Becoming an “Intimate Publics”: Exploring the Affective Intensities of Hashtag Feminism

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To cite this article: Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015) Becoming an “Intimate Publics”: Exploring the Affective Intensities of Hashtag Feminism, Feminist Media Studies, 15:2, 347-350, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1008747

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1008747

Published online: 17 Feb 2015.

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Several scholars have written about the convergence on ‘the girl’ in the field of international development and its ideological implications (see Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill 2013; Heather Switzer 2009, 2010). In this commentary, I join this conversation by exploring the practices of activism, specifically hashtagging, encouraged by campaigns for girls’ empowerment, the kinds of publics that are created in and through them, and their consequences for thought and action. I argue that if we hone in on a different unit of analysis than the individual, we observe the emergence of a publics that engages in epistemic violence against women and girls of the global south by enacting a liberal feminist salvation narrative that has long been critiqued for being a handmaiden of imperial.
expansions and interventions in the global south (see Saba Mahmood 2002; Sunaina Maira 2009).

The explosion of tweets in the aftermath of the kidnapping of approximately three hundred schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014 with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls is a clear example of a feminist campaign that relied on rallying support via social media and using it to pressure the United States and Nigerian governments to take action. What interests me is that through the practices of hashtagging and (re)tweeting, the participants become part of a collectivity that seems to have certainty about the lives of girls in the global south as well as its own role in alleviating their suffering. Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of “intimate publics” (2011, 22) is particularly useful here. Through this notion, she directs us to consider the ways in which strangers can form communities through affective ties. This is precisely what happened during the hashtag feminism that surrounded the kidnapping. The kidnapped schoolgirls became (and continue to be) the site of collective worries, and future happiness seemed to be linked to their freedom. Advocates in the United States, for instance, urged state institutions to protect the innocent girls, even if that meant a military intervention, and to reprimand the Nigerian government for not taking immediate action; the threat of the girls being sold into marriage (as noted in an article by Nicolas Kristof on May 3, 2014) loomed (and continues toloom) large. The affective ties stretched beyond the kidnapping—the event has been assimilated into the broader rhetoric about girls’ education and rights in the global south, as seen in an article entitled “Girl Power” written by Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, in 2014. Brown (2014) notes, “the Chibok girls—kidnapped simply because they wanted an education—have become a powerful symbol of this wider struggle for girls’ rights” (www.project-syndicate.org). This was irrespective of the fact that Boko Haram’s—the organization that claims to have kidnapped the girls—grievances have less to do with girls’ education than the legacies of British colonialism in Nigeria (see Paul Newman 2013), economic marginalization of populations in rural areas, balkanization along tribal lines, and the negative consequences of American and Nigerian involvement in Somalia. Nuanced analyses of non-state actors such as Boko Haram reveal that such acts of violence are often an expression of anti-state and anti-US sentiment. Girls, however, do make ideal targets of violence given societal affective attachments to them as “promissory objects” (Sara Ahmed 2010, 38)—they are often foregrounded in international development discourses to promise elimination of poverty, disease, and terrorism. This makes them symbolic sites of western liberal projects, and hence, ideal targets.

Berlant’s conceptualization of “intimate publics” also points to the broader implications about being part of a collective. An “intimate publics” assumes that those who are affectively brought together also share worldviews and orientations towards the objects of concern. Said differently, participation in #BringBackOurGirls is premised upon, what Ahmed calls, individuals’ “prior affective situation” (2010, 40). We are not neutral bodies; we bring with ourselves impressions of history and its affects, which make it possible for us to enter into particular kinds of affective relationships, or not, with the objects that we encounter. Thus, the participants’ eagerness to take up hashtag feminism on behalf of third world schoolgirls from Nigeria betray the awareness and histories that they bring to feminist activism. Specifically, I note that the kidnapping fits well within the all too familiar trope of the threat of Muslim terrorists, especially towards women. In discussing the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, anthropologist Saba Mahmood notes that the “twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim” (2002, 341)
legitimized the negative consequences of the intervention—such as increased insecurity for women in rural areas, drugs trade, etc.—as the sacrifice needed for the country’s own good. It is, therefore, not a stretch to assimilate the story about the kidnapping of Nigerian girls and Boko Haram within this paradigm, get angry about it, and seek the emancipation of the victims, even if it requires military intervention that may lead to loss of additional lives. It is critical to note here that particular kinds of abuses seem to cause rage more so than others—no similar hashtag activism has emerged around the killing of girls and children during drone attacks in Pakistan, or the more recent ground incursion in Palestine.

While it is important to seek justice for the specific suffering of the schoolgirls kidnapped in Nigeria, this form of feminism produces an oversimplified analysis of the situation, focusing narrowly on Boko Haram and its immediate actions. It sidesteps some of the critical tools for analysis and critique that the feminist movement has provided, such as a deep engagement with history, understanding the entanglements of the local with the global, and exploring the unequal gendered relations of power that produce violence against women and girls in the first place. For instance, hashtag feminism around #BringBackOurGirls creates equivalence between remarkably different groups—Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban—as if the causes of their actions were singularly the result of extremist interpretations of Islam. Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), Hamid Dabashi (2006), and Mahmood (2002), among others, contest such forms of equivalences, and have shown that these groups have emerged in response to specific geopolitical events, including intervention by American and European countries, and have different grievances. In the same vein, the category of schoolgirls as a descriptor for the kidnapped girls in Nigeria also flattens them and masks the differences in tribal affiliation and socioeconomic status, which position some girls at more risk versus others. The practice of hashtag feminism, then, does not enable a consideration of such complexities and assimilates varied situations within already-circulating discourses.

In short, while the hashtag feminism of #BringBackOurGirls makes a tenuous collectivity out of its audience, it is critical to note that the affective intensities that attract individuals to this campaign draw upon, and rearticulate, long-standing colonial and imperial conceptualizations about Islam, Muslims, and schoolgirls. And, in doing so, may engage in epistemic violence against girls and women. I, therefore, propose that this form of feminist participation would be more meaningful if it is supplemented by attention to the broader principles and politics that feminism has inaugurated.

REFERENCES


Over the past year, activists in Delhi, India, have protested violence against women in the streets, on the buses, and on social media with hashtag awareness campaigns including #BoardtheBus. These campaigns hinge foremost on discourses surrounding women’s safety, but are also part of a larger effort to shift the conversation toward women’s rights to claim public space. That effort had a horrific catalyst: in December 2013, a twenty-three-year-old physiotherapy student Nirbhaya was gang-raped on an evening bus by five men who then left her and her beaten male companion on the side of the road; she later died from her injuries. The tragedy incited local and global outrage, and its coverage in the mainstream press and blogosphere drew attention to the restrictions on women’s safety and mobility in India.

#BoardtheBus is a Delhi-based campaign that was started by Breakthrough, a global human rights organization that, according to the “mission” on its website as of October 15,