How 'angry feminist claims' have the power to inform and mobilize voters

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Kimberly Killen was an undergraduate at Wellesley College, which counts Hillary Rodham Clinton as an alumna, during the 2008 presidential election—in which Clinton was an early candidate.

"That election was a complete eye-opener," Killen recalls. "Here I was 19, 20 years old, and my brain was bopping around with ideas about how, as women, we have equality, things are different now. Then I saw all the ways the media treated her as a woman—any emotion she showed or did not show, how that was covered was so completely gendered that it seemed to me, as a woman, you just can't win. You're either too much of this or too little of that."

And if the emotion being shown is anger and the person expressing it identifies as a feminist? She's hysterical, she's strident, she's irrational, she's a "feminazi"—pick your dismissive stereotype.

However, in a recently published article exploring "angry feminist claims" and political and social mobilization, Killen, who earned a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Colorado Boulder in 2022 and completed a research assistantship with CU Boulder researcher Celeste Montoya in May, argues that angry feminist claims have the power to inform and mobilize. She emphasizes that by resonating with empathetic communities, angry feminist claims legitimize feelings and experiences, triggering energetic transfers between feminists and non-feminists.

The article appears in *Political Research Quarterly*.

"I'm interested in this political moment and in what anger can do," Killen says. "Anger is not a uniformly good emotion, and I'm not saying we should all get really angry and go out and do things.

"In this paper, I'm presenting anger as this really narrow path that can get us out of our seats to then transform that anger into something good or civic—something that organizes us to act. It shouldn't just begin with, "I'm really angry, and I'm just going to stay really angry all the time." Part of it was recognizing my own anger and recognizing the ways people are using their anger to reclaim the position of rationality."

Demanding respect and recognition

Killen uses the term "angry feminist claims" to characterize particular statements and issues—not individuals—as "feminist" based on "their demands for respect, recognition and action on women's sexual autonomy and political legitimacy," she writes. "I do not classify angry women writ large as 'feminists.' However, as a result of making these claims, regardless of speakers' self-identification, society often treats these speakers as feminists; their political claims becoming synonymous with their identity.

"Is anger an unproductive political emotion and mode of speech for women activists? Can angry feminist claims only get heard if they are delivered in an emotional register that conforms to liberal democratic conventions?"

She considers whether angry feminist claims can be understood as a mobilizing and productive political practice by focusing on the protests of Brett Kavanaugh's 2018 confirmation hearings for the U.S. Supreme Court. She highlights the confrontation in an elevator between then-U.S. Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona and activists Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher.

After learning that Flake planned to vote in favor of confirming Kavanaugh, Archila and Gallagher confronted Flake in an elevator near his office.

"You have children in your family," Archila told him (some media accounts describe her statements as "shouting"). "Think about them. I have two children. I cannot imagine that for the next 50 years they will have to have someone in the Supreme Court who has been accused of violating a young girl. What are you doing, sir?"

Gallagher then added (also described as "shouting" in some accounts), "I was sexually assaulted, and nobody believed me. I didn't tell anyone, and you're telling all women that they don't matter, that they should just stay quiet because if they tell you what happened to them you are going to ignore them. That's what happened to me, and that's what you are telling all women in America, that they don't matter."

"Do you think that Brett is telling the truth?" Archila asked. "Do you think that he's able to hold the pain of this country and repair it? That is the work of justice."

The exchange was recorded by a CNN team, and for Killen, that exchange and the rhetoric and analysis that followed embody how angry feminist claims and their reception are shaped by a nexus of socio-historical forces. Whether and how an angry feminist claim is heard and valued can depend not only on a person's sex, but on their skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity, economic status and a host of other factors, Killen says.

"It's possible, and it happens frequently, that two people are going to hear the same angry feminist claim, but hear it in two totally different ways," she says. "One person may have that nodding feeling of acceptance, and another may be thinking, "Oh, she's just being hysterical.'"

Challenging conventions

Studying angry feminist claims as a factor in political motivation also highlights disparities that have long existed within feminism, Killen says. The voices and experiences of liberal white women have long had a place at the front of the line, while those of people from underrepresented communities have struggled for legitimacy and to be heard.

"This is a really difficult problem, and I think it even exceeds the feminist movement," Killen says. "We have a lot of sensitive conversations today within feminism and you can see people moving into a sort of defensive crouch rather than taking a beat to listen. Often, it feels threatening to hear that within feminism, some voices and experiences have been marginalized or delegitimized."

She adds that bringing long-marginalized voices and experiences to the fore is a step-by-step process and that anger can play an important role in motivating action.

Citing Archila and Gallagher confronting Flake in the elevator, Killen notes that "you can see they're upset, their voices are raised, but the way in which they're using anger is reclaiming—either intentionally or not—the position of rationality. Step by step, they're pointing out the ways that (Flake) is not behaving as a rational actor. Their language is going, "Wait up, no, look at this story we're telling you, this is the rational path.'"

Further, anger doesn't just fulfill short-term goals for mobilization, but can challenge longstanding conventions about what is politically appropriate and for whom, Killen says. Seeing women's anger empowers other women to articulate feelings that deviate from the norm—norms that have dictated who gets to be publicly angry and whose voice gets to be heard.

Having just completed an election cycle and heading into the 2024 election year, Killen says she is hopeful that anger will continue galvanizing action: "What I see really motivating a lot of people, and not necessarily just women, is protecting reproductive and sexual health rights, voting to protect these rights. To me, that's a really hopeful glimmer that I think is going to continue to be on the ballot in ways that I just find exciting.

"I'm excited for civic action and people feeling the inspiration of, 'We're going to go out and protect these rights.' I'm hopeful citizens are going to continue to show up at the ballot."

More information: Kimberly Killen, "Feel My Rage": Angry Feminist Claims and Affective Mobilization, *Political Research Quarterly* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/10659129231181591

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