



# Understanding Feminist Activism among Women: Resources, Consciousness, and Social Networks

Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World  
 Volume 3: 1–9  
 © The Author(s) 2017  
 Reprints and permissions:  
[sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav)  
 DOI: 10.1177/2378023117734081  
[srd.sagepub.com](http://srd.sagepub.com)  
 SAGE

Eric Swank<sup>1</sup> and Breanne Fahs<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study examines whether women's feminist activism is connected to three key factors: sufficient educational and financial resources, the internalization of a feminist consciousness, and being involved in feminist mobilization structures. Analysis of the 2012 American National Election Survey (N = 1,876) suggests that participation and engagement in the women's movement is least common among less educated women and stay-at-home mothers. Feminist activism is also grounded in the perceptions of systematic forms of oppression, an emotional bond to feminists, and being embedded in political or women-centered organizations. There was also little evidence that involvement in the women's movement is shaped by women's age, marital status, income level, sexual identity, or race.

## Keywords

activism, feminism, political participation, race, sexual identity, social movements, women's movement

Feminists challenge sexism through many means, particularly as they confront exploitation, harassment, and objectification in numerous spheres of their lives: work, home, family, and public settings (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). While some of these resistances and challenges to patriarchy occur in more subtle or individual ways (e.g., servers spitting in the food of rude or sexist patrons; mocking chauvinistic men behind their backs), collective resistance is also one avenue available for feminist-identified women to challenge existing power structures and norms. Specifically, women and their allies sometimes create massive feminist movements that collectively challenge the structural sources of male privilege. This study addresses the reasons as to why some women do and do not join these collective challenges to institutionalized forms of male privilege and patriarchy.

The intensity, scope, and tactics of feminist mobilizations change over time (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Scholars have used the wave metaphor for the different peaks of feminist mobilizations; recently, the election of Donald Trump instigated a new round of widespread and highly visible feminist protests in 2017 (i.e., Chenoweth and Pressman [2017] estimated that over 4 million people attended 653 feminist rallies in the first month of Trump's presidency). While the waves of feminist social movements have produced partial or uneven effects on gender practices in the private and public

spheres (England 2010), feminist social movements have nevertheless ushered in some major changes in legislation, social norms, and perceptions of proper gender roles (Ferree et al. 2002; McCammon et al. 2011; Soule et al. 1999).

Social movements need participants to grow and sustain themselves. During the ebbs and flows of protest cycles, movement organizers constantly face the challenge of recruiting and keeping new adherents. Social scientists have tried to identify and understand the reasons as to why some people decide to join feminist social movements, particularly as they ask why some people become activists and some do not. Studies have revealed connections between feminist activism and exposure to gender biases in families, schools, and work (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Liss, Crawford, and Popp 2004). Other studies have also added that witnessing gender injustices firsthand (Nelson et al. 2008; Yoder, Tobias, and Snell 2011) and knowing feminist friends or acquaintances precede feminist challenges to sexist practices (Stake 2007).

<sup>1</sup>Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Eric Swank, Social and Cultural Analysis, Arizona State University,  
 4711 Thunderbird Avenue, Glendale, AZ, USA.  
 Email: [Eric.swank@asu.edu](mailto:Eric.swank@asu.edu)



Although the quantitative literature on gender roles is sizeable and well established (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Carter and Borch 2005; McCabe 2005), sociological understandings of the predictors of feminist activism remains incomplete, disjointed, and to some degree, outdated. Most sociological studies on gender ideologies use data from the 1970s to the 1990s (Kane 1995; Moore and Vanneman 2003; Peltola, Milkie, and Presser 2004), while three studies by sociologists have explored feminist ideologies with data collected in the past decade (Grollman 2017; Harnois 2015; M. Kelly and Gauchat 2016). While this previous research provides great insights into a person's perception of gender relations, there is a crucial difference between being a feminist activist and having feminist beliefs, and the predictors of feminist thoughts and feminist actions are not always the same. Newer studies on feminist activism often appear in psychological journals and depend on nonrandom samples of college students (Ayres, Friedman, and Leaper 2009; Cassese and Holman 2016; Kaysen and Stake 2001; Liss et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2008; Stake 2007; Yoder et al. 2011).

This study updates our understanding of feminist activism by analyzing a national random sample from 2012. With this newer and more representative sample, we can see if the antecedents of earlier feminist activism—as well as the insights from sociological, psychological, and political science literatures—still apply to current conditions. Moreover, we can address some of the earlier debates and contradictory results related to the relevance of certain demographic predictors of women who join feminist social movements. Accordingly, this research is driven by three research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What proportion of adult women have ever joined the women's movement?

*Research Question 2:* What are the contextual and social psychological antecedents to this feminist activism?

*Research Question 3:* Are demographic factors such as educational attainment, labor force participation, and marital status connected to involvement in political mobilizations for gender justice?

## Literature Review

Variable selection in this study was partially guided by the resource and political consciousness models of political participation (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995; Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980). Offering a succinct answer as to why people remain politically disengaged, the resource model asserts: "because they can't, because they don't want to, or because nobody asked" (Brady et al. 1995:271). The notion of "they can't" suggests a dearth of necessary resources to be political. While crucial resources may come in many forms, these authors emphasize the importance of financial situations, educational attainment, free time, and civic skills. The claim of "they don't want to" deals with a lack of psychological engagement in politics. This indifference to politics is

sometimes seen as political ignorance, but the resource model assumes that lack of participation is more of a reaction to an acceptance of the status quo, a lower sense of political efficacy, and greater levels of individualism. The "nobody asked" idea implies that political bystanders are isolated from the recruitment networks that mobilize citizens into action. Thus, the transformation of feminist sympathizers into feminist activists probably includes a unique mix of material resources as well as specific cognitive and structural conditions (Schussman and Soule 2005; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Ward 2016).

### "They Can't": Income, Educational Attainment, and Workplace Participation

The resource model assumes that educational attainment and higher incomes lead to greater political engagement (Brady et al. 1995). College can be an incubator of feminist commitments because higher education offers women greater occupational opportunities and provides access to a classes that debunk gender myths (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Kane 1995). Consequently, educational attainment among women often leads to firmer feminist beliefs and identities (Carter and Borch 2005; Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011; McCabe 2005; Moore and Vanneman 2003; Peltola et al. 2004) as well as a tendency to vote for feminist political candidates, attend feminist rallies, and speak out against sexist practices (Cassese and Holman 2016; Duncan and Stewart 2007; Nelson et al. 2008; Stake 2007).

The resource model contends that feminist activism is also related to pay differentiation within and between the genders (Scholzman et al. 1994). Similar to the "biographical availability" concept of Doug McAdam (1986), this model assumes that wealthier individuals have less constraints on their political activism than people with lower incomes (enough money to attend protests, more free time, greater flexibility in workplace schedules, etc.). Supportive evidence for this claim for feminist activism is ambiguous and far from conclusive. Some studies suggest that women with greater personal and family incomes are more supportive of feminist causes than women from poorer backgrounds (Carter and Borch 2005; Cassese and Holman 2016; Harnois, 2015; Moore and Vanneman 2003; Peltola et al. 2004), but other studies suggest that class differences fail to predict feminist activism among women (Duncan and Stewart 2007; Kaysen and Stake 2001).

Women's work experiences can also be related to feminist tendencies. Traditionally, in conservative subcultures of the United States, women have been advised to marry relatively young, raise multiple children, and forego the paid workforce in favor of staying at home. Several studies have shown that stay-at-home moms, as compared to women in the paid labor force, often endorse more conservative attitudes on abortion, premarital sex, and the division of labor in the family (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Hamilton et al. 2011;

Kaysen and Stake 2001; Moore and Vanneman 2003). The reasons for this relationship are complicated and multifaceted, but having a paid job (1) exposes women to workforce gender biases that stay-at-home motherhood obscures, (2) raises the expectations of economic independence for women, (3) dispels stereotypes about women being unable to handle tough tasks, and (4) accentuates an awareness of “second shift” inequalities around household chores, child care, and emotional labor (Davis and Greenstein 2009).

*“They Don’t Want to”: Framing Grievances through a Feminist Consciousness.* Gender hierarchies are maintained when men and women embrace traditional gender roles as being proper, normal, and inevitable. Whether through the existence of low paying pink-collar jobs, sexual violence, or disgust over menstruation, feminists contest traditional gender scripts that demean women and prioritize men’s desires over women’s needs (Duncan and Stewart 2007; C. Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; Stake 2007). A feminist consciousness, as conceptualized by Gurin et al. (1980), functions as the ideas that lead to collective gender rebellions. A feminist consciousness, which identifies perceived oppressors and vehicles of social change, has four interrelated beliefs: (1) common fate, or the notion that what happens to women is universal and relevant to every women’s life; (2) power discontent, or the idea that women lack power and influence in society; (3) system blame, or the understanding that women’s lack of power is unjust and caused by systemic forces; and (4) collective orientation, or the awareness that the best way to challenge sexism is through working as a large group.

*Common Fate, Collective Orientations, and Feminist Identities.* Issues of women’s solidarity with each other are often connected to feminist activism. The recognition of shared circumstances among women, plus an admiration of feminists, seems to guide much feminist activism (Cassese and Holman 2016; Duncan and Stewart 2007; Liss et al. 2004; McCabe 2005; Yoder et al. 2011). Notably, personal commitments to ending social injustice and the internalization of a feminist label also seem to be better predictors of feminist activism than simply rejecting traditional gender expectations (Ayres et al. 2009; Duncan and Stewart 2007; C. Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; Liss et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2008; Yoder et al. 2011).

*Perceptions of Gender Injustice and System Blame.* Feminist activism often requires the rejection of traditional gender expectations (Nelson et al., 2008) and the recognition of institutionalized sexism (Cassese and Holman 2016; Duncan and Stewart 2007; C. Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; Stake 2007). Some studies suggest that feminist identities develop when women see sexism in “the way society is set up” (McCabe 2005). Others studies contend that feminist activism occurs when women fear that “relationships with men stunt my growth” or after encountering unwanted sexual

attention, sexist comments, and unfair treatment (Ayres et al. 2009; Liss et al. 2004).

*Power Discontent and Perceptions of Feminist Power.* Feminist grievances might originate from a social order that devalues female input and undermines female autonomy and self-determination. Surveys suggest that feminists, compared to non-feminists, often worry that men control important decision-making processes (Kane 1995) and women increasingly join feminist mobilizations when the women’s movement seems to counteract male power advantages (Duncan and Stewart 2007). Conversely, one study suggests that a calculation of collective efficacy is irrelevant to feminist activism (C. Kelly and Breinlinger 1995).

*“Nobody Asked”: Social Networks and Mobilizing Structures.* Feminist social movements depend on established networks and organizations to create, recruit, and retain potential activists (mobilizing structures). Many sorts of contextual and institutional social ties can make people willing and able to engage in feminist activism. Accordingly, being exposed to feminist ideas, either through interactions with feminist friends or family members, may directly increase participation in feminist activism (Friedman and Leaper 2010; Liss et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2008). Membership in any sort of liberal political organization can foster political engagement among women (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Heaney and Rojas 2014; Minkoff 2016), while participating in explicitly feminist organizations can have even bigger effects (Passy and Giugni 2001; Taylor 1989).

*Control Variables.* Beyond resources, political frames, and mobilizing structures, there are many background characteristics thought to influence feminist activism. Some studies contend that black and Latina women are more supportive of feminist goals than women of other races (Carter and Borch 2005; Harnois 2015) and that white women are less likely than women of color to identify as feminist (Peltola et al. 2004). Some studies suggest that lesbian women are more feminist than heterosexual women (Friedman and Leaper 2010; Grollman 2017), but other studies found no such relationship (Harnois 2015; Swank and Fahs 2017).

Marital status, age, and place of residency can also influence feminist inclinations. Married women often endorse traditional gender prescriptions more than divorced or never married women (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Fahs 2007; Harnois 2015; McCabe 2005; Moore and Vanneman 2003). Life course studies occasionally find that young adult women are slightly more liberal in their gender attitudes than older women (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Carter and Borch 2005; Moore and Vanneman 2003), but older cohorts of women born in the “baby boom” might support feminist political leanings more than women born in different cohorts (Harnois 2015; Peltola et al. 2004). Finally, gender role attitudes can be place bound. Women living in urban

metropolitan areas and Western states express more liberal gender scripts than women from other locales (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Carter and Borch 2005; McCabe 2005).

**Sample.** This women only sample comes from the Time Series Study of the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES). Our data are restricted to the post-election web version of 2012 because only this version of ANES had measures of feminist political engagement (N = 1,876). The web version of ANES drew on Knowledge Networks for respondents. Knowledge Networks (KN) created and maintains a panel of people who have previously agreed to complete online surveys. When building a list of 40,000 U.S. households, KN recruited people through random-digit dialing and address-based approaches. Although issues of race, gender, and education selection biases are found in KN samples, their selection biases are on par with random telephone surveys (Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014).

## Methods

### Measures

**Collective feminist activism.** While the ways that women can join or participate in feminist social movements is limitless, ANES had a single item that asked if people “were active” in the “women’s rights movement.” This item traces lifetime participation, and it did not address the ways or the frequency in which a person participated in this movement (lifetime participation = 1, no participation = 0).

**Resource variables.** Three resource variables are in this analysis: education level, household income, and participation in the paid workforce. Educational attainment dealt with the highest level of schooling completed. Responses of less than a first grade to doctoral degree were collapsed into seven categories (high school degree or less = 1 to PhD or professional degrees = 7). Responses to the question “What is your current household income?” fell into 28 intervals that started with less than \$5,000 a year and ended with more than \$175,000 annually. Current work status focused on the gendered notion of a stay-at-home caretaker. Respondents were considered a homemaker if they mentioned that term when responding to “What is your main occupation?” (homemaker = 1, other = 0).

**Political frames and a feminist consciousness.** Gurin et al.’s (1980) formulation of a feminist consciousness was handled through four variables (common fate with women, power discontent with the media, recognition of sexism, and warmth toward feminists). A common fate with women concentrated on the salience of gender in daily interactions: “How much of life is affected by what happens to women?” (a lot = 1, some and not very much = 0). Power discontent, or a sense that men control institutionalized norms, explored the ways that media overlooks gender biases. In response to the statement “the media should pay more attention to discrimination against

women,” strong feminist responses of a “great deal more” were assigned 7 while nonfeminist responses of a “great deal less” were coded with a 1. System blaming dealt with the recognition of widespread sexism against women. In response to the question “How serious a problem is discrimination against women in the United States?,” scores ranged from 5 if they indicated discrimination is an “extremely serious problem” and 1 if they thought discrimination was “not a problem at all.” Elements of a collective orientation were handled through the impression of women who struggle against sexism. In using the ANES Feeling thermometer, respondents were asked to rank their feeling toward feminists through a 101-point rating scale where 0 indicates very cold reactions and 100 denotes very warm and favorable sentiments.

**Mobilizing structures.** Mobilizing structures were operationalized through three variables (membership in women’s groups, membership in political groups, and contact with political parties). Some researchers argued that women only spaces can generate interest in feminist activism (Taylor 1989), so respondents were asked if they have been active in a “women’s group” (yes = 1, no = 0). Belonging to explicitly political organizations was tracked through being a member in an “issue-oriented political group” (yes = 1, no = 0). A measure of joining explicitly feminist groups or organizations would have been better than what ANES offers, but research nevertheless suggests that simply joining any sort of liberal political group increased the likelihood of women joining protest movements (Heaney and Rojas 2014; Minkoff 2016). Exposure to political social networks was handled through direct appeals from political parties or election candidates. In creating a five-item scale, people indicated if a political candidate or political contacted them via face-to-face conversations, snail mail, email, telephone calls, or social media (the additive scale ranged from 0 to 5 for each yes or no answer,  $\alpha = .74$ ).

**Control variables.** Dummy variables were constructed for a person’s race and sexual identities as well as their marital status and place of residency. The race measure emphasized being white as compared to a person of color (white = 1, other races = 0). When addressing sexual identities, the three categories of heterosexual, bisexual, and gay or lesbian were transformed into one dichotomous variable (heterosexual = 1, other = 0). An open-ended question asked people: “What is your age?” (responses were coded in yearly intervals). People who currently resided in one of the U.S. 374 metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) were deemed urban (urban = 1, other = 0). Regional differences among respondents was tracked through a 4-point regional division devised by the U.S. census. Pacific and Southern residencies were entered into the regressions because they were significantly different in descriptive statistics (Pacific = 1, other = 0; Southern = 1, other = 0). The Pacific division consists of 5 states of along the Pacific Ocean (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington), and the Southern region has 15 states that ranged from the South Atlantic states of Maryland to Florida

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Differences in Women's Movement Participation.

	Range	Mean	SD	Women's Movement		
				Yes	No	F Ratio
Women's movement	0–1	.03				
Resources						
Education	1–7	4.91	1.28	5.71	4.89	24.20***
Family income	1–28	12.55	9.40	14.63	12.48	3.30
Homemaker	0–1	.15		.03	.16	6.74***
Feminist consciousness						
Common fate with women	0–1	.19		.36	.18	12.48***
Power discontent with the media	1–7	4.71	1.49	5.86	4.67	37.57***
Recognition of sexism	0–5	2.85	.87	3.58	2.82	44.90***
Warmth toward feminists	1–100	46.84	28.78	72.17	46.01	49.20***
Mobilizing structures						
Women's group	0–1	.11		.31	.11	23.63***
Political group	0–1	.02		.25	.01	154.24***
Political party contacts	0–5	1.18	1.37	2.41	1.14	51.19***
Controls						
Age	18–88	51.34	16.33	53.72	51.70	1.31
White	0–1	.67		.68	.67	.09
Married	0–1	.51		.48	.51	.26
Heterosexual	0–1	.96		.93	.97	2.64
Urban residency	0–1	.85		.90	.85	1.09
Pacific residency	0–1	.14		.27	.14	8.66*
South residency	0–1	.37		.24	.37	4.08*

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

and the Western Southern states of Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

### Analytical Plan

Associations were identified through several statistical procedures. One-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) looked for significant bivariate differences between people who were involved in feminist movements and those who were not. We then turned to binary logistic regressions to assess the direct relationship of feminist activism to the resources, feminist consciousness, and mobilization factors when holding the other factors constant. Logistic regressions and the odd ratios they generate are well suited at analyzing dichotomous dependent variables, and they are not confined by many of the strict requirements other sorts of regressions (e.g., a normal distribution in the dependent variable or no problems of homoscedasticity). Missing data were handled through a listwise deletion that dropped cases that lacked an observation for each variable.

## Results

### Descriptive Findings

Table 1 suggests that female participation in the women's movement was very rare. Throughout their entire lifetime,

only 60 women, or 3.2 percent of the sample, have done something in the women's movement. With such a low number, one can assume that participants probably limited their understanding of women's movement participation to some sort of a public challenge to sexism, such as a "take-back-the-night" march or a pro-choice rally in a major city. It also suggests that participants probably did not consider individual actions like keeping their last name during marriage, arguing against sexist comments or jokes, going into male-dominated professions, or demanding a fairer division of household labor as being aspects of women's movement participation (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005).

In a simple bivariate analysis, most of the independent variables were associated with involvement in the women's movement. Greater educational attainment increased women's movement participation, and being married had an opposite effect (education increased feminist activism while being married decreased feminist tendencies). All of the feminist consciousness items were connected to women's movement participation. Emotional affinity toward feminists had the biggest difference between feminist activists and their counterparts, but the recognition of systematic forms of sexism, discontent with media coverage of gender inequalities, and sense of common fate-solidarity with women also differentiated the activists from the nonactivists. Integration into mobilizing structures also saw sizeable differences in feminist activism tendencies. Most remarkably, one-fourth

**Table 2.** Binary Logistic Regressions for Women's Movement Participation and Resource, Mobilization, and Consciousness Factors.

	Resources		Resources and Consciousness		Full Model	
	Odds	SE	Odds	SE	Odds	SE
Education	1.66***	.12	1.52**	.12	1.33*	.13
Family income	1.00	.01	1.01	.01	.99	.01
Homemaker	.24*	.71	.29	.74	.31	.75
Common fate with women			.94	.32	.63	.36
Power discontent with the media			1.37*	.12	1.40*	.14
Recognition of sexism			1.60*	.19	1.60*	.20
Warmth toward feminists			1.30**	.00	1.24**	.00
Women's group					2.24*	.37
Political group					9.91***	.45
Political party contacts					1.42*	.01
Age	1.01	.00	1.00	.01	.98	.01
White	.74	.30	.95	.31	.89	.33
Currently married	.93	.29	1.00	.31	1.08	.32
Heterosexual	.46	.56	1.13	.60	1.27	.72
Urban residency	1.28	.44	1.12	.45	1.41	.50
Pacific residency	1.76*	.32	2.15*	.34	2.35*	.37
South residency	.62	.33	.70	.34	.83	.33
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		.09		.24		.34
Full-model chi <sup>2</sup>		44.16***		114.79***		162.28***
Block chi <sup>2</sup>				70.63***		47.49***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

of all women who have joined the women's movement had also been a part of a political organization, while less than one in a hundred nonactivists were part of a political group of any kind. Joining a women's group, being contacted by elected officials or political parties, and living in Southern or Pacific West states were connected to women's movement participation. The variables of greater family income, age, or being white, lesbian, or married were not significantly connected to a tendency to join the women's movement.

### Explanatory Findings

Our regressions were run in a hierarchal fashion that entered the resource and control variables in the first step, followed by an integration of feminist consciousness variables, and ended with the addition of the mobilizing factors (see Table 2).

The block of resource factors displayed significant direct links between educational attainment, being out of the paid workforce, and joining the women's movement. Advancing through higher education was connected to an increase in feminist political engagement while women being a homemaker had an inverse relationship. Family income and all but one of the control factors did not offer significant associations with movement engagement (the one exception was that a Pacific residency increases feminist engagement).

The second set of regressions estimated the relationships of resource and feminist consciousness factors to women's movement participation. Net of the resource and control variables in the model, three of the feminist consciousness variables were significantly connected to women's movement participation. Being aware and upset about gender biases in the media and elsewhere plus respecting feminists who challenge those biases were central to feminist activism regardless of women's education, employment status, age, race, or location of residency. Education level remained a significant factor when considering the role of having a feminist consciousness, but a homemaker status did not. The notion of a common fate among women did not offer a direct link to women's movement participation. Because this factor was significant in the bivariate calculations, one can assume that seeing similarities among women leads to greater feminist activism when women also reject male privilege and admire feminists who contest male privilege.

The final regression entered the mobilizing factors into the full model. Membership in any sort of a political group increased movement participation by almost 10 times that of women who refrain from such activities. Belonging to women's groups and being contacted by political parties also significantly increased the likelihood of being in the women's movement. Thus, being in politicized or women-only social groups increased feminist activism regardless of how women

evaluated current gender arrangements. Conversely, educational attainment, critiques of sexist media coverage, the recognition of widespread sexism, and affinity to feminists also displayed significant odds. This suggests that access to college, rejecting male privileges, and valuing feminists all can move women into feminist activism even if they do or do not belong to politicized social networks.

## Discussion

The study of feminist activism, once central to feminist sociology, has received little quantitative analysis in the past two decades. This study explored feminist political engagement in a national random sample of women in 2012. In the literature review, we proposed three general sources of feminist activism: one based on resources and two others based on internalizing feminist ideas and exposure to politicized social networks. While we discovered that women rarely joined the women's movement overall (3 percent of women in a lifetime), the study also reveals that such activism is guided by a combination of resource, consciousness, and mobilization factors.

Only one of the resource factors—educational attainment—drove feminist activism throughout all of the regressions. With greater educational attainment being significant in the full model, academic achievement seems to link up with feminist activism regardless of how schooling influences women's economic status, their attitudes about gender inequalities, and their access to political groups. Thus, educational opportunities seem to inherently inspire feminist activism beyond the ways in which a school's curriculum can liberalize their gender sentiments and grant them access to more feminist organizations and allies.

The rest of the resource variables had conditional and inconsistent results. Family income never predicted participation in the women's movement, but being a stay-at-home mother initially did. As the homemaker status lost significance in the feminist perspective regression, we suspect that wifely homemakers are less active in the women's movement because they are more accepting of gender inequities than employed women.

Our data also suggested that a feminist consciousness is essential to joining the women's movement. Recognizing discrimination against women, desiring better media coverage of gender issues, and having emotional affinity to feminists significantly predicted feminist activism in every regression. This suggests that seeing a structural source of women's subjugation and holding positive impressions of feminists are both connected to feminist activism regardless of women's social identities, educational level, and group affiliations. Seeing a shared fate with women increased feminist activism until one controlled for the other components of a feminist consciousness. Thus, a sense that women face similar circumstances is important to feminist activism when those commonalities are seen as

a social force that generally undermines women's opportunities and well-being.

The study also highlighted the importance of group memberships and preexisting social networks in feminist activism. Participation in the women's movement was partially predicated on belonging to organizations that existed for women and political causes that benefitted women as well as being contacted by political parties. Being in social spaces that valued political activism and female concerns were as crucial to participation in the women's movement as succeeding in educational settings and seeing problems in gender hierarchies.

Most of the control variables had insignificant links to feminist activism except for the fact that feminist activism was more common among women who lived on the West Coast. Simply being married did not undercut feminist activism, and the lack of a significant link to age challenges the "post-feminist" claims that women's movement is less relevant to younger women. The insignificant link to sexual identities contests the notion that feminist activism is mostly restricted to lesbians. Finally, the women's movement drew from women of all races and social classes as family income and being white were not associated with feminist activism in any of the statistical tests.

## Strengths and Limitations

This study offered some theoretical and methodological advantages over the existing literature on these topics. The study explores feminist activism rather than feminist ideologies, and it does so by looking at women's political activism during the Obama era. The study uses a large random sample of adult women and includes factors that are often overlooked by previous studies of feminist activism. Sociological studies often skip Gurin et al.'s (1980) conceptualization of a feminist consciousness while psychological studies are often oblivious to matters of social class cleavages and social networks (Ayres et al. 2009; Nelson et al. 2008; Yoder et al. 2011). Quantitative studies from both disciplines also seem to ignore the role of sexual identities as well (for exceptions, see Grollman 2017; Harnois 2015).

Still, this study is not without methodological shortcomings. First, some of the measures are far from ideal. Being "active in women's rights movement" could mean different things to different respondents. The term *women's right movement* might be outdated or confusing to younger women, and we cannot know if people consistently apply the *women's movement* term to recent campaigns around Black Lives Matter or pro-choice agendas. Some women could have restricted their movement participation answer to traditional definitions of political behavior such as protesting or voting, while others could have included cultural aspects of feminism. Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) warn that the focus on "contentious social movements" ignores the ways that feminism tries to transform the ways that gender is conceptualized

and performed (e.g., working at domestic violence shelters, refusing to cook dinner for a male spouse, personally objecting to sexist comments, hiring an attorney to challenge the glass ceiling at work, rebuking sexist Internet comments, or rejecting patriarchal efforts to “manage” one’s body). Second, single-item measures for the recognition of sexism can miss some of the more crucial elements of this multidimensional phenomenon. It is possible that anger over the gendered qualities of child care, body management, sexual double standards, domestic violence, sexual harassment, salary inequities, or the general devaluing of women could have all increased feminist activism more than a general impression of discrimination against women. Small cell sizes leads to a conversion of race into a binary code, but this statistical necessity glosses over racial differences for women of color. This study could have also overlooked key variables as well. Educational factors could have been more important if we had information on being enrolled in gender studies classes (Stake 2007), and accepting a feminist label could have been more important than having a feminist consciousness (Yoder et al. 2011). Having feminist relatives or friends can spur greater activism, as could exposure to feminist ideas during childhood or adolescence (Liss et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2008). Moreover, electronic communication from political parties increased feminist activism, but the sociopolitical messages found in the social media outlets of blogs, podcasts, Facebook, or Twitter might matter as well (Earl and Kimport 2011). Lastly, this paper could have problems with temporal ordering. Engaging in feminist activism can be a life-altering experience, so it is possible that women change their marital status, move to liberal regions, join more political groups, and have an elevated feminist consciousness after being involved in feminist mobilization earlier in life.

We hope this study reintegrates a new round of studies on feminism activism. The massive round of feminist protests during the Trump administration obviously created a substantial influx of first-time protesters. Future researchers should see if these newer feminist activists are drawn to activism for similar or different reasons than activists in the past. Similarly, it would be illuminating to see what differentiates women who briefly join the women’s movement versus those who persist over long intervals. In sum, scholars and activists alike need to generate more knowledge of how different groups of people—feminists, socialists, antiracists, sexual minorities, environmentalists, immigrants, and any other group—can mount and sustain successful social movements that block or counteract the forces of conservatism, patriarchy, and racism so deeply embodied in the current Trump presidency and throughout his administration. The time is now for us to better understand the nature of feminist resistance and activist rebellions against hegemony and inequality.

## References

Ayres, Melanie, Carly Friedman, and Campbell Leaper. 2009. “Individual and Situational Factors Related to Young Women’s

- Likelihood of Confronting Sexism in their Everyday Lives.” *Sex Roles* 61:449–60.
- Bolzendahl, Catherine, and Daniel Myers. 2004. “Feminist Attitudes and Support for Gender Equality.” *Social Forces* 83:759–90.
- Brady, Henry, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. “Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation.” *American Political Science Review* 89:271–94.
- Carroll, William, and Robert Ratner. 1996. “Master Framing and Cross-movement Networking in Contemporary Social Movements.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 37:601–25.
- Carter, J. Scott, and Casey Borch. 2005. “Assessing the Effects of Urbanism and Regionalism on Gender-Role Attitudes, 1974–1998.” *Sociological Inquiry* 75:548–63.
- Cassese, Erin, and Mirya Holman. 2016. “Religious Beliefs, Gender Consciousness, and Women’s Political Participation.” *Sex Roles* 75:514–27.
- Chenoweth, Erica, and Jeremy Pressman. 2017. “This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women’s Marches.” *Washington Post Online*. Retrieved June 1, 2017 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/>).
- Davis, Shannon, and Theodore Greenstein. 2009. “Gender Ideology: Components, Predictors, and Consequences.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35:87–105.
- Duncan, Lauren, and Abigail Stewart. 2007. “Personal Political Salience: The Role of Personality in Collective Identity and Action.” *Political Psychology* 28:143–64.
- Earl, Jennifer, and Katrina Kimport. 2011. *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- England, Paula. 2010. “The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled.” *Gender & Society* 24:149–66.
- Fahs, Breaune. 2007. “Second Shifts and Political Awakenings: Divorce and the Political Socialization of Middle-aged Women.” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 47:43–66.
- Ferree, Myra Marx, William Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht. 2002. *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, Carly, and Campbell Leaper. 2010. “Sexual-minority College Women’s Experiences with Discrimination: Relations with Identity and Collective Action.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 34:152–64.
- Grollman, Eric Anthony. 2017. “Sexual Orientation Differences in Attitudes about Sexuality, Race, and Gender.” *Social Science Research* 61:126–41.
- Gurin, Patricia, Arthur Miller, and Gerald Gurin. 1980. “Stratum Identification and Consciousness.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43:30–47.
- Hamilton, Laura, Claudia Geist, and Brian Powell. 2011. “Marital Name Change as a Window into Gender Attitudes.” *Gender & Society* 25:145–75.
- Harnois, Catherine. 2015. “Race, Ethnicity, Sexuality, and Women’s Political Consciousness of Gender.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78:365–86.
- Heaney, Michael T., and Fabio Rojas. 2014. “Hybrid Activism: Social Movement Mobilization in a Multimovement Environment.” *American Journal of Sociology* 119:1047–103.
- Kane, Emily W. 1995. “Education and Beliefs about Gender Inequality.” *Social Problems* 42:74–90.

- Kaysen, Debra, and Jayne E. Stake. 2001. "From Thought to Deed: Understanding Abortion Activism." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31:2378–400.
- Kelly, Caroline, and Sara Breinlinger. 1995. "Identity and Injustice: Exploring Women's Participation in Collective Action." *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 5:41–57.
- Kelly, Maura, and Gordon Gauchat. 2016. "Feminist Identity, Feminist Politics: US Feminists' Attitudes toward Social Policies." *Sociological Perspectives* 59:855–72.
- Liss, Miriam, Mary Crawford, and Danielle Popp. 2004. "Predictors and Correlates of Collective Action." *Sex Roles* 50:771–79.
- McAdam, Doug. 1986. "Recruitment to High-risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer." *American Journal of Sociology* 92:64–90.
- McCabe, Janice. 2005. "What's in a Label? The Relationship between Feminist Self-identification and 'Feminist' Attitudes among U.S. Women and Men." *Gender & Society* 19:480–505.
- McCammon, Holly J., Karen E. Campbell, Ellen M. Granberg, and Christine Mowery. 2001. "How Movements Win: Gendered Opportunity Structures and US Women's Suffrage Movements." *American Sociological Review* 66:49–70.
- Minkoff, Debra. 2016. "The Payoffs of Organizational Membership for Political Activism in Established Democracies." *American Journal of Sociology* 122:425–68.
- Moore, Laura M., and Reeve Vanneman. 2003. "Context Matters: Effects of the Proportion of Fundamentalists on Gender Attitudes." *Social Forces* 82:115–39.
- Nelson, Jaelyn A., Miriam Liss, Mindy J. Erchull, Molly M. Hurt, Laura R. Ramsey, Dixie L. Turner, and Megan E. Haines. 2008. "Identity in Action: Predictors of Feminist Self-identification and Collective Action." *Sex Roles* 58:721–28.
- Passy, Florence, and Marco Giugni. 2001. "Social Networks and Individual Perceptions: Explaining Differential Participation in Social Movements." *Sociological Forum* 16:123–53.
- Peltola, Pia, Melissa A. Milkie, and Stanley Presser. 2004. "The 'Feminist' Mystique: Feminist Identity in Three Generations of Women." *Gender & Society* 18:122–44.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba. 1994. "Gender and the Pathways to Participation." *Journal of Politics* 56:963–90.
- Schussman, Alan, and Sarah Soule. 2005. "Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation." *Social Forces* 84:1083–108.
- Soule, Sarah, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Yang Su. 1999. "Protest Events: Cause or Consequence of State Action: The U.S. Women's Movement and Federal Congressional Activities." *Mobilization* 4:239–56.
- Staggenborg, Suzanne, and Verta Taylor. 2005. "Whatever Happened to the Women's Movement?" *Mobilization* 10:37–52.
- Stake, Jayne E. 2007. "Predictors of Change in Feminist Activism through Women's and Gender Studies." *Sex Roles* 57:43–54.
- Swank, Eric, and Breanne Fahs. 2017. "College Students, Sexualities Identities, and Participation in Political Marches." *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 14:122–32.
- Taylor, Verta. 1989. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance." *American Sociological Review* 54:761–75.
- United State Census. 2013. "Census Regions and Divisions in the United States." Retrieved September 18, 2017 ([http://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us\\_regdiv.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf)).
- van Stekelenburg, Jacqueline, and Bert Klandermans. 2013. "The Social Psychology of Protest." *Current Sociology* 61:886–905.
- Ward, Matthew. 2016. "Rethinking Social Movement Micro-mobilization: Multi-stage Theory and the Role of Social Ties." *Current Sociology* 64:853–74.
- Weinberg, Jill D., Jeremy Freese, and David McElhattan. 2014. "Comparing Data Characteristics and Results of an Online Factorial Survey between a Population-based and a Crowdsourced-recruited Sample." *Sociological Science* 1:292–310.
- Yoder, Janice D., Ann Tobias, and Andrea F. Snell. 2011. "When Declaring 'I Am a Feminist' Matters: Labeling Is linked to Activism." *Sex Roles* 64:9–18.

### Author Biographies

**Eric Swank** is an associate professor of practice in social and cultural analysis at Arizona State University. His research focuses on the ways that stigmatized populations accept and challenge social inequalities. His research on the framing practices of LGBT, pro-life, and antiwar activism has appeared in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Sex Roles*, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, and *Sociological Inquiry*. His upcoming paper on the political distinctiveness of sexual minorities will be appearing in *Politics, Groups & Identities*.

**Breanne Fahs** is professor of women and gender studies at Arizona State University, where she specializes in research and teaching on women's sexuality, critical embodiment, radical feminism, and political activism. She has published over 50 articles and six books, including *Performing Sex*, *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*, *Valerie Solanas*, *Out for Blood*, *Transforming Contagion*, and *Firebrand Feminism*. She is the director of the Feminist Research on Gender and Sexuality Group and also works as a clinical psychologist in private practice.