If the personal is political, is the political personal? Everyday politics in the lives of New Zealand’s feminists

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Introduction
In her famous essay, Carol Hanisch (1970) argues\(^1\) that The Personal is Political, coining a catchphrase which influenced feminist negotiations to distinguish public and private aspects of feminist struggles. While Hanisch’s work is situated in the Second Wave women’s movement of the United States, the influence of her essay reached feminists across the globe (in mainly Western societies) and of all generations. However, the literature (e.g. Cullen, 2001; Snyder, 2008) indicates that younger and older feminists today seem to interpret Hanisch’s catchphrase through differing perspectives, which reflects overall divergent approaches to feminism of Second and Third Wave feminists. Thus, intergenerational debates about Hanisch’s argument and the political character of personal approaches to feminist activities became somewhat symbolic of the broader relationship between Second Wavers and Third Wavers\(^2\). Overall, this relationship is often depicted as conflictual and co-operation of feminists of different ages seems to be rare. Since, however, a healthy relationship among feminists of all generations would benefit the effectiveness of women’s movements, it is important for feminist research to explore ideological conflicts that jeopardise such feminist co-operation. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to investigate this debate about the political and personal character of feminism and to analyse whether feminists of different generations perceive ‘everyday feminism’ to be political and why (not). Using New Zealand’s contemporary feminist community as a case study for Western societies, I argue that misunderstandings related to the political character of ‘everyday feminism’ fuelled intergenerational debates unnecessarily and that major differences between Second and Third Wave feminists refer to methods and sites of activism rather than to disagreements about ‘the political’.

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\(^1\) As Hanisch noted in the introduction to a reprint of this essay in 2006, she did not title this essay herself but the editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt did (Hanisch, 2006).

\(^2\) I thank Tulia Thompson for this observation.
In a nutshell, the two competing positions are the following: Hanisch (1970) argued that women's personal experiences of discrimination, such as unequal division of housework with male partners or disrespect at the workplace, are in fact political problems because they stem from structural disadvantages that women face in society. As such, she suggested, these problems need to be tackled by a women’s movement rather than be negotiated by individual women within their private contexts. Thus, she encouraged women to discuss personal problems in women’s groups and organisations, however, not for the purpose of ‘personal therapy’ and to find individual solutions but in order to identify structural dynamics causing these problems and develop joint, political responses. She stated ‘[t]here are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution’ (Hanisch, 1970, p. 77). This appeal underpins the Second Wave feminist claim that many women’s experiences in their personal lives (as personal as romantic relationships and motherhood, for example) are political in the sense that they are shared among women, not by chance but because of patriarchal power structures in society (Budgeon, 2001).

Since the 1990s, however, feminists identifying with Third Wave feminism have re-interpreted Hanisch’s catchphrase. Many women of this generation adopted an approach that incorporated feminist values into everyday practices, including negotiations of romantic relationships, friendships and family life, as well as perceptions of beauty, fashion, consumption and media. Sowards and Renegar (2006) state that many contemporary feminists choose forms of activism that operate in the private sphere, such as building feminist identities, using strategic humour, sharing stories and challenging stereotypes. Harris (2010) and Budgeon (2001) similarly argue that young feminists often expressed their ideas of gender equality through everyday life and personal means, sometimes without labelling these activities as ‘feminist’. Bulbeck (2001) explains how young feminists focus on personal self-improvement by developing individual practices of feminism and working on personal challenges, as well as expressing feminism through cultural spaces such as ‘zines’ and all-women music bands. Overall, the younger generation seems to assign much political value to expressions of feminist ideas within everyday practices. While many Second Wavers too aim for an alignment of feminist values with their personal lives, Third Wave feminism increased this emphasis: challenging sexism in everyday encounters, making feminist statements with fashion, writing personal blogs and other practises with a focus on the individual may be a side product of a feminist life-style for Second Wavers, but for Third Wavers these practices are central and political (e.g. Harris, 2001b; Shaw, 2013). The personal is political is a slogan used by Third Wavers to illustrate this perspective (Snyder, 2008).

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3 ‘Zine’ is an abbreviation of ‘magazine’ and describes self-made, low-budget publications that are usually distributed by the makers themselves. See Davidson (2005) and Harris (2003) for more details.
These two interpretations of Hanisch’s catchphrase seem to directly contradict each other and several authors pointed out that reading political value into individual everyday practices is a misinterpretation of Hanisch’s intention (Cullen, 2001; Gillis & Munford, 2004; Mann & Huffman, 2005). Since Hanisch herself was part of the Second Wave movement, there may be reason to argue that the interpretation that was popular in the 1970s is the ‘right’ one. In the following, I explain that this dispute requires a more nuanced analysis.

In this paper I elaborate on the seemingly opposing interpretations of The Personal is Political by Second Wave and Third Wave feminists as presented in the literature by situating this debate in the broader discussion of ‘everyday feminism’. Subsequently, I relate these arguments to the empirical findings of my research that is based on 40 qualitative interviews with feminists in New Zealand and I contrast the participants’ arguments confirming and denying the political relevance of personal approaches to feminism. In conclusion, I discuss why I suggest that different perspectives by younger and older feminists are not as fundamentally different as they may initially seem but that misunderstandings nevertheless cause problems for the broader feminist community.

The personal is political is personal…

The literature provides many arguments for why everyday feminism by Third Wavers is lacking political value from a Second Wave perspective. Exemplifying disagreements between generations, Women’s Studies scholar Dallas Cullen (2001, p. 3) reflects on her experiences of teaching young women at the University of Alberta where she noticed differences in feminist perspectives:

To me, “the personal is political” meant, and still means, “Personal experiences have political causes; the problems I face as a woman are due to the patriarchal nature of society, not my personal inadequacies.” To my students, “the personal is political” means “I self-define as a feminist; feminism is a political stance; therefore, any and all of my actions have political import and significance.”

Cullen states that her students were naïve about their world when they argued that individual action of women could challenge patriarchal structures and when they thought they had ‘control over, and responsibility for, what happens to them’ (Cullen, 2001, p. 5). In a similar context, Fixmer and Wood (2005) analyse three key texts of early Third Wave literature and interpret them through their Second Wave lens. They too note that ‘third wavers seem naïve’ (Fixmer & Wood, 2005, p. 235) and that the Third Wave generation focusses on everyday feminism and women’s individual lives because the young women falsely assume that the Second Wave movement secured gender equality on the legal level of society and that ‘all structural sources of women’s oppression have been removed’ (Fixmer & Wood, 2005, p. 248). While Guest (1998) does not suggest that young women are ignorant of structural forms of oppression, she expresses concern that the focus on individual practices would hide the necessity of tackling those structural problems. Kinser (2004) too criticises
everyday feminism — which she perceives as ‘false feminism’ — for evoking young women’s feelings of being revolutionary while not engaging in any actually transformative practices. Mann and Huffman (2005) argue against ‘DIY feminism’ — a branch of Third Wave feminism adopted by individuals or small collectives producing, for example, feminist zines, music and blogs in ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY)-style. The authors claim that such forms of feminism are politically regressive, not transformative (Mann & Huffman, 2005). In the same way, ‘lipstick-feminism’, which emphasises that femininity is a positive trait that can be celebrated through expressions of make-up and fashion, is criticised as a shallow and vain nod to patriarchy (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Coney, 1993). For instance, Ghasedi and Cornell (as cited in Kinser, 2004, p. 144) state that buying ‘the black instead of the pink nail polish’ is not a feminist act. Overall, having allegedly lost political relevance, Third Wave feminism is often accused of dishonouring, abandoning and ignoring the insights and achievements of the Second Wave generation (Bulbeck, 2006; Coleman, 2009; Maddison, 2002; Rosas & Wilson, 2003).

Third Wavers, of course, tend to disagree with such interpretations of their practices and the literature provides many arguments supporting their side of the debate. Budgeon (2001), for instance, explain that feminist forms of ‘everyday resistance’ (Katzenstein, 1990) or ‘everyday activism’ (Sowards & Renegar, 2006) are ways of reacting to pervasive forms of sexism that shape their daily lives. Everyday feminism and other branches of Third Wave feminism, such as DIY-feminism, lipstick-feminism, feminist online activism/cyberfeminism⁴ and power-feminism⁵ all focus on the private rather than the public sphere of women’s lives and therefore are less suited to the broader mobilisation of a women’s movement (Sowards & Renegar, 2006). However, the common intention of these approaches is to challenge taken-for-granted aspects of everyday sexism. They aim to empower individuals within their personal environments (Sowards & Renegar, 2006). Hence, Budgeon (2011b, p. 16) argues that Third Wave feminism ‘shifts the attention to the subjective and individualized experiences of women as they develop their own relationship to feminism’. Sowards and Renegar (2006, p. 67) note that the focus on the individual of Third Wave feminism is not narcissistic but rather a ‘recognition of the complexities of contemporary activism’. Lichterman (1996) and Minahan and Cox (as cited in Harris, 2010) similarly emphasise that Third Wavers engaging in self-centred forms of feminism are not inherently selfish but create the basis of a community of individuals who engage in similar activities. For instance, ‘Stich’n Bitch’⁶ groups, zine collectives and Riot Grrrl bands show that Third Wavers do not all work in isolation.

⁴ Feminist online activism includes, for example, the use of new social media to organise events, write feminist blogs and exchange information.
⁵ Power feminism rejects the perception that women are powerless victims of male oppression and instead focuses on developing women’s individual strengths.
⁶ ‘Stich’n Bitch’ groups are collectives that combine handcrafts with political — often feminist — messages. For more information see (Chansky, 2010).
Third Wavers seem to be well aware that their practices differ from feminist approaches of the Second Wave generation and often this difference is purposeful. The title of Henry’s (2004) book *Not My Mother’s Sister*, which engages with the feminist generational conflict, illustrates this notion well. Third Wavers want to distinguish themselves from the previous generation because they criticise Second Wave feminism for being old-fashioned and too monolithic; for not addressing intersecting forms of oppression adequately; and, sometimes, for being racist. Moreover, the Second Wave is often blamed for being jealous of the younger generation’s freedoms (Bulbeck, 2006; Maddison, 2013; Purvis, 2004; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005).

Third Wavers justify the use of everyday politics and other forms of individualised feminism as political strategies not only by the desire to do things differently than their mother’s generation. Harris (2001b) argues that many young women consciously choose forms of political engagement that are situated in the private sphere over more traditional and public forms. She explains that many young women experience the public sphere as an environment that reacts to their politics in a negative and patronising way and is ‘saturated with idealised or demonised images of girlhood’ (Harris, 2001b, p. 136). Additionally, young women’s cultures, such as the ‘girl power’ and ‘riot grrl’ cultures which transport feminist values and became popular in the 1990s, got co-opted by mainstream society and were turned into consumer products (e.g. the pop band Spice Girls, the television show ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’). Thus, retreating into private contexts is, according to Harris (2001b), a sensible reaction to such developments as young women have no interest in participating in traditional politics which do not take them seriously. Young women are engaged in social and political agendas but they choose to keep their engagement ‘underground’, marginalised and private. From this perspective, manifestations of everyday feminism such as feminist zines and blogs can be understood as platforms to communicate (Harris, 2001a), to express alternative values (Riley, Griffin, & Morey, 2010) and to raise consciousness for their concerns (Kennedy, 2007) without the fear of scrutiny and co-option (Harris, 2001b). Another argument to explain the relevance of everyday politics is presented by Wood (2012) who states that political and social issues have more significance for young people when they are related to their lived experiences. Approaching political concerns by situating them within private environments and individual lives, reflects how ‘young people are crafting their political identities’ (Wood, 2012, p. 345).

In summary, feminist everyday politics are characterised by different authors as situated in the personal sphere of women’s lives, however, there is disagreement about how political such practices really are. The literature discussed mainly focusses on theoretical perspectives on this debate. In the following, I present empirical findings to illustrate their practical implications and possible misunderstandings within the arguments.
The study

The arguments presented in this paper draw on the analysis of qualitative, problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000) conducted for my broader PhD project, which investigated the characteristics of New Zealand’s contemporary women’s movement. For this purpose, I interviewed 40 women, recruited by snowballing, who identified as feminist and/or engaged with feminist activism or political women’s issues in New Zealand. The recruitment process was designed to maximise diversity among participants according to their age, ethnicity and forms of feminist engagement. While other characteristics of the women interviewed such as their sexual identity and occupation were not primary sampling criteria, they were used to increase diversity where possible. The final sample included women between 20 and 70 years old (median age 31), who identified as Pākehā/European descent (31, including New Zealander, Australian, diverse European, Northern American), Asian (8, including Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Malay, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese), Māori (5) and/or Samoan (1). Of the 40 participating women, 34 self-identified as feminist. Two women rejected this label entirely, four stated that they ‘maybe’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘not often’ identified as feminist. However, all 40 participants engaged in activities that focussed on the empowerment of women — ranging, for instance, from feminist research to grassroots activism, from working for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs to running women’s church groups, from participating in women’s student politics to working for violence prevention organisations.

For the purpose of this paper I divide the group of participants into those associating with the Second Wave/older generation and those associating with the Third Wave/younger generation. Some authors (e.g. Edelman, 2001; Heywood & Drake, 2007) define the Third Wave generation as consisting of those feminists born after the 1960s baby boom and engaging with feminism from the 1990s onwards. According to this definition, my sample included 11 women belonging to the Second Wave (born before or during the 1960s) and 29 Third Wavers. However, a number of participants found a differentiation between ‘Wavers’ purely based on age problematic. For instance, Margaret (48, Pākehā) explained:

Technically, I should be a Second Wave feminist, except that I didn’t really start off from there. I started off from coming in 1999 after the divorce and getting involved with feminists on campus. And getting involved just because of projects that we were running with a bunch of radical feminists who were Third Wave girls.

Moreover, the terminology of Second and Third Wave was not one that all participants liked and associated with. However, this paper analyses a debate in the literature that consistently equates ‘young women’ with the Third Wave generation

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7 Pākehā is the commonly used Māori term for New Zealander of European descent
8 Many participants identified with more than one ethnic group, therefore numbers add up to more than 40.
(e.g. Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Harris, 2001a; Maddison, 2004). Yet explicit age brackets to specify ‘young’ are seldom available within this discourse and when they are, they rarely meet the aforementioned definition of the Third Wave generation based on the baby boom cohort. This is not surprising because women who started to engage with feminism in the 1990s at a young age are now in their late thirties and forties. Because of this discrepancy, this paper adopts a rather pragmatic approach and understands participants to be part of the younger generation if their age meets or is below the median age (31); otherwise participants are referred to as belonging to the older generation. I acknowledge that some of my participants disapprove of using the categories ‘younger’ and ‘Third Wave generation’ synonymously. However, this paper should be understood as a comment on the literature which frequently employs this synonymy and therefore I use this age-based differentiation of the Third and Second Wave generations to explain how my empirical findings fit (or do not fit) into this debate.

While Third Wave feminism emerged in the United States — Rebecca Walker was the first to announce the rise of a new wave of feminism in 1992 — choosing New Zealand as a site for a case study of contemporary feminism and the women’s movement has several reasons. For instance, the already indicated focus on the individual that is characteristic of Third Wave feminism is closely linked to neoliberal values of personal responsibility and agency (Budgeon, 2011a). Neoliberalism became the dominant political and economic ideology in many Western countries but New Zealand’s shift towards neoliberalism after 1984 has often been described as more rapid than elsewhere, making New Zealand a paradigmatic setting for studying the influences of neoliberalism (Larner & Butler, 2005). Moreover, the history of New Zealand’s women’s movement is a particularly proud one. Being the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote in national elections (1894), having had female Prime Ministers (Jenny Shipely 1997-1999, Helen Clark 1999-2008) and having a comparatively low Gender Pay Gap (OECD Family Database, 2013) are popular examples of the women’s movement’s past successes. Because of mainstream society’s pride associated with these gains towards gender equality, young feminists in New Zealand are all the more criticised for jeopardising the women’s movement’s achievements if they do not live up to the expectations of the Second Wave generation (e.g. Coleman, 2008). Finally, Third Wave feminism claims to be more sensitive to intersectionality issues (i.e. the relationship between gender-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on race, class, sexuality, etc.) than Second Wave feminism (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Given New Zealand’s bicultural character, the intersection of ethnicity and gender has always presented challenges to the negotiation of feminist values between Māori and Pākehā (and, historically more recent, Pacific and immigrant) women. These characteristics of the New Zealand context provide an ideal setting for analysing

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9 The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Crown and Māori chiefs, is New Zealand’s foundation of bicultural policy.
tensions between Third and Second Wave approaches that are not only relevant for New Zealand but for the broader Western world.

**Increasing individualism**

One of the major critiques by Second Wavers about Third Wave approaches to feminism is, as explained before, the alleged lack of collective mobilisation and the focus on the individual. Before I explain how this feminist individualism affects feminist practices, I briefly draw attention to its impact on feminist identities, which will help to understand perspectives on practices. Many of my participants embraced individualist approaches to feminist identities. Anne (30, Pākehā) explained ‘if you self-identify as feminist then you are feminist. I don’t know that there are really any other factors’. Seven more participants agreed with her or indicated that self-identification was at least an important part of determining who was a feminist. Such perspective intended to be inclusive of cultural and other differences between women and reflected the women’s caution not to impose specific meaning of ‘feminist’ on others. However, this approach inhibits one collective feminist identity and potentially divides feminism into an infinite number of strands accommodating individual needs and experiences. Consequently, it becomes difficult to define shared feminist aims for which collective mobilisation is required. Instead, personal challenges of everyday life receive much feminist attention. Alice (24, Pākehā) summarised this general trend towards individualism:

> Feminism has become increasingly individualistic. So it’s become less about the collective, so it’s not even about people joining groups now. It’s just people being feminists in their day-to-day lives, you know, which is totally legitimate. It’s just very individualistic.

Many younger participants emphasised that everyday feminism helped them to understand and challenge gender inequalities in personal experiences. For these women, the line between the private and political spheres was blurred. They indicated that being a feminist and engaging in feminist activities was not confined to certain aspects of their lives. Rather, the women stated that they applied a feminist lens to everything they did. Susan (23, Pākehā) argued ‘I feel like it almost got to the point where I’ve done feminism for so long that I can’t turn it off’. Nana (28, Southeast Asian) described this mind-set as being a ‘24/7 feminist’:

> I’m continuously aware and analysing the circumstances around me. Whether it is my interactions with people on a one-to-one basis or if it’s with group identities or group collective networking and stuff like that. So when I say [I am a] 24/7 feminist it also means that I’m quite analytical about the choices I make in my personal life, in the relationships that I have with people, friends as well as family and in the political work that I do. […] Kind of like ticking, ticking, ticking, 24/7 [laughs].

As Nana’s statement already showed, most women who shared similar perspectives also suggested that their everyday practices were motivated by broader political
aims. Meri (27, Pākehā/Māori), for example, stated ‘if, in my political ideal, I want to limit as much social inequality as possible, I can practice that in my personal life, you know, simply by... if I’m grumpy not being rude to someone else’. Often participants explained that everyday practices of feminism, such as challenging someone on a sexist joke or changing someone’s idea about ‘victim blaming’, counted as valuable achievements for feminism. Josephine (41, Pākehā) elaborated on the importance of this:

Small victories often mean the most, making a difference in an individual life. Although the big picture is important, it’s sometimes more difficult to get people motivated in the big picture because it often takes a long time to get it organised or get stuff done. Whereas sometimes it’s easier to focus on a smaller issue first and then slowly move forward.

At this point I want to highlight that while younger participants were in the majority among those sharing an interest in everyday practices, not all belong to the group of younger women, as the example of Josephine demonstrated. Overall, women who shared similar views mentioned how rewarding it was to change people’s opinions through individual conversations. Such small victories contributed to remaining motivated as feminists. This helped to overcome the frustration associated with the slow and often futile activities of ‘bigger picture’ activism (e.g. advocating law changes and equal pay/pay equity). Therefore, these forms of individualised feminist activities not only aimed for (small) incremental social change, but also served as one way to sustain feminist motivation among the women, which is important for any broader women’s movement.

For other women, however, the relationship between their individual activities and political aspirations was initially not intentional. Some feminist groups were established to share personal experiences and to provide a support network for the members themselves. Nana (28, Southeast Asian) talked about one of the collectives she belonged to, which addressed Asian women only. She explicitly stated that the initial purpose of this group was primarily to support the members themselves, who experienced intersectional marginalisation in their daily lives: ‘we wanted a space where you can go “Oh my God, I know what you mean!” And so for us it’s also self-fulfilling. It’s not just something we can do for other people. It’s like so we can all feel healthy as feminists [laughs]’. While this collective started as a support group, it has continued to be involved in various types of activism. Phoolan (23, Southeast Asian), who was a member of the same group, explained:

That’s quite an informal group. It’s supposed to be social support-based but it’s kind of, I guess, becoming whatever it’s becoming, which is more politically active than the original intention, which was just to share our experiences with being non-male in a Eurocentric society.

It is possible that the initial personal and self-directed focus on supporting Asian feminists was necessary to create a safe environment for the members, which in turn enabled their further political involvement.
Not all participants shared an enthusiasm for individualised everyday practices of feminism. The reasons for this were diverse and shared by some younger and older women. For instance, some women refused to engage in personal conversations and arguments about feminism, especially with non-feminists, for personal motives. Virginia (26, Pākehā), for instance, explained in colourful language:

I try to not have conversations [about feminist issues] in my personal life anymore with people that I don’t know very well who it seems really clear that I’m gonna have a very different perspective to them and I’m gonna have to explain myself. Or they’re gonna say shit and I just can’t be fucked telling them how fucked their idea was.

Thus, the same activities some women saw as rewarding and central to social change were regarded as tiring and draining by others. Virginia was not alone with this stance, as a number of particularly younger women tried to avoid certain situations because, as Anne (30, Pākehā) clarified, they ‘just couldn’t be bothered having the argument or the debate with somebody. You know, sometimes you just can’t be bothered to go into Feminism 101’. While Anne was one of the women who did see feminist value in conversations with other women, she — at least sometimes — limited them to feminists. This again raises the question as to whether ‘preaching to the converted’ is an appropriate tool for achieving social change.

Other women doubted that social change could occur through individual choices or activities. Nana (28, Southeast Asian), for example, worked for a domestic violence organisation and disagreed that day-to-day activities such as having conversations about feminist topics have the ability to raise awareness. She explained:

[It is frustrating] how people think that with more awareness things will get better. It doesn’t work that way! Especially when you talk about family violence and you are talking about violence and discrimination against girls and young women. Just because people know that it’s not ok does not necessarily mean that criminal statistic will reduce.

Andrea (33, Pākehā) had a similar dislike for ascribing political value to activities when she thought there was none:

Often people think that ‘the personal is political’ means I don’t know... God knows... there is something political in wearing make-up or not wearing make-up or any of those things. [...] That’s a trend that I really disagree with — the individualism as politics. I don’t think it is politics. [...] The way you live your life is about dealing with it and finding the best circumstances and the strongest way forward for you. And politics is when you get together with other people and try to make something better.

Andrea was concerned because some feminists viewed individualised activities as political while she did not. Alice (24, Pākehā) had a similar complaint about feminist activities turning into social events: ‘I worry about some of the feminist stuff that’s coming up that it is so focused on having fun and having lots of cupcakes and whatever that it gets forgotten that it is a political kind of thing’.
Overall, the women interviewed had different understandings about the political impact of individualised feminist activities, which is linked to the variety of individualised activities in which the women engaged. In order to discuss the political character of everyday feminism more specifically, the following discussion will draw attention to concrete examples of such activities.

**Types of everyday feminism**

The women interviewed found a broad range of outlets for everyday practices of feminism and these activities covered many aspects of their lives, including their education (e.g. choosing feminist topics in their university assignments), their art (e.g. playing in a Riot Grrrl band, writing novels about women) and leisure activities (e.g. reading feminist books, watching or avoiding certain television programmes). Some women’s professional work was also a part of their individual involvement in feminism: one woman, for example, viewed her employment at a sex-toy shop as feminist work because she could help women explore their sexuality, while Kathleen (31, Pākehā) made an effort to engage with the public to ‘be seen as a scientist. I don’t want to be a poster girl but I think it’s necessary to have women out there talking about science’. In the following, I focus on two types of everyday feminism: first the integration of feminism into personal relationships and second, feminist online activism. Both types of practice have been criticised for their apparent lack of political relevance.

**Interpersonal relationships**

For Anne (30, Pākehā) ‘one of the most important ways of bringing around feminist change is just through your interpersonal relationships. You know, that’s where you meet and talk to the most people. Bringing up ideas and discuss them’. Many participants shared this view and their relationships with friends, partners, children and broader families were the four types of relationships these participants referred to most often.

Feminist friendships were valued highly because they allowed the women to have conversations with like-minded people about feminist issues. Betty (31, Pākehā) explained why this was important to her:

> The best thing is really just feeling like I’m not a weird crazy freak. Because if you are isolated it’s super-easy to feel like you are the only person who thinks this and nothing is ever going to change. By having a feminist community, if I’m having a bad day I can talk to them and so it’s probably the connection that’s the most powerful thing to me.

Thus, while Betty talked about her personal friendships, she explained their importance by referring to the value of a community. She used the word ‘powerful’ but some of the participants, including Anne (30, Pākehā), understood feminist friendships to be political:
I don’t think that you need to be part of a group in order to make some kind of change. I think that within this house [her home which she shared with feminist flatmates] we have amazing conversations and we are really supportive of each other and we talk about things along gender and sexuality and that’s not part of a group but I think that it’s really political as well.

Implementing feminist values in romantic relationships seemed to be challenging for older and younger participants. Several women reported about difficulties of transgressing traditional gender roles within their personal lives. Older participants were often relatively comfortable with such arrangements. Liz (58, European), for example, explained:

I fall into the role of the cook because I like it and I do it better [laughs]. […] And he tends to do more things outdoors like mowing the lawns and that. So we fall into traditional roles in that way but that doesn’t mean we don’t have equal respect for one another as human beings. So the basic understanding is we’re equals.

Younger participants tended to have different expectations about how ‘feminist partnerships’ are supposed to work. Isabella (28, European), a community educator who taught school children about sexual violence prevention including concepts such as consent, respect and equality, said ‘[i]f it’s good enough for the young people [educated by her organisation], we need to be doing that ourselves because otherwise we are just hypocrites. It’s gotta be something that we actually believe in to be able to tell someone else’. Thus, for Isabella, integrating her feminist values into her own romantic relationships was not only important to her as an individual but part of being a role model for younger women.

Among the participants, 15 women were mothers and some of them talked about the contradictions between social expectations regarding their roles as both mothers and feminists. Their ways of parenting — a profoundly personal aspect of family life — became subject to these women’s feminist analysis. Christine (31, Māori/Pākehā), mother of two children under the age of 10, said:

My son loves ‘My Little Pony’ and he loves […] wondering around with a pink fairy dress [laughs]. […] First, I kind of struggled with that because it goes against what you are led to expect from your child. But I think as a feminist I am aware of how those norms about dressing and that sort of thing are socially constructed. It [feminism] definitely has made me a lot more aware of that and sensitive, I think, to his needs and that sort of thing.

Christine indicated that she consciously employed her feminist views in parenting to overcome her unease about her son who did not conform to gender norms. But not only younger women reflected on their feminist parenting styles. Margaret (48, Pākehā), for instance, perceived child-rearing as activism. She stated ‘You can’t do activism by not moving and parenting is probably one of the most moving things I’ve ever done’.
**Feminist online activism**

The use of new social media such as Facebook, blogs and Twitter changed the possibilities of organising feminist activism. I argued elsewhere (Schuster, 2013) that online activism is exclusionary towards those who do not use new social media and that older feminists are more likely to be among the excluded. In the context of this paper it is necessary to explain the function and political relevance that online activism has for those who use it. ‘Clicktivism’ (Butler, 2011; Karpf, 2010) has a bad reputation for not being ‘real’ but ‘lazy’ activism and not having impact on the offline world. However, based on the experiences of my participants I argue that new social media can be used in politically effective ways.

The women interviewed who made use of new social media for feminist purposes tended to be members of online feminist collectives, such as Facebook groups (e.g. Campus Feminist Collective, Wellington Young Feminist Collective). While some of these collectives do have meetings 'in the real world', many members did not attend such meetings but only interacted with the groups online. However, their online-only membership had reasons other than 'laziness'. Ellen (24, Pākehā), for example, had not ‘actually been to a meeting cos they are at night and I have a kid’ and Djamila (21, South Asian) did not go to a group’s meeting because she assumed ‘it would probably be a very white event. And I’m not sure whether I would be represented that well’. She was also part of a Facebook group by an Asian feminist collective and she has not ‘actually been to any of their meetings or I haven’t even been posting on their page. I’m just kind of lurking on their page’. The value of engaging with Facebook groups was for Djamila that it was ‘less daunting’ than attending protests or meeting and that she did not ‘have to tolerate people’s abuses or whatever’ because she was in control of what she read online.

Gabriela (25, Southeast Asian) further explained that the internet was in fact an ideal way of joining a group and collecting relevant information:

> I wake up and check my phone and have a scroll through it. And a lot of it, I guess, is just being part of the collective and watching the discussions on Facebook and someone always links articles and stuff. So just looking at those and reading that. The internet is a wealth of resources. And obviously, I got books and shit at home but it’s just not as current and immediate […].

She also argued that Facebook offered an easy avenue for people to engage with feminist issues:

> [Y]ou check Facebook every day and […] it’s something that people will digest, it’s a format that is not like giving someone a book or saying “come to this lecture” or “come to this rally”. It’s just something that slowly permeates people.
To emphasise that online activism also involves the organisation of events, Judith (21, Pākehā), who was one of the organisers of SlutWalk Aotearoa\(^{10}\) in 2011, illustrated that ‘SlutWalk was a totally online pushed thing. We had no — I think Auckland might have — but Wellington had no posters up. We were totally off the back of Facebook and Twitter and we had 1200 people just in Wellington!’

These are just a few of many examples how my participants used the internet for their activism. Often, these were practices in which the women engaged as individuals (even the organising team of SlutWalk was essentially constituted by one or two individuals per city), however, they were perceived to be political.

**Difficult relationships**

One of the reasons for why conceptions of the political character of everyday feminism vary between generations may be the lack of communication and cooperation between younger and older feminists, which causes those not familiar with individualised practices to remain unclear about their purposes. While most of my participants reported that they interacted with feminists of ‘the other generation’, often these interactions were infrequent and irregular, in particular when they were not employed by or volunteering for women’s organisations through which the women met. Some of the participants occasionally worked with older and younger feminists, respectively, during specific events, one-off projects or in random situations. Nine women, however, seemed to have little or no experience in this regard. One of them was Chen (22, East Asian), who replied to my question about the relationship between feminists of different generations by saying ‘To be honest, I haven’t really had that much interaction with older feminists. So yeah, I don’t know how to answer that’. Others only used examples relating to their own mothers or daughters, which is indicative of little intergenerational feminist interaction outside of their family.

Overall, the participants tended to talk respectfully but distantly about the generation that they did not identify with. Many agreed with Rebecca (34, Pākehā), who said that ‘there is a lot we can learn from each other’ and thought that disagreements did not inhibit co-operation and respect for each other’s work. A few younger women highly valued having been mentored by older women, and some older women appreciated young feminists having shared new perspectives on certain issues with them. But across all age groups women strongly regretted that there were too few opportunities for generations of feminists to get together and have discussions or provide and receive mentoring.

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\(^{10}\) Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand. ‘SlutWalk’ is the title of an international series of feminist protest marches that started in Toronto 2011 in response to a police officer’s advice that female students should not dress like ‘sluts’ in order to avoid sexual harassment.
Conversely, Andrea (33, Pākehā) claimed that ‘generational conflicts in New Zealand’s feminist movement are massively overplayed’ and a few others interpreted differences rather as a life cycle effect than as a cohort effect. There was also much agreement among the women that differences between generations are normal, as Eva (54, European) explained:

I mean, in some ways wouldn’t you expect contemporary feminists would be different from Second Wave feminists anyway because we have moved on, our understandings have changed, the world has changed. We don’t have this sort of stark choice between liberal feminism and radical feminism anymore. Feminism itself has changed. So yeah, there are differences.

Thus, I do not want to exaggerate the potential of conflict between younger and older feminists in New Zealand. Still, the arguments and reciprocal allegations present in the international literature discussed earlier were, to some extent, noticeable among my participants, as the following examples show.

In her role as a community educator, Virginia (26, Pākehā) facilitated a discussion on the use of the word ‘queer’. She reported that during that discussion some older women argued ‘all the young queers are just totally depoliticised because they are not using the word “lesbian” anymore’. According to Virginia, they interpreted this rejection of the ‘lesbian’ label as dishonouring past successes of lesbian feminists. However, when the younger participants of my study explained the term ‘queer’ they often explicitly emphasised the political aspect of it: just as the early lesbian movement fought against heteronormativity, they felt that taking on a queer identity deliberately opposes binary categorisations of sexual identities (hetero- and homosexual). The queer concept assumes sexual identities to be fluid and multiple instead of fixed and binary. It is an expansion of the lesbian argument, not a backlash.

Older participants also struggled with the terminology of the younger generation, as Sylvia (52, Pākehā) explained. Together with a friend she used to run a radio programme called ‘The Women’s Show’ when she was in her thirties:

This group of young women started coming around the edges and wanting to get involved with the show and they eventually took it over. And the first thing they did was changing it from ‘The Women’s Show’ to ‘The Girlzone Show’. And we were like ‘Oh my God!’, completely horrified. […] It’s like… ‘girl’ was so not acceptable and you had to be a woman. And then it just flipped around and ‘girls’ are ok again. […] So you know, go on, you [younger women] do what you need to do.

Even though Sylvia first was ‘horrified’ about the younger generation’s choice of terms, it is necessary to highlight her subsequent encouragement which acknowledged that younger generations might do things differently. However, this and the previous example by Virginia illustrated that misinterpretations of each other’s terminology are related to conceptions of what counts as political.
Changing perspectives on collectivity

Individualism among feminists is arguably a less isolated stance today than it would have been during the time of the Second Wave movement. I have explained that social media tools provide new ways of networking on an informal level that individuals can use without having to join a group. Many, mainly young, participants who used such tools did not see the need for networking through physical groups with regular meetings and official constitutions because they perceived online networks as less binding and equally effective for sharing information and organising events. Nevertheless, many interview participants were members of women’s organisations that operated on a more formal level. The literature often portrays individualised and collective activities as mutually exclusive, as if individual women can only engage in one type of activity in their lives. However, engaging in everyday feminism did not necessarily mean that feminists were not connected with each other. Most participants in this study were involved in multiple feminist projects. Some participants who were particularly active online were also members of feminist grassroots collectives, others worked for women’s organisations as their day-jobs. Additionally, some participants emphasised that New Zealand is a small country with an even smaller feminist community. Virginia (26, Pākehā) explained how this enabled an informal way of networking:

People know who people are. [...] There’s multiple ways of how you can connect in but I guess if you don’t find one of those ways then it’s a bit of an abstract collective. So it might be quite hard to start getting involved with. Then once you are involved a little bit you know people that know people or whatever [...] If some of my friends or someone who I’ve done an action with before wants to do an action […] then someone will call something and people will come together.

Nana (28, Southeast Asia) described the feminist scene in a similar way:

People know them, and if you know someone, you know someone. So it’s quite a sub-culture in a sense but it’s definitely there. And the way I know it is because if there is an injustice happening and I need to go somewhere to shout about it, I know who to go to, I know who to find.

Returning to the starting point of this paper, Hanisch’s (1970) essay offers a more nuanced discussion of the relationship between the personal and the political than often reflected in the debates which only concentrate on the meaning of the essay’s title. In the last paragraph of her essay, Hanisch (1970, p. 78), in fact, warns against dismissing women as apolitical who do not join the collective of a women’s movement. She states:

I think ‘apolitical’ women are not in the movement for very good reasons, and as long as we say ‘you have to think like us and live like us to join the charmed circle,’ we will fail. What I am trying to say is that there are things in the consciousness of ‘apolitical’ women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have.
Thus, unlike many of the defenders of a Second Wave perspective on *the personal is political*, Hanisch explicitly acknowledges that political stances for women can be made outside the context of collective activities that are traditionally associated with the women’s movement. This is an argument strikingly similar to many younger and/or Third Wave feminists who engage in everyday feminism.

Today, Hanisch is the editor of *Meeting Ground*, a website (!) that offers an ‘ongoing place to hammer out ideas about theory, strategy and tactics for the women’s liberation movement’ (Hanisch & Scarbrough, 2014). As Carol Hanisch herself goes online, I believe, there is much reason for optimism that Second and Third Wavers, younger and older feminists can find a common ground in their understandings of what makes feminism political, however, they will need to communicate more with each other.
References


Hanisch, C. (1970). The Personal is Political. In S. Firestone, & A. Koedt (Eds.), Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists (pp. 76-78).


