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‘Post-feminist’ or ‘pro-rape’ culture?

By Anastasia Powell and Sheree Cartwright
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We have been described as living in a post-feminist age: a time of “girl power” where young women are empowered to negotiate sex on their own terms. Today’s young women (like many young men) are free to actively embrace their sexuality, and to put their bodies on display without fear of sullying their reputation or experiencing sexual taunts and violence. They aim to determine their own reality and reject constructs imposed by society’s expectations.

The F-word has long been described as irrelevant to today’s young woman, who avidly exclaims “I’m not a feminist, but …”

“But …” is right. In last Monday’s edition of The Age (November 9, 2009) it was reported that a group of past and present students of the University of Sydney had set up a “pro-rape” page on Facebook describing themselves as “anti-consent”. Yet the public Facebook site (which has since been closed down) is apparently just one part of a larger counter-culture that is associated with the sexual assaults of several young women.

Of course, those working in sexual assault services know that young women’s experiences of sexual assault and other forms of sexual harassment and violence remain remarkably common across mainstream Australian society. According to Victoria Police statistics it is young women aged 16 to 20, and 21 to 25, who are the most likely to experience sexual assault.

Meanwhile, national victimisation survey results from the Australian Institute of Criminology show that a third of Australian women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. For more than 30 years we have known that women are most likely to experience sexual assault at the hands of a known man, such as a boyfriend, friend or acquaintance, rather than at the hands of a stranger.

In addition to these appalling levels of forced sex, young women also commonly report experiencing unwanted sex, with a recent survey from the Australian Research Centre in Health, Sex and Society reporting that 38 per cent of young women have experienced sex that was unwanted (an increase of 10 per cent from the previous survey), and often as a result of pressure from a sexual partner.

For decades, the women’s movement has lobbied to improve laws to protect women from sexual assault, and to change societal attitudes that condone or ignore violence against women.

Yet, in the same month as White Ribbon Day (November 25), a campaign driven largely by men to raise awareness of and prevent men’s violence against women, the revelation that some young men are actively promoting rape defies belief. That any group of men could proudly describe themselves as “anti-consent” is shocking.

It might be comforting to some, to think that such attitudes exist only in a minority of groups or small pockets within society - or perhaps just touted in “comedic” fashion in shock films like Borat, which drew attention to some appalling attitudes of a group of young American men towards women. Comforting, but naïve. These issues and attitudes aren’t in the past, and they’re certainly not funny.

This latest “anti-consent” group may represent a rather extreme case, and thankfully there are many men who reject this attitude completely. However, ignorance regarding women’s sexual consent is also characteristic of a much larger set of attitudes and beliefs within mainstream Australian society.

Last month, we were shocked by a group of under 19s footballers charged with the rape of a young woman at
Phillip Island. Meanwhile, we’ve become almost accustomed to reports of sexual “misconduct” including repeated alleged sexual assaults by Australian Football League and National Rugby League players.

But this is not just something that occurs in sporting groups or university “counter-cultures”.

Who could forget the “Werribee DVD” in 2006, and several other cases reported since, in which groups of young men have indecently or sexually assaulted girls and young women, only to record and distribute images of the assault for others’ viewing and apparent “entertainment”. In each of these examples, a woman’s consent has, in the minds of these men, been a “non-issue”. Consent isn’t even on their radar.

The voice of the “anti-consent”/“pro-rape” group also comes to light in less than a fortnight after this year’s annual, Australia-wide Reclaim the Night rally and march, which is held on the last Friday of October and is part of an international campaign to raise awareness of and stop violence against women.

However, despite campaigns such as Reclaim the Night (which has been held every year in Australia since the late 1970’s), and if these incidents are anything to go by, it appears we are far from a post-feminist culture. These two contradictory discourses and practices (“post-feminism” and “pro-rape”) appear to exist simultaneously today.

Indeed, in 2009, nearing a decade after the turn of the new century, gender equality and justice, and women’s liberation seem further out of reach than ever before. Even with new discourses espousing and celebrating so-called “choice”, “equality”, and “empowerment” that came from the second wave of feminism and advances in technology, gender equality has not been achieved. We are far from it. Those who claim we live in a gender equal society have their heads buried in the sand, or in their ivory towers. The weight of evidence speaks.

These incidents and the public discussion to date about dealing with this, reflect many things about us. Such as the gender struggle that continues to exist between women and men - and the effects takes many forms, which persist in the face of legislation and community campaigns. Not least of all is the sorry state of the current situation of gender inequality and sexual violence in Australia today. These issues need to be unpacked for starters.

They raise important questions about what lies beneath: How can both women and men challenge the oppression that comes from inequitable power and gender relations, which are sustained and reproduced through interactions in “physical spaces”, and now in “cyber space”? We might also ask: what has changed? What remains the same? What can we do about our reality?

Perhaps a key question today should be about what goals are useful to create a gender equal world, where there is less marginalisation and disadvantage to all women, children, teenagers and men? If this is worth striving for then we need a call for more community action.

We need to advocate for a zero tolerance to all forms of gender violence and inequality. We need to identify and acknowledge that a culture of gender inequality not only exists, but is perpetuated everyday - by way of not changing, challenging or deconstructing our perspectives about what we expect of “men” and “women” in terms of how we should “think” and “act”.

We need to draw attention to the values, ideologies and larger social forces, which will need to be better understood and addressed (for example, by legislation and policies) if any significant changes are to take place. We also need those men who oppose rape, and who actively negotiate their relationships with women on the basis of equality, respect and mutuality, to speak up and enter into these debates.

Perhaps then, we can imagine and create a more robust reality that is not skewed towards distorted expectations of women and men - as being mere sexual creatures in this debate - and which exist within a rigid “dominant”/“subordinate” dichotomy. More than ever, women and men need to work together to ensure a culture that is “anti-rape” and pro-equality in our real, everyday lives.

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