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The New Face of Feminism ***A new generation is expanding its activism beyond women's rights***

By Katti Gray
Staff Writer

As soon as female visitors enter the Hofstra University office of Women of Action, a student group, they are greeted with one clarifying question.

"We ask them what they want to be called: 'he' or 'she,'" said Blyth Barnow, 21, a senior at the Hempstead campus. "Only giving people the option of 'male' or 'female,' dominant or submissive, is restrictive."

And when post-9/11 fears put dark-haired, dark-eyed men of presumed foreign origins under a different sort of restraint, the young women activists of the Manhattan-based Sakhi decided to stop picketing outside the homes of known batterers in their South Asian community. Domestic violence is one kind of trauma for women and children, they reasoned, but having husbands and fathers broad-brushed as potential terrorists presents another danger. What if their picketing abetted law enforcement's profiling of Arabs and men who looked like Arabs? Wouldn't that amount to being anti-community, anti-family and, therefore, anti-woman?

Avowed feminists, the women of Sakhi tailored their tactics to fit these times. "We've all very different definitions of what feminism means. We're in constant dialogue on that question, given the current climate and, of course, our being South Asian," said Bix Gabriel, who came to the United States from her native India in 1999 and is community outreach and media coordinator at Sakhi. She is 28, the second oldest - Sakhi's executive director is 32 - on a nine-woman staff whose youngest worker is 23.

Whether agitating over such boilerplate feminist issues as pay equity and abortion rights, letting a person born female (or male) choose her (or his) gender identity, or probing the role of women across an increasingly borderless global landscape, the current crop of younger feminists, many of them in their 20s, are charting their own multi-faceted course.

If the women's movement propelled more than a half-century ago by the likes of Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Flo Kennedy transported women out of the kitchen, up the corporate ladder and onto the judicial bench, its younger aspirants say their own trailblazing flows directly from the current economic, political and cultural moment. Today, the nuanced work of feminism is as fixed on matters of war as on poverty, racism, sexism and what authenticates gender in the first place.

"My passion is women's issues but I strongly want to pursue other social justice movements. The prison industrial system, education ... police brutality, housing issues," said Leslie Grant, 18, a Touro College sophomore, who attended January's World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The single mother of a son, 2, came into her feminist self, she said, while helping the nonprofit Sistas on the Rise beat back a proposed closing of the Bronx's Martha Nielsen High School for pregnant and parenting teens. Sistas ended up hiring Grant as an intern.

With under-30 feminists heavily involved in its reshaping, feminism in the United States, whose public profile peaked in the 1970s, incrementally is undergoing a

makeover, said Amy Caiazza, study director for the Institute for Women's Policy Research, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

"One of the fascinating things about this generation is how much more diverse their movement is," Caiazza said. "Yet, even when these young women are working in their different communities, there is a good deal of interaction between organizations. I don't want to discredit [pioneering] First Wave organizers but this wave is less led by one or two or even 10 specific leaders. It's very bottom-up, very grassroots and focused on broadly defined cultural issues."

"It's no longer a Betty Friedan feminine mystique kind of thing," said Helen Wang, 28, assistant director of Manhattan-based Women's Rights at Work, "or having to conform to roles as a reaction - of women having to be on the defensive. Today's feminism is very connected with much larger, broader issues of humanism."

And it is played out in such far-flung venues as this weekend's Ladyfest East, an offshoot of the original Ladyfest, launched in 2002 in Washington state. The Brooklyn festival's female-focused slate runs this Friday through Sunday at sites in Williamsburg, with performances by several all-women bands and workshops on such disparate topics as "Tampaction," which ponders the physiological and environmental pros and cons of using tampons, and "Ladies Bicycle Repair," which carries the message: Women are capable of self-sufficiency.

From the seemingly mundane to the more fractious, these are the issues many neo-feminists confront, said Lisa Jervis, publisher of "bitch." It is one in a small crop of magazines and e-zines established during the past decade to present the complexity of voices and ideas among young women.

"We don't want to give the impression that there's a feminist party line. Feminists disagree with each other all the time and that's a good thing," said Jervis, 32, who co-founded the magazine when she was 22. Sometimes, disagreement within the larger ranks is fed directly by neo-feminists' youth. Rebecca Dell'Aglio, 26, is director of Women's Rights at Work, which fights workplace sexual harassment on the job. During a recent conference hosted by the Center for the Women of New York, formerly the Queens Women's Center, she kept raising her hand, hoping to offer a polite corrective to a woman at least old enough to be her mother and offering what Dell'Aglio dismissed as a tepid remedy for harassment.

"First, you will need to contact the local human rights commission," the older speaker said.

"Why bother?" Dell'Aglio said, under her breath. "They are completely ineffective." She was seated in the back of the room, waiting to start her 30-minute fast-chat on combating untoward advances.

"For most of the women who talk to me, and who sue, it's not just the harassment, but the retaliation: 'I got fired' or 'They cut my pay,'" said Dell'Aglio, speaking rapid-fire, her hands flying. "Often our callers are vulnerable women, single moms with kids, which makes it really important that women who can speak up do."

Understanding that the bulk of its paid membership was aging out, the National Organization for Women established its Young Women's Task Force in 2003. Two of NOW's 38 board members are under 30. Formed when Lyndon Johnson was in the White House, NOW has maintained no precise age breakdown of members. But an eyeview suggests that most of those who turn out for NOW marches are under 30, said Latifah Lyles, 28, one of NOW's three national vice presidents, while about 40 percent of attendees at last summer's national convention were in that age group.

Bronx-born and -reared Lyles also is the organization's membership director. She has been exploring how to attract young women on the Internet, among other arenas. What motivates them? What do they know of what remains of an ongoing feminist struggle?

"So you want to be a tenured professor or make partner or take time off to raise children or have fair pension benefits? Things might seem a lot better," Lyles said, "... when there really is so much work to do."

In 2004, for example, women earned an average of 76 cents for every dollar men earned. That's up from 59 cents two decades ago but some distance from the parity envisioned when federal equal pay provisions became law in 1963.

For her think tank, researcher Caiazza these days has been traveling the country interviewing under-30 feminists about the criss-cross of their workplace and personal goals, spiritual beliefs and activism.

"They're less suspicious of religion and marriage. They recognize those institutions are patriarchal but want to redefine them and not throw the baby out with the bathwater," Caiazza said.

She found a chorus at Planned Parenthood of Nassau County. "There are," said Danielle Varney, 29, outreach coordinator for that agency, "so many ways to be a feminist, whether you get married at 22 or stay single."

"This is so much more than what it started out as, more than just breaking stereotypes and stigmas," said Lisa Anchin, 23, the agency's Stand Up for Choice coordinator.

"It's not about female superiority versus male inferiority," said Diana Benavides, 27, program director for Planned Parenthood's education department.

"We're talking about an everyday kind of feminism," Verney said, sitting with Benavides and Anchin in an agency conference room.

The daily realities for women immigrants are another layer of the new feminist discourse. In a cultural community where a woman's future rests frequently on a man's dictates, Women for Afghan Women aims to upset male dominance. Many immigrant Afghans, said Manizha Naderi, 29, administrative director of the Flushing nonprofit, ventured to the United States seeking an assortment of personal freedoms.

But, she said, a startling number of them remove their daughters from public schools in their adopted country as early as age 12, believing education is a right reserved for boys.

"The thing that really informs my work is all that has happened to women - including their torture under the Taliban. I could easily have been one of those women if we'd not gotten out," said Naderi, who, at 4, crossed the desert from Afghanistan into Pakistan on a motorcycle carrying her father, mother, infant sister and the motorcycle driver.

Her clan arrived in the United States when Naderi was 8. This year, she agreed to let her 11-year-old daughter enroll in an American school in Kandahar, while the child's contractor dad, Naderi's Afghan-American husband, is helping rebuild bombed-out cities in that region.

At home, his wife addresses neighborhood concerns over housing, employment, spousal abuse, immigration and the fundamental pursuit of proficiency in English.

"I will learn English very good and I will find a good job for a good life," said Mansoura Samin, 32, from the Afghan project's Saturday English class in an office building in Flushing's warehouse district.

Researcher Caiazza, now 37, said she began hearing talk of a feminist Third Wave when she was in college and chose then to call herself by that f-word. The women's movement, though, has lost ground during the last decade or so, she said. Then, she cited the 60-something head of her Washington institute.

"She talks a lot about being tired. Her generation forged all these paths and paid such a price; they don't want to be unrecognized for that. Whether or not it's expressed, these younger women, who are doing this new organizing, are the only hope we have."

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