

# What does the 'Fourth Wave' Mean for Teaching Feminism in Twenty-First Century Social Work?

Ruth Phillips & Vivienne E. Cree

*There is no straightforward definition of feminism today. In spite of this, scholars and researchers who describe themselves as 'feminist' continue to produce work that both interrogates the specific and general conditions of women's lives and explores the more ubiquitous construct of 'gender', and in social work, feminist understandings remain central to practice, theory and research. This may, in large part, be reflective of the continuing over-representation of women as providers and users of social work services. It may also echo social work's broader emancipatory, 'social justice' aspirations. Whichever is the case, we are currently witnessing a resurgence of interest in feminism across the world, with a claim that we are experiencing a 'fourth wave' in the global North that has its birthplace primarily on the Internet. Given that this is so, this paper asks: what (if any) is the impact or possible influence of fourth wave feminism on teaching social work today?*

*Keywords: Fourth Wave; Second Wave; Feminism; Social Work Teaching; Herstories*

## Introduction

Social work is, and always has been, a women's profession. Since its early days in the industrialisation and urbanisation of the nineteenth century, women have been at the heart of the social work enterprise, providing services, teaching on educational programmes and receiving services, whether as clients themselves or as carers of service users (Barretti, 2011; McCormack, 2001; Orme, 2003; Pease, 2011). Professionalisation brought with it deliberate attempts to recruit more men into social work, and, unsurprisingly given the gendered attitudes of the day, many of those men went on to become the managers of statutory social work agencies and voluntary bodies, and the professors of social work education (McLean, 2003; Orme, 2003). But women's higher participation rates in the social work profession have continued,

---

Ruth Phillips, The University of Sydney, Australia; Vivienne E. Cree, The University of Edinburgh, UK  
Correspondence to: Ruth Phillips, The Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. Email: [ruth.phillips@sydney.edu.au](mailto:ruth.phillips@sydney.edu.au)

and even today, there are many more women social work students than men (McLean, 2003; Parker & Crabtree, 2012; UKSSC, 2012). The dominance of women is also evident in the employment of social workers, as recent data provided by the Health and Professional Care Council (via email correspondence in October 2013) indicate that in England, 79% of those registered currently as social work professionals are women, while in Australia, figures from 2011 suggest that 83% of social workers were women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013).

Despite calls for more men in social work to make it more 'men friendly' (Fishl, 2013), social work practice continues to focus attention mostly on women. Whether or not this means that there should be a 'feminist' focus in how social work is taught, however, is open to debate. Some might argue that social work is imbued with feminist ideas in its DNA and that this is (or is not) a good thing; others might suggest that the influence of feminism has largely been constrained to specific projects and initiatives, including, for example, those around domestic violence and it is therefore satisfactorily referred to in teaching those topics. This paper proposes that it is time to revisit the question of feminism and teaching social work, asking: what are the consequences of the presence and availability of feminist views, politics and identity in the ways that social work is taught? What (if any) is the 'right' kind of feminism for the 'now' in this context? How do we negotiate/navigate and present feminism to a new generation of social work students who have grown up with popularised and theoretically informed postmodern values and may see feminism and the position of women and men very differently to their teachers? How do we best confront and challenge the essentialising and moralising tendencies within feminism? How does a global North feminism interact in a positive, non-patronising way with feminism in the global South? And finally, how might we introduce four waves of feminism to a new generation of students today, both women and men?

This paper assesses the current state of play for feminism as a theory and as an approach in contemporary social work education. It does so by using a form of self-reflexivity by us (the authors) as feminist researchers, teachers and scholars. Drawing on our own 'herstories' as documents of the evolution of our personal feminist identities, we present some of the events and issues that position us in a reappraisal of current feminist perspectives. This is not offered as a definitive perspective, but rather should be seen as our shared attempt to begin to articulate the continuing relevance of feminism, contradictions and all, as a body of knowledge and thought within our lives and our teaching practice. [For more about the tradition and practice of self-reflexivity, see Kobayashi (2003), Mitchell, O'Reilly-Scanlon, & Weber (2013) and Pagis (2009).]

## **Our Herstories**

### *Ruth*

I was born in remote Western Australia into a family that experienced many transformations. My mother left my biological father when my older sister and I were

very young, as he failed to provide for and be loyal to her. She then ‘married up’ into the vestiges of the landed gentry, into a family directly descended from the first colonists of the Swan River settlement. This union afforded me an ideal growing up lifestyle of a big farm and later a boarding school that was, surprisingly, the first site of my transformation as a feminist. Family life was generally fraught, however, as my adopted father failed to be a good, kind father as he transformed from a wealthy bachelor to a father of five girls, to a hopeless financial manager who saw much of his inherited wealth disappear, to an alcoholic and a self-perceived ‘victim’ of my mother’s second divorce and re-marriage. Despite the bumpy family context, my mother was a kind of feminist role-model to me, as she passed on her skills as an extraordinary horsewoman, her independence, drive and strength of character. She was committed to both conservative politics and wearing bright red lipstick every day of her life, and was always comfortable as an equal among men, naturally drawn into leadership positions and was a founder of a rural women’s association and later a national president of the cattle-breeding association that she was part of. Although I often thought that if her marriage at that time had continued as it had started—a loving and strong working partnership on the farm—and perhaps had she had a son or two, things might have been different. She might not have been drawn away for regular, distant meetings in the Eastern states and so been able to have a greater input into her daughters’ lives. She most certainly did not fit the stereotypical mother/wife of the 1950s and 1960s, but as a staunch conservative, would never identify herself as a feminist.

Being sent away to boarding school was a wrench from the land and the animals I loved, but it was also a tremendous liberation from the small-minded social suffocation that was then characteristic of Australian country life. My school was staffed by some feisty 1970s’ feminists who shifted my view of the world and women’s role within it. I went on to university and then travelled and lived overseas for a few years, returning to Australia a fully-fledged environmental campaigner. It was during a second spell at university in the 1980s, when I became involved in a feminist magazine and later a women’s studies course, that I also became a fully-fledged feminist activist, always carrying my feminist identity on my sleeve. These were heady days of being immersed in peace protests, in women’s actions against nuclear power, and being part of groups that were embracing transformations in feminist theory, as postmodernism challenged the hegemony of radical and liberal feminism. I was fortunate to be surrounded by diverse and complex feminist politics and practices and men and women friends who were equally engaged in that complexity.

Engagement in broader politics led to me working for a woman politician in a Labor government, in power for the first time in nearly two decades and then into women’s policy positions in the Western Australian government at a time when women’s policy agendas were well-entrenched after a decade or so of ‘femocrats’ being highly influential at national and state levels of government (Chappell, 2002; Lake, 1999). I then went on to advise a minister on community services and later took up a senior policy position in the Community Services Department, the start of my career that led me to become a social work academic. Throughout all this time, I maintained my activist feminism; every meeting dominated by male (social worker) managers and

executives meant that everyday engagement was part of my feminist struggle. I was also in a position to influence substantial changes in policy language and objectives that were positive feminist achievements.

In my thirties, I became a parent of two boys with a long-term partner who had embraced feminist ideology and had shared the journey of much of my political growth and pathways. For me, being a mother was another lived experience of being a feminist and of being in the midst of the diversity of women's views—maternity, birth and parenting—then raising boys—life was full of practical applications and tests as a feminist woman. Being a primary carer allowed me to do a PhD, after a period of work as a policy consultant. It was never a question of 'you can't have/do it all' (Summers, 2013); it was just the way it was. I had a partner who was equally invested as a parent and paid worker, and we made it work with no additional family support as we were living on the other side of the country from our extended family members.

Our now grown-up sons understand and hold feminist outlooks and are clearly drawn to young women who share those views. Being the only female in a family led me to embrace and love boys and empathise with the stresses of masculinity for my partner and my sons. Yes, another privilege offered to my education as a feminist.

As a social policy scholar, I have been committed to integrating feminist analyses and concerns into my research at the national level and in the global social policy context. This has often meant simply placing women at the centre of the frame, as it is traditionally women who experience the worst of social policy problems, particularly in the 'development' context (Escobar, 2011). I have reflected continually on the role of feminism and on what it means to me as a researcher and teacher; this has been a core part of my academic research and teaching (see Phillips, 2007). I have also been concerned with trying to understand Australia's place as a 'Northern'-facing country in the global 'South'. This has led me to explore the role of social policy, and more specifically, the third sector, locating gender equality in the global context. My research has thrown up a number of theoretical dilemmas for feminism as a strategy for women's emancipation; put simply, how useful is a 'Northern' worldview of feminism in an Asian context? This question has also been reflected in my work with students.

What has become clear in teaching and listening to students today is that what felt so right for me as a young feminist is likely to be different to their sense of what feminism can do for them as women but also as social workers. This is not to suggest that there are not still struggles that are intrinsic to gendered power, but it does mean that I now see how younger people can see feminist ideology as oppressive and alienating in some cases and that a kind of reverse sexism or judgementalism can occur, resulting in poor practice. I have come to believe that while grassroots feminism still needs radical and sometimes extreme attacks on patriarchal structures that systematically oppress and hurt women, it does not end there, and that often what follows the struggle to get an issue on the agenda is subtle and in a constant state of transformation and must bring men on the journey in addressing inequality or emancipation. I believe that this is very much the business of social work, from the casework level to the community level and at the national or global levels of policy influence and implementation.

*Viv*

I was born in a small town in Scotland in the 1950s, the middle child of three girls. My mother was a strong woman who believed that a woman should never be dependent on a man; she was, of course, herself almost wholly dependent on my father's income and status, and her part-time job as a shorthand typist gave her little choice but to choose a life in which her own aspirations and ambitions were subjugated to those of 'the family'. My father was devoted to his daughters and his wife, and wholly supportive of my mother's participation in local community politics; they were both supporters of the local Conservative and Unionist party and strong believers of people (including women) standing on their own feet and fighting for their rights.

I left home to go to university in the 1970s, the first in my family to go to university, thanks to a grant from the public purse that paid for fees, accommodation and gave me a small maintenance grant besides. (Students today would envy this level of public support for higher education.) At university, I found feminism or what we then called the 'Women's Liberation Movement'. In the arrogance that is youth, we looked down on our parents' generation and looked back to the feminism of the 'first wave' for our inspiration—to the suffragettes and campaigners of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—completing ignoring the reality that feminism had not gone away in the intervening years; that 'There's always been a women's movement this century' (Spender, 1983). But in the 1970s, we were making the world anew, or so we thought, and this meant criticising everything that had gone before, and reinventing ourselves as revolutionaries. I graduated from university with a wish to put some of my ideas into practice; perhaps not to change the world, but at least to play a part in trying to change it. I became a social worker and located myself in practice settings where I worked predominantly with girls and young women. Together we shared experiences of discrimination and oppression, and worked to build relationships with each other and with men that were not exploitative or governed by the same, gendered assumptions that we felt we had grown up with. Two significant things happened when I was in my thirties, both of which have had a major influence on my development as a feminist and as a human being.

Firstly, I became a social work academic, and discovered the joys of carrying out research, writing for publication, and above all, supporting students (women and men) in their learning. I brought my feminist self to all this activity; my first journal article, published in this journal, was entitled: 'Surviving on the Inside. Reflections of Being a Woman and a Feminist in a Male Academic Environment' (Cree, 1997). Reading it again today, I blush at some of the generalisations, but relish in the passion and commitment I see expressed in the article. My experience over 20 years as an academic has been, on the whole, a positive one. Although I began as a part-time member of staff on a fixed term contract, I was fortunate enough to be employed by a university that had made (and continues to make) an institutional commitment to equality, including gender equality. This meant that I was encouraged to grow and learn; I also had my abilities recognised along the way, including through academic promotion. I take none of this for granted; it would have been impossible without support and I freely admit

that I gained from social policy changes that allowed me to come to university in the first place, and then enabled me to thrive as an academic at a later point in my life.

The second big change that affected me in my thirties was becoming a mother of two sons. This opened my eyes to two key realities, both of which changed my understandings of, and relationship with, feminism. The first discovery was that caring for a child is not something that women are uniquely good at; more than this, there were times when my (male) partner was better at childcare than me. This led me to challenge some of the other essentialist ideas that I held; ideas that, I believe, are often part of what we think of as feminism. My second discovery was that it is hard being a boy/young man. I had known that it was hard to be a woman; 'only women bleed' and countless other songs remind us of this every time we turn on the radio. But I hadn't fully appreciated the degree to which patriarchal ideas and structures also impose a burden and responsibility on men. This has led me to new understandings of feminism, as I began to articulate in publications (e.g. Cree, 2000; Cree & Cavanagh, 1996, p. 4).

Feminism returned to the top of my agenda in 2008, when I was invited to give a lecture on feminism at a national conference in England. I accepted the invitation eagerly, because it offered an opportunity to revisit something that had become rather quiet in recent years, in my life and my work. Feminism had, in my university at least, taken something of a back seat; it had been many years since the heady days of 1990s' social work women's and men's groups. I realised that I had little idea what the current generation of social work students felt about feminism, so in preparation for my lecture, I sought institutional backing for a survey and focus group interviews with students from our undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes, asking the question, 'Feminism: Lost it, Past it or Unfinished Revolution?'. Eighty-four students completed the survey and I went on to meet seven students in two small focus groups. I later followed this up by conducting the same survey in Sydney and Auckland Universities in 2010. The findings of this research will be presented in full in a subsequent paper. What is important to note for this article is that the students' (women and men) responses in all three countries were complex and multi-layered. Two prevailing attitudes emerged. While some said: 'I'm not a feminist but ...' (I support women's rights and believe that women should be treated fairly etc.); others said: 'I am a feminist but ...' (I am not anti-men, segregationist etc.) In reality, there was little distance between the two sets of opinions and a large measure of agreement about the issues. Moreover, it was clear that the feminism that the students wished to sign up to was a very different feminism to the feminism that I had grown up with.

Since 2012, I have again been interrogating my feminism and my life, this time through a seminar series in which we have explored the social issues and anxieties of the day through the lens of 'moral panic', first introduced by Stan Cohen (1972). Our work has led me to question again some of the debates at the heart of feminism: about prostitution (or should this be regarded as sex work?); pornography (should this be seen as freedom of speech?); and so it goes on. These are difficult and uncomfortable subjects, getting as they do to the heart of what it is to be human. In looking ahead, I would like to see social work embrace a feminism that recognises the gendered nature of oppression and the harm done by patriarchal structures, but at the same time

acknowledges that both women and men lose out in the current order; we therefore have much to gain from working together to change things.

### **Reflecting on the Herstories**

A number of observations can be made about the herstories. Most significantly, our paths have been surprisingly similar, in spite of the geographical distance between us. These similarities reflect our shared intersectionalities of being white, middle-class, colonising nation, Western women, illustrating well the hegemonic danger of the dominant second wave. Keeping this in mind, we can trace our evolutions through the different ‘waves’ of feminism, acknowledging, of course, that this is itself an artifice; the dividing lines are never as clear as might be assumed, and there is a great deal of overlap (and more than a little divergence) between and within the waves of feminism.

#### *First Wave Feminism (1840s–1920s)*

First wave feminism refers to the period from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries when women (and in some cases, men) gathered together to confront a wide range of practices which affected the lives of women and children, including: fighting for the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women; for women’s right to vote; for legislation to protect women and girls from prostitution and what was then called ‘the perils and evils of the white slave trade’ (Cree, 1996); for ‘social purity’ and as part of this, for legislation to raise the age of sexual consent and to criminalise incest; for women’s access to higher education and to the professions of medicine, law and accountancy.

First wave feminism was, by and large, an ‘equal but different’ version of feminism, rooted in the sexual division of labour. The early campaigners tended to believe that women and men inhabited separate spheres; their goal was not just to ‘right a wrong’, but to bring women’s influence into men’s worlds. They believed that women were, in many ways, a higher form of being, more innocent and, at the same time, more virtuous than men. This was also a feminism that was, on the whole, oblivious to its classist, homophobic and at times racist underpinnings. This is not to diminish the accomplishments of those brave women and men who fought for women’s rights at a time when it was, at the very least, unpopular to do so. To suggest that first wave feminism inevitably reflects the social and political conditions of its time is also to acknowledge that any discourse inevitably has within it a range of consequences, potentially positive and negative.

As children born in the 1950s, we benefited from, and lived through, the contradictions first wave feminism had bequeathed to us. And so to the second wave.

#### *Second Wave Feminism (Early 1960s–Late 1980s)*

Second wave feminism commonly refers to feminist activity from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. Women’s lives had been transformed by their experiences of employment and family life during and after the Second World War. Change

accelerated in the 1960s with the advent of the contraceptive pill. Feminists became involved in a range of campaigns: for women's reproductive rights and hence for abortion; for equal rights in employment, education, public and private lives; against rape and domestic violence; against pornography and prostitution. Second wave feminism saw individual, social and political inequalities as inevitably interlinked; 'the personal is political' was one of the popular radical feminist slogans of the day.

Although at different points of time, we both actively engaged in feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, setting up women's groups and joining 'consciousness raising' groups. We also drew attention to the gender-blindness of social work education and practice, making use of the new bodies of feminist knowledge that were emerging, including Brook and Davis (1985), Dale and Foster (1986) and Hanmer and Statham (1988). What they and other feminist writers were drawing attention to was the fact that, historically, most service users had been, and still were, women; most of those caring for vulnerable adults and children were women; and most social work practitioners were women. Yet, somehow, these realities had been obscured, if not directly ignored. At the end of the 1980s, Dominelli and McLeod proposed the following strategies for a feminist social work practice:

- (1) The recognition of the problematic nature of women's material welfare and employment conditions;
- (2) The promotion of women social workers' welfare as workers;
- (3) The promotion of women social work clients' and client groups' material welfare;
- (4) Fostering awareness of the common material interests between women social workers and clients;
- (5) The contribution of 'independent' feminist social work organisations;
- (6) An appreciation that the achievement of feminist working relations in social work needs the contribution of a feminist thrust in other spheres, notably a feminist political presence. (1989, p. 132)

It was the fourth strategy—the idea of 'common material interests'—which came under greatest attack from within and outside social work. By 1990, Sue Wise, herself a strong advocate of feminism, suggested that because of their statutory responsibilities, women social workers and clients could never be 'on the same side' (Wise, 1990); it was dishonest to pretend otherwise. Not only this, there was a growing recognition of differences between women; women were not all the same, and it became increasingly clear that white, middle-class, able-bodied feminists had ignored what became referred to as 'the contradictions of oppression' (Ramazanoglu, 1989). This leads us to third wave feminism.

### *Third Wave Feminism (Late 1980s–2013?)*

In the 1990s, a self-critical, diverse and contradictory feminism came to the fore. This was a feminism that reflected postmodern ideas; it allowed for individual choice, and



some of the certainties (the ‘grand narratives’ of second wave feminism) could no longer be taken for granted (Mani, 2013). It accepted fully the idea that there might be different feminisms, and that gender was something, as Judith Butler argued, that was ‘performed’, not innate (Butler, 1990). It also railed against the emerging ‘Men’s Movement’, which not only suggested that feminism had gone too far and was no longer needed, but that women who were feminists were ‘ball-breakers’ who were out to get men (Bly, 1991). The book *Working with Men, Feminism and Social Work* (1996) reflects this mood well. The authors argue that feminism must target men and women; that only then will society as a whole change, for the benefit of all, women, men and children.

We were at the heart of this shift in feminism. Our teaching demonstrates our positioning through this, as, for example, new courses such as ‘Working with Complexity’ and ‘Reflexivity in Qualitative Research’, were introduced in 2008 and 2009 in one of our universities. Both courses were built on feminist ideas and practice, but neither were reflective of second wave approaches. Feminism was presented as a critical praxis that intersected with other areas of oppression, including those of ‘race’ and ethnicity, age, social class and disability. This is still the situation today, taking us to the present day, and to what has been called a fourth wave of feminism.

#### *Fourth Wave Feminism (2008 Onwards?)*

There is scant literature that refers to fourth wave feminism in the social sciences (Munro, 2013; Simões & Matos, 2008–2009; Wrye, 2009). However, like most new categorisations, it has been articulated across a number of disciplines and sites of activism; so far social work is not one of them.

However, one of the more notable observations of the past few years has been the rise of instances of public commentaries in popular media reasserting a need for feminism in some form or another. This has been driven by a mix of ‘old-guard’ feminists, and young women and young men within public domains such as politics, business and entertainment. In Australia, the rise and election of a woman as Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in 2010, set an immediate context for the re-emergence of debates about women’s equality and, in equal measure, misogyny (Summers, 2013). Many of these debates took place on the Internet, often revealing the extremes of polarisation between pro- and anti-feminist opinions.

Social Media has opened up significant spaces for the rebirth of feminist debates and resistance and it has been argued that this is the birthplace of fourth wave feminism (Leupold, 2010; Solomon, 2009). Baumgardner (2011) pinpoints the starting point of this as 2008. She proposes that the fourth wave evolved to take forward the agenda of third wave feminists, observing that ‘their experience of the online universe was that it was just part of life, not something that landed in their world like an alien spaceship . . .’; while zines and songs were innovations of the third wave, the fourth wavers introduced the use of blogs, Twitter campaigns and online media with names like Racialicious and Feministing (Baumgardner, 2011). Baumgardner writes:

They commented on the news, posted their most stylish plus-size fashion photos with info about where to shop, and tweeted that they, too, had had an abortion. “Reproductive justice,” coined by women of color in the 1990s, became the term of choice for young feminists. Transgenderism, male feminists, sex work, and complex relationships within the media characterized their feminism. (<http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>)

Supporting this characterisation of the fourth wave, there have been several cases where social media, such as Twitter, Facebook or blogs, have become battlegrounds between feminists and others, often after specific events or cases have been reported in mainstream media. (See, for example, the rape threats received by feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez in 2013 following her successful campaign to have a woman placed on the new release of the British £10 note.)

Many of the concerns of the second wave women’s movement are echoed in contemporary or fourth wave feminist voices, but there are also different issues and less clear or rigid ‘feminist’ parameters. This is partly to do with the evolution of new cultures around sexuality, work, reproductive technologies, communication technologies and what can be seen as the continually changing market-driven commodification of all that is feminine and targeted at women. It is at this intersection of popular culture and feminism that many apparent contradictions arise for those of us who have grown up with the principles of second wave feminism, where every imposition on women had to be confronted or scrutinised. Despite the ambiguous assertion of feminism in popular culture, there appear to be as many grassroots feminist strategies purveyed through new social media today as there were being produced by grassroots women’s groups and the wider women’s movement between the 1970s and the 1990s. Munro (2013, p. 3) argues that the new social media-based feminism is intolerant of all ‘isms’ and inclusive of diverse sexualities and cultures. It reflects the popularity of intersectionality as a theoretical frame for analysis and has created a ‘call-out’ culture in which sexism or misogyny can be challenged. Feminist activism is alive and well and asserting itself in new ways, making it accessible to waves of technology ‘savvy’ younger (‘generation-Y’) people. What we see reflected here is a desire to tackle the feminist backlash construction of feminism as ‘man-hating’ or ‘bra burning’ and to seek an equality that demobilises the power of one gender over another and shames sexist and violent behaviour wherever it is found (see also Cochrane, 2012).

This, then, is the feminism that we are confronted with in our classrooms and lecture theatres, as well as in practice settings and social work agencies. Equality remains at the centre of our students’ concerns, because inequality is often the root cause of disadvantage, vulnerability and oppression, and is directly related to the loss or lack of power to make choices, exercise freedom and live life with dignity. But students are also deeply worried about political and financial insecurity and about the planet—about climate change, and about global issues such as environmental change and inequality on a global scale. Feminism fits/competes within this broader agenda, as gender equality has become a widespread social policy concern, recognised as a key factor in alleviating poverty, improving women’s health and achieving economic

growth (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012; UNMDGs, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2009). The strength of global gender equality policies has bolstered various feminist agendas, offering avenues for issuing challenges within public debates about women's inequality and in relation to questions of how feminisms might fit in the broad and complex canvas of the contemporary world. Feminists, as part of women's social movements, can claim important global gains in that most international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the World Economic Forum (WEF), the World Health Organisation (WHO), have placed gender equality as a top priority on their policy and action agendas. However, if the question of the extent to which we have achieved 'gender equality' or women's emancipation is asked, there is no answer that points to evidence of global success, as the numerical majority of women in the world continue to endure inequality when compared with their male counterparts (Hausmann et al., 2012; UN, 2013).

### **Rethinking an Applied Feminism for Social Work Education**

So how do we help social work students make sense of feminism today? In reviewing our 'herstories' again alongside feminism's herstory, it is clear that the essentialism and binary positions that characterised the second wave of feminism are not complex enough in theory or in practice to deal with the complexities that we face in the twenty-first century. Social work needs to find ways of drawing on broader, more nuanced approaches to feminism than it did in the past, and in doing so, it must reject the rigid ideological parameters that characterised second wave feminism. As 'older generation' feminists, it behoves us to build bridges with the new generation, allowing feminist insights to emerge, rather than trying to impose them. This means offering students an opportunity to identify with feminism that does not require 'being' a feminist; we have to put to one side the negative stereotypes and shift back to structural issues of inequality that are clearly supported by evidence. This can occur in one of two ways: through evidence-based construction or the logic of experience (that can often come from the students themselves, asking them if they have ever found that they have been treated in a negative or uncomfortable way on the basis of their gender). In practical terms, this means presenting a problem of gender inequality by building a body of research-based evidence that shows that our experience of the social world is still heavily constrained by gender. It is therefore strategic to leave the analysis fairly open, in order to allow students to follow up with a desire for further inquiry: 'why is this so?'. The second way is to lead students on a journey of understanding of theoretical analysis that is not named as 'feminist analysis' but is understood to have been influenced by feminist thinking. This approach removes the confrontational component of being a 'certain type of feminist' and forcing de-identification (Dean, 2009). It allows students to adopt positions that can be applied in practice that will challenge both women's inequality and gender-based injustice.

As scholars and teachers we cannot entirely identify with the entire scope of what is being put forward as fourth wave contemporary feminism, but we can seek to understand it; we can be critical of it but not dismiss it. It seems to us to be based on a

selective diet of various feminist achievements and it involves dropping parts of the diet regime constantly, in order to accept a highly commodified feminine identity that is ideologically inconsistent. But there are good elements of the fourth wave too. It is more ‘men friendly’ and is still about equality. Most importantly, however, it has placed key feminist debates back on the public agenda and to a public that is far more comprehensive than any time before.

## Conclusion

Social work pedagogy has a responsibility to cover the breadth of what social work does, how it is best done and how it best responds to the complexity of the lives of the people that it aims to serve. However, what is clearly evident in relation to feminism is that it must be taught in a way that is digestible and relevant to contemporary students of social work. This paper positioned us (the authors) in the centre of a response to the fourth wave as teachers of social work, in order to understand and digest the seeming contradictions that are evident in the feminisms that are most likely to be part of current students’ social world. The question of how the current, Internet-based fourth wave reflects a feminism of the ‘now’ stems from how different it is to previous iterations of feminism. This paper aimed to reflect critically on the relevance of bringing feminism to the fore in social work education. By beginning with our personal narratives we aimed to highlight the distinctiveness of our generation in relation to the birth and growth of the second wave, as it is broadly second wave feminism that appears to still inform what feminist social work researchers draw on and forms the basis of most feminist analysis in social work teaching. It is arguable that this is because the broader social justice agenda for social work has persisted, for example: poverty; gender inequality; domestic violence; child abuse and neglect. As these social problems persist, frameworks for analysis and practice logically persist with them. We have challenged whether these issues have always been serviced well by feminist approaches, especially when the orthodoxy of radical or liberal feminism has been applied in an unquestioned or ‘essentialist’ way.

More generally, we are aiming to shake up the ways that feminism is portrayed in teaching social work, seeking a refreshment with what is offered in the new world of broad social movements operating in the huge sources of ideas and views that are now made available via social media and the Internet. It seems to have built a new fabric that, at times, is as slippery as silk and as seemingly fragile as a spider’s web, but has an inherent infrastructure that offers universal ways of understanding both social justice and feminist concerns and challenges.

## References

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2013). Australia’s welfare, 2013. *Australia’s welfare series no. 11*. Cat. No AUS 174. Canberra: Australian Government.
- Cree, V. E. (1996). Why do men care? In K. Cavanagh & V. Cree (Eds.), *Working with men. Feminism and social work* (pp. 65–86). London: Routledge.

- Cree, V. E. (1997). Surviving on the inside: Reflections on being a woman and a feminist in a male academic institution. *Social Work Education*, 16, 37–60.
- Cree, V. E. (2000). *Sociology for social workers and probation officers*. London: Routledge. (republished in a Second Edition in 2010).
- Cree, V., & Cavanagh, K. (1996). Men, masculinism and social work. In K. Cavanagh & V. Cree (Eds.), *Working with men: Feminism and social work* (pp. 1–8). London, New York: Palgrave.
- Barretti, M. A. (2011). Women, feminism, and social work journals 10 years later: 1998–2007. *Affilia*, 26, 264–277.
- Baumgardner, J. (2011). Is there a fourth wave? Does it matter? *Excerpt from F'em: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls*, Seal Press. Retrieved August 7, 2013, from <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>
- Bly, R. (1991). *Iron John: A book about men*. Shaftesbury: Element.
- Brook, E., & Davis, A. (Eds.). (1985). *Women: The family and social work*. London: Tavistock.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chappell, L. (2002). *Gendering government, feminist engagement with the state in Australia*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Cochrane, K. (Ed.). (2012). *Women of the revolution. Forty years of feminism*. London: guardianbooks.
- Cohen, S. (1972, 2002). *Folk devils and moral panics*. 30th Anniversary Edition, London: Routledge.
- Dale, J., & Foster, P. (1986). *Feminists and state welfare*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dean, J. (2009). Who's Afraid of third wave feminism? *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11, 334–352.
- Dominelli, L., & McLeod, E. (1989). *Feminist social work*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Escobar, A. (2011). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fischl, J. (2013). Almost 82 percent of social workers are Female, and this is Hurting Men. *Policymic*. (Posted April 2013) <http://www.policymic.com/articles/30974/almost-82-percent-of-social-workers-are-female-and-this-is-hurting-men>
- Hanmer, J., & Statham, D. (1988). *Women and social work: Towards a woman centred practice*. London: Macmillan.
- Hausmann, R., Tyson, L., & Zahidi, S. (2012). *The global gender gap report*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Retrieved from [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf)
- Kobayashi, A. (2003). GPC ten years on: Is self-reflexivity enough? *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 10, 345–349.
- Lake, M. (1999). *Getting equal, the history of Australian feminism*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Leupold, L. (2010). Fourth way feminism, special report. *Portfolio Magazine*. Retrieved August 7, 2013, from <http://journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/archives/portfolio/leupold/>
- Mani, K. (2013). *The integral nature of things: Critical reflections on the present*. New Delhi: Routledge India.
- McCormack, J. (2001). How many social workers now? A review of census and other data. *Australian Social Work*, 54, 63–72.
- McLean, J. (2003). Men as minority: Men employed in statutory social care work. *Journal of Social Work*, 3, 45–68.
- Mitchell, C., O'Reilly-Scanlon, K., & Weber, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Just who do we think we are?: Methodologies for autobiography and self-study in education*. London: Routledge.
- Munro, E. (2013). *Feminism: a fourth wave? Political insight*. London: The Political Studies Association (PSA). Retrieved from <http://www.psa.ac.uk>
- Orme, J. (2003). 'It's feminist because I say so!': Feminism, social work and critical practice in the UK. *Qualitative Social Work*, 2, 131–153.
- Pagis, M. (2009). Embodied self-reflexivity. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 72, 265–283.

- Parker, J., & Crabtree, S. (2012). Fish need bicycles: An exploration of the perceptions of male social work students on a qualifying course. *British Journal of Social Work*. Advanced Access Published July 20, 2012 online: <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/content/early/2012/07/19/bjsw.bcs117.full.pdf+html?sid=15bd7967-ccc9-4e98-8813-289eb61af8b8>
- Pease, B. (2011). Men in social work: Challenging or reproducing an unequal gender regime? *Affilia*, 26, 406–418.
- Phillips, R. (2007). The place of feminism in contemporary social work education in Australia. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 9, 54–68.
- Ramazanoglu, C. (1989). *Feminism and the contradictions of oppression*. London: Routledge.
- Simões, S., & Matos, M. (2008-9). Modern ideas, traditional behaviors, and the persistence of gender inequality in Brazil. *International Journal of Sociology*, 38, 94–110.
- Solomon, D. (2009). Fourth wave feminism. *New York Times*. November 9. Retrieved August 7, 2013, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html?_r=0)
- Spender, D. (Ed.). (1983). *Feminist theorists: Three centuries of women's intellectual traditions*. London: Women's Press.
- Summers, A. (2013). *The misogyny factor*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing.
- UKSSC (UK Sector Skills Councils). (2012). *UK skills council annual report, 2011–2012*. Rotherham: The UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Retrieved from <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/ssc-annual-report.pdf>
- UN (United Nations). (2013). *The millennium development goals report*. New York, NY: The United Nations. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf>
- WHO (World Health Organisation). (2009). *Women and health; today's evidence, tomorrow's agenda*. Geneva: World Health Organisation. Retrieved from [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241563857\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241563857_eng.pdf)
- Wise, S. (1990). Becoming a feminist social worker. In L. Stanley & S. Wise (Eds.), *Feminist praxis*. London: Routledge.
- Wrye, H. K. (2009). The fourth wave of feminism: Psychoanalytic perspectives introductory remarks. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 10, 185–189.

Copyright of Social Work Education is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.