Feminism and Women’s Sense of Humor

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The present study empirically examined the long-standing folk belief that women, especially feminist women, have no sense of humor. Svebak's (1974) revised Sense of Humor Questionnaire [SHQ; (1974b) "Revised Questionnaire on the Sense of Humor," Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, Vol. 15, pp. 328-331], the short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale [ATW; found in J. T. Spence and R. L. Helmreich (1978) Masculinity and Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates, and Antecedents, Austin: University of Texas Press], and S. K. Murnen and D. Byrne's Hyperfemininity Scale [HF; (1991) "Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct," The Journal of Sex Research, Vol. 28, pp. 479-489] were administered to 175 college women. Self-ratings were also obtained of the women's stands on women's issues (from traditional to feminist), their own sense of humor, and how often other people typically laugh at their humor. Significant positive correlations occurred between the latter two measures and Svebak's scale. A significant negative correlation appeared between the ATW and the HF. The lack of a significant association between the women's self-rated sense of humor or the SHQ and either the ATW or HF suggests that no relationship between feminism and sense of humor was demonstrable at least with these instruments in this young adult sample.

The contemporary cliché is that feminists have no sense of humor. Some feminists unapologetically agree, while vigorously pointing out that the cause of feminism is too important to trivialize with expressions of humor. Most feminists, however, rail at this stereotype and deny such a pejorative

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Barreca (1991), while admitting that she also once shared the perception that feminists were humorless, now argues that it is really only men who think feminists lack a sense of humor because women typically have hidden this trait from men in order to appear traditionally “feminine.” She reveals, “It is no secret to women that women have a sense of humor” (p. 103).

Before investigating the domain of feminism and humor, it is important to distinguish several related categories of humor. Female humor refers to humor about or by women without necessarily implying any affiliation with feminist philosophy. Such humor may ridicule a person or social system without implying any demands for change. Female comedians may or may not be feminists in their work. Walker (1988) considers female humor to be more self-deprecatory and more disguised than feminist humor. Kaufman (1980) bluntly classifies female humor as a “humor of hopelessness” in contrast to feminist humor, which is a “humor of hope.”

Feminist humor arises from a belief system that societies and their major institutions have historically been male dominated and generally oppressive and exploitive of women. Further, it assertively assumes that women's secondary status should be changed (Kaufman, 1980). Marlowe (1989) realizes that such change cannot be accomplished without hurting some feelings. “... The content of feminist humor aims at changing women's behavior, and aims at changing women's relations with men” (p. 152). Humor serves as feminists' survival mechanism and their cure for burnout. Gallivan (1992) succinctly defines feminist humor as “humor which reveals and ridicules the absurdity of gender stereotypes and gender based inequality” (p. 373).

Barreca (1991) defines feminist humor as breakthrough behavior. “[A]nytime a woman breaks through a barrier set by society, she's making a feminist gesture of a sort, and every time a woman laughs, she's breaking through a barrier” (p. 182). She elaborates the relationships between gender, feminism, and the use and appreciation of humor.

Whether you choose to call it feminist humor or feminine humor, or ‘just’ humor, if you're a woman, then you're making a woman's joke, laughing a woman's laugh . . . . Nearly all women's humor is in some way feminist humor because in the same way we can't help but speak as women, we can't help but be funny as women. We're inevitably informed by our gender . . . . You're using feminist humor because you're offering some sort of challenge to the system. You're taking on a new perspective, offering your statement or question when the system would encourage you to be silent. When you make a joke, when you laugh with your mouth open, or when you refuse to laugh at something you don't find funny even though you know you 'should' laugh, then you're making a radical gesture. (p. 182)

Lesbian feminist humor is a special subcategory of feminist humor. Walker (1988) quotes Susan J. Wolfe's distinction: “Joking about the lack