Women in the Music Scene: How Sexual Discrimination is Counteracted with Decibels and Outreach

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"To challenge the stereotyped image of men and women and to promote a more positive image of women in music; to promote women bands; against the exploitation of women in advertising or on stage; to define the right of everyone to determine their own sexuality, whether they be straight, gay, both or neither; to fight sexism in music and to use music to fight sexism at large."

— Issue 2 of Drastic Measures, 1978.

In 2014, I attended the Pussy Riot panel in Chicago, Illinois. Riot Fest, a three-day music festival with thousands in attendance, organized it. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Masha Alekhina of Pussy Riot, known for their fervently outspoken views against Russian politics, were "treated like freedom fighters by a panel that represented a loose timeline of punk history in America" (Kot, 2014). They became iconic, globally-recognized activists after they entered a cathedral in Moscow and shouted out iconoclastic lyrics, playing their guitars as quickly and fiercely as possible, as a service was taking place. They were incarcerated by Russian police, herded into barred cages during trials, and were given strict visitation from their family members. Gathering fame wasn't the objective for them. It was to make a statement against an oppressive system, to encourage others to follow suit by taking a stand for themselves and their own causes.

At a point in time, the discussion panel was centered around the lack of women involved in the music scene. Tolokonnikova and Alekhina urged the audience to speak out against any dehumanizing conditions, which involves women musicians being harassed at venues and even physically threatened because they have a stage presence. They gave light to the issue that diversity in the music scene is still occurring. Women are still being ostracized in the music business across the world, but discriminatory backlashes will never restrain some of these rock 'n' rollers from their true calling. In fact, some women musicians, including members of Pussy Riot, have made it their duty to use their stage time to encourage *all* women musicians to promote unity and give visibility to the negative connotations they are subjected to, in hopes to seek ways to end them. Their achievement is more modern, but the pioneers behind *Riot Grrrl*, an underground movement that radically shifted women musicians towards the spotlight and activist involvement, still inspire musically and politically inclined women to participate.

In the early 90's, a collective of women musicians were on the brink of starting a movement that would redefine the music industry across the United States. It all begin with a vision from a vociferous and fiercely passionate artist named Kathleen Hanna from Olympia, Washington. She passed out hand-crafted journals called "zines", which were both creative and informative. They provided insight regarding women's rights and health. Hanna also encouraged teenage girls to come to "safety meetings" that she coordinated. During these meetings, the girls would take turns sharing stories about their experiences with discrimination, abuse, and even sexual assault. They came from various backgrounds, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. The diversity strengthened the group and became more and more popular over time. The stories ranged from cat-calling to more extreme cases, such as rape and physical beatings from relatives. Hanna was profoundly moved by these stories, and shortly after, she was taking action. After meeting Tobi Vail and Kathi Wilcox at Evergreen College and befriending Billy Karren (former guitarist for *Go Team*), the four radicals formed the band, *Bikini Kill*. Hanna chose the role of being a front woman in a politically charged punk group.

At the time, indie and grunge music was explosively popular around the West coast, with bands such as *Nirvana* and *Fugazi* bringing in roaring crowds, quickly rising in the "indie" scene. Although *Bikini Kill* constructed their band around women positivity and anti-discrimination, it was difficult to gain popularity and good reviews from critics while all-men rock groups swept over the music industry. Fortunately, other like-minded women were becoming transfixed by *Bikini Kill's* radical message. It inspired several women musicians, such as Allison Wolfe of *Bratmobile* and Corin Tucker of *Heavens to Betsy* and *Sleater-Kinney*, to join the feminist movement and speak out against white privilege, socially constructed stereotypes, and promote the general interests of punk culture through music (Schilt, The History of Riot Grrrls). The arriving wave of women musicians extended third-wave feminism, which cannot be taught without including *Riot Grrrl*'s contribution to the women's movement.

With the impact of women musicians being involved in the general public, such as Carrie Brownstein's autobiographical *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, The Runaways' glorious rebuttals towards a journalist that began a music review of their album *Queens of Noise* with "these bitches suck" (Raha, 24),

and *Riot Grrl's* paramount influence on women musicians, it is without a doubt that women are rightfully defensive and outspoken. For them, success is not achieved without being harassed, discriminated, or assaulted throughout the process. Additionally, the confidence of women musicians is stymied by the false idea that "stage time" is reserved for male musicians only. There is a fear that their performances would only be recognized because of their gender, or their appearance being the sole focus, and not valued for their performance material. When women are mistreated within a male-dominated field of work, it only enforces "toxic masculinity", which is the state of "masculinity" being dominant in any given circumstance and used to "domineer" women in manipulative ways. Patriarchal structures depend on concepts of "masculinity" in order to claim entitlement over the majority because it is often associated with power, virility, and overall dominance. Without their dominance, or when it is challenged, these structures take action to prevent the rise to power for women. This way of oppression also contributes to the dispiriting phrase, "the disappearance of women".

Another journalist, Helen Davies, concluded that music journalists are to blame for the "disappearance of women". She wrote that "the male-dominated press responds to women's attempts to break into the world of "serious music" by reducing women in question to her gender, either through concentrating on her physical attributes or through endless comparisons with other women artists, as though sharing the same gender is enough to make all female artists the same in a way that male artists are not" (Davies, 401). In summation, some men are purposely trying to make it a competition among women and their identities, rather than accepting that a patriarchal mentality makes them feel childishly threatened by their occupation when women hold positions. Music journalism is another career dominated by men, which leaves more women with economic tension by being torn between doing what they love and choosing a different career path. When women enter the music field professionally, it's met with harsh criticism and sexist remarks. Tracy Moore, a music journalist and blogger for *Jezebel*, created a personal post to document her accounts of being harassed after writing music reviews. Men have made remarks to her such as, "you don't know what the fuck you are talking about because you are a woman", "you have fucked (or want to fuck) everyone in every band you have ever covered", and "you want the entire rock scene pointed at your face like a trembling bukkake" (Moore, 2014). Women in the music industry, or generally any profession, are going to become tremendously discouraged when they know that their hard work will be spit on by discriminatory men. However, women must pursue their interests at heart, with the knowledge that criticism is inevitable. They offer more to the content by diversifying submissions and creative inputs, whereas an all-male dominated profession quickly becomes lackluster and competitive among a singular type of people. Moore had concluded her post with a message of optimism: "when women come at something men have traditionally left them out of, they can bring new insights and attitudes and considerations that expand the body of work in useful ways and that should not undermine anything." (Moore, 2014)

Not only does harassment occur for women *discussing* music, it's also a very real reality for women *performing* music. Their continuity in playing reflects the resilience of these women musicians. Despite the cons, they're willing to take the stage and prove that *all* women have a say in their own lives. The front woman of *Best Coast*, Bethany Cosentino, has also publicly reflected on bad experiences with sexism and physical attacks while performing at shows. One incident in particular involved a cheeseburger being thrown at her during a set that *Best Coast* put on for college students. She wrote, "imagine, you're standing there, doing your job, and suddenly, a fucking cheeseburger comes flying at your face. And attached to it: a man yelling at you that you suck. I was humiliated, and also smelled like a McDonald's, so I had no problem just saying the first thing that popped into my head" (Cosentino, 2016). Later on, she reminds everyone that music can be used to call out misogyny and encourage women to recognize their talents. "I know I absolutely chose the right career. I am a creative, strong, outspoken woman, and my voice will not be silenced. If anything, I will deal with the sexist bullshit and have burgers thrown at my face so that I can use my voice to say "THIS IS NOT OK!" and let women, and men, know that we don't have to accept this type of behavior" (Cosentino, 2016).

Teresa Suárez, or popularly known by her stage name, Teri Gender Bender, is a musician from Guadalajara, Mexico. As the vocalist of her garage-rock band, *Le Butcherettes*, she comes up with poignant lyricism about feminist topics. She addresses issues regarding sexism and injustices across the border. To amplify her passion for vocalizing these issues, she created a stage gimmick (which is now retired since transitioning to the era of *A Raw Youth*): a bloody apron draped over her body and an occasional severed pig head, pierced by a spear. Teri believes that the apron symbolizes the hegemonic roles of women, such as cleaning the house, preparing meals, or looking out for the children. The blood symbolizes the rebellion against these stereotypes (Pogue, 2011). For their third full-length album, which was released last September, they collaborated with musical icons Iggy Pop and John Frusciante of *The Red Hot Chili Peppers*. In the music world, working with high-esteemed musicians after a short duration of being a recorded musician is a sign of great momentum. It proves that Suárez works diligently, as do other women musicians. It proves that the idea of gender is not to be included while discussing subjective quality to artistic productions. Above all, the most important thing is to appreciate art being released by the marginalized, as it normalizes their presence and bridges the gaps in societal divides.

So, how can women combat these castigations and live more freely? By "outreaching", being publicly vocal about societal issues, and welcoming the marginalized into the conversation. Participating in public action is the key to initiating change. As long as a cause is inclusive, dismissing judgment regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, or social class, supporters will accumulate exponentially. On the *Mic.Music* website, journalist Tom Barnes uploaded an article expressing how *She Shreds* magazine, a newly-founded publication that gives recognition to women musicians, was a major step for women in the music industry. He interviewed Fabi Reyna, the founder and co-editor, and asked for some insight on the issue. She explained that "you can look at the music industry, journalism, media, drumming culture, producers and it's the same thing in that women have been largely ignored, and not involved and not welcome. Our goal is to introduce a new way of looking at guitars, aesthetically and editorially. Not necessarily for women, but for people. For alternative learners, people of color, anyone who doesn't see themselves represented" (Reyna, 2016). It's empowering to know that forms of "women-positive" activism are occurring all over the world: in Mexico City, sexual harassment in the streets is doubled in frequency in comparison to the United States. In response to "predatory men", a group of young women called *Las Hijas de Violencia* (translating to *The Daughters of Violence*), came up with a self-defense system that not only secures an escape from dangerous situations, but also allows them to "counteract" the responses from street-prowling men. When approached in a flirtatious or unsettling manner, these women blast confetti guns into the faces of the instigators, then use portable stereos to blare punk rock, with the speakers pressed at the tips of the instigators noses. Ana Beatriz, one of the founders of the group, gave a statement regarding their mission: "the fear is subverted because we switch the roles and they are the ones (predatory men) who are startled. It's only for a second because they see that its just confetti, but it's subversive" (Beatriz, 2016). As long as similar movement are actively arising, progress will be in the hands of the determined. Women are living in a time in which coalition is critical to their presence, and with the aid of progressive music scenes, gender becomes irrelevant when it comes to performance time. We must continually encourage women to build up calluses, train their vocal chords, rehearse their tablatures, *and make their music*. Music is a force, and in a patriarchal society, the time on stage is the time to utilize that force and provide the most wholesome experience for expressing one's own self, through the decibel counts and the continual fight to end discriminatory stereotypes regarding gender.

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