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Girl Power: Professor Lyn Mikel Brown on her new book, activism, and "the power of the immediate"

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GIRL POWER

By Mareisa Weil

Q: Your activist work with young people has spanned many decades and taken many forms. Where did this passion originate?
I was not a youth activist in any sense. I grew up working class on the border of New Brunswick and Maine—Calais and Vanceboro, these little border towns—and I saw unfairness. I saw class-based and gender-based injustices, and I felt them. And I had no name for them and no language for them, but I think that’s probably the beginning point for a lot of girls, that sense of, “Something’s wrong, something’s unfair, it’s bigger than I am, I don’t quite know what it is and so I need to know more.”

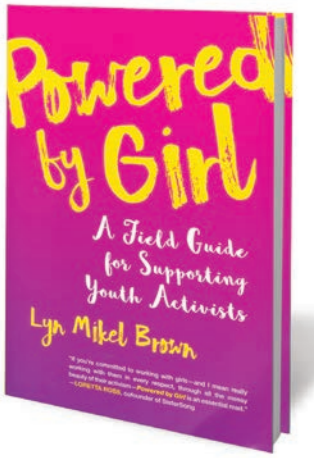
It wasn’t until graduate school where I worked with Carol Gilligan at the Ed School at Harvard [Harvard Graduate School of Education] that things really fell into place for me. I had the opportunity to sit around a table and talk with girls and come back and unpack it all with my colleagues and it was just a really incredible experience.

Q: The power of collaborating with women and girl?
Absolutely. We started the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development and at the time nobody was really studying girls. This was in the mid to late 80s, and all of the primary psychological theories were based on the study of boys and men. Girls were considered discrepant data or sort of outside the norm, and so a lot of times their voices were kind of thrown out of studies because they didn’t fit expected patterns. So we went to schools and community organizations and talked with girls and it was just mind-blowing. We took girls as experts on their own experience and we were invited into the active underground. So that was it for me, I was hooked.

Q: What do you think of young women who say they don’t identify as feminists or with feminism? Yeah, that’s kind of shifting. More girls are claiming feminist identities. I’m more concerned with the mainstreaming of feminism. The way that activism—particularly feminist activism—has become

a kind of fashion accessory. So you have Lena Dunham, Taylor Swift, Beyoncé—all these remarkable, successful actors and artists claiming their feminism. But when feminism is mainstreamed this way, usually it's toned down, non-threatening—well, maybe less so with Beyoncé. But feminism is part of their image, a commodity, and so it has to be a likable, sellable part, which usually means lots of smiles and apologies. My concern is that girls are invited into a feminism that's detached from dissent and activism.

Q: You talk about the "Special Girl" narrative in the first section of *Powered By Girl*. Can you expand on that? Girls are set up to fail when we just talk about individual grit and determination—in fact, to do activism they need to work in coalition; they need to understand how sexism or racism or compulsory heterosexuality, as systems, work. All of that stuff is left out of the conversation when you talk about the individual, and I feel like that's the underpinnings of the "Special Girl" story. It's much harder to point the finger at a flawed system. It means we have to do something very different.



Q: What was the inspiration behind putting out a book like *Powered By Girl* now? I've done a lot of work training women to work with girls and just coming up against this barrier over and over again of this well-intentioned, feminist woman who wants to do the very best by girls and is just getting in their way and not doing the self-examination to be able to really open up something genuine with girls. I thought, 'You know, I do this with my class, every year.' I have them read a series of things and I thought, 'I have to pull this together because nobody else is doing it.'

Q: What do you think of the current cultural discourse as it relates to feminism and misogyny? I'm really torn. I think people are being exposed in ways they never would have been exposed a generation ago. We have young women like the Stanford rape survivor who makes a direct speech to her rapist and then puts it on Buzzfeed for the world to read. The social media and the online stories calling out the sexist commentary in the Olympics, I mean … I have never seen the likes of it! It was hilarious and maddening. So we have both sides of it, right? I feel like this is now at the level of a kind of cultural community discourse and my faith is in the girls; my faith is in this next generation. They are tenacious, and they're funny and very brave, and I think we have to really listen and support and work with them if things are going to change.

Q: How has your work on girlhood evolved as we learn more about gender identity? Yeah, I actually struggled with the title of this book because I felt like 'girl' is such a contested term right now, I didn't want to inadvertently contribute to the binary. I think that it's absolutely shifted and opened up, but again, this is how working with youth and working with girls can really inform our practice, right? Mark [Tappan, Brown's life partner and co-teacher at Colby] and I have run the gay/straight/trans alliance at the high school for a number of years, and those students have taught us a ton about their experiences and about language and about fluidity. So I think that it just means that we need to listen more carefully and we need to alter our practice on the basis of what we learn.

Q: What have you learned from your students? What are the big takeaways? One of the things I've learned from girls is to have a sense of humor. Particularly this generation of girls because of their work on social media, are leading the way. They're culture-jamming, exposing the craziness in this ironic, kind of funny way. I've really learned from them to see the power of irony, to see the power of humor in this. They're always coming up with really inventive, creative ways to get their point across and do activist work. But ultimately I would say it's their tenacity and their hopefulness and their passion for the work.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about creating space for young people? I think the best spaces for kids to learn are spaces that they feel safe in, which means bringing people together and allowing them to say risky things, to say things that are out of the ordinary, to invite in the underground stuff that's usually shut down by other adults. Kids pick up really fast on adults they can trust and when they're in a space that is safe for them to be fully who they are. So that is a big part of it. The other part of it is bringing people together to work across difference. Bringing kids together with other kids they wouldn't normally choose, whether out of their own self-protection or fear of what other people would think.

Q: Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you want to add? I'd like to emphasize that activism is key to girls' leadership. Activism is the power of the immediate, of really having an impact on your immediate environment rather than a kind of leadership skill building for some future time. I think in order to see the possibilities, you really have to do the activist work first; you have to unpack all these systems and really see what the issues are. If we want girls to be part of creating a more just and caring world, we have to give them the opportunity to jump into the fray, right here, right now.