

Book Review

Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change across the Americas

Jessica K. Taft

New York: New York University Press, 2011

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The basis of this book is a project begun in 2005-2006 by Jessica K. Taft, who set out to document girl activism by conducting interviews with 75 girls who identified as activists. Through the interviews, Taft gathered understandings of girl identities, girlhood, and youth activism. To this end, Taft spent approximately one year residing in a selection of cities in the Americas, including the San Francisco Bay Area of California, as well as Mexico City, Caracas, Buenos Aires, and Vancouver. Each city had a well-documented and continuing social movement history and, therefore, provided opportunities for Taft to locate girl activists. The restriction of Taft's research to the Americas confined the investigation to issues that may be specific to a region. However, it also offered an opportunity to compare differences and similarities in girls' identities and activism across cities.

The first section of the book, *Building the Activist Identity*, explores the identities of girl activists. As the girls define themselves as activists, their discussions with Taft lead to an understanding that activism describes part of their entire identity as girls. The 75 interview participants were born between 1987 and 1991 giving their approximate ages between 12 and 18. The term *girl* is used to describe the young activists rather than teenager. According to the girls, teenager is a label that can be construed as one who is reckless or irresponsible. Taft deftly uses the words of the girls in the interviews to overcome any preconceived and media-driven ideas that their social behaviour is dominated by passivity and self-interested consumption. It was also thought-provoking to read that these girls described boys as being self-interested and socially or politically uncommitted. One of the more fascinating ideas revealed at this point in the book is a challenge to the notion that somehow girlhood needs to be relinquished if a girl wishes to engage in activist behaviour. The idea that girlhood is incompatible with activism is perhaps a good example of the influence of ageism on perspectives about girl identities. Particularly, Taft cites Sazama's (2001) identification of adultism as a particular form of ageism (i.e., adults stereotype young people based on their age), which often leads to their systematic mistreatment.

The second section, *Making Change Happen*, describes the activities that constitute the activism of the girls. Remarkably, girls report that they are not restricted by established adult behaviour and thus are better able to speak their mind on issues, which are both deep and broad in scope. According to Taft, these girls discussed meaningful issues about

community development, including struggles against gentrification, unemployment and hunger,

challenges to destructive building proposals (shopping malls and highways that would disrupt important ecosystems and community spaces), demands for corporate accountability and solutions to ongoing corporate environmental health and safety violations, and projects that aim to build alternative, community-controlled social service institutions. (p. 27)

Additionally, Taft reports that the girls' involvement in local campaigns is accompanied with activism aimed at global entities that structure local issues.

The girls' style of activism is defined by goals that include recruiting and educating supporters for their respective groups. In contrast, adult activists appear more preoccupied with the strategic goals of the local group. The revelations of the girls indicate a fractured relationship often between themselves and adults (again exemplified by adultism). In this case, adultism works on the assumption that adults are superior to young people and therefore, adults have the final say on directives. Understandably, Taft identifies adultism as forming a major role in young girls' interactions with adults, which significantly undermines girls' social progress and the relational benefits of bridging age barriers.

Taft is to be commended for her respect of the participants and the rich data from the interviews. She is sensitive to the opinions of the girls, which is obvious when she skilfully permits the girls to interpret their own dialogue as well as making research-generated comments that may contradict the girls' interpretations. It is commendable that Taft reflects on the transcription of the interviews. Sometimes this involves transcribing from one language to another and Taft reflects on her position as a researcher and recognizes the possibility of researcher bias in shaping the data analysis. While there may be limitations to her interpretation of data, she contributes significantly to current literature about understanding girls, social activism, and perhaps ageist stances.

Certainly some of the suggestions and revelations in the study could be used to enhance social activism. For instance, gathering data in different cities allows Taft to reflect on the foundations of girls' activism and permits Taft to comment on ways that the benefits of political discourse as the basis of activism in South America are missing in Northern America. Contrasting the availability of political discourse through interview transcripts highlights the significance of ongoing political education and its effect on social activism. The basics of which include critical knowledge about the social construction of formal education. It is also particularly useful and stimulating to be confronted with a position that ascribes girls as central to their social activism and avoids othering them. This approach is justified by Taft, who incorporates the voices of girls "whose words and ideas are not quite what most readers expect" (p. 193).

One of the greatest contributions this book makes is Taft's identification of the predominant bias in popular media, which presents girls as little more than self-interested consumers. Similarly, Taft overcomes a current bias in research and media that emphasises the seemingly innumerable dysfunctions that afflict 12 to 18 year-old girls. It is refreshing to read from a different aspect, namely a conception of girl identity that is constructed through an inductive approach. It also peaks curiosity about the possible future contributions of girl activists. In her most recent work, Taft (2014) calls for research that seeks to understand rather than impose standards on girls. Unfortunately, some ageist impositions in popular media still construct girl identity by awkwardly coupling a somewhat submissive stigma. By reading *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change across the Americas*, one can only imagine that there is a great deal more to be understood about contemporary girls and the activities that belong to girlhood.

References

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