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## **Who we are at work: millennial women, identity and the workplace**

### **Abstract**

Based on research with millennial women in Canada, this article examines the process of workplace identity, or (un)conscious strategies of identity management that young women employ at work. First, despite increasing labour market participation from women, young women's experience of the workplace can be one of precarity and insecurity. Many millennial women have responded with a 'positive front'-saying yes to all work tasks while highlighting their likability and acceptance of the status quo. This isn't seen as a permanent strategy-but rather one that gets you into the workplace and 'liked' until your work speaks for itself. Second, and operating at the same time, young women also use tactics to confront intersections of ageism/sexism in the workplace. While some employ conscious strategies to be 'taken seriously' through dress, small talk, even taking on stereotypical traits of masculinity to be recognized as competent, others explicitly confront inequality through 'girlie feminism' with a pro-femininity work identity that challenges the masculine-coded norms of how a successful workplace operates and what it looks like. For everyone, who we are at work is a constantly shifting negotiation between how we're treated and seen by others, the workplace as a social space, our past experiences and our own expectations. Considering young women's work identities reveals how power and privilege operate in the workplace, and the possibilities of young women's agential challenges to inequitable workplace norms and an insecure labour market.

**Keywords:** millennial women; identity; agency; workplace; performance

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### **Introduction**

Geographers have emphasised how space is critical to understanding identity as performance, where space is not simply as a site of action, but a social force that operates relationally (Gregson and Rose 2000; Hetherington 1998). While previous research has considered the performance of gender identity in such diverse spaces at the countryside (Little 2002), the military (Atherton 2009) and the treatment room (Wilton, DeVerteuil, and Evans 2014) there has been particular interest

in the workplace (Crang 1994; Guyatt 2005). The work of Linda McDowell (2009; McDowell and Court 1994b) has been foundational here, moving beyond how work is accomplished to consider questions of identity and performance. This article develops this vibrant literature by examining work identities with a generation of young women in Canada, drawing on in-depth interviews that were interested in understanding who we are at work. In particular, this article examines questions of agency, power and privilege in the contestation of age and gender stereotypes, where the workplace is a site of everyday sexism and ageism for millennial women.

We are now in a time of gendered and aged precarity, with millennial women facing high levels of insecurity in the labour market (Vosko, MacDonald, and Campbell 2009). Millennial women in Canada

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(born between 1980 and 1995 (Foot 1998)) still face a significant gender wage gap, are more likely than men their age to be in part time or contract jobs and remain responsible for more childcare and housework (Marshall 2014; Status of Women Canada 2015). As young workers, millennials experience significant underemployment (Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté 2014), which is especially challenging as stable, full time employment is hard to find. Beyond these familiar statistics, Gill and Scharff (2013, 7) claim “To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?” In an era of post-feminism (McRobbie 2009), young women supposedly enter workplaces with ambitious plans for success now that old barriers have been removed; however, everyday sexism remains in the workplace, as well as wider institutional challenges around pay and the retention and advancement of women. At an interpersonal level, much of this is this is subtle and ‘under the radar’, and it is often hard to talk about or ask about how one is treated differently from others—yet work and the workplace influence our sense of self, our plans for the future and our choices in the labour market (Freeman 2000). This research is interested in both gender and age, as the shared identity makers for the millennial women involved in this research—importantly, these two aspects of identity are just one way of understanding the self as intersectional (Valentine 2007).

The article first situates the concept of work identity, making use of the literature around performance, but also highlighting how work identities are highly situated in specific jobs and workplaces. Next, using Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*, I examine some of the motivations and possibilities for work identities and the framing of work for some young adults as 'temporary exploitation', before detailing methods and the challenges of asking about work identities. The majority of the article will centre around three case studies that draw out different aspects of young women's work identities. The first strategy involves accepting the status quo, where women ignored discrimination or chose not to challenge it to protect themselves or their jobs. The second strategy details how young women negotiate inequality at work through particular performances of dress and behaviour—changing themselves to get by in inequitable work cultures. The third strategy examines how some privileged millennial women are able to challenge the rules, in some ways resisting gender and age stereotyping. In discussing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, as well as issues of power and discrimination, it's important to recognize the messy and contested nature of identity. For everyone, who we are at work is a constantly shifting negotiation between how we are treated and seen by others, the workplace as a social space, our past experiences and our own expectations. Considering young women's work identities is crucial as this analysis reveals how power operates in the workplace, and the possibilities of young women's agential challenges to inequitable workplace norms and an insecure labour market.

### **Framing work identities**

#### ***Identity work***

Existing literature on work identities is often found in the management and organization behaviour literature: here identity is often conflated with roles inside the workplace (manager, sales assistant) (Clarke, Brown, and Hailey 2009) or roles more widely i.e. mother, worker, friend see (Rothbard and Ramarajan 2009) or understanding how workplace discourse creates leaders (Anjouri and Marra 2011). Trethewey's (1999) work, using a Foucauldian lens to understand how professional women's bodies are disciplined in the workplace, examines both gender and organizational discourses. Research in the sociology of work has also considered issues of identity, performance and work, examining issues of aestheticization and the body (Adkins and Lury 1999) and gendered organizations (Halford and Leonard 2006). There is also a useful body of work that builds on Bourdieu's theory of capital. Huppatz (2012) uses Bourdieu to suggest that 'gender capital' is a powerful resource in working lives and Ho and Bauder (2012) use

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‘identity capital’ to understand how workers negotiate the multicultural workplace. For my purposes, the strategic nature of the identity work I describe suits a lens of performance rather than capital.

Literature that makes use of theories of performance and identity are prevalent in studies of service sector employment (Guyatt 2005; Halford and Leonard 2006). In particular, literature examines employer demands for certain kinds of gendered performances in the workplace (Ainsworth 2014; Bennett 2014), especially as economies become dominated by tertiary or ‘interactive work’ (Leidner 1993; McDowell 1997; Crang 1994). The kind of work becomes critical as it determines what kind of work identities are valued, from retail where normative femininity is rewarded to skilled trades where it is often derided. Workers face ageism and sexism in different ways in different workplaces, and what it means to act or look ‘professional’ changes. For young women in the workforce, it becomes critical to learn the rules of the game for each workplace. Yet no matter what work identities are adopted, the concept of recognition or how work identities are read by others, often limits millennial women’s abilities to confront stereotypes (Butler 1990). I argue that work identities are not completely agential choices, as social norms/power structures about our aged and gendered selves (among other kinds of difference) impose on how and if our work identities are recognized. For feminist geographers, there has been a long standing critique of how private/domestic space gets coded as female and public space and the space of the workplace gets coded as male. One example of this is McDowell and Court’s (1994a) classic research ‘Performing Work’, about gender in merchant banking in the City. They write about how women sought power in a very masculine world through both dress and behavior—yet where entrenched gender roles limited their ability to be seen differently. My focus on the (gendered and aged) performance of work responds to this research with a new generation of young women workers, going beyond banking to examine possible work identities in a variety of workplaces.

### ***Work identities and ‘cruel optimism’***

This article has emerged out of my attempts to think through work as ‘temporary exploitation’. Several of my respondents spoke about some work as ‘temporary exploitation’, where their work identity was about getting on, fitting in—in some cases they let themselves be taken advantage of in the short term in the hope that it would be less likely in the future. More broadly, a recent post to a blog on the World Economic Forum cites an ILO study that states the gender pay gap will

last another 70 years (Descano 2015), yet millennial women are ‘optimistic’ about the progress to equity in the workplace. ‘Temporary exploitation’ thinking also exists in debates on internships, where the head of the Bank of Canada controversially stated that young people should consider working for free to gain experience for future paid work (Quinn 2014). Thinking this through led me to Berlant’s (2011, 1) *Cruel Optimism*: ‘a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’. For my purposes, the fantasy of future job security and achieving equity in the workplace are two of many ‘dissolving assurances’ that are often mobilized to neutralize harm in the present. *Cruel Optimism* delves into the temporalities of the present, considering how we respond when expectations of the good life begin to ‘fray’:

‘The historical present—as an impasse, a thick moment of ongoingness, a situation that can absorb many genres without having one itself—is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape. It is experienced in transitions and transactions. It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation’ (Berlant 2011, 200)

If we think about work as a ‘cluster of promises’ to use a phrase from Berlant, encountering discrimination as you enter the workplace as a young woman requires various forms of adaptation—out of necessity, but also perhaps hope that promises may still be met in the future. In her chapter on the precarious present, Berlant (2011, 195) names the present moment as a ‘situation’ to get this ongoingness: “when a situation unfolds, people try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust”. Entering

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a workplace requires this attention from its workers, where an ‘adaptive imperative’ has become the response to insecurity (Ross 2009). Drawing on queer phenomenology, Berlant (2011, 197) also highlights the bodily negotiation of insecurity: “This instability requires, if not psychoanalytic training in contingency management, embarking on an intensified and stressed out learning curve about how to main footings, bearings, a way of being, and new modes of composure amid unraveling institutions and social relations of reciprocity”. While this insecurity is negotiated by all workers, workers come from unequal subject positions and have access to different amounts and kinds of privilege. My use of work identities is one example of what Berlant calls ‘reconfigurations of manner amid the persistence of the body

in the world'. Where 'body' matters greatly when thinking through questions of agency and the ability to act—for the millennial women involved in this research, it was often much more possible to adapt rather than develop a 'manner' that challenged the status quo. Next, there is a brief discussion of methods before considering work identities through the particular lens of age and gender to examine how millennial women used work identities to strategically deal with everyday sexism and ageism in the workplace.

### **Asking about 'who you are at work'**

This research is part of a wider investigation of millennial women's working lives (anonymized). This research focuses on women born in the 1980s to capture the first cohort of the generation in the labour market. Rather than study a particular workplace (banking firms or creative industries) or a particular kind of labour (through temp agencies), this research takes an identities approach, focusing in particular on how age and gender intersect. This framework allows analysis on 'ordinary' encounters in the workplace, to make visible prejudices that have been 'forgotten' (sexism) or underexplored (ageism) (Valentine, Jackson, and Mayblin 2014). Main data collection involved 33 in-depth interviews with millennial women to collect their perspectives on work. These women opted in to the interview after completing a survey about their working lives. A diverse group of women were selected for the interview, making sure groups underrepresented in research (women of colour, disabled women, sexual minorities) were included as well as women with diverse work and family backgrounds. This diversity was important to show the wide range of lived experience within the generational and gendered category 'millennial woman'. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached for the wider project; participants were reiterating issues raised by others and key themes began to emerge. The interviewees included stay at home moms, students, women looking for work, as well as women working in a variety of fields including healthcare, media, HR, civil service, finance, non-profit, education, and food service--29 of the women were in paid work of some kind. Interviews were coded and organized using a framework analysis, a large grid of participants on one axis and research questions on another, allowing for analysis across both respondent and theme (Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor 2013). During the interview I asked participants if they had a work identity, if they could tell me who they were at work (see also McMorran 2012, for a discussion of researching embodied labour). Many jumped at this starting point, but if needed I used a prompt such as 'For example, some women have told me about subtle changes in how they dress/speak/act at

work compared to when you're at home'. Several respondents initially said they did not have a work persona ('I'm the same everywhere') but when prompted they came up with multiple examples—it seemed the term 'work identity' was hard to get to grips with and I ended up using the psychological term 'persona' with some participants, as it was more relatable than 'identity' which can seem more fixed. This question was also initially difficult to answer for some people because negotiations and performances of identity are subtle and are happening all the time—moreover, behaviours become naturalized based on dynamics of individual workplaces and these normative acts can seem unremarkable. But a brief anonymized example from another participant or simply a prompt that reframed the same question was often enough to start a litany of examples of work identity.

The answers to this question usually led to *why* participants felt a particular kind of work persona was necessary, and explanations were not just about being professional, but considered how to respond to

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discrimination in the workplace and how to be seen as effective or competent or successful in ways that were gendered and aged (amongst other axes of difference). For my purposes here, my examination of work identity focuses on how respondents dealt with issues of discrimination, most often everyday sexism and/or ageism, but this is necessarily nested in a variety of diverse motivations and possibilities for identity. In considering how millennial women respond to discrimination in the workplace through their own negotiation of work identity, the research is interested in the lived experience of work (McDowell 2009) and how participants deal with and make sense of unequal treatment.

### **Who we are at work: encountering gender and age stereotypes**

The excerpts provided below consider three possibilities for dealing with gender and age stereotypes in the workplace. The first is passive, a work identity that is about fitting in. The next two are more active, with the second focusing on how millennial women change themselves, and finally how some attempt to overtly challenge everyday sexism and ageism at work. Before working through these three strategies it is important to acknowledge that one quarter of my participants told me they had not faced discrimination at work based on their age or gender. In thinking this through there are two overlapping explanations. In a negative reading, one could argue that some women are not able to recognize

discrimination as it may be institutional rather than overtly personal and therefore more normalized. In an extreme example from my data, Karolina internalized stereotypes about young women:

KAROLINA- I know this is silly—but I care more about being liked than I care about being respected and I find a lot of the time people walk all over me because I'm really nice, because I really care about being polite and I don't want to rock the boat. I don't want to cause confrontation, like I never want to get mad at something, like I find that I'll go 'oh, sorry, my fault' even though it's not my fault, just because I don't want to ruffle any feathers. And I think that is because I'm a contract worker—because I know that I'm disposable, so if I flip out or have strong opinions or yell at someone, they are going to be like, 'oh, this girl is crazy' or like 'this girl is angry', so I think a lot of the time I bottle, I bottle up stuff and try to hide it and be polite because I do care about being liked. (age 31, contract work in media--developing content for TV)

Her aim is to not make a mistake, to be likable at all costs—rather than disputing stereotypes about age and gender, Karolina has bought into them, internalizing that young women (in precarious work) should aim to please and not have strong opinions. According to McRobbie (2009, 68), this is a kind of post-feminist masquerade, where, drawing on Riviere, claims that 'the woman both masks her bid for masculine power and retreats from it at the same time'. Karolina later wonders if she should be 'pushy and speak her mind' like other young women in her office, but decides against it. Another possible explanation for why young women don't report age or gender discrimination in the workplace is because they work in places that are age and gender segregated, where the workplace is dominated by women at all levels or that all workers were of a similar age or both. Most women who cited a lack of discrimination referenced a powerful boss who was a woman, usually in fields like media and healthcare where young women dominate the labour market. However, the majority of participants did experience discrimination they attributed to gender and/or age and their responses lead to insights around how power and identities operate in the workplace.



### ***Accepting ‘temporary exploitation’, agency as making do<sup>1</sup>***

One strategy for dealing with age and gender stereotyping in the workplace is to accept the status quo, often with the hope that the job will lead to better opportunities in the future. This often involves putting up with poor treatment to not damage chances of being hired in a related position elsewhere. This isn’t seen as a permanent strategy—but rather one that gets you into the workplace and ‘liked’ until your work speaks for itself. Isabel told me all about her last boss, who berated her constantly and embarrassed her in front of others—even demanding she sit on the floor at an important meeting rather than letting her find a chair. Isabel felt she would have been treated much differently if she were older or male. She concluded by telling me:

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ISABEL: It’s interesting to have a male partner who is like, ‘Well, why don’t you confront your boss?’ I am like, ‘No I don’t want to do that! You don’t understand!’ I get frustrated. Because I [told that story]<sup>2</sup> to my partner when I was at my job in Toronto and he said, ‘Well, why don’t you just quit?’ or ‘Why don’t you just do this?’ ‘Why don’t you write her an email?’ I am like, ‘I don’t feel like I have the power to be able to do that’. You know, like— it just – he says, ‘Well if it was me I would just sit down and have a one on one conversation’, etc. But it’s different. (age 27, contract employment counsellor)

Isabel didn’t feel like she had the power to address issues with her boss, partly because she wanted to retain a good reference to get a better job elsewhere, so she accepted poor treatment, leaving the job when her partner was hired in another city. Isabel loves her current job, doing administrative work at a university, but she told me ‘I have no job security, no benefits, and my hours fluctuate’. Many young women acknowledged poor treatment based on stereotypes of age and gender, but were willing to put up with it in the short term as a trade-off for longer term success in the labour market. For young people, it is tempting to view work as a ‘temporary exploitation’, where the expectation of a more equitable workplace in the future or a role with more power to avoid poor treatment makes present challenges more palatable. Yet for Isabel, there is a sense of cruel optimism here, as work is unlikely to become more stable and as her partner’s career

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<sup>1</sup> Subheading adapted from ‘Agency and/as making do’ (Gill and Scharff 2013).

<sup>2</sup> [...] indicate where a cut has been made to anonymize or clarify an excerpt

is prioritized she may have to establish herself in the labour market as a trailing spouse again in the future (Careless and Mizzi 2015).

Like Isabel, other women acknowledge that being taken seriously as a young women in the workplace can be a constant challenge, but one that just needs to be accepted as part of the status quo. Evie told me about the gendered power dynamics of her hospital: “Nursing is mainly woman dominated and so I find a lot of [doctors], especially the males will come in and just have that confidence about them that – and make us feel like they know more and we know less. I just ignore it, to be honest. I just don’t let it get to me and I keep going and do my job.” For Evie, the hierarchy between doctors and nurses was not something she expected to change. For her, succeeding and thriving in a work environment that doesn’t always recognize her skills involves her choice to not let it get to her, allowing her to carve out a space for her own feelings about work that can be more positive.

For Isabel, Evie and the other millennial women who used this strategy of getting by, agency emerges through making do. For Isabel, making do involves thinking of the job as temporary while for Evie, making do involves not seeing poor treatment as a reflection on herself, but as a result of more general stereotypes. Butler (1993) frames (gendered) performance not within the individual, but through power relations and a set of constraining norms—agency is ‘the effect of productive constraint’. The practice of ignoring discrimination is often the limit of millennial women’s agency when occupations are gender or age segregated or when work is contingent and insecure. Agency as making do allows young women to persevere in sometimes challenging or precarious workplaces, protecting the self by distancing or delimiting harm.

### ***Playing the game and changing yourself***

Some millennial women employ (un)conscious strategies to be ‘taken seriously’ through dress, small talk, even taking on traits of masculinity to be recognized as competent. This process involves careful attention to the power dynamics in each workplace, learning the rules of the game. Returning to McDowell (1997), in *Capital Culture* she notes the alternative strategy of feminine parody, where women’s work identity drew on tropes of sometimes sexualized femininity to subversively disrupt male dominated workplaces with varying success. In contrast the women involved in [project title] developed work identities that encouraged their colleagues to see them as older and less ‘girly’. Dress (and to a lesser

extent speech) is a very concrete example of an act or practice of work identity, so it was mentioned more often than more subtle acts which could include more bodily doings like department, one's body position relative to others—there is a wide range of corporeal acts that often don't come across in interviews. Megan told me about an evolving process of starting a new job and aiming to come across

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as 'proper', but that this gets relaxed as she gets to know the people she's working with and she feels comfortable in her role. She added the following caveat:

MEGAN: Unless of course, if I am going to a meeting. Like, at [part time NGO] I sit on some advisory committees and stuff with the City departments and that is definitely where I shift up a little bit. [laughter]

Interviewer: What does that look like?

Megan: I tend to wear sort of darker colours. Even toning down exuberance a little bit, for sure. I tend to be fairly chatty and smiley and I think that that makes me seem younger than I am and I like to not give off that vibe. And you know dressing, dressing the part a little bit more. (age 28, several part time jobs, including a cash-strapped 'dream job' with NGO)

Megan's efforts to appear older and less 'girlie' in order to be taken seriously at work were familiar to participants in [project title]. Yet some participants actively chose more feminine clothes to play against different workplace norms. This was true for Tara, who told me about wearing heels to physically match the height of her colleagues in the male dominated workplace of a global accounting firm, or Sara, who told me about getting into the 'costume' of a Calvin Klein dress when meeting clients. The idea of managing the first impression was common, as this was when everyday sexism or ageism was more often encountered. It is critical to parse microspace dynamics of workplace cultures to figure out what kind of presentation will be successful—for most it was about aligning themselves with the look and behaviour of those in charge, but for one participant, dressing 'dowdy', spared her critique about from colleagues who thought she was only in the workplace to be noticed by men (Dellinger 2002; Rucker, Anderson, and Kangas 1999).

Crafting a sense of what kind of worker you are and trying to minimize being the subject of pejorative assumptions impacts how people respond to the contributions of millennial women in the workplace. Sam thought very carefully about who

she was at work, and slowly made changes. Sam told me she decided to use her nickname professionally in part because it is a gender neutral name. She went on to say:

SAM: I think I changed a couple of things, you know. [...] I wouldn't say that I cut my hair short for professional reasons but I do cut my hair short and I noticed a difference too in how I am actually perceived in that, you know, if I changed the way that I dress, I change the way I present to be a little bit less I think – you know, I am pretty feminine and expressive in certain aspects of my life but to actually scale that back at work made me more comfortable in the persona I was occupying. And not necessarily totally – you know, to sound too cynical about it because I am happy with the clothes that I wear but just realizing that what I was trying to portray I could do more comfortably in say, slacks than a super girly dress with a cardigan. I could kind of just – I looked older too, that was a big part of it. I actually tend not to talk about my age. I tend not to talk about my personal life a lot. I am private at work [...] You know, and some people manage to really make it work for them, right? They have sort of meshed their lives. But I feel like there is a very strong divide for me between my life and my life at work. (age 26, working at one paid and one unpaid part time job in areas of social policy/research)

It's interesting that Sam aims to be comfortable in her work identity—that it is not a façade, but it is very different from how she is outside of work. Most of my participants fit into this category, with many effecting subtle changes to try and manage how they were treated at work, playing into workplace-specific normative rules about what a successful worker looks like and sounds like to avoid ageism/sexism at work (see Ronai, Zsembik, and Feagin 2014, for more on everyday sexism). For Ina, a work personality is about playing the 'male phenotype':

INA: My personality at work however is rather different, especially now [in this position]. In my private life I do not like things too serious, I enjoy a lot of humour and I am very willing to let someone else be in charge, delegate to other people. At work I am very in charge, assertive, and sure of myself, I was once told by a female colleague that I do not have what our supervisor has called the female phenotype in science (although this was intended as a compliment, the female phenotype is the woman very unsure of herself, downplaying the significance of her results...while the male phenotype is that his result will be the cure for whatever). (age 31, contract position as a research scientist in a biotech lab)

Ina's 'intense' and focused work identity fits what's called for in her workplace to be recognized as competent. Other research has argued that 'identity capital' is needed to match work identities with

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colleagues and wider workplace culture, a skillset to know what's needed and what's possible in a given situation (Ho and Bauder 2012). Overall, these tactics of avoidance involve millennial women changing themselves, not challenging the behaviour of others, again because of hierarchical power relations common to most workplaces. Here too a relation of cruel optimism emerges, as the aim of these work identities is to allow one's work to be recognized for its merits, where strategies of dress, talk and behaviour can then (hopefully) be relaxed. Yet the future ideal of a workplace where workers are not judged against a normative standard of success that often abjures both youth and femininity is by no means guaranteed.

### ***Challenging age and gender stereotypes in the workplace***

This final empirical section considers some ways millennial women's work identities have overtly pushed back against discrimination at work. The framing here is one of resistance, but in a qualified sense—what Berlant (2011, 100 & 17) calls lateral agency, 'an activity of maintenance' which is 'a relief, a reprieve, not a repair'. It is also important to underline that these kinds of challenges only seem possible for millennial women with particular kinds of privilege. For example, Nina only wants to do work that she cares about and she wants to always feel valued at work—she currently works part time on a short contract with a NGO and wants to take more courses towards a Master's. She went on to tell me 'I am very selective about what I pursue, you know. It does sometimes lead me in a situation – like that's where I can't piece together a fulltime job and I wish I could. [laughs] But I also know what I am looking for in terms of a work environment, right? And the type of work I want to do, so.' Nina has the family support to be able to turn down job opportunities; other millennial women have different forms of safety nets that made their actions possible. For Danielle, an ER doctor, resistance against unfair treatment is possible because she has the social capital to push back against everyday sexism from her male colleagues. She told me:

DANIELLE: Where you get that work identity is if I get challenged –say a consultant is giving me a hard time or even patients families that are giving me a hard time, I am going to turn on my very intelligent conversation that’s to the face. So that’s definitely a switch that’s turned on. But other than that I actually try to keep the – I talk to people just like we are talking now. And even with consultants, most of the time that’s how it is as well. I think it’s important to establish good relationships with them that are real and that are authentic. So yes, sometimes we need to turn on the really smart gene [laughs] which I think is essential too because it is a serious job. (age 32, works full time as a doctor)

Already in a position of social power and respect—the social capital of her medical degree and relative position in the hospital give Danielle the space to challenge a male dominated department. Not just playing into masculine stereotypes of power—not yelling, bullying or taking over, just doing her job well—being kind, speaking with people directly and building relationships.

A very different example of challenging stereotypes in the workplace blends entrepreneurialism and activism, through an ethic of girlie feminism. ‘Girlie feminism’, involves a pro-femininity work identity that challenges the male-coded norms of how a successful workplace operates and what it looks like. Leah works in student advocacy. During the interview she reflected on creating a work identity that is open, friendly and welcoming, and the challenge of having a young, feminine and fun persona at work, where being called a ‘girl’ was often meant as a term of disrespect:

LEAH: At meetings it feels hard to be taken seriously, and I dress like a student because I want to be comfortable with them and them to feel comfortable with me. But when I go to a meeting with upper administration, they’re like ‘Who’s the girl in the flowery pants??’[laughs] so it’s definitely makes it harder [...] I think Suzanne my colleague and I try and embrace and feel powerful in this persona because as much as its easy for people to see us as girlie or juvenile or whatever, we have seen how powerful it is for the students so we try to remember that when we’re in a meeting and know that that energy, that difference we have is maybe powerful in some way, I guess. So I’d have to admit to playing it up sometimes, in order to feel safer and more powerful at meetings by just being like ‘whatever, I’m the different one at this meeting and I’m going to say this’ you know what I mean,

so...trying less to conform and more to being about 'I'm the kooky one!' [laughs] which is valuable in some way.

(age 28, permanent job in student advocacy)

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We had a long discussion about her attempts to create a professional space around being girlie, and Leah concluded with the line 'So we've tried to reclaim the fact that we're always called girls, and turn it into a positive in some way and I think that comes from the idea of friendly activism and using girlhood as a non-threatening way of changing things.' This differs from McDowell's (1997) discussion of feminine parody in two ways—first in where its occurring, an industry that's dominated by women and second in its aim—rather than trying gain advantage by disrupting a masculine environment, this strategy aims to recuperate value in what young women would say is their lived reality. Importantly, this remains a project of the present—improving wellbeing in the moment rather than changing the future.

Critically, for Nina, Danielle and Leah, their ways of challenging ageism/sexism in the workplace are only possible with particular forms of privilege. This echoes Nyong'o's (2014) analysis that "The modal subject of many studies of gendered precarious labor, McRobbie notes, are 'highly educated [...] beneficiaries of second-wave feminism [... with] no children [and] freelance careers [...] characterised by constant change [...] predominantly white [... with] training and education prior to this entrepreneurial activity'". Harris (2004, 44) also emphasizes that 'Material circumstances have much to do with employment outcomes'—Leah acknowledges that her form of resistance is made possible through access to higher education, the ability to take on poorly paid internships, and cooperative jobs—but I argue that it is a powerful example of thinking about what kinds of work identities are possible for (some) millennial women, eschewing work as cruel optimism by aiming to create an alternative work dynamic in the present rather than paying dues for a future ideal workplace that may never arrive.

## **Conclusion**

A common question to ask someone when you first meet is 'what do you do' —when what we're really asking is 'who are you?', 'What are you about?'—employment is often used a marker for identity, and as Sennett (1998) argues, it is a story of the self that is increasingly difficult to tell. Most of the women involved in this research had not achieved the 'standard

employment relationship' of a permanent, full time job with benefits or often even a job that matched their skills (Doherty 2009). As work for many feels increasingly precarious and contingent, what you do can be increasingly separate from your sense of self, especially for young workers who are new to the labour market. Understanding who we are at work becomes an important question in flexible, neoliberal times, as the ability to adapt to different workplace norms becomes essential. For Canadian women of the millennial generation, this negotiation is often difficult because of ageism and sexism in the workplace.

This article used the framework of work identities to pull apart different strategies millennial women use at work to deal with these everyday -isms, considering issues of agency and privilege, understanding identity as a negotiation of both performance and recognition (see also Morgan, Brandth, and Kvande 2005). While complex and multifaceted, work identities are a useful concept, as they are situated in space—the workplace—and are explicitly relational—how you relate to your boss, your co-workers. This makes questions of identity unusually accessible in research interviews, where work identity is readily seen as something you *do* rather than popular framings of identity as who you *are*; having the spatial framing of the workplace can make questions of identity easier to get a hold of. Young women could reflect on 'who we are at work', and then the why, how, with whom questions that come after. In particular, by focusing on how work identities respond to discrimination in the workplace, the article points to subtle but personally powerful negotiations by millennial women, negotiations I've framed as lateral agency and agency as making do.

I suggest above that for women in precarious work, or in gender/age segregated workplaces, agency is about making do, accepting the status quo and perhaps hoping for a more equitable job in the

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future. There is often a sense of cruel optimism within discussions of work identity, where dealing with discrimination in the workplace is tenable in part because of a future expectation of 'the good life', one of secure employment and equitable treatment at work. Some millennial women had some power to be seen differently and changed themselves to avoid negative stereotypes. Many aimed at portraying themselves as less girly at work, developing work identities that were perceived as older and less feminine through dress, speech and behaviour. Finally, some women with particular kinds of



privilege are able to challenge everyday age and gender discrimination, carving out work spaces where stereotypes are contested. This privilege can take multiple forms, from economic—having the financial resources to turn down exploitative work, to social—having a position high enough in an organization to publicly challenge discrimination without fear of reprisal. For some young women privilege came from job security; Leah’s attempts to reclaim girliness were possible as she felt safe in her job. Despite these outward acts, challenging sexism and ageism at work is not resistant agency, but a more lateral act to use the language of Berlant, attempting to make life better amidst the ‘crisis ordinariness’ of the present.

A wider question of how helpful these strategies are in the longer term is tricky. Workplaces are not generally spaces of equity for young women in Canada, where occupational segregation, the gender pay gap, and gendered precarity put women, especially young adults, at a disadvantage (Author, 201X). I have used Berlant’s (2011) work to suggest that all of the above are strategies of the present: putting up with ‘temporary exploitation’, personal strategies to avoid discriminatory treatment and outward actions that push back against workplace norms all seem to be justified by the hope or expectation that the future workplace will not require these efforts. A sense of cruel optimism emerges when this future never seems to arrive, and performative work identities that respond to age and gender stereotypes are a continuing part of the experience of work. The focus here on millennial women and their negotiation of gender and age identities leaves questions about how other identity categories are negotiated in the workplace. For the women involved in this research, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and social position were also important components of work identities. Moreover, work identities is a large conceptual area that will be useful to geographers beyond my focus on discrimination. Further research on work identities from other intersectional positions and other conceptual lenses will expand our knowledge of agency in the workplace.

## **Acknowledgements**

Forthcoming

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