

Millennial Feminisms: How the newest generation of lawyers may change the conversation about gender equality in the workplace – without even trying.*

Much has been written about the “millennial generation” and how it is reshaping the modern workplace, including the legal profession. This body of literature ranges from heralding the millennial generation as the vanguard for a new age of creativity and work-life balance, to decrying the millennials as technology-obsessed, entitled and lazy. And while some characteristics attributed to the millennial generation have dubious support at best, an increasing body of reliable research supports the anecdotal evidence emerging from the legal marketplace around the country suggesting that millennial lawyers share a set of characteristics that differentiates them from prior generations.

These characteristics include an ease with technology heretofore unimaginable, a desire and expectation that they will rise rapidly through the ranks of the profession, and a commitment to an expansive definition of work-life balance that values a wide range of non-work pursuits and relationships.

Perhaps from the perspective of progressive Baby Boomer lawyers, however, one of the most alarming trends is the perceived disinterest on the part of the millennials in pursuing explicitly social justice-focused careers. This includes the perception that young millennial women, specifically, are not as concerned as their feminist foremothers with fighting for gender equality in the office and in the courtroom. They may not even (gasp!) call themselves feminists at all.

But even assuming that millennials are less likely to have an obvious focus on justice or equality as they enter their legal career, their mass entrance into the legal market, attended by their expectations of the workplace, may do as much or more as previous generations’ explicit campaigns to alter business as usual in the law firm. The avalanche of publications dedicated to advising firms on how to recruit, manage and *retain* millennial lawyers – along with some anecdotal evidence collected from interviews with partners in DC law firms – suggests that the notoriously entrenched legal workplace is very interested in changing to meet the demands of the millennials. And the three characteristics outlined above – ease with technology, expectation for rapid advancement, and a commitment to an expansive definition of work-life balance – have enormous potential to fundamentally affect gender equality in the workplace, even absent the specific intention of millennials to have such an affect. What could be better for young female lawyers than the ability to have flexibility in their work thanks to technology, the ability to rise more rapidly through the ranks so they don’t have to choose between becoming mothers and partners at the same time in their life, and an understanding that everyone wants time away from the office whether they are men or women, parents or not? Such a law firm, I argue, would be a more *feminist* workplace, even if the methods employed to get there are not explicitly feminist.

What if the oft repeated rallying cry of feminists that it is *only* “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens” who can “change the world” turns out to be false in this case? What if changing the legal world instead takes the largest generation in American history all demanding apparently gender-neutral changes to the workplace that just happen to ease traditional points of tension for female lawyers? Through a review of the available literature and in-depth interviews with both millennial lawyers and those that supervise them, this paper examines these questions and discusses whether, consistent with its potential, the influx of millennial lawyers into the practice of law is actually resulting in a more equal workplace.

* submitted for consideration for presentation purposes and publication in the symposium volume