**REPORT ‘Let’s Get Loud!’: Gender, Politics, ACTION**

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I recently attended Vocal Majority’s recent ‘Let’s Get Loud!’ conference, held at the Australian National University. The day provided an opportunity for students, academics, NGOs and other members of the community to come together on the issue of women’s rights. VM founders Melanie Poole and Courtney Sloane introduced the day, emphasising the power of young people’s voices in the debate on women’s rights and calling the audience to collective action.

I was eager to hear more from a new generation of activists at the conference, so I found the choice of the first keynote speaker Anne Summers (AO) a little odd. However, there was clearly much to learn from her expertise. Summers’ analysis of the misogyny operating within Australian politics was particularly insightful, and she noted that there is a need to remain focused, specific and united for activism to be successful. Despite Summers’ rousing words, I found it troubling that when asked a question regarding the need to self-reflect within feminism and recognise diversity, Summers dismissed this as something that could be taken for granted if the issue of women’s “needs” is truly being addressed.

Up next was the ‘Global Injustice and its Gendered Face’ panel, which set out to address “intersectionality”. On a question from the audience regarding agenda setting and discussing issues even if they’re not in “your” area, Stella Young (disability advocate) responded that it is sadly rare for women with disabilities to be invited to feature at such forums. I noticed that the problem of representation became pertinent several times throughout the day, as many of the (mostly women, mostly student) audience asked insightful questions regarding how LGBTIQ issues and the experiences of people of diverse backgrounds might fit into the discussion being had. The panel acknowledged the difficulty of addressing these questions without direct experience with or being part of particular minority groups.

Following lunch, the second keynote Professor Hilary Charlesworth (ANU) spoke on women’s rights within international law. Charlesworth described the cultural reservations that can be made to international treaties which diminish commitments to women’s rights. Charlesworth endorsed taking the time in academia to enrich and complicate the debate rather than reinscribe a simple binary of universalism versus cultural relativism, and to see these issues in productive tension. Charlesworth ended with, “the power of male culture is indeed universal”, which I thought should have been elaborated on during the talk. Indeed, comments regarding the “patriarchy” were only raised once or twice during the conference, leaving a gap in theorising what was perhaps implicitly informing the positions being taken.

The next session was split into three workshops and one panel, run by a gamut of experts and activists. I attended the campaigning workshop run by Anna Rose (ANU), which provided a practical introduction to developing strategic campaigns. At the beginning of the session Rose had participants name issues important to them, and many named a wide range of political concerns - evidence of the varied interests of attendees both alongside and intersecting with questions of gender.

The final panel for the day ‘Where to Next?’ focused on the possibilities for achieving change. In particular, concern over cuts to gender studies majors across Australian universities was discussed. Fiona Jenkins (ANU) noted the importance of having specific gender courses to allow space for developing sophisticated critical thinking around these issues. The topic of men’s involvement was also mentioned, and it was noted that only five men had registered for the conference. All panellists agreed that the inclusion of men in the discussion around women’s rights is important.

Rosanne Kennedy (ANU) closed the day, offering some remarks on gender in the academy, and the importance of keeping gender studies vital. Kennedy also briefly discussed the potential role of “public feelings” in activism, and the need to make things like disappointment and outrage known. I enjoyed Kennedy’s conclusion that we need to make (gender) trouble.

Overall, I felt that the day involved a range of inspirational women speakers. To the organisers’ great credit, much time was left in each session for questions and comments from the audience, and it was during this time that much of the most thought provoking concerns were raised from an upcoming generation of politically engaged minds. However, some of the audience’s questions regarding diversity (sexual, gender, ethnicity, culture, and so on) were only partially addressed and I was struck that there were some notable gaps in representation. More time could have been dedicated to questions of intersectionality between ethnicity or indigeneity and gender for example. Despite these concerns, the day offered a space for an engaging discussion on women’s rights. I have no doubt that many of the attendees walked away excited and enthused to continue the conversation.