnaire on the first day. It asked whether she identified herself as a feminist.

"I looked for 10 minutes at this stupid question, wondering if I should circle yes or no. I circled no," recalls Filipovic, 24, who had gone to a suburban Seattle high school where feminism was not considered a cool thing, especially as it applied to the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. "Growing up, there were stereotypes attached to it," she says, "that feminists are crazy, man hating, and hairy-legged. That was a disincentive for many girls and certainly for me."

Her identity shift began that very night when she queried her 16-year-old sister and discovered that even she wasn't afraid to call herself a feminist. "I said to myself, 'get over it,'" recalls Filipovic, who ended up minoring in gender and sexuality studies. She's currently a law student at NYU with aspirations of a career in international human rights focused on reproductive health and family planning. Her writing has been published in the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* and elsewhere. And Filipovic helps maintain an Internet blog called *Feministe,* where she comments on topics ranging from what it means today to be a so-called third-wave feminist to sexual violence in the Congo.

The Legacy Continues

Feminists of every stripe and generation concur that the road to gender equality remains unfinished. They also agree that no one can be complacent when women's rights, as established in such landmark cases as *Roe v. Wade*, are slowly being chipped away. But the issues have become more global. The style of today's young generation of feminists contrasts dramatically with that of their predecessors. And the feeling that young feminists should pick up the fight where the older guard left off has been a bone of contention.

"They say, 'Why do you have to reinvent the wheel? We've talked about the workplace forever,'" says Courtney E. Martin, 28, who recently wrote *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body*. She also helps maintain Feministing.com, a hugely popular Web site for young feminists that she says gets about 200,000 individual readers a month. "We have to make our own wisdom," she points out.

Like Filipovic, Martin got in touch with her inner feminist in her own time, place, and way. Two

feminists raised her (her lawyer dad once turned down the opportunity to join an exclusive club that didn't allow women). But some aspects of her mom's "I am woman, hear me roar" generation turned her off, including her mom's swishing skirts, her shoulder pads, and her reading groups. What was important to Martin in high school was being witty and hot and good at sports. Attending Barnard College in the late 1990s, Martin went to hear a young feminist speak. "I can honestly say her fishnet stockings made me a feminist."

Martin doesn't hew to the characterization of feminism as a "women's movement" anymore. "I think of it as a culture of feminists, a fragmented culture," she says, describing her brand of feminism as an opportunity for "both men and women to be authentically what they want to be in the world." That means women shouldn't be judged for wearing, say, heavy makeup and spiky heels. And men shouldn't be judged for choosing to stay home with the kids.

Similarly, Filipovic believes that "women's equality" is too simplistic a term to characterize the goal of today's feminists. She says dismantling gender roles and norms is a more appropriate way of describing what the third-wavers are up to.

That is all fine and good, says Gloria Steinem, a prominent women's rights advocate from the second wave, which did so much to desegregate the schools and workplace, get more women elected to political office, and establish a legal framework to pursue women's equal rights. As the cofounder of *Ms.* magazine who continues to be a consulting editor, Steinem pays close heed to what's important to young feminists. "We are in a period of expanded definitions," she says. "It's now global, with issues like sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and environmental dangers that know no national boundaries."

Steinem says that although issues may appear more attuned to one generation than another, their struggles actually have much in common. For instance, Steinem's age group fought hard for abortion rights. Young women today grapple with abstinence-only sex education obstacles and subscribe to a more "holistic" approach to reproductive rights, in which women of any economic status can access a full range of reproductive health-care options.

"But all these struggles are about making reproductive freedom a fundamental human right, like freedom of speech," Steinem says. "The good news is third-wave feminists have higher expectations and get even more angry and active when they do encounter barriers."

Both second- and third-wave feminists view the legal field as a viable platform for creating change.

One constant from the second wave to the third wave is how feminists continue to view the legal field as a viable platform for creating change. "We've had a revolution in women in the law," says Karen DeCrow, president of the National Organization for Women from 1974 to 1977, pointing out how the number of women in law schools today equals the number of men. "We've reached a critical mass where we don't have to explain anymore that we can do it," says DeCrow, who was the only female graduate in her 1972 law school class at Syracuse University.

"One thrill I have is using laws that I helped change," says DeCrow, describing, for instance, a federal case that she brought in 1985 against the City of Syracuse's Department of Aviation on behalf of the Fathers' Rights Association of New York State for not providing baby changing rooms that were accessible to men. At the time, most of the changing stations were connected to women's bathrooms. Today, she says, stand-alone changing rooms are found everywhere.

Gaining Legal Ground

Legal Momentum is typical of the feminist legal advocacy institutions established during the early stages of the modern movement. Founded in 1970 as the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, Legal Momentum has filed amicus briefs or counseled on many key cases for women's equality, including *United States v. Virginia*, which successfully challenged the males-only admissions policy of the state-run Virginia Military Institute. "I think the impact of women lawyers has been immeasurable," says Jennifer K. Brown, vice president and legal director of Legal Momentum. "It's been largely women lawyers who have been the biggest advocates of women's rights in the courts."

Julie Kay, a senior staff attorney at Legal Momentum, says that looking back, it seems like a lot of things happened very quickly. "But there are a lot of issues out there that still need to be addressed," she points out. "Our job is to point out injustices that aren't so obvious."

For example, "No one stops to wonder why there are no female taxi drivers," Kay says. At 39, she feels like she straddles the second and third wave of feminism. "I feel comfortable with the second wave," she says. However, she likes to sleep in her third-wave Feministing.com t-shirt, which carries the Web site's logo of a curvaceous woman giving the finger. "But I wouldn't wear it outside," she chuckles.

Young feminist lawyers also have assumed the task of keeping

precedents like *Roe v. Wade* from falling backward, and they spend a lot of their time educating the public. "If you win a lawsuit," Kay says, "and no one knows about it, what do people know of their rights?"

To disseminate information, Legal Momentum, for instance, just launched its first Web-based course (it's about intimate partner physical violence), which is geared toward judges, lawyers, and service providers.

The emergence of the women's movement in the 1960s coincided with Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which provoked women to question their traditional roles. Reflecting on that time, Steinem says, "Women were just beginning to declare our right to be full and equal human beings, often because we had experienced inequality in the workforce or even in the admirable peace and civil rights movements."

It was a challenging moment. Those women who united in a nationwide swell of consciousness-raising, grassroots organizing, and protest marches, Steinem says, "were ridiculed as women libbers who were going against biology, God, Freud, and so-called femininity."

They were also criticized for being too aggressive, says Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, a sociologist and author of the seminal *Women in Law*. "But if you don't speak out, who is going to listen?" Epstein says. "I don't know how you make change by saying, 'Pretty please, may I have more rights?' and batting your eyelashes."

As a result of their movement, Epstein says, the concept of women's equality has taken root all over the world. "Many think the battle is over," she notes. For instance, she's observed that young feminists don't necessarily see discrimination as a group gender problem. "They see it more as individual problems," Epstein says, echoing a sentiment shared by other older feminists that the younger ones have become substantially more oriented toward individual expression and individual options. Some older feminists even feel that the next generation has sold out.

But putting oneself first is not necessarily a bad thing, Filipovic points out, especially considering the fact that women, for so long, were told to put themselves last. Besides, when second-wave feminists reflect on what sowed their seeds of rebellion, self-interest was usually a motivating factor.

> More oriented toward individual expression, younger feminists may not see discrimination as a group gender problem.

"I can't say I was a strong feminist at the time," says DeCrow, describing what compelled her to join a chapter of the National Organization for Women in the mid-1960s. "But I heard equal pay for equal work, and that sounded very good to me."

The Honorable Emily Jane Goodman, a justice for the New York Supreme Court, recalls what happened when she graduated from high school. "I looked around and said, 'Is this all there is?'" She tried journalism for a time. Then, to avoid the typing pool for the rest of her life, she turned to law school.

The women's movement was already "in the air" when she graduated in 1968. Soon thereafter she represented a group of female editors who organized a sit-in at their publishing house to protest their lower wages compared to those of their male counterparts. She also worked on the first abortion case in New York (pre-*Roe v. Wade*), when a lawsuit was brought on behalf of several doctors who were not being allowed to exercise their medical judgment with regard to providing abortions. "Scores of women testified to back-alley illegal abortions," says Goodman, explaining that all the activism surrounding the case encouraged the New York legislature to change its law before the case was decided. "There was a tremendous sense of victory," she recalls.

She was also at the forefront of many of the work/life balance issues that have become such a major topic of concern for third-wave feminists. When she ran for her first judgeship in 1983, she was pregnant. "People would look at me like I was a freak," she recalls.

New York Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney recently reminded Goodman of how they passed her baby around at her induction and what a novelty it was. But Goodman says it wasn't like she had an agenda for her life the way young feminists do. "My daughter says, 'I want to have three children by age 35. Therefore, 11 years from now, or by 30, I need to be in a stable relationship,'" Goodman says. "That is a very different way of thinking than we thought."

But even as today's young feminists appear poised to have it all, Goodman notes the current lawsuit by dozens of women against Bloomberg L.P. for what they allege was discrimination against pregnant employees. "Apparently these kinds of things are still happening," she says.

In early June, the Veteran Feminists of America saluted dozens of feminist legal icons active from 1963 to 1975, including U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a superstar in the eyes of every generation of feminists. "I want to be Ruth Bader Ginsburg," says Stephanie Lopez-Boy, a former director of the New York chapter of the Younger Women's Task Force and a program associate at Legal Momentum. She plans to be a lawyer and still believes

in getting the Equal Rights Amendment passed. "I am really sad that Ginsburg is the only woman left on the Court. It's going to be hard to fill those shoes. Even though she's a small woman, she has very big shoes."

Communicating Globally

Another thing differentiating the two generations of feminists is the third-wavers' lack of an obvious heir apparent to someone like Steinem, whose name and face became synonymous with the 1960s' women's movement. This generation does, however, boast numerous nationally known feminist singer/songwriters, novelists, and journalists. And while the young feminists are also less likely to assemble a march on Washington, they regularly troll all over the Internet—which has become their primary consciousness-raising tool.

"It can be really powerful to connect with women around the world who may not be able to talk about these issues," says Filipovic, describing recent comments on her blog from a Pakistani woman who is frustrated that Westerners are not standing up against the gender apartheid in her country. She also routinely gets comments from Islamic feminists who complain that Westerners unfairly demonize the tradition of wearing a headscarf. "Blogging "has done more for my understanding of feminism than four years of study," Filipovic notes.

Women also use the blogosphere to do more than just talk. Last Christmas, for example, an incensed blogger alerted the founder of Feministing.com, Jessica Valenti, about a line of pink adolescent underwear being sold at Wal-Mart that carried the slogan "Who needs credit cards" on the front. (A reference to Santa was on the back.) Valenti, author of *He's a Stud, She's a Slut*, posted a picture of the panties with a caption that read, "There's nothing quite like telling adolescent girls that they don't need to worry about finances since they have their very own money pot between their legs." As it spread through the blogosphere, it became linked to an action letter-writing campaign that resulted in Wal-Mart's removing the undergarments from its stores and issuing an apology.

More recently, the blogosphere became a heated debate zone for feminists aligning themselves with either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton during this year's presidential primaries. For instance, when author Courtney E. Martin came out on the Internet in support of Obama, it provoked some angry responses from older feminists who felt women should align behind Clinton. "I feel sympathy with them," Martin says. "I feel torn about my choice to vote for Obama. But my feminism is about more than gender."

Sheila Tobias, a feminist author and copresident of the Veteran Feminists of America, says despite the bifurcation between the generations, she's thrilled to see all the women who have come out in support of Clinton, especially as so many conservative women, through the years, have expressed their resistance to the proposition of a woman leading the nation. "I didn't think I'd live to see that," Tobias says. "That to me is the result of feminism."

In reaction to the recent tensions, Martin created "Thank You Thursdays" on Feministing.com, a weekly posting to highlight the legacy of feminism. The first week she thanked, among others, Gloria Feldt, the former president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Another week she saluted singer Madonna "for being someone who complicated the idea of female sexuality on such a grand scale." Her most recent posting honored the early feminist suffragettes, who fought for women's right to vote. "We wouldn't even be getting in all these Clinton/Obama shenanigans," Martin wrote, "if we didn't have the power to influence who was elected."

Thank yous are always appreciated. However, Steinem, for one, does not want young women feeling they owe her generation anything. "Gratitude never radicalized anybody," Steinem says. "I didn't walk around saying, 'Thank you for the vote.' I got angry on my own behalf at injustices I experienced.

"As Susan B. Anthony said, our job is not to make young women grateful, but to make them ungrateful," Steinem adds. "Yes, we need to know women's history so we don't reinvent the wheel or believe that women have ever been *given* equality from above, but young women will get radicalized on what they themselves experience. We're just here to support them."

Ann Farmer works as a freelance breaking-news reporter for the New York Times *and writes frequently about culture, law, travel, and other topics for various publications. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.*