‘They’ve never been taught what feminism is’: the case for teaching feminism, gender issues, and related topics in school.

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Interview transcript between Laura Stocker (researcher) and Cate (young participant aged 19-20 from British Columbia, Canada) as part of research data collected for dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc Gender, Sexuality & Society at Birkbeck, University of London, September 30, 2020.

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Introduction

Laura: To start actually I just kind of want to get a sense um of your interests. Um so my first question is if you could tell me what you’re studying in university and why you chose that that subject.

Cate: Um yeah I’m studying, well my major is in environment and my minor is political science. {Information about program redacted} Um and I picked it because I well when I graduated high school I was interested in environmental law and I don’t know if that’s still what I want to do but I know that I love my major and I know I want to do something with it and it just feels extremely relevant and I find everything super interesting and I don’t know exactly what I want to do with it yet but I know that I like it.

L: Ok super. Um and the next question might be sorted of related but I’m wondering if there is anything you would say you are particularly passionate about

C: Yeah uhm you’re right I think I’m passionate about environmental issues um. Probably yeah that’s probably my main my main interest.

L: Ok and do you remember kind of how you got in to that or if something if something influenced you um into that or why why the environment?

C: Um well it feels like I mean it feels pretty pressing right now um. Like uh it feels like people my age are like having to think about things that no one’s really had to think about before like I don’t know if I want to have kids because I don’t know if there’s going to be a planet in 70 years like um and to me that just is like it’s going to affect me and it’s going to affect people I know and I want to know more about it and I like I also love spending time outside, um that’s probably my main like hobby is to just be outdoors so that kind of I like care about I care about maintaining that.

L: Ok great, well thank you for sharing. Um I’ll move on to the next set of questions so just generally just to start off, I’m wondering what comes to mind when you hear the word feminism?

C: Um when I hear the word feminism I [pause 1.64] I mean, I think, I think of myself as a feminist. I I don’t know um like I don’t have any problems with the word. I know that some people have like uh negative connotations but um I think I was actually just listening to this podcast [laughter] called um Dolly Parton’s America

L: Ah okay, yeah

C: Have you heard of it?

L: um my my roommate actually was listening to it and she’s told me a bit about it

C: It’s really good, you should listen to it. But uum it’s like it I loved it and it’s really interesting and Dolly’s really interesting but at one point she said like oh I don’t like the word feminism because like I’m not anti-man and I was like wow it’s amazing that that’s what some people associate with the word feminism. But that’s not how I picture it at all. I um ya know I think I’m a feminist and I’m not anti-man, so [laughter] uh yeah

L: Great um, what, maybe just broadly still, what more can you tell me about feminism?

C: Um. I well I think of it as like I mean when I think back I kind of think like through the different waves of feminism um and like I’m grateful for the feminists before me um and yeah I think I think it’s really interesting because I think a lot of people identify as feminists but like act on that in different ways. Like I remember asking my dad when I was like 15 or something I was like ‘Dad would you self-identify as a feminist?’ And he was like ‘well it depends what you mean like if you if you mean like someone who believes in equality and stuff then definitely but if you mean someone who is like actively fighting for women’s rights then like I’m not, I’m not really actively like making a lot of change’ but like I don’t know, to me my dad seems like a feminist so I guess it depends on your [laughter] depends on your definition. But I feel like it can take a lot of forms. Like it’s not really I don’t know how I would like define a feminist

L: that was my next question [laughter] if you had to and you don’t have to but if you had to define it, how might you?

C: Um well I don’t know I I think that um in my mind I think it’s anyone who like fully believes in equality and like um people of all genders should have um should have like equal access to everything and equal-- but I I don’t know because I’m sure there are some people who believe in like believe women should have more rights in some areas of life and not others and they may identify as feminists and I feel like I’m not qualified to be like well you aren’t a feminist cause you don’t fight for this so, I don’t know if it’s truly definable [inaudible?]

L: mm ok no that’s great, thank you. Um I’m wondering uh what kind of key feminist issues can you tell me about [pause] either generally, or that are important to you.

C: Um I I care a lot of about women having um women being um like present in government um that’s really important. I also feel pretty passionate about women having um like access to abortions. Like when I think about, I mean here like in Canada that feels really normal but when I think about it in the world, it’s really not for women to just like have free and safe access to abortion and to me that’s like really scary. Um I don’t uuh I think pretty much like in all aspects of life it makes me pretty mad to think about women like not having… I feel like I’ve grown up pretty confident. I don’t feel like I’ve ever, I mean I think like all women like suffer kind of micro aggressions of you know misogyny but um I’ve never been like denied a specific opportunity because I’m a woman and um like I I’m in a good university, I feel like I have options and I’m just lucky to be born in Canada but I don’t know it makes me feel sad to think that that’s really not the case for a lot of people.

L: Ok great, thank you. Um I guess I’m gonna maybe dig a little bit deeper and you’ve kind of already touched on this so um it might kind of sound like a repeat question but um are you familiar with sort of differing viewpoints um within feminism either on specific issues or just kind of generally like schools of thought or strands within feminism

C: Yeah I mean I think that for like everyone it looks a little different. Um I there are like women I know who to me are like not at all feminist which fascinates me um I just just don’t get it [laughter] and like I don’t mean I don’t mean like even I don’t mean they aren’t radical feminists, I mean like they truly like think women are less than men and I’m like well you’re a woman in Canada like how are you um but yeah I don’t know I feel like I know kind of everyone I know who I think of as advocating for women’s rights like advocates in a different way and to a different degree so I don’t know if there are like specific schools of feminism or more of just kind of like an interlocking sliding scale type of variety.

L: why why would you say that is uh if I can just push a little further or ask you to expand a bit more why do you think kind of everyone might have a different opinion of perspective about feminism

C: Yeah I guess it’s like I would think it’s based on people’s personal experiences and like their education and people that have surrounded them that maybe they think of as feminist um just kind of yeah like what’s what’s shaped your personal experience um and how that kind of like molds what you care most about or what you don’t think is an issue

L: Okay great um you’ve already also mentioned um like waves of feminism um I’m just wondering if you can tell me a little bit more maybe um kind of what you know about the history of feminism um just in a bit more detail

C: yeah um I mean I definitely could know more [laughter] but when-- and I’m probably gonna get this wrong [laughter]

L: that’s okay [laughter]

C: but the first the first wave of feminism when I think about it is like women like uh fighting for the right to be able to vote and um like own property and have their own bank account um like women being recognized as people too um and then the second wave of feminism um was more uh was more uh like I uh I don’t even know [laughter] more like uh general general kind of equality instead of being yeah being recognized as equal like maybe not just the bare minimum eyes of like being able to vote and then now like the third wave of feminism um is more to me it’s like more based on kind of having the freedom to express your gender how you want and like still still pushing for equality because like even in Canada and England I don’t think we’re, you know, [laughter] there’s still progress to be made

L: Ok great. Um and what um maybe what feminist figures come to mind. If any

C: Um I definitely think of like the suffragettes and um and I think of like Marsha P Johnson and I think of like Rosa Parks like badass women [laughter] but then even like now when I think of people like I think of um like Alexandria Ocacio-Cortez and um and I think of like uh yeah yeah I guess .. I mean there are like a lot of powerful women [laughter]

L: can you tell me a little bit more about why I’ll just say AOC, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, why does she come to mind?

C: I just think she’s so I think she’s so cool [laughter] I think she’s like I have so much respect for her, I think she’s so like so smart and I think she like intimidates a lot of I think it must take so much energy to like um be like as strong as she is and she’s definitely like not I think she spends a lot of time like talking like working with old white men who probably like don’t want to hear like anything she has to say but I think that like doesn’t slow her down and she just she like stands up for what she cares about and like very effectively yeah

L: great. Um I’m wondering why do you think it is that why women aren’t, why have women been denied equality, why do you think if you kind of had to explain or not necessarily explain to someone but why do you think it is that um women and men aren’t or haven’t been equal?

C: Mmm. Um I feel like that’s a loaded question [laughter]

L: oh [laughter]

C: I mean not you know what I mean, uh like probably a lot of reasons but uh hm I mean I guess uh like historically women were um … kind of like I mean uh I don’t know [sirens] sorry

L: that’s okay. I was going to say actually I have quite um noisy neighbours so sorry if some music starts blasting or you might hear some yelling also so sorry in advance

C: I live in {city}, it’s hot right now so the windows are open. Um yeah I don’t know like I know that historically women have like not been the breadwinners and that like had to um the role has been to take care of kids and stay at home and like and that’s been kind of undervalued but I don’t know really why that would have been undervalued to begin with I mean like or women have been it seems kind of objectified since like literally [laughter] forever so that’s a lot to unlearn but I don’t know I don’t know why that um I mean there’s like the physical strength difference but I don’t think that’s enough to explain why women are so yeah why we aren’t equal or haven’t been

L: mm ok thank you, that’s interesting um I’m gonna kind of switch gears a little bit and I’m wondering how did you come to learn about feminism or hear about it if you can remember

C: hm um I think it I’ve always um I think I’ve been pretty lucky in the circles I’ve like my family is very much I I think in that same conversation with my dad he was like you know Cate for a lot of my life I thought that women were better than men and then I’ve come to realize that we’re actually just equal [laughter] um like neither of my parents are are sexist um and then yeah so I guess that probably like most friends and some of my family would identify as um as feminist but I don’t know but I don’t remember first hearing the word feminism or anything but um mean I I remember like yeah I don’t really remember how it came about, it’s just always kind of been a thing.

L: mm ok. And um what would you say has kind of influenced you the most in learning about or kind of developing a feminist opinion or viewpoint or identity

C: um. I think probably um I don’t think it’s been school necessarily. Like maybe maybe more like select teachers and kind of like their personal viewpoints um. But maybe like that combined with friends and family that that care about the issues but I don’t yeah I don’t know. I feel like I haven’t yeah I’d say not necessarily school. Just kind of general knowledge and learning about things on my own and from people that I trust or look up to

L: mm. how much would you say feminism was may taught or talked about in high school

C: um well. Honestly not a lot um. Yeah, I think I mean I don’t really remember like any specific uh specific education about feminism I just kind of think of like female teachers I had that definitely like I don’t I don’t even know if they directly talked about feminism but just kind of in existing and being like strong female role models and really clearly believing in equality just kind of in the way they existed was probably the yeah. But I definitely I mean I don’t think the like staff at {high school} was like I don’t know I think some of them were great, some of them were less great [laughter], I guess that’s always how it goes.

L: um do you have any maybe kind of memorable examples of kind of maybe these teachers that you said it wasn’t necessarily something they said but kind of the way they were, do you have any kind of specific examples you could share. Anything that sticks out?

C: Um. I hmm I don’t think so, like I think it was just um yeah I really don’t think so I think it was really just like teachers who I think I didn’t have any male teachers who I would go oh yeah they’re definitely feminist um but and but a few of my female teachers. Yeah nothing specific. I think just probably kind of the way they like acted probably was helpful in-- cause I’m sure that like not everybody knows a lot about feminism or like why equality is important or I’m sure that there are a lot of students that didn’t fully believe in equality but even like when I think of my math teacher in grade 12 I think she was great because she she just kind of like broke the stereotype like she was really really smart and had done like her master’s in math at UBC like while raising two kids and she would like stay up all night to do her math and she was just like really really bright and she also like I think she probably broke a lot of people’s stereotypes of what a math teacher is. {Iformation about teacher redacted} she wore like these tiny little dresses and had like big tight boobs and like stilettos and drove a sports car and I think but she was like this um total math whiz and I think that was probably like a good thing for people to see {information about teacher redacted}

L: that’s a great uh figure I think in a high school. Um I’m just wondering so it sounds like you didn’t really learn about feminism in a class specifically. Would you have wanted that experience to be different?

C: um yeah I mean it definitely could have been incorporated I think more into like social studies class and like it’s a little weird that I don’t ever really remember learning about the history of feminism. It’s possible that that’s just me not remember but that does seem kind of a weird important thing to just um I I also feel like I yeah my circles like I say were already pretty supportive but I’m sure there were people who like really could have benefitted from more education about it

L: mm okay great. Um are there any kind of maybe memorable conversations you’ve had about feminism or kind a topic addressed through feminism with friends or family that comes to mind

C: Um like about like anything in general about feminism?

L: could be like a particular issue maybe around abortion or something else that you’ve mentioned or something different or um maybe like uh an event where you talked about maybe with like a feminist lens or something… anything come to mind?

C: yeah well what comes to mind is or one thing that comes to mind is when I first moved to {city} for the first like 5 months I was here I was living in my aunt and uncle’s basement and they they’re like. This is my mom’s sister and her husband and it was very interesting to live with them because my mom’s sister is like 25 years older than her um or 20 some somewhere around there yeah and they were like they it’s just like thank God it’s like an extremely different environment from the one I grew up in like my aunt is definitely someone who I who is a woman who I don’t think is a feminist and I think that both her and my uncle are sort of like racist and homophobic and sexist and it was like really interesting to see. But I remember sitting it was like Thanksgiving dinner and um I think the MeToo thing was really prevalent at the time um and it was my aunt and uncle and their son and me sitting around the table and they started talking about like um sexual assault and like my uncle is like a retired like corporate lawyer and they started talking about like when like when we should believe women about sexual assault and it was just like I was sitting there and I wasn’t really saying anything and it was like my uncle and their son who’s like 30 just like basically just dialogue between them and then my aunt would chime in every once in a while not with a feminist lens like yeah you can’t like always believe women like it’s just their word and like and I I didn’t really-- I was like I need to just I just got up without saying anything and like left, I just really don’t want to be here. I remember another you know Jian Gomeshi?

L: yeeah… [laughter] I used to love listening to Q, that was such a shame

C: I remember like having a conversation about that with my aunt and I remember her saying like these women with with like what they were in to, like they were kind of asking for it like if you’re going to have if you’re going to do be in to that kind of thing anyway [laugher] um so those are probably they’re definitely some of like in the past couple of years a couple of frustrating or just like to me like I just can’t believe you’re saying this um but I’ve also had I’ve also had like conversations with I’ve had like the opposite I kind of think that in in high school when I was living in {city} in terms of like male role models in my life um I I really I think I feel very respected by my dad and like my dad’s friends but I just like really just like strongly disliked all of the boys at my high school and just didn’t interact with any of them and then I moved to {city} and I’ve never really had male friends before and then I started like meeting people like my age or just a few years older in my age range who are guys and they were like respectful and intelligent and really good listeners and I was like wow they’re out here um but I do feel like I have some really close male friends who um I’ve just had some good conversations about feminism with them and they’re just really good listeners and um yeah definitely wouldn’t be monopolizing a dinner table conversation about when to believe women [laughter]

L: [laughter] that’s a really interesting story. I guess to maybe just have you spell it out a little bit more although I think I understand what you’re saying but um just maybe like why some of the guys at {high school} um you didn’t particularly like or wanted to get to know maybe, like what kind of about them do you think it was

L: yeah I mean I think it’s a pretty toxic, it’s a pretty weird environment like at high school like especially such a big high school with like low expectations of people. I remember about the beginning of our senior year we had like a grade assembly and the principal got up in front of us and he was like okay this year he wasn’t being at all sarcastic he was like this year our main goal is attendance we just want you to show up [laughter]

L: really

C: and I just feel that kind of sums up my high school education. But I don’t think, I mean I think like if boys didn’t come from households where there was sort of feminist presence I don’t think um I don’t think {high school} was going to solve that but yeah I don’t know like when I think of boys from my high school I don’t think of like I never had any overtly the people were just boys especially were just kind of like rude and obnoxious and like took up a lot of space.

L: mm. you used the word toxic. Can you kind of just explain a little but what you mean by that

C: I mean I think it was just like not not an ideal environment for growth. Like I think I was I think I’m pretty well-suited to the school system and I think I’m lucky for that like it’s not hard for me I don’t mind just like like I think I fit in um but I think a lot of people don’t um and when you have a lot of people who are somewhere where they would just absolutely would rather be anywhere else but there um they aren’t really learning anything they’re just wasting everyone’s time I think that easily becomes toxic.

L: mm ok. You’ve already brought this up but I wanted to talk about the MeToo movement um and so I’m just wondering maybe to start, what you can tell me about the movement

C: um well I don’t act- I don’t remember who started it um but I know that it was just kind of to bring awareness um that like almost all women have had like negative experiences to varying degrees um like involving sexism or assault or um and I think that some people knew that but I think that the movement was probably or is probably important for people who just don’t realize who are just ignorant to how prevalent um like sexism and assault still are. Yeah I don’t know like who um you probably know, who started the movement?

L: um so it actually kind of began in 2006 um with a woman called Tarana Burke and is from the States and working with a grassroots organization and it broke out kind of on a wide scale in 2017 when the actress Alyssa Milano um kind of posted sort of like to any woman who has kind of experienced um you know harassment or assault, please write MeToo and then it kind of like exploded um so yeah there’s sort of I think the media thinks it kind of happened overnight but actually it was sort of a longer process but also I think social media in 2006 was kind of not as big as it was in 2017. Um I’m wondering, I think you would have been about 16 or 17 when it broke out on a wider scale do you kind of remember that happening. You’ve already mentioned this conversation you had with your uncle and cousin in {city} but do you kind of remember what that was like when it broke out

C: um I mean I remember yeah I remember it being like I remember it being very prevalent um. I don’t think, like I support the movement, I don’t think it like necessarily like swayed or influenced me a lot because I feel like I already like I’m not surprised that that many women have yeah like I I don’t I wasn’t like it wasn’t earth shattering for me.

L: mm ok. And I haven’t totally done the math, I don’t know if you would have been in high school or university at the time, do you remember?

C: um I think I was in high school. What year was this?

L: uh October 2017

C: yeah I was in high school

L: right because you graduated in 2018. Um do you remember if, was it kind of talked about in high school at all?

C: uh if it was like I don’t remember so not extensively um. Or if it was it would have been like really [noise] uh like really informally just by a teacher like yeah [noise]

L: [noise] and why, why do you think that was? Like why maybe teachers weren’t kind of keen to talk about it

C: I don’t know um. I don’t know if they didn’t know how to address it or. Um. Or if they were like yeah I’m not sure um, or if they were kind of afrai—I don’t know if they I don’t know if there would have been any like fear of kind of sensitive subject to bring u—like I don’t I don’t know.

L: mm and would you have liked to have someone address or do you think it was appropriate not to?

C: I think it would have been good to, like I think it’s pretty weird when like current day events aren’t, like how can you have like a social class and start the class not and like completely ignore all the current events, it feels pretty weird. Like most of my classes in university when like when there’s I took a class last semester about global environmental politics and like every single day opened with this week in global environmental politics and like I took a class like intro to politics in the developing world last year and um it like whenever there was whenever there was I mean obviously there are always like important things happening [laughter] but um definitely like our prof would address things like he would change the syllab- like I had that class when there was the Christchurch and he like scrapped a lecture to talk about that. I think that would have also been beneficial in high school to also focus on more currently what’s happening

L: mm. um I’m wondering if in high school you talked about I’m not really sure what sex ed looks like now in high school but if they might have talked about like healthy relationships or consent or any of those kinds of topics

C: well um I think the like my I think how the received sex ed was actually really interesting um like in all throughout well I think starting in like grade 4 or 5 we had this woman come in for probably like 3 one hour sessions um and she was really great but I still just think it’s funny that it was 3 one hour sessions a year [laughter] uh I mean I think my parents were pretty open talking about things and I don’t think I ever really like learnt a lot from her like I think by the time she was telling us things I’d already heard it from my parents um but that continued from like grade 4 or 5 to grade 7, and then high school started in grade 8 and I think that went down to one or two one hour sessions um for like grade 8 and 9 and then grade 10 we like might have had an hour and I remember at the end of like the hour in grade 10 her like pleading her being like you know you guys have the right to more of this and they’re cutting the funding and if you want me to come back like talk to your principal about it. I think in grade 11 we like might have had an hour and then in grade 12 there was definitely nothing so it um it was pretty minimal [laughter]

L: I thought it was improving but it kind of sounds like my um my experience. We had um an exercise where everyone was given a cup and then you like mixed fluids with people’s cups and then at the end they saw like “who had the STI” but like putting colouring in people’s cups like that’s the only thing I remember really stood out the very risk they’re pushing the risk angle

C: uuuh yeah yeah I think it’s a little scary um and I also think that like I mean I’m not saying I feel like there should be sex ed from like kindergarten to grade 12 and it should be more than 1-3 hours a year but um like I don’t know in grade 4 you’re like teaching people to like wear deodorant but in grade 11 and 12 people are starting to have sex it seems like more it seems pretty relevant but yeah.

L: yeah. Um following from our conversation about feminism I’m just wondering if any other hashtags or movements other than MeToo come to mind,

C: uum. Not like specifically. Um. Yeah. I mean. No. Not really. Not like. Obviously people are continually talking about it online but I can’t think of specific hashtags.

L: um ok. Um what do you think about um activism on social media?

C: um. I think it’s like a good way to spread um like I think it’s currently probably pretty effective like I don’t read the newspaper, like I follow I follow news sources that I trust on Instagram. Like follow. Like I follow newspaper’s Instagram accounts and I follow articles from there. I think like everyone’s on social media I mean especially like my age but for people who aren’t like seeking out to be informed I think you’re like spending time on social media. I mean there’s also obviously it’s like not all reliable but um I think it’s like people are yeah it’s a good way to get like resources out to people who aren’t like actively seeking out the news

L: sorry the last thing you said I didn’t quite catch

C: oh I think it’s just a good way to like like people will people who it’s a good way for people to see things for people who aren’t like actively doing their own research to know what’s happening in the world

L: mm ok. And then I have it might be a difficult question to end but I’m wondering um how do you think gender equality might be achieved? Or do you think it’s been achieved already [laughter] but maybe premised from our conversation that it sounds like it hasn’t um how do you think it will be achieved?

C: um yeah I don’t think it’s been achieved I mean I think there’s been a lot of progress but uh. I don’t know I don’t think there’ll be like one way I think it will be kind of a mix of a lot of people’s continued effort and maybe maybe like improved education will need to happen um yeah I don’t know I think it I think it’s gonna need like a lot of people’s effort from a lot of different um going to need to be intersectional um I don’t I don’t know if there’s one way to achieve, a quick easy fix for gender equality [laughter]

L: [laughter] can I get you sorry to just kind of expand on what you mean by you said by improve education kind of specifically what you mean by that and also what you mean by intersectional [laughter]

C: Um I think that education maybe yeah I don’t know maybe part of it is like teaching more about both history and current events of like gender issues like in high school um maybe there should be mandatory like mandatory courses on um like gender issues in high school and university. I mean it was interesting this year at {university} the first the first year they like made an online consent course mandatory and I think it was kind- [laughter] for me it was kind of a waste of time, but I’m happy they did it

L: [laughter] okay. Like it was something?

C: it was something yeah. Like maybe they taught someone something. Like better than nothing um so yeah I don’t know, maybe it’s about making it mandatory but then obviously not everyone goes to university so maybe it’s more important that it happens in high school. And by intersectional I guess I mean that like I think that women still there’s still inequality in many like many different professions um like sexism looks different in different countries. Even like within different like regions of different countries, it like varies with religion and class and all you know everything um. And I think it’s important that it’s both men and women working towards equality. Um yeah.

L: great, thank you. That’s it from me. I’m just wondering if there’s anything you want to add generally or anything you want to revisit or anything at all before we close

C: I don’t think so.

[52:32’]

L: ok great, well thank you so much….

Debrief & concluding remarks

Cate is a pseudonym

Redactions indicated in {} to protect participant’s anonymity