

Where Have All the Feminists Gone?

Millennials and the Unfinished Gender Revolution

If you were to hop on a beach cruiser for a ride around Isla Vista, California, you would see that it is a naturally stunning beachside community. Riding past Freebirds twenty-four-hour burrito shop, Woodstock's Pizza, and the Isla Vista grocery co-op, you would notice businesses interspersed with densely packed homes and apartment buildings, with the largely student and Latina and Latino family populations sharing bedrooms or illegally converted garages. As you rolled down Del Playa, the street paralleling the beach, the sun would feel warm on your face, and you would hear the music of a band practicing out of an open window. You would notice houses painted with brightly colored murals, someone rinsing off post-surf session in a wetsuit in an outdoor shower, and a 1968 VW van being slowly driven by a hippy sporting a huge beard. You would probably be incredulous that these tenants live in residences perched overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

On the evening of May 23, 2014, on the streets and in the homes of Isla Vista, twenty-two-year-old Elliott Rodger killed six University of California–Santa Barbara students and injured fourteen others before killing himself. His rampage—which included killing his two roommates and their friend, two Delta Delta Delta sorority members, patrons of local businesses, pedestrians, and bike riders—encompassed seventeen crime scenes across Isla Vista. It soon emerged that the rampage was driven by Rodger's hatred of women. In his last YouTube video, he said, "For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love to other men but never to me. . . . I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it."¹

While grief and sorrow descended upon the beachside town and beyond, there was a surprising turn of events. The news provoked an eye-opening surge of feminist activism. Fueled by the wide circulation of the killer's misogynist manifesto and his desire to exact "revenge" upon young women, feminists in Isla Vista and across the world clamored for a halt to sexism. Students and young people, online and off, successfully shaped national discourse on the tragic incident. What started as a discussion of gun control and the killer's mental illness shifted into a broader debate about sexism. "Campus Killings Set Off Anguished Conversation about the Treatment of Women" (*New York Times*)² was accompanied by a photo of University of California–Santa Barbara feminist studies students marching through Isla Vista bearing placards saying, "Nobody is entitled to a womyn's body" and "Speak up! Every day." Major news outlets not known for their coverage of feminism or gender inequality blared headlines such as "Why It's So Hard for Men to See Misogyny" (*Slate*)³ and "Hollywood and Violence: Is Misogyny a Growing Concern?" (CNN).⁴

Online feminists shaped mainstream news coverage during this time, with #YesAllWomen drawing significant media attention. Born as a result of women's outrage over the sexist motivations of the killer, #YesAllWomen generated over a million tweets in four days. The tweets revealed, according to one CNN analyst, the "collective experience of what it's like to be a woman in a world where that can be dangerous."⁵ Women around the globe shared 140 characters documenting their experiences with sexism, violence, and sexual harassment. Examples of tweets include the following: "Because I can't tweet about feminism without getting threats. . . . Speaking out shouldn't scare me," and "Every single woman you know has been harassed. And just as importantly every single woman you don't know has been harassed."

This feminist mobilization illuminated unexplored dimensions of feminism and gender inequality. Although the outcry may have been unforeseen by people who think that young women are uninterested in feminism or that sexism is no longer a pressing social issue, these events drew attention to the endurance of gender inequality as well as to the deep feminist networks rooted in the community. Social movement scholars know that this type of organizing does not appear out of thin air—it is the result of mobilizing grievances, preexisting social ties, a

solidarity with other participants, spurious events, and a context that is, to some degree, amenable to movement organizing.⁶

Examples of surges of feminist mobilization are not rare. You may have read about Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz, who carried her mattress around campus in protest of the way university administrators responded to her sexual assault report—or the widely used hashtag #RememberRenisha, commemorating murdered Detroit teenager Renisha McBride, bringing attention to the racism and sexism that erases the experiences of African American women. These campaigns, like the Isla Vista massacre response, point to the continued existence of feminists and relevance of feminism in the United States. Despite media attention to these events and much speculation about young women’s interest in feminism, there is very little scholarship analyzing the state of the movement. *Finding Feminism* fills that void.

In the following chapters, I tell the stories of a diverse group of college student feminists from three different regions of the United States. By analyzing participants’ intersectional feminist identities as well as the organizational strategies and structures of their feminist organizations, I elucidate the ways in which feminism has persisted and changed over time. The evidence in this book demonstrates how college students continue to be feminists and activists, despite speculation to the contrary, and how the meanings and tactics of feminism have changed over time. *Finding Feminism* contributes to broader conversations about the transformation and current state of the feminist movement, and the way these students are negotiating the strain borne by progress and stall.

This May Have Been the Best Year for Women since the Dawn of Time
—12/23/2014, *Huffington Post*

2014 Was a Bad Year for Women, but a Good Year for Feminism
—12/24/2014, *Huffington Post*

Oversimplified and contradictory notions of feminism and gender equality circulate widely in the media. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 1990s, the “feminism is dead” pronouncement had its heyday. Much to all feminists’ chagrin (young and old mobilized as feminists during this time) the phrase was splashed across headlines and the cov-