

This “New” Feminism Has Been Here All Along



Dani McClain

JOANNE SMITH'S UNDERSTANDING OF FEMINISM is shaped in large part by her grandmother's story. The now-deceased matriarch, then employed as a nurse in Haiti, wrote to President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s seeking a way out of the country for her family during the turbulent reign of Haitian President François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. Kennedy responded, awarding Smith's engineer grandfather a fellowship in Tunisia. But while in the North African country ahead of his wife and children, the man started a new family. Smith's grandmother was undeterred by the betrayal and found a way to the United States and work that allowed her to eventually send for the children she'd left with relatives in Haiti.

Smith, who leads an organization in Brooklyn called Girls for Gender Equity, said that she remembers being told about her grandmother while growing up: “She got your grandfather the job. She accessed politics. She was educated.” That example now informs the work Smith does supporting the 11- to 24-year-olds who come to her organization for training in community organizing. “Her leadership shaped everything that I know about feminism and Black feminism,” Smith said.

Smith's own identity is rich and layered. She is a Black woman, a Lesbian, a first-generation Haitian American, and one of three daughters raised by a single mother who earned a bachelor's degree at the age of 50. These and other aspects of her identity figure into how she understands and lives feminism. In other words, she embodies what's often called intersectional feminism. Through her organization's work with the New York City Council's Young Women's Initiative and the White House Council on Women and Girls, Smith is one of many voices exposing new audiences to this intersectional approach. In the process, she often finds herself making a critical point: While her feminism—a feminism that takes into account the totality of a person's identity and experience—may be a new concept for some, there's nothing new about it.

The feminism that some find more

familiar, the feminism that made words and phrases like “womanism” and “intersectional feminism” necessary in the first place, is less explicitly inclusive.

Consider the plain and simple feminism that novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie named in her TED Talk, “We Should All Be Feminists,” and that Beyoncé then enshrined in her 2014 song “Flawless.” As Adichie put it, “Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.” This is a clear, concise explanation voiced by a Nigerian writer and amplified by an African-American entertainer, one that implies a big tent with room for all kinds of people. Yet many are turned off by the word when it stands on its own because of the exclusive ways it’s been applied throughout history. “Feminism” can serve as shorthand for a political project that, in theory, sought to liberate all women but, in practice, elevated a particular slice of womanhood. The typical student of 19th-century feminism is more likely to think of Elizabeth Cady Stanton than Anna Julia Cooper, the Black educator and author of the 1892 book *Voice from the South*, if asked who advanced the movement’s first wave. Gloria Steinem is nearly a household name; Florynce “Flo” Kennedy, the Black feminist and attorney who was often paired with Steinem for ’70s speaking engagements, is not. This is because of the textbooks and mainstream media projects that build and preserve standard narratives about who feminism benefits and who has kept it alive all these years.

Unfortunately, differences between the priorities of second- and third-wave feminism and those of the

intersectional approach gaining more traction today are often presented in mainstream media as a generational conflict. Take, for example, the campaign-trail debate last winter over why many young women seemed unmoved by Hillary Clinton’s presidential candidacy. Most news outlets framed the phenomenon as a clash between older White women and their younger counterparts. Think Gloria Steinem suggesting that young women were simply on the hunt for dates with the young men supporting Bernie Sanders and Madeleine Albright’s “special place in hell” quote about the destination of any woman not supporting Clinton.

The coverage described both a betrayal of the old guard by women young enough to be their granddaughters and the emergence of a new guard that considers itself feminist but understands the word in entirely different ways. This framing cast millennials as the engines behind a “new” feminism—one in which efforts toward equality on the basis of sex (Clinton’s domain) get equal footing with efforts toward racial justice, immigrant rights, the eradication of poverty, and the centering of Queer and Trans people’s issues (not exactly Clinton’s domain).

But the lack of enthusiasm about Clinton was not actually evidence of a clash between generations. Similar tensions have long existed within struggles for women’s rights, and two recent historical documentaries show just how. In *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, a 2014 film about women organizing in the ’60s and ’70s, the Black feminist activist Linda Burnham talks about going to an abortion-rights rally in San Francisco in the early 1970s and being confronted

by “a sea of White women, very few women of color.” She recalls that someone in the crowd grabbed a bullhorn and asked for the Black women present to gather under a tree. The idea behind the impromptu caucus, she says, was that “maybe we have something to talk about that might be different from what’s coming from the stage, and indeed we did.” The organization Black Sisters United developed as a result.

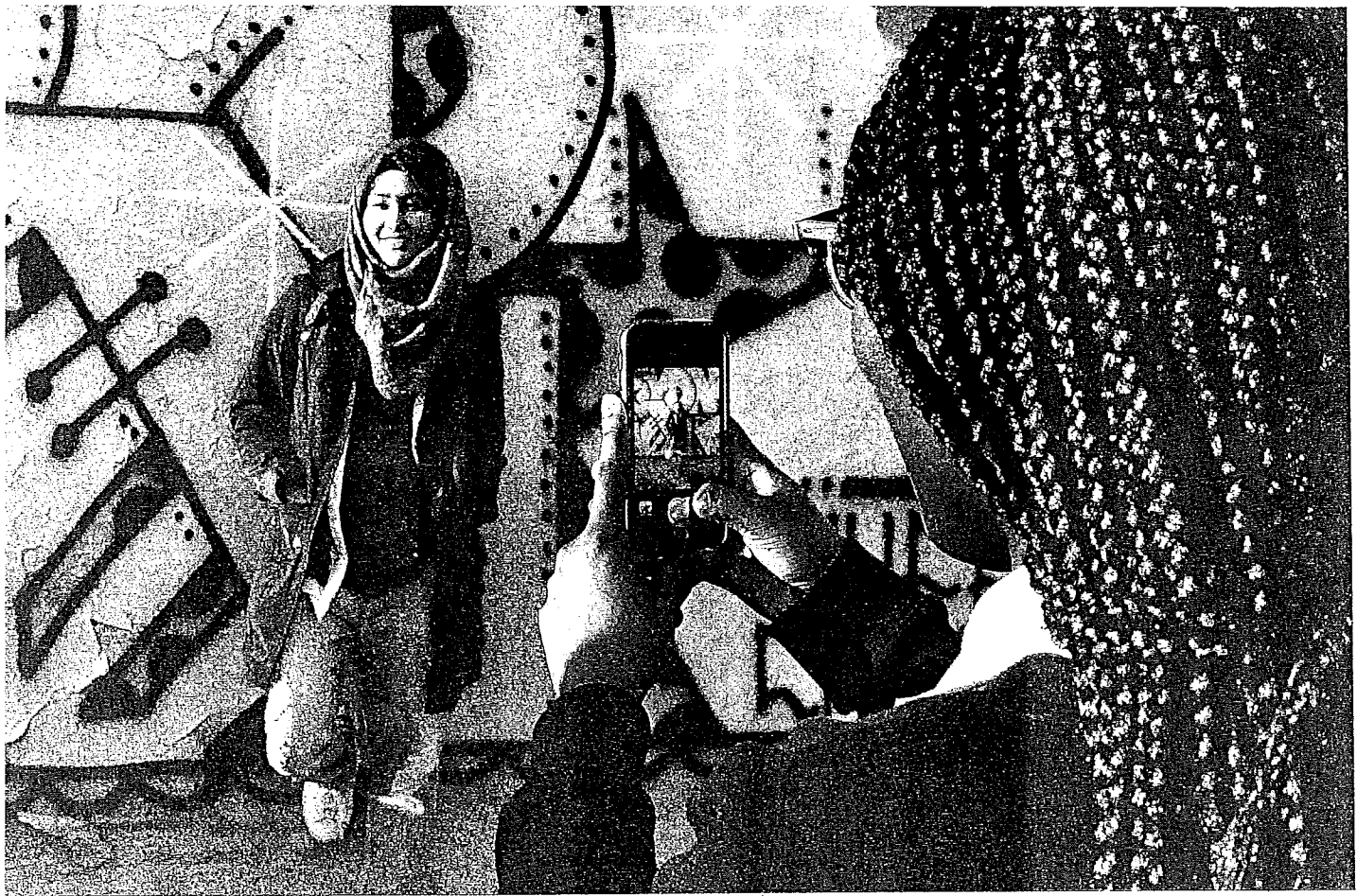
In the same film, the lesbian feminist activist Rita Mae Brown recounts how lesbians were excluded from mainstream second-wave organizing. On joining the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1968, Brown said, “I joined NOW, and I was the youngest person there, and I think I was the only Southerner. I called them on the carpet about class, and I called them on the carpet about race, and then I called them on the carpet about lesbianism. I said, ‘You are treating women the way men treat you. And those women are lesbians.’”

The 2015 documentary *No Más Bebés*, about the forced sterilization of Mexican immigrant women at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center in the 1960s and ’70s, highlights tensions between White and Latina feminists. The latter group called for a waiting period for sterilization to ensure that women understood what they were consenting to at the hospital, thus safeguarding against a eugenicist practice that had resulted in doctors tying the tubes of unsuspecting Spanish-speaking women who had gone there to give birth. “The [White] feminists wanted sterilization upon demand,” Gloria Molina of Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, a Chicana empowerment organization, recalls in the film. “They basically opposed our waiting period. They weren’t really taking into account that, if you’re Spanish-speaking or if you don’t speak English, how you were being denied a right totally.”

Burnham, Brown, and Molina were taking an intersectional approach to feminism. When it comes to blind spots such as those described above,

At left: Joanne Smith (second from left), executive director of Girls for Gender Equity, with members Hyunhee Shin, Sharone Holloman, and Fariha Farzana.

Photo from pages 16-17: Members of Girls for Gender Equity in Brooklyn, left to right: Sharone Holloman holding Patsy Matsu Takemoto Mink, Charisma Barrington holding Sojourner Truth, Miasia Clark holding Anita Hill, Ferial Morisset Noé holding Myriam Merlet, Joanne Smith, Zainab Abdemula holding Vandana Shiva, Fariha Farzana holding Dr. Mae Carol Jemison, Sheneise Patterson holding Shirley Chisholm. Portraits by muralist Crystal Clarity.



Fariha Farzana being photographed by Shenese Patterson.

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the difference between today and 50 years ago is that now people whose perspectives were once pushed into the margins—where separate organizations often took shape—are more effective in pushing right back and reshaping what's mainstream and visible. From the democratizing role that Twitter and other social media platforms have played in broadening our view of leaders and spokespeople, to the emergence of a slightly more diverse group of scholars and commentators with large platforms (see, for example, the topics and guests Melissa Harris-Perry featured on her recently ended MSNBC show), various channels are helping age-old feminisms reach new audiences.

The introduction hasn't been easy for everyone. Take the recent half-hearted attempt of a *Los Angeles Times* columnist to explain to her readers why some young women view Hillary Clinton with skepticism. In a column

titled "Yes, millennials, Hillary Clinton is a feminist," Meghan Daum writes: "'Cis' is short for cisgender, in case you didn't know, and it refers to people who are not transgender. 'Intersectionality' refers to the idea that oppression or social inequality operates within a framework of overlapping identities. (That's a simplified explanation; if you want to know more, Google it and prepare to get dizzy.)" Daum goes on to say, "It's simply wrong to dismiss her [Clinton] because she doesn't adequately hew to the orthodoxy of the latest gender-theory hashtag."

Daum's implication is clear: The young folks have invented a bunch of complicated words to confuse those of us who truly understand feminism. But legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw came up with the term "intersectionality" nearly three decades ago. In the 1960s, attorney and civil-rights advocate Pauli Murray coined the phrase "Jane Crow" to describe the burden that

Black women shouldered as women in addition to the racial discrimination they faced as Black people. When the formerly enslaved Sojourner Truth put the question, “Ain’t I a woman?” to those gathered at a women’s rights conference in 1851, she was demanding that the first wave acknowledge those overlapping identities that Daum finds so tiresome. Multiple oppressions are real and always have been. No one who has to navigate them should be ridiculed, in the *Los Angeles Times* or elsewhere, because the details of her life are deemed too confusing, too dizzying, by those who understand feminism to be something more narrow and neat.

It’s not the narrow and neat we’re after, Daum and others put out by an intersectional gender justice movement might argue, it’s the attainable. They might say an agenda that tries to center the needs of each individual identity under one tent is no agenda at all; if we set the bar so high, we’ll never make progress.

But for proof that concrete victories can be achieved using an intersectional frame, look to Joanne Smith. In February, New York’s City Council announced a two-year, \$20 million initiative—\$10 million from the city budget and \$10 million from foundations—to support the city’s women and girls in concrete ways. The funds will fuel programs to increase access to birth control, improve health care for Transgender people, and support survivors of gender-based violence, according to City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito’s 2016 State of the City address. This newly funded Young Women’s Initiative (YWI) is the result of recommendations and demands put forth by Smith’s organization and more than 200 other community-based groups and policy experts. Smith and Mark-Viverito co-chair the YWI, which has hosted listening sessions with women and girls to learn about their experiences at school, at home, and on the job, and about what they most need. “In a process that represented the diversity of

New York City, the YWI ensured that the voices and experiences of Transgender women, gender-nonconforming New Yorkers, and young women and girls directly impacted by systems such as criminal justice and foster care were central to the recommendation development process,” a February city council press release reads.

The YWI is, in part, a response to the Young Men’s Initiative, a program started by then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg and foundations to benefit Black and Latino boys and men. When it launched in 2011, many wondered: What about the girls? Boys and men of color certainly face challenges specific to their race, ethnicity, and gender, but to assume that their counterparts experience similar conditions and somehow thrive despite it all is wrong. The same critique was made in early 2014 when President Barack Obama announced his \$200 million My Brother’s Keeper initiative targeting improved education, employment, and health outcomes for boys and men of color.

Smith has helped those close to that national project use an intersectional lens to see its shortcomings. Last June, she and other advocates hosted a national listening session, like those used by the YWI, which included participation from Kimberlyn Leary of the White House Council on Women and Girls. In November, the White House, in partnership with Wake Forest University, Ms. Foundation, and academic institutions and foundations, announced a \$118 million initiative focusing on women and girls of color, the very group My Brother’s Keeper had left out. “We’re providing a replicable model for the White House Council on Women and Girls with the Young Women’s Initiative,” Smith told me when I interviewed her for *The Nation* following the White House launch event.

Sure, correcting a glaring omission on the part of the White House is not the same as winning the White House, but both are legitimate feminist goals. The approach taken by

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TODAY AND 50 YEARS AGO IS THAT NOW PEOPLE WHOSE PERSPECTIVES WERE ONCE PUSHED INTO THE MARGINS—WHERE SEPARATE ORGANIZATIONS OFTEN TOOK SHAPE—ARE MORE EFFECTIVE IN PUSHING RIGHT BACK AND RESHAPING WHAT’S MAINSTREAM AND VISIBLE.

Smith and those who stand alongside her and those who have come before offers lessons that can be applied in other fights for gender justice. The word “intersectionality” and, more importantly, the wealth of experiences that it references isn’t something to roll one’s eyes at or to feel threatened by. It’s a legacy to learn from. And in a country with shifting demographics and the widespread use of digital tools that make old ideas available to new audiences, understanding intersectionality is increasingly the only way to be relevant, the only way to win. ▼



Dani McClain is an award-winning journalist who reports on race, gender, reproductive justice, policy, and politics. She is a contributing writer at *The Nation* and a fellow with The Nation Institute. McClain’s writing has appeared in outlets including

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