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The Third Wave: Young Feminists Find Common Ground With Those Who Came Before Them

Jane C. Murphy.

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They're known as the "third wave" - the daughters and granddaughters of feminism's pioneering generation. Their style may be less confrontational or political than in past eras. Some of them might not even call themselves feminists. But that's what they are - and they might be surprised to find how much they have in common with their elders.

That's what we discovered at a gathering at the University of Baltimore that brought together women from the different "waves" of feminism that have shaped the landscape of gender politics over the years. The first wave, which flourished in the late 19th and early 20th century, secured women's right to own property and to vote under the leadership of suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The fight for women's rights did not emerge again as an organized political movement until the late 1960s, when the second wave organized around issues such as reproductive freedom and equal opportunity in the workplace. Now comes the third wave.

From one perspective, the feminist movement has achieved remarkable progress in many institutions. This is certainly true of Maryland, home to powerful female leaders in many spheres. Some would hold, then, that the war for gender equality is won, and that "feminism" is thus an outdated concept with little relevance for today's twenty- and thirtysomethings.

True, today's brand of feminism rejects many features of the movement's earlier incarnations. Contemporary feminists tend to see gender less as an instrument of women's subordination than as a fluid concept that embraces a spectrum of sexual expressions and preferences.

They reject the notion that women's experiences are largely universal; rather, third-wavers celebrate individual experiences and choices. They seek change through creative expression that illuminates the diversity of feminism, rather than collective, organized political action. While many baby boomer feminists might consider boycotting a TV network that offers such fare as the Pussycat Dolls Presents: Girlicious, third-wavers are more likely to see such shows as legitimate expressions of women's sexuality. And their concern is less with securing rights for white middle-class women in the U.S. than with combating inequalities women around the world face as a result of economic status, sexual orientation, race or cultural norms.

But there is also evidence that this generation's feminism shares a lot with the boomer version. At a recent conference at the University of Baltimore School of Law, academics, activists and students from around the country gathered to talk about feminism and societal change. There was some discussion of what distinguishes second- and third-wavers. When one young women's studies major asked what was wrong with drawing on her sexuality to gain power over men, one of her "elders" reminded her that such power was, at best, temporary, and that education and good employment might provide more lasting power.

Most of the day was devoted to discovering points of common experience. Despite occupying half the seats at most law schools today, female law students surprised participants when they shared their feelings of isolation and marginalization in the classrooms of 21st-century law schools. Reporting on recent research at Chicago-Kent law school and supported by studies at other schools, a group of student panelists noted sharp differences in participation rates in class discussions and lower feelings of self-confidence among female students compared with their male counterparts. Female faculty responded with similar recollections of their attempts to gain promotion and tenure in the last two decades.

And the same second-waver who noted the shortcomings of sexual power also pointed out that opportunities to achieve at the highest level are not as open to women as the confident young strivers of the third wave might think. A recent study of female representation on publicly traded corporate boards in Maryland revealed that the percentage of women on such boards declined in the last year to 8.9 percent, and that Maryland continues to lag behind the national average for women directors.

Other areas of commonality were found. One twentysomething asked whether she could call herself a feminist when she was interested in the intersection of women's rights, racial justice and poverty; the feminist boomers in attendance noted that they, too, have always shared those concerns. In fact, a call to merge the "waves" of feminism into a single category, "social justice feminism," was enthusiastically embraced by many in attendance.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the bonds of common experience and aspiration across generations was the response by younger women to a speech by Gloria Steinem. In a week in which she was roundly criticized by conservative pundits for her comments on the presidential election, Ms. Steinem was given a standing ovation.

Although the large, diverse audience included various age groups, races and genders, third-wavers dominated the question-and-answer time. They wanted to express thanks for a lifetime spent in helping to strive toward an equality that they admit to taking for granted. They wanted to be reassured that their broader definition of feminism is acceptable to this prominent second-waver. And they sought advice on the areas in which this generation needs to continue the struggle.

Maryland is the home of female pioneers such as Clara Barton, Rachel Carson, Harriet Tubman and Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, who helped launch the first "Women's History Week" in the early 1980s. When we look back on women's struggles for equality over the last century, we have much to celebrate, but we need to be clear-headed about the challenges that remain.

Ms. Steinem and her young protégés left us feeling that the future of the feminist movement is shifting to new but capable hands.

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