**Ruth Lewis, Susan Marine, and Kathryn Kenney. ‘I get together with my friends and try to change it.’ Young feminist students resist ‘laddism’, ‘rape culture’ and ‘everyday sexism’.**

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**Abstract**:

Contemporary alarm about ‘laddism’ reveals what feminist research and activism has long-recognised; universities, like other social institutions, can be dangerous places for women. Research in the US and, more recently, the UK reveals alarming rates of violence against women, the cultural and institutional norms which support violence and gaps in institutional responses. In the midst of this contemporary alarm about the university as a hotbed of laddism, there is a risk that the university – a site of potential empowerment and liberation for women (and men) – becomes re-positioned as a danger zone. The limited focus on danger and safety belies the potential of universities to enhance human freedoms through intellectual endeavour. We argue this progressive potential should remain centre-stage, as should university-based resistance to everyday sexism and laddism. This paper analyses accounts of young women feminists (*n*=33) in UK and US universities. It explores their use of feminism and features of the university environment to resist and challenge oppressive cultures and practices. It argues that, despite encroaching neoliberalism and enduring sexism, universities continue to provide environments for engagements with feminism, enabling young women students to use feminism to resist and challenge sexism and to envision their feminist futures.

**Keywords**:

laddism, rape culture, feminism, activism, university, campus, sexism

**Introduction**

While it has never neatly occupied a series of discrete eras or waves, and has eluded formation of a single unified ‘movement,’ feminism has found a new lease of life (e.g., Meltzer, 2014; Traister, 2011; the website Young Feminist Wire (wwwyfa.awid.org)).  Feminism’s re-emergence appears to be especially vibrant in universities[[1]](#endnote-1), where various forms of activism, particularly related to combating sexual harassment and challenging sexist norms in social life, are taking root and gathering momentum (e.g., Associated Press, 2014; Grigoriadis, 2014; Pearce, 2014; Powroznik, 2014; Younis, 2013). Students are forming and growing feminist communities, using their collective experiences to name sexism and its causes, and taking action to reform their campuses through social norm transformation, policy development, and strategic resistance.

While young feminists are making their voices heard through campus and popular press outlets, very little research has systematically sought to understand and analyse their perspectives on the work they are doing to change the campus as a microcosm of the larger society. Feminist identity development, especially in university students, has been studied extensively (e.g, Erchull et al., 2009; Friedman and Leaper, 2010; Marine and Lewis, 2014; Moradi and Subich, 2002), but very little attention has been paid to the specific environmental contours of university life and how they enable the development of feminist communities and activities.

This paper addresses this gap by examining contemporary students’ use of feminism to resist and challenge ‘lad culture’ and sexism as they experience it on campus. Based on analysis of interviews with young feminist women students in the UK and US, we argue that, although universities have been more recently under the spotlight *because of* instances of sexism, they can also provide fertile environments for *resistance* *to* sexism. First we discuss current discourses about universities which problematically foreground notions of danger rather than freedom, then we present our analysis of interview data and discuss its implications for lad culture and feminist resistance to it.

**Universities, gender and danger**

Are colleges and universities in the US and UK safe for women? The answer appears to be mixed. For the last three decades, awareness of the problem of violence against women in higher education has significantly increased. Now, in 2015, we are at a moment of increased attention from scholars, media, activists and university administrators, as well as increased accountability, evidenced by the legal action against 100 US colleges for failure to comply with Title IX, and by the first British national survey on violence against women students (Phipps & Smith, 2012). This builds upon previous research which has revealed the nature, extent and impact of gendered dangers in US and UK universities.

In the US Mary Koss and colleagues’ (1987) landmark research documented for the first time that as many as one in four undergraduate women experience rape or attempted rape during their time at university; subsequent replications of her research found similarly alarming percentages of women students affected by rape, attempted rape, and other forms of interpersonal violence (Fisher, Daigle & Cullen, 2010). While campus rape in the US has been an acknowledged reality for the last three decades, interest in the issue has piqued with the recent influx of highly visible student-generated lawsuits against colleges for mishandling reported rapes (Anderson, 2014; Bahr, 2014). In January 2014, a Presidential commission initiated by Barack Obama declared campus rape a national emergency in the US (White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). In the UK, the prevalence of campus sexual violence has only recently been formally documented, but the prevalence is equally worrisome and widespread (National Union of Students, 2010; Tozer, 2013). The popular press and internet abound with stories of individual survivors’ harrowing experiences (It Happens Here, 2014; Younis, 2014), and recently the President of the Student Union at Oxford was arrested following an allegation of rape (Sanghani, 2014). As well as documenting the nature and prevalence of this violence, and the gaps in institutional responses (Freeman and Klein, 2012), more recently, researchers have identified a phenomenon known as ‘institutional betrayal’ (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal occurs when an actor who has some trust in an institution, such as a university, experiences a breach of trust in the institution when their victimisation is made difficult to report and/or is inadequately responded to. As well as being correlated with greater severity of negative physical and mental health outcomes of assault, this ‘shedding [of] protective unawareness’ is a process that is ‘fraught with risk’ (Smith & Freyd, 2014, 575).

Theorising about sexual violence on university campuses in the two countries has followed a similar thread, alternatively called ‘rape culture’ and ‘lad culture,’ depending on the source. Rape culture, a term first used in a 1975 documentary (Lazarus & Wunderlich) commodifies women’s sexuality, and debilitates their sexual agency, while simultaneously celebrating men’s dominance over women and ideals of violent masculinity. American feminist theorists have long argued that the flourishing of rape culture in the US prevents any real systemic solution to rape from emerging (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald & Fletcher, 2005). In the UK, a more recently named incarnation of this phenomena - ‘lad culture’- is characterised as ‘misogynist banter, objectification of women and pressure around quantities and particular forms of sexual interaction and activity’ (Phipps & Young, 2015b, p3) and has been ‘positioned as a factor scaffolding this violence, and as indicative of the persistence of gendered structures and cultures in HE’ (Phipps & Young, 2015b, p.3).

At the same time as the dangers for young women are increasingly evident, women’s presence in universities is becoming more visible. Although women are still significantly under-represented in senior positions in universities, perhaps due to ‘cultural sexism’ (Savigny, 2014), they are a growing proportion of staff and, as of 2011, a significant majority of university students in both the US and UK (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; Ratcliff, 2013).

It seems then that current discourse about universities as a site of danger for young women students runs parallel to the growing challenge to the long male domination of these institutions. This leads us to make two observations: firstly, perhaps the growth of lad culture in universities can be conceived of as part of a backlash to women’s encroachment on traditionally male environments (but see Coppock et al (1995) for caution that the term ‘backlash’ suggests greater advances than evidence bears out). Secondly, the depiction of universities as unsafe for young women runs the risk of a neoconservative (Phipps & Young, 2015b) paternalistic response whereby parents and *in loco parentis* institutions aim to protect young women from marauding, excessive masculinity. As well as essentialising men as sexual predators and women as responsible for preserving sexual restraint, such a response risks limiting rather than expanding women’s freedoms. It risks focusing on the more limited questions of danger and safety rather than on the ways women are pursuing and inhabiting universities more agentically. Women’s safety should be a concern inasmuch as challenges to women’s safety compromise their freedom; safety is one element of women’s freedom. Moreover in the context of education, which is arguably fundamental to human freedom and fulfilment, and which implicitly requires a degree of unsettling and disruption, ‘safety’ is indeed a limited aim, a necessary requirement but not an end in itself.

Concepts of safety and freedom in universities also emerge in contemporary debates about freedom of speech. In the midst of heightened fear in the West about terrorist threats, Universities in England and Wales are being implicated in the ‘fight against terrorism’. They are required (by Section 26(1) of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015) to contribute to the ‘Prevent’ counterterrorism initiative by, for example, preventing ‘hate speech’ by external speakers and the dissemination of ‘radicalised’ students’ views. The Act and guidance (Prevent Duty Guidance for higher education institutions in England and Wales, 2015) require universities to anticipate whether views expressed at events with external speakers will constitute criminal offences[[2]](#endnote-2) (such as encouragement of terrorism and inviting support for proscribed organisations), and to demonstrate willingness to train staff to recognise changes in behaviour and outlook which might indicate ‘radicalisation’. Criticised as an attack on free speech which ‘would have a chilling effect on intellectual debate and inquiry at universities’ (Grove, 2015), these powers reflect worrying restrictions on the university’s protection of open, free debate, including of counter-cultural and subversive views.

Questions of safety on campus have also been raised by the restrictive practice of ‘no-platforming’ external speakers, including both anti-Islamic and ‘extremist’ Islamists speakers and those involved in gender politics (e.g. Julie Bindel and Germaine Greer), to avoid causing offence to students. No-platforming is a strategy adopted by student groups such as the National Union of Students but its impact has similarities with the strategies adopted by universities and government bodies which have also, arguably, suppressed freedom of speech. ‘Traditionally about rejecting the rhetoric of violence’ especially by far-right organisations, no-platforming is now used to avoid ’offence’ (Ditum, 2014). Concern about protecting people, especially marginalised groups, from ‘offence’ is illuminated by the new attention in social sciences to affect (see Tyler’s (2008) consideration of ‘disgust’ in the creation of the new vocabulary of social class in Britain). Phipps (2015:15) notes ‘feelings have become a new political commodity, leading to an ‘expressivism’ (Edwards 2004) which can be seen in debates in which hurt feelings are used as currency.’ Given feminism’s long and proud history of saying the unsayable – usually ‘offensive’ things for which women were expected to carry the blame and the shame, such as men’s violence, menstruation and childbirth, women’s anger, and their sexual desires - we should be extremely cautious about relying on systems which give priority to those ‘offended’ by speech, particularly if safety is deemed to rest on not being offended.

In the midst of these developments, the unsettled debate about whether US and UK universities are safe havens for women’s growth and educational ascension, or alternatively are constitutionally treacherous for women, overlooks considerations of young women’s agency in challenging and improving cultures. Many factors are known to underpin and perpetuate a sense of danger for university women, while questions of the ways that women themselves are fomenting empowerment in the campus environment are often disregarded. Yet women students are far from passive victims, and in fact, are often at the centre of principled resistance to sexist norms on their campuses. Feminism and feminist strategies for confronting sexist oppression are alive and well on college campuses (Lewis & Marine, 2015; Marine & Lewis, 2014; McVeigh, 2013; Powroznik, 2014).  These students fight back against sexual victimization, against the oppressive ubiquity of male-dominated social systems, of the dismantling of women’s centres[[3]](#endnote-3) and women’s studies, and the unquestioned primacy of male sport. They take equally to the streets and to the internet to eloquently express their antipathy for the existing social order on their campuses and in society at large, often with game-changing effect[[4]](#endnote-4). Tremendous energy, resources, and intellectual capital have been dedicated to the documentation of risks for women on campus, but far fewer stories of women’s freedom - demanded, if not always granted - have been told.

Women’s centres in the US, and feminist societies in the UK function as breeding grounds for feminist mobilization (Marine & Lewis, 2014). These activities, time-consuming and potentially distracting from the ‘work’ of focused study, come with added benefits: A wealth of research suggests that women’s participation in feminist groups at university nurtures positive relationships, high self-esteem, and a greater sense of well-being, and protects against some forms of gendered self-harm (Hurt et al. 2007; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Vaccaro, 2009; Yakushko, 2007). However there has also been criticism of contemporary feminist activism, to which we now turn.

***The neo-liberal feminist subject?***

In response to the significant re-emergence of feminism amongst young women, some scholars critique contemporary forms of feminism for their incorporation of neoliberal values such as individual responsibility and personal autonomy. Young feminists are criticised for adopting notions of empowerment through consumption at the expense of analysis of on-going structural inequalities and oppression. For example, Cole & Crossley (2009, p.5) are critical of ‘third wave feminists’ embrace of consumerism as both a choice and a source of women’s empowerment’ and Kimball (2015) describes criticism of third wave feminists for ‘being self-absorbed feministas who don’t attack substantial political and social issues, for transforming liberation into freedom to wear a T-shirt saying “Bitch” or dress like Miley Cyrus.’ However, as we have argued elsewhere (Lewis & Marine, 2015), these critiques of contemporary feminism’s support for neoliberal values are based largely on feminism in the written form rather than feminism in action. There are surprisingly few empirical examinations of contemporary feminist activism (exceptions are: Kimball’s (2015) study of the ‘global girls’ revolution’ which details the wealth of youth activism about feminist and other issues; Mackay’s (2011) examination of the UK London Feminist Network; Bobel’s (2010) examination of third-wave menstrual activism; Vaccaro’s (2009) participant observation of a US university feminist society; Maddison’s (2004) case studies of young women in the contemporary Australian women’s movement).  Empirical examinations of feminist activism amongst students show that universities can provide environments for young women’s engagement with  feminist politics, community and activism through feminist networks and centres (Marine and Lewis, 2014) or through encountering institutional barriers (Vaccaro, 2009). These studies show that universities continue to  be a setting for developing feminist politics, in line with the long history of universities in both the US and UK  as fertile grounds for feminist identity emergence and collective action (Aiku, Erickson, & Pierce, 2007; Davie, 2002).

Although, because of privileges inherent in higher education, feminism in universities is not representative of all types of feminism and is dominated by white, middle-class women (see, for example, Black Women’s Blueprint, 2011) , there is plenty to celebrate in its revival. However, while the revival and the dangers for women at universities have received scholarly and journalistic attention, there is little contemporary empirical work which explores *how* young women students use feminism to actively negotiate such risks and dangers. Empirical examinations are needed to understand how young women negotiate the contemporary gender order with its denial of enduring gender inequalities, especially as it plays out in the university environment. Such studies can reveal not only how women *come to* feminism (Marine & Lewis, 2014), despite some powerful cultural disincentives (Scharff, 2012) but also how they *use* feminism to challenge manifestations of the contemporary gender order and to imagine alternative ways of being. In the face of encroaching neoliberalism in higher education, and restrictive discourses about ‘sexual celebration’ and ‘sex-negative radical feminism’ (Phipps and Young, 2015a), are contemporary feminists carving out spaces of resistance?

Driven by a desire to defend and expand university spaces for radical politics, in this paper, we ask how are contemporary women[[5]](#endnote-5) students using university spaces to develop feminist praxis, to challenge ‘lad culture’ and sexism in the university context and beyond it? How is feminism articulated and practised as a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse about universities as dangerous places for young women? We present analysis of data from a qualitative study of young women feminists in UK and US universities to demonstrate that, despite experiences of lad culture and ‘everyday sexism’[[6]](#endnote-6) some young women successfully use the university environment as a ‘safe space’ to develop their feminist politics and practices, resist and challenge sexism, and envision their feminist futures in community and solidarity with others.

**Methodology**

This qualitative interview study explored several areas of inquiry: the participants’ experiences of gender-based inequality, how they came to identify as feminist, the significant influences and deterrents to embracing feminism, and their experiences of university feminist communities. Seidman (2005) proposed that in-depth interviewing enables researchers to mine lived experience through witnessing the meaning-making that occurs in the telling of stories. Interviews explored the meaning-making of the contemporary gender order and engagements with feminism.

Given that we were examining a particular phenomenon, our sample was purposive (Patton, 1990), drawn primarily from existing networks of feminist students, including feminist societies[[7]](#endnote-7) (in the UK) and women’s centres (in the US). Sampling started with outreach to feminist organizations, visibly activist students, or feminist events, and additional participants were found through snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998). Interviews were conducted by the first two authors in 2012 with students on degree programmes running between 2008 and 2013. While those who participate in higher education are of a particularly privileged and socially mobile type, there are also significant differences *between* institutions in terms of the social demographics of the student population. To account for this and to ensure diverse perspectives, we made certain to include women of mixed class backgrounds (working, middle, and affluent), ethnicities (women of colour and recent immigrants), and institutional types (public and private, and predominantly composed of students of disparate social classes). Participants were varied in their fields of study, including humanities, sciences, and social sciences, and most were not studying women’s studies degrees.

*Table 1: Demographics of sample group*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Location and number of interviews | Race/Ethnicity | Age | University level | Sexual Orientation |
| UK: 18 | White: 17  Black African: 1 | 19-21yrs: 6  22-26yrs:12 | Undergraduate: 9  Recent graduate: 2  Masters: 2  PhD: 5 | Heterosexual:11  Bisexual: 3  Lesbian: 3  Prefer not to say:1 |
| US: 15 | White: 10  African-American: 1  Asian American: 1  Latina: 2  Biracial: 1 | 19-21yrs:12  22-26yrs: 3 | Undergraduate: 14  Recent graduate: 1 | Heterosexual: 10  Bisexual: 2  Lesbian: 1  Queer: 2 |

***Analytical Approach***

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first two authors. For ease and clarity (bearing in mind colloquialisms, accents and familiarity with the local context), the interviewer who had conducted the interview also transcribed that interview; this enabled the transcriber to clarify, from memory of the interviews, any aspects of the audio recordings which were not clear. Once both interviewers had read through all the transcripts (at least once), through a series of discussions about emerging themes, a set of 14 broad analytical codes was developed and each interview was then coded. To ensure inter-researcher reliability and to increase our familiarity with the dataset, each interviewer coded the interviews she had not conducted. This process also alerted us to similarities and differences in the UK and US sample groups. Throughout, we had frequent communication to ensure consistency in our approaches to coding the data. When the interviews were coded, we each read the resulting documents (one document for each code), annotated the text in each code document with our observations and recorded the themes that seemed to stand out, as well as the tensions and contradictions in the data. Alongside this process, we continued to have frequent conversations to discuss our emerging analysis and understanding of our data, in light of the existing relevant scholarship.

Throughout this analysis, rather than adopting a highly systematic, mechanical analytical procedure whereby an extensive set of detailed codes is developed and the data are chopped up to fit into those codes - an approach which we have found can close down opportunities for open thinking and free observations about the data - we were influenced by Mason’s (2011) ‘facet methodology.’  Drawing on this approach, we conceived of our data as a cut gemstone with many facets which ‘refract and intensify light, taking up the background, and creating flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow’ (p.75). We found this approach, ‘with its emphasis on the significance of flashes of insight rather than the production of ‘“maximum data” of a descriptive kind’ (p.75) encouraged us to use our ‘skill, inventiveness, creativity, insight and imagination’ (p. 77) as researchers and scholars, interweaving our growing familiarity with the existing scholarship and with our participants’ accounts of their experiences, lives and reflections. Instead of simply identifying the most common themes expressed in our data, our analysis centered on moments where participants offered particularly clear or insightful reflection about their experiences of gender politics on campus which appeared to be related or intertwined with other resonances. Our title - ‘I get together with my friends and try to change it’ – a statement by Krissy[[8]](#endnote-8) (a white bisexual woman in the US sample) is one such facet of our data, poignantly reflecting Krissy’s insight as she reflected on sexism and her community’s response to sexism. Through this iterative collaborative process, we developed our understanding of what our data reveal about young women’s engagements with feminism.

**Findings**

This section presents analysis of young women’s accounts of laddism and sexism as it emerged in their lives and their consciousness. We demonstrate their familiarity with laddism and everyday sexism on campus and in the wider world, and their sense that universities can offer a ‘safe space’ in which to engage with feminist politics as a response to sexism. The nature and diversity of their feminist engagements are explored, as are the benefits of engaging with feminisms, in terms of finding a community and experiencing solidarity with others.

Participants in this research gave accounts of their own experiences of sexism both before and during university. Some came to university with an awareness of gendered norms and socialisation because they had had identified gendered roles and inequalities in their home or school lives. Others, who expected the university environment to be free of such features, perhaps because universities are associated in the cultural imagination with high standards of freedom and endeavour, expressed shock and disappointment when they encountered laddism or sexism in an apparently enlightened environment: ‘I thought it would be better here and I got to [university name] and it’s really laddish’ (Laura, white, straight, UK sample). Their experiences included: having drinks ‘spiked’ (presumably with the intention to commit sexual violence); sexual harassment by university staff and students; rapes and victim-blaming responses amongst their peer group; misogynistic and anti-feminist attitudes and behaviours amongst students and staff; social pressures and surveillance of bodies, clothing and appearance; institutional and student resistance to the establishment of feminist societies. Sexual violence was a common concern amongst the young women we spoke to. Regardless of whether they reported personal experiences of it, almost all of the interviewees discussed sexual violence as a live concern and a priority for feminism. However, the women in this research tended to describe experiences and concerns with sexism as galvanising rather than paralysing as expressed by Lois, (Chinese-American, straight, US sample)

But the more I thought about it and the more I looked around and saw the crazy culture at [university name] and the way that people acted here, I realized that I wanted to work on women’s issues. My roommate had an eating disorder our freshman year and another girl on my floor was in an abusive relationship with a really popular guy on campus, and things just started making me realise that a lot of this stuff had to do with gender and the way that girls and guys are treated differently. There was a lot of stuff happening that didn’t sit well with me and I thought this was my chance to get involved.

In the following sections we discuss the university environment as conducive to exploration of feminism, then we examine how students use feminism to challenge laddism and sexism, finally we highlight the social aspects of feminism at university. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings.

***University as a ‘safe space’ for engagement with feminism***

In contrast to the portrayal of universities as unsafe for women, participants gave compelling accounts of how the university provided relatively safe spaces for engaging with feminism to challenge sexual violence and other forms of sexism. They indicated that their universities enabled exploration of different politics and perspectives as well as resources and communities where knowledge, understanding and skills related to feminism are developed. Most sought out feminist engagement early in their time at college, and felt energized by the possibilities of collective feminist engagement. Speaking about people she met at the Women’s Centre on her campus, Diana (white Jewish, straight, US sample) said:

The two of them made a huge impression on me, I thought this was the coolest place, so I signed up for the mailing list and I think it was there that I just started getting emails about all of these cool events and that got me thinking about things*.*

The mechanisms for creating and maintaining such an environment are unremarkable but important: flyers advertising feminist societies and women’s centres; public lectures by visiting feminist speakers; feminist material covered in core or optional courses; Student Union websites and newsletters covering debates on issues relevant to feminists; and publication of zines and other media addressing feminist issues. Each of these was referred to by our participants as conduits for becoming aware of and engaged in feminist activities and communities on campus.

These communities and the activities they sponsor provide opportunities to develop skills such as enhanced knowledge about feminist issues and strategies for deploying them through argumentation. Through engaging in feminist groups and activities, students feel surer of themselves and their views, and their growing confidence leads to a more sophisticated articulation of their feminist politics.

I feel as though I can explain what I think a lot better now. Before I came to university I was just like… well, I know what I mean but I can’t really explain it. And I feel as though my thoughts are a lot more coherent now, with everything to do with feminism I think my views are possibly clearer than they were… (Katie, white, straight, UK sample)

The influence of others figured prominently in participants’ narratives of feminist identity, particularly faculty, peers, and in some cases, well-known feminists. Intellectual engagement with role models in women’s studies was central to the development of this emerging consciousness for several in this study, and they were inspired by these scholars’ enthusiasm for feminism. Fiona, (white, straight first year student from the US), directly connected her feminist work on campus to the influence of a professor:

I took the women’s studies class with [professor] and she was like, “hey you really seem to get this stuff in a different way from your peers, I hope you’ll get more involved”. So that’s when we decided to start the feminist club.

Peers also played a significant role in shaping participants’ feminism , including those in leadership positions in feminist societies and women’s centres that were the ‘hub’ of students’ involvement, often also drawing others into participating. For example, Olivia, a white, lesbian woman from the UK sample, wryly acknowledged that she was motivated to attend her feminist society, in part, because of her attraction to another member of the society; the personal and political are indeed intertwined in feminist politics:

A friend of mine said “oh you should go to the feminist society, you must know about the feminist society.” I had known about it by the time I started my 2nd year... I coerced my flatmate at the time, [I said] there's this really important discussion about patriarchy going on and we have to go, I think it's really important that we go. And they came along with me and that was when I started at the feminist society and getting to know these women.

Regarding the influence of public figures in feminism, some UK participants mentioned a specific talk by a visiting feminist activist-scholar, hosted by a group of gender scholars, which was significant in their development thinking about feminism: ‘I think I can locate it exactly to the day that I went to see Finn Mackay speak and she totally made me change how I think about things’ (Emma, white, straight, UK sample). Maintaining the university as an environment which fosters curiosity, debate, dissent and critical thinking, through invited speakers amongst other activities, is clearly important for the development of feminist politics amongst students.

Some of the routine features of university environments - access to new ideas through course material, public lectures, student societies and services, and student performances and events - appear to be highly significant for students’ engagements with feminism.  Several respondents intended to seek out similar networks after their graduation, and were anxious about the loss of this conducive environment; as Anita (white, straight, US sample) put it ‘there is no women’s centre in the world… there is no little protector… I think it’s certainly a luxury of being in a university.’Some reflected on the value of online and offline feminist connections after graduation; speaking of a listserv network, Candice (biracial, straight, US sample) said ‘it’s like a community in itself where you can send your work or you can discuss things, but … I hope to find some kind of actual community, physical community.’ An important feature of this engagement with feminism is that it provides a ‘safe haven’ (Lucy, white, lesbian, UK sample) from the wider sexist culture and, specifically, lad culture, as well as a tool with which to challenge such cultures. The description of such spaces as ‘safe’ should not suggest that they are free of ‘offence’ or dissent. Respondents provided many examples of disagreements and debates within their feminist networks and communities as well as of how their feminist views had developed in response to challenges. Most frequently cited examples concerned women-only space, men’s role in feminism, issues to do with trans\* politics, sex work, and pornography – all recognised as topics in contemporary feminist politics which have generated reactions of outrage and offence.

***Students using feminism to resist sexism and ‘lad culture’***

For the participants in this study, resistance to sexism and lad culture took varied forms, such as: producing *Speak*, a zine presenting anonymous accounts of ideas and experiences about sex and sexuality, designed to challenge silences and dominant discourses about sex; producing performances of *The Vagina Monologues*; establishing, running and attending feminist groups on and off -line; holding discussion groups, book groups, films showings; joining local Reclaim/Take Back the Night marches and SlutWalks[[9]](#endnote-9); advocating for establishment of sexual assault resource centres on campus; providing a counter-narrative to the existing lad culture on campus; and amplifying the voices of the silenced in order to build solidarity and community. Some of these are examples of some of the ‘unsayable’ things that have historically caused offence to mainstream society, discussed above. As described by Alma, a bisexual, Latina in the US sample:

I helped set up an event on campus called “speak up”, and we did art from feminists and art about domestic and sexual violence… I wanted an event that while it entertained, it also had a message and it wasn't a lecture, and while those lectures and teachings are important, I wanted someone to see and to hear something, someone who suffered through child abuse, or someone who suffered through domestic violence and sexual assault, had written themselves in their words, because they survived this and their story deserves to be told, and for people to realize that they are not alone.

In other instances, young feminists directed their energy toward creating institutional policy change, in order to cultivate a culture of respect and empowerment for women on their campus. The roots of this activism were often surprisingly insightful, as participants grappled with moving beyond the limits of institutional change. As noted by Krissy:

I am so proud of the fact that we will now have an office that exists to fight the problem and to provide services to survivors, that’s super important and I honestly don’t think that would have happened if not for the work we did together this year. We actually got the president of the university to meet with us, read our proposal, and give us funding for a sexual assault hotline and professional counselor…..

As well as policy and institutional change, participants also directed their activism at individual and cultural change. Respondents gave numerous accounts of specific conversations and encounters in which they challenged the views and/or behaviour of classmates, teachers, strangers, family and friends and also reflected on how they represent feminism in those encounters. Lorena (Latina, 20 years old, straight, US sample) gave several examples of her one-to-one challenges, including of men (strangers to her) who sexually harassed her in public, and noted that she managed her behaviour, as a representative of both feminism and Latin society:

I feel like speaking out when you see something that you think goes against your principles is really important. … And it's hard, and I like to think I do probably more than I actually do. The way that I have been conditioned as a woman is that I am not supposed to get angry. I also think, like being Latina, you don't want to feed into that stereotype.

Sexual violence and harassment, key elements of lad culture, featured strongly as central concerns in respondents’ politics. Lad culture, in the US context, was typically referred to as rape culture (Buchwald et al, 2005)[[10]](#endnote-10). Rape culture in the US context is the complex interplay of media messages, social norms, and sexist market-driven imperatives that underpins the culture’s implicit acceptance and endorsement of rape. By keeping them in fear, rape culture’s ubiquity serves to subordinate women. Participants’ commitment to naming and challenging rape culture on campus was vivid, as noted by Anita:

I mean, for me, a lot of it is transforming rape culture.... we just actually had a group gathering last week of people from all different groups around campus to talk about transforming rape culture at [this campus] and really it is also a thing, like doing campaigning against the base sort of section of the fear of oppression, how can we get people to talk about language they use, jokes they make and how can we show them that those are the things that leads to really what we call the big mistakes – like rapes and murders.

As Tomlinson (201) notes, the trope of ‘the angry feminist’ is ubiquitous in contemporary society and serves as part of ‘discursive technologies of power deployed strategically to suppress claims for social justice" (p33). Challenging these reactionary forces, social movement theorists have named anger as a force for collective action which is particularly essential in fomenting social change related to sexual violence; Fraser (1996) has noted that ‘working with sexual violence involves mobilising the force of survivors' untapped anger and assisting them to direct it where it belongs, on the perpetrator(s) of sexual violence and on the social forces which shape the existence of perpetrators’ (p. 167). Commitment borne of this mingling of affect and action were evident among the women in our study.

Far from being one-note in approach, diverse strategies were employed by students on their campuses to effect change. Julie, (white, bisexual, UK sample) reflected on the value of these different forms of activism:

the things I was doing with Amnesty [International] were kind of more getting the government to change certain things so I think that was very political activism that targeted policy change, because at the time we were doing a campaign, it was about trafficking of women and we were trying to get the government to ratify this agreement to help support women who'd been trafficked to the UK. So that was very sort of targeted at policy change. And then the other stuff that I've been doing, just like standing on the street and talking to people, I think maybe that would be classed as more activist but I think they're all equally important, I don't know.

The different kinds of interventions and the different foci of activism reflect, among other things, the respondents’ varying perspectives on feminist politics. Although respondents shared engagement in feminism, they varied in the detail of their political beliefs, theorisation and values. As would be expected with a diverse, dynamic body of thought like feminism, respondents expressed a variety of views about what feminism is, ranging from women’s liberation from capitalism and patriarchy, through perspectives associated with radical feminism. Others advocated for liberal feminism’s focus on equality within the existing system, while still others maintained an emphasis on intersectionality or to eradicating the gender binary. Far from the simplistic characterisation of contemporary feminism as reflecting a neo-liberal worldview, our sample revealed the breadth and variety of feminist political perspectives that have existed throughout feminism’s history.

***The social benefits of feminist engagement: community and solidarity***

As well as providing the satisfaction of ‘making a difference’ in challenging sexist cultures, engaging in feminist activities provides space in a feminist community that offers friendship and a sense of belonging. Lad cultures disparage feminism and women’s connections independent of men. In this environment, women who resist lad cultures can feel alone and isolated.

I think before it [feminist society] was set up I was feeling very very alone in my views, like I can remember sort of not long after I was spiked, and I’d had an argument with one of my friends, and I can remember crying and I was with my boyfriend and I was like “why did I come to this Uni?” … And we kind of thought there is no way that I'm the only person that's been spiked in this University. There's no way that there is nobody in this University who's been raped or molested. And I don't think people realise how widespread it is, when they're making these jokes. .... And I was feeling very alone because I was wondering how many other people felt like I did. But I felt I could never get into contact with them because it's not something you talk about because there was no group. (Helen, white, straight, UK sample)

Women in this research frequently referred to the importance of friendships and community created through feminist engagements. Interactions with other feminists help create a sense of belonging and safety within the university environment:

…so I am really glad I found the women at the women’s centre, they have been super important in my overall experience here. I felt like I wasn’t sure if I belonged here, then I met them, and now I really do feel like this is a good place for me and I can make it here. (Lois, Chinese-American, straight, US sample)

However, communities are defined by inclusion *and exclusion* and so communities of interest, such as feminist groups, can be difficult to enter. Several respondents mentioned that, at first, they were tentative about joining such communities:

I think during my freshman year, I knew about it, but I was kind of scared to go down, because everyone in there seemed really cool and I was intimidated. So then I just – they sent an email about volunteer hours, so I was – I felt like, okay, well if I was there with a purpose, I would feel less awkward. So I went through volunteer training and then I volunteered and I met more people and now I’m on the board (Candice, biracial, straight, US sample)

While the concept of ‘community’ it not without complexity, and has not always served feminist interests well (e.g., Friedman, 1989), a sense of community appears to be highly influential in developing these students’ feminist consciousness and validating their emerging politics, and provides a sense of affirmation in a largely anti-feminist world (Hercus,1999). This contrasts with the depiction of ‘agency’ as a solitary enterprise, imbued with neo-liberal tendencies; women’s accounts prioritised the benefits of community and solidarity as well as the benefits of feminism to groups rather than to individuals. Interviewees expressed reassurance at finding a group of people ‘who feel the same way about these things as me… It is really, really cool and totally expanding my life and my knowledge’ (Heather, white, straight, US sample) and are ‘just really like lovely incredible women who are really supportive of each other’ (Julie, white, bisexual, UK sample). In line with other research which shows that self-help groups contribute to members’ social support and wellbeing  (Seebohm et al., 2012), in an environment of everyday sexism, finding a community is reassuring, affirming, and empowering:

The [women’s] centre is definitely my community, at least around this stuff. It is so reassuring because I guess it is just really nice to realize that you are not alone, you are not crazy for thinking that there are things that are wrong with this world.  (Maggie, white, queer, US sample)

In the university environment where laddism is tolerated (and even actively cultivated, Phipps, 2014 a and b; Schwartz et al, 2001), young women are constructed as the object of men’s judgement, and hostility to feminism is routine, joining a feminist community is an act of resistance which can have positive impacts on participants’ self-esteem, confidence and happiness (Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006; Vaccaro, 2009; 2011):

I felt so good, it was like, get in! It’s like an active thing going on and it’s not just me there are other people in [city that she lives in] who feel like this, I sort of felt a bit like verified in my views and not wrong. (Caroline, white, bisexual, UK sample)

Lack of self-confidence amongst women seems to be an enduring feature of patriarchy. Central to this are relentless normative gendered expectations about body image, to which younger women in particular are subjected. Engaging with a feminist community can be an important defence:

I think a lot of my awareness about gender issues has to do with self-confidence and my life right now. I felt like my life was a popularity contest. And what goes into popularity contests, especially for young women, is body oriented. And so for me, feminism was like my way to accepting who I was and my body, and all the, like, weird things that I was made to feel insecure about… It also made me feel great to be more confident. I’m so thankful for them [the women at the women’s centre], they weren’t my closest friends, they weren’t the people I hung out with all the time, but thank god they were there and existed. And we found each other… (Theresa, white, queer, US sample)

A feminist community and a feminist consciousness provide women with defences against a culture that encourages self-blame amongst women for their failure to fit into a gendered, heteronormative world.

Feminist communities offer opportunities to engage with women from more diverse backgrounds. Encountering members of feminist communities from different ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds with different philosophical/political perspectives helped develop respondents’ own feminist politics and understanding:

I thoroughly enjoy being here [at the women’s centre] because I learn so much all the time especially with so many different perspectives. (Vanessa, African-American, straight, US sample)

The narratives of the women suggest that they derive more than simply the rewards of hard work and social progress from their relationships to one another. The collective actions taken yield a palpable sense of possibility, of ‘individual and collective experiences [that] offer the possibility of transforming grief and open up the potential for a joyful and hopeful politics’ (Barker, Martin and Zournazi, 2008, p. 433; see also Sharp and Lewis, forthcoming).

Participants’ positive descriptions of feminist communities at university align with the more general benefits of a group environment – to foster solidarity, a sense of belonging, empowerment and to provide the foundation for a positive identity for members (Hunt & Benford, 2004). Martell and Avitabile (1998) argue that women’s centres at US universities (in which most of the US sample in this study participated) provide mutual support from a like-minded community for members that allows them to evolve their skills personally and professionally. This sense of solidarity is an important feature of community and was repeatedly expressed by participants in this study such as Vanessa (African-American, straight, US sample): ‘It feels like a tool of empowerment because… you feel like you have backing when you put forth a statement about your feminist values…I feel like I am not alone in that feeling.’[[11]](#endnote-11) These positive reflections on experiences of feminist community challenge critiques of contemporary feminism as individualistic; women in this research appreciated the intrinsic nature of feminism as a group, community, collective experience.

**Discussion**

In this study there was widespread experience of everyday sexism, what Sue (2010) and Nadal (2010) call ‘microagressions’, and what we think of as the ‘wallpaper’ of sexism. However, there was relatively limited focus on victimisation; instead, these young women seemed to be galvanised by experiences of everyday sexism to seek out and work with other like-minded individuals, to make sense of their own experiences, develop their understanding, and to form communities of resistance. Thus, they used the university environment and resources as testing grounds to resist and challenge sexism. Despite the dangers of campus lad cultures, as well as of the wider environment of everyday sexism, women in our research demonstrated that universities are also places of feminist growth and activism. Against the encroaching neoliberalism in universities, these women demonstrate that they are able to carve out ‘safe spaces’ in universities, to engage in counter-hegemonic activities, politics and personal growth. And despite some recent depictions of contemporary feminisms as reflecting limited neoliberal, individualistic challenges, the women in this research occupied a range of political positions including aspects of liberal, socialist, radical, intersectional and Black feminisms and they explored these positions in community with others; the solidarity offered by feminist networks was a crucial aspect of their developing feminist politics.

As Phipps and Young (2015b) argue, young women in universities who use feminism to challenge lad cultures are treading a narrow path between a ‘sexual celebration’ discourse which conflates ‘empowerment with sexuality and sexual pleasure and accept[s] uncritically the idea that young women especially perform their identities via the vocabulary of sex’ (2015b, p12*)* and the stereotype of ‘sex-negative radical feminism’ who are portrayed as ‘prissy, prudish, Puritanical and bitter’ (2015b, p13). However, the women in our sample seemed to tread this path with a relatively light step; we were surprised at how much their frustration and anger at encounters with sexism were counterbalanced by an energy and optimism about using feminism to reshape their environments and the wider world. The youthful enthusiasm of this group of young women gave the lie to ‘prissy, prudish, Puritanical and bitter’ feminists; these women combined a light touch, flecked with humour and enjoyment, with their heartfelt commitment to a feminist politics which created an infectious energy and belief in the power of feminism to change society. They spoke particularly movingly about the power and strength of feminist communities which provided solidarity and a sense of a shared challenge to contemporary sexism. These were not self-interested individualists using feminism to support their personal development and progress in a neoliberal, competitive environment, but members of communities, working collectively to understand, analyse and reshape the world around them. In their accounts of their feminist communities, growing feminist identities and politics, and resistance to sexism, they express a joyful pleasure and excitement, despite the extent and nature of the oppression they challenge. Perhaps in contrast to groups of older or more experienced feminist women, the women in this research seem to engage with feminist topics, such as sexual and other forms of violence against women, without becoming paralysed by the ‘unspeakable inequalities’ (Gill, 2011) they faced, without the burden of oppression outweighing the sense of optimism that they could make a difference. Despite confronting the ubiquitous, harmful, enduring nature of sexism and lad culture, they seem to have come to the position that doing *something* is better than the feeling that accompanies doing nothing. This seems to set them apart from other feminist networks we have known, where the harm and injustice being challenged are burdens carried more heavily, as represented in Sara Ahmed’s (Ahmed, 2010) ‘feminist killjoy’ motif. We wonder whether this distinctive aspect of young women’s feminism is a feature of youthful engagement. Or perhaps it is a feature of a university environment which exudes possibilities of social and political change, personal and intellectual growth and which can provide the resources - networks, physical spaces, learning materials, ways of engaging with others, financial backing - for such exploration, as well for activism to accompany it. Some contemporary commentary depicts universities as dangerous spaces for young women (Fisher et al, 2010; Koss et al, 1987; NUS, 2010, Phipps and Young, 2015 a & b; Tozer, 2013; Younis, 2014), damaged by market forces, individualism and neoliberalism which encroach on the tradition of education as a public good (Phipps and Young, 2015a). But this depiction should be balanced by both our data and events in the US where university students are organizing in large numbers to demand accountability for systemic racism (Glenza, 2015; Pearce, 2015; Shapiro, 2015). Our research suggests that even as they enact more neoliberal stances, universities are, *at the same time*, environments that can act as a catalyst for personal, intellectual, social and political change. We lose this aspect at our peril.

This research analysed engagements with feminism amongst a sample of contemporary students in the UK and US. Clearly, they are not representative of either students or young women in those countries, let alone beyond the Anglo-American environment; feminism remains a minority activity. However, increasingly scholars are mindful of the diversity of contemporary feminisms and cautious about reducing diverse activities, political positions and bodies of thought into single ‘waves’ (Lewis and Marine, 2015; Evans, 2015). We advocate that more empirical examination of the diversity of contemporary feminisms will reveal the richness of feminism as it is enacted, debated and developed. Future research could valuably explore the impact of university feminist communities on their communities; (how) do they influence institutional policies, practices and cultures? Longitudinal research would reveal the extent to which engagement in such communities endures; what are the barriers and facilitators which enable feminist students to maintain and develop their feminist politics and activism once they leave the university environment?

In the midst of the current revival of interest in the ubiquity of sexism, and the particular concern about lad culture in universities, it is vital we keep at the forefront the similar revival of resistance and challenge. While we want to avoid resurrecting the contested and false dichotomy of victimisation *vs* agency, it would be fruitful to keep centre stage young women (and men’s) resistance to contemporary forms of sexism, which we argue can best be derived directly from their narratives of the work they are doing. This will help reveal how young people use their social and political environments and communities to imagine, enact and bring about alternative futures.

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1. The language and terms used to describe post-school education differs in the UK and US. Our focus in this article is on higher education in universities (in the UK and US) and colleges (in the US). To avoid complication, we use the British terms – ‘university’ and ‘higher education’ - to include both British and American institutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In an ironic twist, gender equality legislation is implicated in this; Universities in England and Wales are required to ‘pay regard to their existing responsibilities in relation to gender segregation’ (p13 Prevent Duty Guidance). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Women’s centres are campus based organisations at most US colleges. They strive to ensure equal opportunities and gender equality by providing support and resources to women staff and students (Kasper, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We are thinking of, for example: Emma Sulcowicz’ performance art - *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* - in protest at New York Columbia University's response to her allegation of rape by another student, and the tremendous media and critical ripples it generated; the British National Union of Students surveys to address violence, harassment against students, development of a Zero Tolerance policy and the resulting media and institutional responses; the use of Title IX to challenge various aspects of gender inequality and discrimination in universities. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We recognise that men and people of other non-binary genders can and do identify as feminist. However, given that the main constituency of feminism has been women, we focused our study on women’s engagement with and use of feminism to challenge the misogyny and sexism they experienced. We did not limit our study to women-born-women, but no trans women were forthcoming in our sampling process, despite attempts to include such women, perhaps indicating that such women are not well represented in university feminist networks. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A website developed in the UK by Laura Bates whose aim is to document everyday examples of sexism as reported by contributors around the world. By its third anniversary, it had collected 1000,000 entries (Bates, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. UK University feminist societies are generally established by groups of students, are open to other students and operate as relatively independent bodies. Some are affiliated to the university’s Student Union, although some of our respondents reported their SU was resistant to the establishment of a feminist society. It is believed that student feminist societies have multiplied (see, for example, Pearce, 2014) in recent years although we know of no reliable empirical evidence that supports that claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interviewees’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. SlutWalks were identified by the respondents as contentious; the majority who mentioned them expressed uncertainty about their political value and cultural focus. SlutWalks have been variously critiqued for foregrounding whiteness (see Black Women’s Blueprint 2011), for reflecting a neoliberal individualist consumer culture in which sexuality is commodified (Mendes, 2015, Miriam, 2012 - Miriam, K. (2012). Feminism, Neoliberalism, and SlutWalk. *Feminist Studies*, 262-266.) and also, along with Pink Chaddis in India, as a form of ‘feminism lite’ which, although not transformative, ‘operate[s] as a space clearing mechanism for other analytical possibilities to emerge’ (Kapur, 2012:3). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Although the young women in this study were passionately concerned about the various forms of violence against women, they spoke relatively little about lad culture, referring more often to ‘sexism’, ‘misogyny’, ‘gender inequality’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘oppression’, ‘objectification’, ‘rape culture’, ‘slut-shaming’ and ‘gender expectations’. We observe that the term ‘lad culture’ suggests a novelty and a homogeneity which potentially detract from the enduring nature of sexism and ask whether it is strategically useful to adopt a new term, to suggest a reincarnation of an age-old phenomenon, in order to capture public attention and shine the spotlight anew? Or does focusing on this new term detract from the enduring nature of patriarchy and, simultaneously, risk reviving a narrative which depicts women as powerless victims of preying masculinity? [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. These valuable experiences of groups and communities may differ from experiences of contemporary feminism on social media. However, our respondents had rather limited engagement in online feminism. This is a topic for future research (see Connelly, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)