

#ChangeAgents

GIRLS TO THE FRONT: WHAT RIOT GRRRL TELLS US ABOUT WOMEN IN LIBRARY IT

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#ChangeAgent #DIY #Feminism #Leadership #RiotGrrrl

I learned about “leaning in” long before Sheryl Sandberg¹ put her manicured hands to the keyboard. Competitive speech and debate gave me my first lessons about smiling prettily when facing a male opponent to avoid appearing “too aggressive.” I would lose rounds to girls with thin arguments and short skirts. None of my male squad mates would receive as much unsolicited “advice” about their hair, their shoes, the fit of their pants, or the cut of their shirts as I did by the age of sixteen. None of them were told to invest in a good manicurist because their

¹ COO of Facebook, and author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, 2013.

hands were lovely but their nails were terrible. Debate taught me how to succeed in patriarchal spaces. Riot grrrl—a feminist, DIY punk movement that produced a number of bands, zines, and local communities in the 90s—taught me that the goal should be blowing the patriarchy up entirely. I was too young for the first wave of riot grrrl bands from Olympia or DC, in a town too conservative for zines or girl meetups. I browsed the “alt rock” new release wall at CD Warehouse in Springfield, Missouri every week, looking for albums by women—this was only intermittently successful, as my old copy of Joan Osborne’s *Relish* may indicate. I eventually picked up Sleater-Kinney’s *All Hands on the Bad One*, and subsequently included “You’re No Rock & Roll Fun” on every mix CD I ever made for a boy (in retrospect, this was a mixed signal). With more exposure in college, riot grrrl became the lens through which I viewed the world, and it’s an ethos I strive to embody personally and professionally. The challenges I’ve faced in my career aren’t found in Sandberg’s book, but the answers are in Kathleen Hanna’s “Riot Grrrl Manifesto.”² I have included a few guiding principles from the manifesto to frame my experiences in library IT.

”BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.”

I chose libraries over start-ups because the work and the mission matters. I chose technology over reference because I had the skills and knowledge to get things done, facilitate communication, and do my part to make sure our most at-risk digital assets can get to someone else in the future. I am far from a the-

2 Kathleen Hanna, *RIOT GRRRL MANIFESTO*, accessed July 05, 2017, http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm. The riot grrrl manifesto was originally published in 1991 in the *BIKINI KILL ZINE 2*.

orist in radical librarianship, but I advocate for openness and DIY as guiding principles in library technology. I believe in repositories, not “proprietary publisher platforms.” I want every visitor to our digital collections to exercise the right to read in a private space, not to send analytics back to a parent publisher so they can make “data driven editorial decisions.” I recommend the adoption of open-source technology, and support participation in those communities, because I believe that to be one of the most significant ways we can control our own destinies.

“BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standards of what is or isn’t.”

I struggled at great length with the decision to submit an essay for this collection, because I honestly don’t know if I’m “IT” or not. I’m a “digital *something* librarian” by trade and training, not a developer or sysadmin. I can write a bash script or a simple Rails app, but that isn’t my job. The language of my post-MLS career has been about sprint planning, scrum meetings, velocity, and backlogs, but if I’m not the one who does the thing, who lives and breathes Eclipse and Pivotal and git commits, am I truly “IT”?

I am far from the only woman who questions my status within a group, and I have spoken to many of my female technical librarian colleagues who struggle with the same identity and expertise questions I do. To my mind, the only way to shut down this source of self-doubt is to stop caring about the question entirely—whether anyone considers me IT “enough” is irrelevant to my abilities, and I would rather bring more people together to accomplish a thing than worry about who belongs at the table.

“BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self defeating girlytype behaviors.”

A few weeks ago I got drinks with some of my former male library IT colleagues, and the conversation turned to the behavior of one of the women we had worked with. One of the men I was with said, “Well, women just always hate other women, that’s how it is,” and I retorted with “No, *she* hates other women, and that’s patriarchy at work. Not all of us buy that bullshit.”

I have worked with women in library IT who happily step on the necks of other women to gain attention and approval. This is often subtly done through microaggressions—minimizing the contributions and roles of women in a technology team, limiting opportunities to share expertise, dropping other women from “sidebar” conversations that are relevant to their work, and simultaneously claiming credit for and denigrating another woman’s abilities. Some women willingly participate in the patriarchy—lean in—at the expense of women who through economic status, race, disability, or other dimensions, do not present as “professional” (often a term used to reinforce patriarchal, racist, and ableist norms) and may be unfairly criticized. This perpetuation of a fundamentally oppressive system must be called out. In the project-driven world of library IT, this can be particularly problematic as our work is often poorly understood within our organization, and women who are the victims of such tactics may have even fewer options for recourse.

As I said to my former colleague, I don’t buy that bullshit, and I don’t tolerate it in my teams. In my meetings, I do deploy amplification tactics—calling out someone’s idea or contribution by their name, and doing my best to propel the idea forward. I strive to promote the expertise and accomplishments of all my colleagues at every opportunity, cognizant that women inevitably have a harder time being considered experts. I am very sensitive to how often women are asked to talk about their own appearance in the workplace, e.g. the ritual of women telling other women what they like about their attire and personal grooming as a form of small talk. This excludes and alienates

women who don't participate in such norms, and is rarely experienced by men. If women are going to succeed in this world, we need to elevate each other and detach from patriarchal systems that encourage us to bully, exclude, and condescend.