

# Stealth Feminists: The Thirtysomething Revolution

DEBRA MICHALS

WHEN I CLOSE MY EYES, I still see her there, this eighteen-year-old version of myself,<sup>1</sup> gazing out my college-dorm window at protestors on the street below. It was 1981, my first year at Boston University, where I'd gone to study journalism with the goal of "exposing injustice," hoping to make my debut as a campus radical. But as I looked out at the rag-tag assembly of demonstrators, I thought, "How passé. Why do we have to copy the '60s and '70s to make a difference?"

I was not alone. Those of us born in the 1960s grew up with Kent State, the anti-Vietnam-war movement, Black Power, and Women's Liberation as the background music of our lives. Heady notions about making a difference seeped into our collective consciousness, embodied in national figures like Bella Abzug and everyday heroes like nine-year-old Maria Pepe of Hoboken, New Jersey, who integrated Little League baseball in 1974. Teachers assigned homework based on TV news or asked where we stood on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). We listened to the "Free to Be You and Me" record and watched TV characters from Mary Richards to Maude challenging sexism. We saw a president disgraced over Watergate and we mastered the art of questioning *everything*. We ingested two basic messages: that we could change our world, and that (for those lucky enough to have access) college might be a good place to start.

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1. I was born in 1962. To make the case that a distinct cohort of thirtysomething "Stealth Feminists" (my term) exists, I have included the birth years of myself and the women quoted in this article.

But when we got there, we found the party was over, or what remained wasn't what we had in mind. Instead of struggles for women's equality and social justice in the USA, we found Anti-Apartheid, No Nukes, El Salvador. Worthwhile causes all—and evidence of emerging global activism—but to many a young mind it felt distant, dated. Again we stood in the shadow of former greatness—first as 1970s teens hearing about the peace-and-love Woodstock generation, then in the 1980s when it seemed activism was dead or wheezing its last breath.

Fast forward to the 1990s and 2000s. While the media claimed feminism was on the lam, the real picture was more complicated. Beyond endless accounts of young women from so-called Generations X, Y, and Z renouncing feminism with the oft-repeated, "I'm not a feminist, but . . .," lay another reality: countless thirtysomething women not only embracing the label but defining our lives as torchbearers for feminism. In our careers, relationships, childraising strategies (or decisions *not* to have children)—in all our choices—"Stealth Feminists" have been quietly, invisibly, and sometimes even subconsciously continuing the work of the Women's Movement.<sup>2</sup>

So how did we slip under the radar? Pop-culture theorists couldn't see these thirtysomethings in part because of false demographic categories lumping the first half of us with Baby Boomers and the second half with Gen Xers.<sup>3</sup> Unconvinced that these labels adequately described my generation and its politics, in 2001 I conducted an Internet survey of women born between 1961 and 1969.<sup>4</sup> The result: *most respon-*

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2. For more on younger women as "functional feminists," see "Notes of a Feminist Long Distance Runner," by Eleanor Holmes Norton, p. 145.—Ed.

3. Demographers define Baby Boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964, and Gen Xers as born between 1965 and 1978. See "The Baby Boom at Mid-Decade," by Patricia Braus, *American Demographics*, April 1995, and "The Generation X Difference," by Nicholas Zill and John Robinson, *American Demographics*, April 1995.

4. Special thanks to the women who participated in my survey, and to the women's Internet networks that posted my query, among them: [www.ivillage.com](http://www.ivillage.com), [www.systems.org](http://www.systems.org), [www.moonlady.com](http://www.moonlady.com), [www.hbrwm.com](http://www.hbrwm.com), Amy Richards and Marianne Schnall at [www.feminist.com](http://www.feminist.com), Irene Stuber at [www.undelete.org/abreb.html](http://www.undelete.org/abreb.html) and the list-serv H-Women. My initial query asked if women born between 1961 and 1969 identified with either demographic category of Baby Boomers or Generation Xers, and included questions on the experience of growing up in the politically conscious decades of the 1960s and 1970s. More than seventy women nationwide filled out questionnaires or took part in interviews.

*dents identified with neither category.* Instead, they defined Baby Boomers as at least ten years older (movers and shakers of the '60s and '70s), and Gen Xers as five to ten years younger (unappreciative, label-shunning beneficiaries of social-justice movements). Others have begun to question these categories; in *Generation Jones* (Vanguard Press, 1999), Jonathan Pontell argued for a group of in-betweeners born 1954 to 1965.<sup>5</sup>

For thirtysomething women, the lack of a unifying generational label intensified our sense of disconnectedness, sending us searching for other ways to define ourselves. For many, feminism filled the void: "I remember thinking we could never measure up, that we had failed as a decade because the '60s was where it was at," recalled Tomi-Ann Roberts (b. 1963), a psychology professor at Colorado College and a respondent to my survey, "It matters that we don't have a label. This sense of being cast adrift is why I take the label 'feminist' so seriously." Without an identifiable movement of their own, Stealth Feminists say they turned their activism into daily life. Another respondent, a network-systems engineer in Kansas City, Missouri (b. 1963), wrote: "I just live and work as a 'practicing feminist' . . . breaking small barriers . . . hopefully changing some minds by example."

Contrary to stereotype, thirtysomething Stealths eagerly self-identify as feminists.<sup>6</sup> "*Absolutely, I'm a feminist!*" was the refrain in Internet and telephone interviews, stressing a belief in equal rights regardless of sex or race. Some define that to mean "humanism" or anti-capitalism; all recognize the necessity for *action*, particularly given Right-wing political agendas and anti-woman backlash. "I define feminism as: 1) the understanding that there is inequality between men and

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5. Others use varying start and end dates for this group of in-betweeners, beginning in the late 1950s and reaching into the latter '60s. There's also an active Internet community for those who fall between the Boomers and Gen Xers at [www.generationjones.com](http://www.generationjones.com). For information on the myth of the homogeneous Baby Boom, see "The Four Baby Booms," by Campbell Gibson, *American Demographics*, November 1993.

6. Only two of the women who responded to my survey said they did not identify as feminists. One self-identified as a religious fundamentalist and the other as a member of the military—yet both expressed support for gender equality.

women, and 2) the responsibility of acting upon that knowledge,” explained an academic skills specialist in Allegheny, New York (b. 1965).

Ironically, Stealths’ invisibility has been the source of our power. While no one was looking, this virtual army of feminists has acted on the lessons of our childhoods. As conservatives urged creationist theories on U.S. classrooms,<sup>7</sup> such Stealth-Feminist educators as Carolyn Eichner (b. 1961), an assistant history professor at the University of South Florida, and Katino Manko (b. 1966), an adjunct professor at the University of Delaware, have introduced new generations to literature from the late-twentieth-century feminist renaissance. Most academics who responded to my survey noted their efforts to teach feminist history and politics, including professors/instructors at Western Michigan University (b. 1963) and Smith College (b. 1965). Others, like Lewis-Clark State College English professor Carman C. Curton (b. 1962)—who traces her awakening to a copy of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* she discovered in seventh-grade study hall—have made sure their university libraries offer feminist works. Thirtysomething scholars are continuing research inspired by earlier feminists, such as projects studying the intersection of body image, self-surveillance, and media representations emphasizing youth and beauty.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Stealth Feminists have infiltrated the worlds of government (working on election campaigns for pro-choice candidates) and business (hiring qualified women, battling management for equal pay). Promoting and training women, particularly in male-dominated sci-tech fields, topped priority lists for many respondents, including an information-technology project manager in Nashville, Tennessee (b. 1968) and a manager of artificial-intelligence programs from Cherry Hill, New Jersey (b. 1961). Others, like a computer scientist at NASA

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7. See “Combating the Religious Right,” by Cecile Richards, p. 464.—Ed.

8. Tomi-Ann Roberts, for example, explored issues of self-surveillance in a study of women’s test scores executed while the women were wearing sweaters vs. bathing suits. The women took the tests in rooms alone, yet still their scores plummeted in the swimwear (unlike the scores of their male counterparts, which were roughly the same regardless of the men’s apparel), and the women described themselves in bathing suits by using shame words like “disgusting.” (The men, on the other hand, described themselves as “silly.”)

(b. 1966), report encouraging girls to study science through mentoring and educational demonstrations. Entrepreneurs use their independence to merge business and politics: *www.focusonstyle.com* updates visitors to this fashion website with news on women's rights. In childrearing, Stealths reject gender-biased stories outright, or else explain what's wrong with them—like the title character in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* film becoming voiceless.<sup>9</sup> When her toddler announced that there are no female "firemen," Amy Bowles Reyer (b. 1967) took him to her local Bethesda, Maryland, engine company so he could meet women firefighters. Another survey respondent, a University of Arkansas programmer (b. 1963) proves gender-neutral childrearing works: "As my son was growing, I kept 'girl' toys in the house—dollhouse, shopping cart, baby doll. He played with them some, and grew up very sensitized. . . . [Now seventeen] he sees no conflict between cooking and caring for babies or mowing the lawn and building a deck."

In large part, we Stealths regard ourselves as the first beneficiaries of 1970s feminist sociopolitical victories, and consider it our duty to continue the fight: "My politics are after the same goals of the '60s: equal pay for equal work, adequate childcare, the removal of the glass ceiling, women's right to choose," wrote a Ph.D. candidate at Johns Hopkins University (b. 1965). Militance that seemed passé in the 1980s is getting a second look: Stealths say they would take to the streets over any effort to subjugate women, especially the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. Our concerns include poverty, the environment, and the exploitation of women and children in the global South by multinational factories. Some Stealths are formulating political agendas around the unrealized promise of Title IX, including lawsuits to contest unequal representation of women in public institutions receiving federal funds.<sup>10</sup>

Parents, teachers, and the culture of our youth sparked this consciousness. Tomi-Ann Roberts flashed back on the memory of her dad

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9. Several respondents mentioned Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and the problems of women characters being denied the power of speech. See also "Honey, Disney Shrunk the Kids," by Carolyn Mackler, *Ms.*, April/May 2001.

10. Title IX of the 1972 Education Act Amendment protects women from gender discrimination in education by requiring all educational institutions receiving federal funds to provide equal access to female and male students for all available programs, including athletics and vocational education.

mowing their lawn in a conservative suburban neighborhood while wearing a pro-ERA t-shirt. Others had powerful recollections they recognized as key to their awareness: the woman (b. 1965) whose family wasn't shocked when, at age seven, she announced she was marrying her best friend Molly; the information-systems manager (b. 1968) who memorized Helen Reddy's feminist anthem "I Am Woman" while her Mexican American immigrant mother fought for ethnic and gender access to "the American dream"; the Ph.D. candidate (b. 1965) who felt empowered watching Billie Jean King trounce Bobby Riggs in the 1972 "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match; the welfare-rights activist (b. 1963) whose youth was spent reading "all the feminist classics"; the graduate student (b. 1966) whose mother shifted the housework to her spouse while earning a Ph.D. in 1974; the educator (b. 1963) who will never forget her mother voting for Shirley Chisholm in the 1972 presidential election.

Many scholars, reporters, and even some Baby Boomers who engaged in '60s and '70s activism claim that as a unique moment in U.S. history, one with little precedent and few signs of antecedents. Opponents take comfort in what they (want to) believe is the exceptionalism of those decades; some participants preen themselves on having been a rare breed. Both overlook the generation nurtured on that activism. It's a failure of the modern media, victim of its own anti-feminist bias, to have missed perhaps the biggest story of the last decade: the '60s and '70s legacy is alive and well in the consciousness of Stealth Feminists, who are not only passing these politics on to future generations but adding our own spin to yesterday's legacy and today's action. As we age, we will, like our predecessors, gain increasing authority to influence the broader culture with our values. Our existence proves that generations of women activists are *not* cut off from each other. Rather, we *do* stand on each other's shoulders. We are building a bridge from the past through the present to the future.

And, most important, we are *everywhere*.

DEBRA MICHALS is a feminist journalist and scholar who completed her Ph.D. in U.S. history at New York University in 2001. Her dissertation focused on the rise of women's entrepreneurship in the post-World War II decades. She traces the moment of her feminist awakening to her

seventh-grade English class, where a male teacher labeled her the class “women’s libber” for requesting more readings by female authors. Her journalism has appeared in *Ms.*, *Working Woman*, *American Heritage*, *Self*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*. She spent two years as acting associate director of the undergraduate program in women’s studies at NYU, where she founded a student-run publication on gender issues, entitled *revolution/evolution*.

### Suggested Further Reading

(*There isn’t any on Stealth Feminists. That’s the point of writing this essay. That’s also why I’m writing a book on the Stealth Feminist generation. Meanwhile, the following are sure to inspire the Stealth generation—and beyond.*—D.M.)

Baxandall, Roz, and Linda Gordon, eds. *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Ann Snitow, eds. *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991.

Schneir, Miriam. *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, 1983.