FROM ZEROINES TO HEROINES: TRANSFORMING DEBATE ABOUT eVAW IN NEW ZEALAND

Joy Liddicoat, 12 November 2013

Lorde’s new album, “Heroine,” is taking young New Zealand women where they’ve never been before: to the front of the world stage. A leading New Zealand singer-songwriter and a self-identified feminist, Lorde is just 17 years old and grew up in Auckland. But this past two weeks, young Auckland women have been taking the world stage for completely different reasons and in what has been an emotional roller coaster of public debate on violence against women.

The result is that violence against women online has finally become a force for debate about internet related public policy in New Zealand. In a strange twist of fate, the cruel story of gratuitous online disclosure of the names of victims of sexual assault and rape has led to transformative online campaigns for justice for survivors of sexual crime and the debate about online spaces to do so.

The story began some weeks ago when a local TV channel broke the news: For the last two years a group of young men, who called themselves Roast Busters, have been accused of having group sex by luring young women into social situations, getting them drunk and then sexually assaulting and raping them (including some girls as young as 13 years old).

The young men boasted about the rapes on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and disclosed the names of the girls online. TV 3 News broke the story about lack of action by the police, and the police defended their actions, claiming they were unable to act because no formal complaint of rape or assault has been made by any of the alleged victims. But it was later revealed that there were indeed multiple complaints by as many as four young women, none of which resulted in prosecution. One young woman, who was under 16 years old at the time of the alleged offending, complained that the police officer who took her statement asked her what she was wearing and implied it her own fault.
While the police are under intense public scrutiny and several investigations are underway, part of the debate focused on the role played by social media, and what should be the adequate responses both by content providers (Facebook, for example, which took the site down and then put it up again), and the government. As many as 17 Facebook pages sprung up – some seeking revenge, some discussion, some defending the young men’s actions.

A particular concern was the report that the police did not request takedown of the Facebook site, instead leaving it up in order to carry out surveillance as reported in one local newspaper. “Mr Scott said the Roast Busters Facebook page had been left open for ‘operational and tactical reasons.’ And further: ‘Whilst we acknowledge it was upsetting for the victims, it was being monitored for information or evidence that would assist our investigation.”

This of course had the effect of keeping the young women’s names in the public domain.

The government initially responded by speeding the introduction of law about harmful digital communications that has been in the pipeline for a while. While the government’s quick reaction to a situation where girls’ rights were so flagrantly violated is commendable, the Harmful Digital Communications Bill has been criticized by internet rights activists for enabling new, invasive censorship by the government and for limiting free speech. What’s more, at least one leading commentator considered it would do nothing to address this particular case.

A previous analysis of the proposed law changes concluded these “have the potential to curtail, or hinder, the exchange of information online.” The analysis was accompanied by a call for greater and more meaningful involvement of women human rights defenders in the drafting and implementation of these new legal measures.

But by the end of last week the tide had started to shift from anger and frustration to direct action. This followed an interview of a young female friend of one of the victims of online disclosure. The two media presenters who conducted the interview shocked the nation in their demeaning and callous attitudes towards the events, for example, describing the men’s actions as “mischief.” There was another public outcry, despite an apology from the interviewers.
This time the outcry was accompanied by a call for advertisers on the programme to withdraw their advertising. Within hours the Automobile Association, ANZ and Vodafone had done so and within a day, four more followed (including Countdown which had initially declined).

One rightwing male commentator, Matthew Hooten, appearing on the same radio show later that week, was ejected for criticizing the presenters for their actions. Hooten defended his beliefs about men taking responsibility for their behaviour saying “My daughters are entitled to rebel and behave badly without being raped” – the presenters are now off air for the rest of the year.

Women also took to the media, highlighting the lack of action on reforming sexual crimes and failure to adequately implement the recommendations of previous inquiries into Police conduct following previous complaints from Louse Nicholas. All in all, as Michelle A’Court wrote “it’s been a tough week from women and those who love them.”

There’s been other good news as well. In more numbers and with higher profile than I’ve ever seen in New Zealand before, male commentators have publicly supported women: affirming that rape is a male problem, that men need to talk about, deal with and stop. These included Giovanni Tiso who had started the advertising boycott ‘A surge in the tide’ and from Russell Brown ‘Narcissists and Bullies.’

An online petition also started, calling for government action, and had 77,000 signatures within a week.

And on twitter, debate has started about whether, if the Harmful Digital Communications Bill had been law, all of these developments would have been possible, or if they, too would have been subject to takedown or censorship. This followed Police threatening one group with prosecution for a parody of a Police recruitment campaign linked to these events.

I’m therefore gone from feeling anger, to hope and steely resolve: from feeling kiwis are zeroines to celebrating our heroines. Especially those many young women who came forward and went to the Police to complain about what happened to them and tried to stop it happening to anyone else: they are incredibly brave.
And I plan to keep being a part of the movement for change, to end violence against women and to help connect our online and offline activism.