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## The F Word

### How bright-sidedness overshadows feminist talk in schools

In my 15 years as a high school and university teacher, I have been increasingly perplexed by the degree to which young women reject the idea of feminism as something “no longer needed,” because of their belief that gender equity problems are solved, and therefore there’s no need to fight. I visit about 80 high schools a year in the course of my work, and teach well over 100 in-service and pre-service teachers annually. Based on inquiries, discussions and observations, I am troubled that very few teachers address issues of women’s equity issues, especially when dealing with career-focused content.

When asked why they hold these beliefs, the range of responses include denial of the problem, and the presumption that students should not be exposed to such negative ideas so early in their lives. While this evidence is anecdotal, ignoring inequity has more broadly become a “no problem” problem in schools and society.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I explore the bright-sided nature of *Girl Power* discourses in classrooms — I use the term *Girl Power* to represent the popular and well-meaning messages which suggest that if we persuade girls to internalize that they can do anything, this will be the reality. I argue that this is a misrepresentation of reality, and a more productive framing of women is

called for in classrooms if we hope to address the very real gender inequities head on.

### **The bright-sided myths of *Girl Power*: empowering, or dangerously misleading?**

Is *Girl Power* conveying a dangerous form of “bright-sidedness”<sup>2</sup> to our students? The bright-sided discourse in the classroom consists of messages such as “you can do anything you want.”

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Newspapers, magazines and textbooks often lead us to believe that women are doing quite well in the world. We see successful, smiling females interviewed, sharing their career paths. Certainly, this is a positive message for girls. However, this faith in “positive thinking” has become so ingrained that positive has become not only normal but normative, leading to ignoring important issues that deserve attention because they may be perceived as “negative.”<sup>3</sup>

But clearly, positive images of women’s success only represent half the story, and tends to be the extent of what constitutes the explicit curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Despite much progress in recent decades, women are still not well-represented in senior corporate positions, face a glass ceiling, take on disproportionate amounts of unpaid care and household work, and are marginalized in policy. The other half — the null curriculum — is that girls *can* succeed, but they will face different obstacles and more barriers than their male counterparts. This view ignores the effects of privilege, feminist movements, and affirmative action that got women where they are today. While we may want to believe that society is post-feminist, this is just not the reality.

*Girl Power* may appear to be empowering on the surface, but it is not. The logic underpinning it is dangerously flawed. It’s an

individual solution to a systemic problem: that is to say, *Girl Power* discourse rests on inculcating the belief that girls operate on a level playing field — that success in life is meritocratic (that is, a belief that women’s successes are a direct result of hard work and dedication). Inequality is reproduced through white, middle class, hetero-normative standards which are no threat to the patriarchy. While widening the traditional terrain for girls, the imperatives of dangerous social constructions of beauty, sexuality and bodies undermine the promise of gender equality. *Girl Power* is useless if it ignores these issues. By convincing young girls that they can be as successful as males, we overlook the struggles she is sure to face in a man’s world — with men’s rules. Under such an ideology, who is to blame if the girl does not make it?

The consequences of an individualized “solution” to a systemic problem, Barbara Ehrenreich argues, bright-sidedness forces blaming the victim.<sup>5</sup> In actuality, the problem is framed in the classroom as girls not “wanting” to make it, not the reality that they simply do not have the same opportunities as men. And it also sends a message that, since women have equal opportunities, feminism is obsolete.

### **Rhetoric versus reality**

While we may acknowledge the existence of some aspects of gender inequality: sexual harassment; the glass ceiling; domestic violence; and date rape the bigger system problems are ignored. Women still fare worse than men on every major measure of wealth, power, and status.<sup>6</sup> Although education has been a powerful tool for helping the status of women, a substantial pay gap remains between sexes with the same educational level. The most recent OECD data available reveal that 30 to 44-year-old women’s annual earnings are 63% of their male counterparts in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>7</sup> That means that, on average, a woman earns \$36,000 for doing the same job as a man who earns \$50,000. In the U.S., women account for 46.5% of the workforce and yet represent less than 8% of top managers.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Canada, women represent only 8% of executive positions, and 6.4% of CEOs.<sup>9</sup>

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wages; a woman *chooses* to engage in unpaid care-giving for family members which limits her ability to devote additional time and effort to paid employment; and so on. But women's decisions are not that simple. To suggest that women have equal choice and opportunity in our current social structures is false. This

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type of choice discourse pathologizes and personalizes inequity, and conceals the systemic barriers that women face. For example, Martha Nussbaum recognizes that societal barriers restrict self-determination for women, resulting in a lack of internal or external power to exercise self-determination as a result of material constraints and social constructions. She explains this position using

women's oppression as an example. Women have a legal right to education, though they may not have the financial or material resources to exercise those rights. For instance, a repressive marriage or traditional hierarchies in the community might prevent a woman from "true choices." As well, social constructions<sup>10</sup> about a woman's role might also prevent her from pursuing such opportunities. Thus, women's inequities are viewed not as individual choice, but as systemic barriers which prevent a woman from either taking on a particular job, how many hours she can devote to that job, or working without hiatus. Research supports Nussbaum's assertions:

Much of the gender differences in wealth can be explained by the gendering of work and family roles that restricts women's ability to build up assets over the life course. But beyond this, there are significant gender interaction effects that indicate that women are further penalized by their returns to participation in family life, their health and where they live. When women do work, net of other factors, they are better able to accumulate wealth than their male counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Time off for child care is only one part of the unpaid labor typically undertaken by women. Wives put in substantially more of the total time couples spent at jobs and spent on housework, though the division of labor within dual-earner couples becomes more equal when wives have higher personal incomes than their spouses.<sup>12</sup> As well, care-giving for older adult family members has become an increasing and inequitable burden on women. One-third of male caregivers spent one hour or less per week, compared with less than a quarter of the women. American women spend disproportionately more time on unpaid household work than their male spouses.<sup>13</sup> Together, these circumstances detract from a woman's ability to enjoy the same sorts of professional (and therefore economic) choices as a man. Thus, a woman may have *equal* opportunity to earn and save money, and to contribute to pensions and investments, but not *equitable* opportunity given the realities of things such as care-giving and lower wages.

The problem is that the “you can do it” messages within *Girl Power* discourses fail to talk about any of these realities. Thus, when women reach working age, they come at situations without having considered what they are facing. Men, similarly, may not have thought about such issues (as they well should), and may lack insight into women's struggles for equity.

### **From *Girl Power* to critical understandings**

Aligning myself with critical pedagogues, I view the *Girl Power* discourse on its own as dangerous, naïve and failing to reflect realities that girls are likely already aware of. As Martha Nussbaum often argues, gender justice requires participatory parity for women and relies on both cultural and material equality. But presently, this is simply not the reality for women, and it's a reality that everyone should be aware of if we are to overcome it. Classrooms are a place where these types of critical understandings can be discussed.

On the one hand, some may (and have, in my courses) suggest that it's depressing to have these conversations — certainly they might raise objections from parents, students, or other members of the school community who don't want to hear “feminist” view. On the other hand, girls must be aware of the realities they face, so they can tackle the problem early on. Boys must be conscious of these issues if they are to someday contribute to solutions.

Girls appear to have some awareness of double-standards they face, and the barriers that restrict them. Take, for example, the work of Jessica Valenti who has championed brave discourses for adolescent females through her blogging, books, and other work.<sup>14</sup> Their popularity suggest that young women are interested in hearing this perspective, and are at an age and developmental level which allow them to make sense of it.

### **The obligation of teachers to address these issues head on**

Deciding what is “worth knowing” or “most important” is a value-laden act, especially within the context of gender issues. As teachers, we must take this power very seriously, and critically interrogate how we frame gender in the classroom. *Girl Power* ignores the issue of equity entirely, trivializing learning by over-emphasizing bright-sided, misleadingly positive snippets of information. A more productive framing of women’s issues would take on the “myths”, and look to how structures can be challenged to move toward equity for all, rather than settle for *Girl Power* when discussing gender issues. Without attention to issues of gender equity, education is reduced to replicating inequities, and contributes to the continued marginalization of already vulnerable populations. This brings to mind Mark Kingwell’s lamentations, which call on us to consider how one’s success relates to that of others. He observes:

Suppose you have been struggling to get a foothold in the professional sector of your choice, making sacrifices for education and entry-level activities, and finally begin succeeding quite nicely. You find yourself, perhaps for the first time ever, modestly wealthy. Now, do you leave it at that, content to explore your identity as a householder and cultural being? Or do you ask what this good fortune means in terms of political opportunities and obligations?<sup>15</sup>

Instead of reinforcing the status quo, Kingwell posits that many individuals chalk up problems of equity to “a picture of the world itself as inevitably unbalanced or naturally unjust,” and keep with the false notion of value-neutrality. This includes the mentality that financially disadvantaged women are in their situation because (a) they didn’t make the right choices;

and/or (b) life isn't fair to some who do make the right choices. This, Kingwell argues, is not part of the natural order — rather, it is part of a society we have created that perpetuates systemic barriers that affect particular individual groups, without acknowledging that those barriers exist. *Girl Power* talk contributes to this very problem. In response, Kingwell asks: “How do we create the world we want, rather than a world that just happens to us?”<sup>16</sup>

Take for example, the three main explanations for why so few women are able to break the glass ceiling as possible classroom discussion areas. They are: exclusion from informal networks; pervasive stereotyping of women's capacity for leadership (as evidenced in the landmark 1989 case in America of *Price Waterhouse v Hopkins*); and a lack of role models.<sup>17</sup> Textbooks written by well-intentioned authors often address this third explanation, offering one-sided role-model profiles of women framed as though it's easy for women to reach positions of power in the workplace. But they neglect to tell the full story of the first two explanations that these women typically face. Teachers can and should take the opportunity to address these issues overtly, and engage students in talk about barriers and how we can (and ought to) address them.

### **Approaching the issue in classrooms**

I'm not at all suggesting throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater — indeed, girls need positive female role models portrayed, and the message that they can succeed. But, we ought to temper *Girl Power* talk with other, realistic portrayals of the challenges they face. Teachers can approach this in countless ways — from providing cross-curricular opportunities to explore data (for example, pay equity in math classes) and literature (for example, the *Princess Smartypants* book series). As well, the use of humor as critical rhetoric, especially with adolescent students, is a promising practice

A teaching tool I enjoy using within the critical rhetoric category is a satirical article, “CEO Barbie Criticized For Promoting Unrealistic Career Images.”<sup>18</sup> Through humor, it encourages discussion about the (mis)representation of women, and the dangers of “bright-sided” thinking. In the article, a “fake” expert observes, “Any girl who thinks that she can run a large corpora-

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tion when she grows up is in for a bitter disappointment, and it is simply shameful that Mattel would seek to cash in on impressionable young girls this way.” *The Onion*’s article ends with this passage:

When your daughter comes home crying because she was passed over for a promotion for the fourth time, what are you going to tell her?” Lang asked. “It would be easier if she’d been raised with dolls like Glass Ceiling American Girl, Service Sector Bratz, or Maria The White House Maid.

While this is one example of an approach, a number of resources specifically targeted at brining feminist concepts and discussions are available for use in classrooms. Many are decidedly not bright-sided. The *Miss G\_ Project* has a wealth of resources available online, including readings and video suggestions. Fully-developed lesson ideas on the *Miss G\_ Project* website include an anthropological trip to a toy store, and deconstruction of a popular teen magazine, which can be adapted to fit into a variety of curriculum areas.

A number of texts offer perspectives on issues that avoid bright-sided discourses, though the content may be a bit sophisticated for some students. These include Jessica Valenti’s book *Full Frontal Feminism* which is written for adolescent girls, *Shameless Magazine*, and Jessica Yee’s edited collection *Feminism For Real*.<sup>19</sup> Each of these publications offer readings that take on the uncomfortable questions feminism and are possible anchors for classroom analysis aimed at helping all students make sense of the world around them.

### Conclusion

This essay raises some of the questions we might begin to ponder as part of a more socially just treatment of gender issues to contribute to a world we want. It is my hope that teachers consider these important issues, and challenge the next generation to think carefully about how society can overcome various barriers to equity by disrupting bright-sided *Girl Power* talk in classrooms. By specifically addressing gender justice, we can begin to challenge our students to think about not only their own futures, but the bigger issues that must be addressed as we move toward

a more equitable society. Only then can we begin to achieve gender equity, and overcome women's cultural devaluation and economic marginalization. I would hope that a critical approach to talking about girls' issues in the classroom — which includes positive role modeling tempered with realistic features of the world — would invite, as John Portelli and Patrick Solomon describe, “critical thinking, dialogue and discussion, tolerance, free and reasoned choices, and public participation” in the process of learning.<sup>20</sup> Feminism need not be the “f-word” in education, though bright-sided thinking may stand in the way of addressing women's issues head on.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Deborah L. Rhode, *Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 99 – 100.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*.

<sup>4</sup> Those items which appear in the explicit curriculum — that is, perspectives, skills, and information that are presented to students in classrooms via curriculum resources — privilege certain knowledge, skills and attitudes, while marginalizing the null curriculum (those things omitted).

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah L. Rhode, *Speaking of Sex*.

<sup>7</sup> OECD Family Database (2010), Accessed November 30, 2010, <http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database>.

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<sup>8</sup> “The conundrum of the glass ceiling — Why are women so persistently absent from top corporate jobs?” *The Economist* [Online Edition], Jul 21st 2005. Accessed February 22, 2010.

[http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=4197626](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=4197626)

<sup>9</sup> Catalyst. (2010). “Quick Takes: Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa & United States.” Accessed 12 September 2011.

[http://www.catalyst.org/file/465/qt\\_australia\\_canada\\_israel\\_south\\_africa\\_us.pdf](http://www.catalyst.org/file/465/qt_australia_canada_israel_south_africa_us.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Women and Equality: The Capabilities Approach,” *International Labor Review*, 3 (1999): 227-251.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Denton and Linda Boos, “Gender Inequality in the Wealth of Older Canadians. Social and Economic Dimensions of an Aging Population” Research Papers 169, McMaster University (2007), accessed June 1 2009, <http://ideas.repec.org/p/mcm/sedapp/169.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Marshall, “Converging gender roles. Perspectives on Labour and Income,” Statistics Canada, (2006) 7, accessed June 5 2009, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/10706/4168755-eng.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Jens Bonke, Mette Deding, Mette Lausten and Leslie S. Stratton, “Intrahousehold Specialization in Housework in the United States and Denmark,” IZA Discussion Paper P No. 2777, accessed November 1, 2010, [http://www.sfi.dk/graphics/SFI/Forskerfiler/mette\\_deding/dp2777.pdf](http://www.sfi.dk/graphics/SFI/Forskerfiler/mette_deding/dp2777.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> See Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman’s Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007) her the popular blog she founded, [feministing.com](http://feministing.com).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Kingwell, *The World We Want* (Toronto: Viking, 2000), p. 206

<sup>16</sup> Kingwell, *The World We Want*, p. 207

<sup>17</sup> “The conundrum of the glass ceiling — Why are women so persistently absent from top corporate jobs?” *The Economist* [Online Edition], Jul 21st 2005. Accessed February 22, 2010. [http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=4197626](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=4197626).

<sup>18</sup> “CEO Barbie Criticized For Promoting Unrealistic Career Images.” The Onion, September 7, 2005. Accessed September 8, 2010. <http://www.theonion.com/articles/ceo-barbie-criticized-for-promoting-unrealistic-ca,1787/>.

<sup>19</sup> Jessica Yee (Ed.), *Feminism For Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism* (Ottawa: CCPA, *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 2011). Yee also edited the Winter, 2009 issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, a themed issue on sex education and youth.

<sup>20</sup> John P. Portelli and Patrick Solomon, *The Erosion of Democracy in Education* (Calgary: Detselig, 2001), p. 17.