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Gender, Intersectionality and Social Movements in the USA: A New Political Generation

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, a new political generation emerged in the USA, shaped by its members' experience as digital natives, the growth of labor market precarity, and the shattering of political illusions about racial and gender justice. Women and LGBTQ-identified individuals have been disproportionately prominent among leaders of the past decade's wave of protest, spearheaded by college-educated Millennials (recently joined by "Generation Z"). Guided by a commitment to social justice and intersectionality, these young women and LGBTQ people have not only been at the forefront of gender-focused movements like that against sexual violence, but also others like Black Lives Matter and the immigrant rights movement. This paper analyzes the social processes that shaped this new political generation of activists, their distinctive worldview, and their leading role in recent social movements.

The 2008 financial crisis sparked a wave of protest among a new *political generation* whose members' lived experiences and worldviews distinguish them from youthful social movement activists of earlier eras. This is a global phenomenon, but this paper focuses on the U.S. case.ⁱ Many commentators have noted that post-2008 movements like Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Black Lives Matter (BLM), and their counterparts around the world, were led by what Paul Mason memorably called "the graduate with no future."ⁱⁱ Yet few have recognized the fact that women and LGBTQ people were overrepresented among the leaders of many of these movements (including movements that are focused on issues other than gender inequality).

Karl Mannheim's canonical argument that political generations are not biological or demographic phenomena, but rather are formed by historical and sociological processes, is crucial here.ⁱⁱⁱ He pointed out that while in every era, activists tend to be disproportionately youthful, not all generations of young people are politically engaged. Those that are propelled into activism, he argued, are shaped by transformative historical breaks that occur during their formative years, in early adulthood. Although Mannheim did not explore generations in relation to gender, his theory is consistent with the conventional understanding of "waves" of feminism, which emerge not in every generation, but instead in selected periods of broader social change.

I argue that three key historical developments shaped the worldview of the political generation comprised of those born after 1980 (including "Millennials" and the slightly younger "Generation Z," born after the late 1990s) that spearheaded the 2010s wave of protest:

- They are "digital natives," and their activism exploited social media on an unprecedented scale (although older generations are catching up in adopting the new communication technologies).
- The economic aspirations of many members of this generation were blocked or frustrated by the Great Recession and by the longer-term growth of precarious employment, along with skyrocketing inequality. As new labor market entrants in the post-2008 period, they were disproportionately impacted by these developments; many are also saddled with historically unprecedented levels of student debt.
- Members of this generation often experienced a process of political disillusion as they encountered persistent racism and sexism, belying claims that they came of age in a "post-racial" and "post-feminist" society.

This generation also has a distinctive demographic profile, with more racial and ethnic diversity than any previous generation, as well as greater diversity in sexual orientation and gender expression. Its members are also more highly educated, on average, than those of older generations, and theirs is the first generation in which women's average educational level is higher than men's. College-educated youth generally, and college-educated women and LGBTQ youth in particular, are overrepresented among this generation's progressive activists.

A large body of survey and polling data indicates that the political attitudes of Millennials and members of Generation Z position them well to the left of older generations. These young people disproportionately support LGBTQ rights, same-sex marriage, immigrant rights, labor unions, racial justice, and feminism. They also are far more likely than their elders to express positive views of "socialism" (and negative views of capitalism). Limited data are available on attitudinal differences *among* youth, but those that do exist suggest that the college-educated, as well as people of color, are even more left-leaning than other members of their generation.

The new wave of protest this political generation spearheaded in the 2010s has an explicitly feminist component – especially visible in campus-based campaigns against sexual assault, which emerged several years before the multigenerational MeToo# movement. But women and LGBTQ individuals were also disproportionately represented among leaders of BLM and the “Dreamers” (the movement of undocumented immigrant youth), and more recently in campaigns against gun violence and those centered on climate change. Moreover, a central feature of this generation's political worldview, across a variety of campaigns and movements, is the framework of *intersectionality*, in which gender oppression is understood as inextricably intertwined with class and race.

A New Generation and a New Wave of Protest

In the U.S. context, this political generation first attracted public attention in the 2008 presidential election campaign, when Barack Obama captured the imagination of millions of young people. Eight years later, Millennials were even more prominent among supporters of Bernie Sanders' presidential bid: 72 percent of voters under age 30 cast their ballots for Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primaries, while 71 percent of those 65 and over voted for Clinton.

In between those election years, Millennials were in the forefront of social movements like OWS, BLM, and the Dreamers, as well as campus-based campaigns against sexual violence. More recently a wave of labor activism among college-educated young people has emerged, most notably among adjunct faculty, journalists, and K-12 teachers. Women have been prominent in that context as well. This generation also has breathed new life into the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose membership has swelled to over 50,000 members and which helped elect Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in 2018. Notably AOC and the other three members of the “squad” of young progressives elected to the U.S. Congress that year are female.

In 2016, I compiled a database of over 250 high-profile BLM activists and leaders mentioned frequently in news reports on the movement. As one might expect, the vast majority (94 percent) were Black or bi-racial. Less predictably, 95 percent had attended college, and 85 percent were 35 years old or less (in 2016). Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) were women, and a majority of those for whom information is

available (64 percent of women and 56 percent of the total) identified as LGBTQ. Reflecting not only this demographic profile of its leadership, but the broader progressive Millennial generation worldview, BLM's rhetoric was permeated with the language of intersectionality, as this excerpt from a 2014 statement by the umbrella group "Ferguson Action" illustrates: "This is a movement of and for ALL Black lives — women, men, transgender and queer.... We do not cast any one of ours to the side in order to gain proximity to perceived power."

Leaders of the Dreamers movement (which emerged years before BLM) were also disproportionately female and/or LGBTQ; indeed, they deliberately adopted the language of "coming out" in regard to the political choice to publicly reveal their undocumented status, one aspect of what Veronica Terriquez calls "the intersectional mobilization of undocuqueers."^{iv} Like BLM, the Dreamers' rhetoric is explicitly intersectional. For example, a 2010 manifesto declared, "Many of us have been organizing in other movements such as the anti-war, LGBTQ and labor movements.... We face racist, sexist, homophobic attacks from the right."

Although to my knowledge no systematic data have been collected on the demographic makeup of anti-gun violence or of climate change activists, young women and LGBTQ people, many of color, stand out among the most visible leaders of these movements (e.g. Emma Gonzalez, who identifies as bisexual, of Parkland fame). In contrast, OWS and DSA do not appear to have more female than male leaders; unlike BLM and the Dreamers these groups are made up largely of white, affluent young people, with fewer prominent LGBTQ leadership cadre. Yet these groups too embrace intersectionality, often highlighting connections between inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. Indeed, OWS working group meetings typically began with those present introducing themselves by name and preferred pronoun.

The Campus Movement Against Sexual Violence

The most explicitly feminist sector of the post-2008 wave of protest was the campus anti-sexual assault movement, which took off in 2009. That year, an unprecedented number of sexual assault complaints were filed under Title IX of the Equal Education Act, the federal law that bans sex discrimination in education, sparking an upsurge of campus activism protesting "rape culture" and spotlighting the inadequacy of then-existing college and university procedures for handling sexual assault complaints. As one would expect, the vast majority of activists and leaders in this movement were female. More surprisingly, many (by some accounts a majority) were LGBTQ, although this aspect of their identities remained largely invisible to the public.

Female college students and recent college graduates, most of them at elite colleges and universities, were in the forefront of this movement, which would later merge into the multigenerational MeToo# movement. Many of the early activists were survivors of sexual assault themselves; others had been radicalized previously around other, unrelated issues. However, few of these young women had any previous engagement with feminism, and indeed many had been skeptical about it prior to their involvement in anti-sexual assault campaigns. As one activist I interviewed recalled, "My freshman year, there was an activities fair with a table for campus feminists, and I picked up their information just so that I could make fun of it... I thought it was so stupid, because obviously women have equal rights." Another recalled that she had considered feminism "antiquated" before she got involved in the campaign against sexual assault. Ultimately these young women did embrace feminism, however.

The anti-sexual assault movement both benefitted from and helped fuel other Millennial-driven social movements that emerged around the same time. “There was an explosion on campuses in general,” one participant recalled. “Right at the time when we filed our sexual assault complaint, lots of other activists started coming forward about other things.” Some leaders of the campus anti-sexual-violence movement had deliberately studied the history of previous social movements as part of their effort to develop effective framing strategies. This was part of an effort to ensure that individual sexual assault cases would be seen not as examples of individual pathology, but as part of a larger, systemic phenomenon. As one put it, “How do we flip that frame to say, what happened at [campus X] is not the problem, it is a microcosm of the problem?” These women also reached out to activists in other movements for ideas. “We talked to a bunch of people in Occupy,” one anti-sexual assault student leader recalled. “What worked with Occupy that also worked here was social media, being able to connect to people that you never would have been able to connect to 15 years ago. Talking on Facebook, talking on Twitter. That was part of the Occupy movement and our movement as well.”

Indeed, social media were vital to the anti-sexual-assault movement, which used Facebook and other platforms to create private on-line spaces where survivors and activists could share experiences. The movement also exploited the new communication technologies in its organizing and mobilization. But traditional media coverage was also crucial. For example, a front-page 2012 *New York Times* story alerted many student activists engaged in campaigns against sexual assault to similar efforts on other campuses of which they had not previously been aware. Face-to-face interaction was also key: virtual networking could scale up organizing quickly, but it supplemented rather than replacing face-to-face interactions.

Many of the young women who emerged as leaders of this movement were galvanized into activism by outrage about the inadequacy of existing remedies for sexual assault at colleges and universities, a problem that many experienced firsthand in pursuing their own cases. They rapidly came to understand that campus administrators’ unresponsiveness to complaints was largely due to the vulnerability of higher education institutions to negative publicity. Yet that very vulnerability afforded activists the opportunity to strategically seek (traditional) media coverage, knowing that sexual assault allegations would attract extensive attention from news reporters, especially for cases at selective colleges and universities.

Indeed, starting in 2012, sexual assault complaints at elite colleges like Amherst and Swarthmore; Ivy League institutions like Yale, Columbia and Harvard; and flagship public universities like the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and the University of California-Berkeley made headlines in newspapers and other print and broadcast media. That publicity, in turn, soon propelled activists on those campuses (mostly from affluent families) into prominence as spokespeople for the larger movement. Yet the LGBTQ identities many anti-sexual assault activists held were largely invisible. News stories instead tended to focus on the “perfect victims” — cisgender female students, typically white and privileged, conventionally attractive and presumed to be heterosexual. In reality, as victim surveys and other evidence show, less affluent women and LGBTQ people are disproportionately sexually assaulted.

Over time anti-sexual assault campus activists — who, like other members of their generation of progressives, were shaped by the discourse of intersectionality — tried to shift the narrative, highlighting stories of women of color, men, and LGBTQ survivors of sexual violence. They also actively supported and allied themselves with movements like BLM and the Dreamers. Although the election of Donald Trump led to a backlash, as well as a rollback of federal government support for students filing Title IX complaints

involving sexual assault, soon after that setback the campus-based activists (many of whom had graduated by this time) merged into the broader #MeToo movement.

The student movement against sexual assault was not mentored directly by older activists (unlike the Dreamers, for example). It did attract support from some veteran second-wave feminists, including many of the lawyers representing complainants; but other older feminists were openly critical. Some rejected the younger activists' strict view of sexual misconduct; others expressed concern about due process for accused men in regard to campus administrative remedies.

This is only the most recent manifestation of longstanding generational tensions among feminists. Those tensions may not be as deeply rooted as some commentators assume, however, as data on the #MeToo movement suggest. The overall level of support for #MeToo is only slightly higher among women less than 35 years old than among those 35 and up (71% vs. 68%), according to a 2018 poll drawing on a nationally representative sample. In that poll, the younger and older groups reported similar rates of experience with sexual harassment, but a larger share of women 35 years and older had never reported it to anyone. The widest generation gap in this poll was its finding that the younger women were far more likely than the older ones to endorse a "zero tolerance" approach: 25% of women under 35, but only 12% of those 35 and older, thought it was "acceptable" for "some men to lose their jobs over allegations of sexual misconduct, even if those allegations are not backed up by concrete evidence." On the other hand, responses to another question in the poll found a miniscule age difference in the level of concern about due process for men accused of sexual misconduct.^v

Conclusions

Alongside the recent resurgence of feminism, and equally significant, is the disproportionate political engagement of young women across a wide range of issues and movements. Systematic research is limited, but a 2017 national survey (conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and MTV) of youth aged 15-24 found that young women were far more likely than young men to report involvement in political activism over the previous year. Gender differences were significant across all modes of activism, from online political participation, to volunteer activity, to attending a public rally or demonstration. This survey also found that 52 percent of women in this age group (and 27 percent of men) identified as feminists, far higher than the levels reported in recent surveys of the overall population.^{vi} Barbara Risman's recent study of gender attitudes among Millennials (based on a convenience sample of college students) found a large cluster of "true believers" who accepted traditional gender roles, but also substantial groups of "innovators" who were explicitly critical of gender inequality and "rebels" who questioned the gender binary itself (many of whom identified as LGBTQ).^{vii}

Youth activism in itself is nothing new (although as Mannheim noted nearly a century ago not all generations embody this phenomenon). But there is no historical precedent for the apparent gender shift in the composition of social movement leadership and participation, or for the level of explicit support for feminism (and intersectionality) among U.S. youth today.

ⁱ This paper draws on my 2017 article, "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest," *American Sociological Review* 82: 1-31. That article includes extensive citations to supporting literature, mostly omitted here.

ⁱⁱ Paul Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere* (New York: Verso, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1927).

^{iv} Veronica Terriquez, "Intersectional Mobilization, Social Movement Spillover and Queer Youth Leadership in the Immigrant Rights Movement," *Social Problems* 62 (2015): 343-62.

^v <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/17115620/me-too-sexual-harassment-sex-abuse-poll>

^{vi} <https://www.prrri.org/research/mtv-culture-and-religion/> Compare a 2018 survey of U.S. adults by "YouGov" that found that 38 percent of women and 22 percent of men (of all ages) considered themselves feminists. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2018/08/09/feminism-american-women-2018>

^{vii} Barbara Risman, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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