Miley Cyrus, Sinéad O’Connor and the future of feminism

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A twerking, tongue-poking Miley Cyrus at the Video Music Awards in Brooklyn earlier this year. Does the pop singer represent third wave feminism? EPA/Jason Szenes

Since her tongue-poking and “twerk”-filled performance at the American Video Music Awards, Miley Cyrus has been the subject of intense media discussion. This has only magnified in the past week, after Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor wrote an open letter to Cyrus, imploring her to “refuse to exploit your body or your sexuality in order for men to make money from you”.

Cyrus did not react well to being chided by one of her idols and her tweets in response have provoked two further open letters by O’Connor. Fellow musician Amanda Palmer has appointed herself as intergenerational umpire, offering an open letter to O’Connor in which she maintains that Cyrus has orchestrated her own plan to be a “raging, naked, twerking sexpot”.

Some people have been left wondering why one young, white American female pop singer is generating this much attention. Certainly, Madonna deliberately pushed the boundaries with controversial video clips and an erotic photo book, Sex, before Billy Ray Cyrus’s “achy breaky heart” had even settled on Miley’s mother, Leticia.

One of the tensions driving the international debate about Cyrus is the now-entrenched difference between second- and third-wave feminisms. In 1963, prominent feminist activist Gloria Steinem went undercover to work as a Playboy Bunny. The resulting exposé of the harmful aspects of women’s work in the New York club exemplified how feminists once
largely agreed that there were exploitative practices inherent in women’s employment in industries connected with sex.

The movement fractured as some women came to disagree with views of pornography and sex work as oppressive. From the 1990s, third-wave feminist rhetoric about “choice” has challenged the idea that stripping, pole dancing, or posing naked are enforced by a male-led – or patriarchal – society.

Michaele L. Ferguson, a political scientist, explains that “choice feminists” see anything a woman says she has chosen to do as “an expression of her liberation”. It does not matter whether a woman elects to run for parliament or to ride naked on a wrecking ball — as does Cyrus in her video for her most recent single — as a woman cannot freely choose to be oppressed.

Third-wave – or choice – feminists have been critical of O’Connor’s initial letter. They have suggested that it exhibits “slut-shaming”, which refers to the denigration of women who transgress sexual expectations for their gender. Like Amanda Palmer, third-wave opinions contend that O’Connor denies Cyrus’s “agency” or control over her career. Finally, they also criticise what they see as O’Connor’s misguided assumption that she can judge what is and what is not “empowering” for another woman.

In contrast, women who uphold second-wave feminist ideals have expressed admiration for the way in which O’Connor’s letter draws on her own experience as a successful female musician to caution against the workings of male-controlled music industry that markets sex appeal. This week, former Eurthymics singer Annie Lennox has also highlighted the impact on young girls of an industry “peddling highly styled pornography with musical accompaniment".
Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor has exchanged a war of words with pop singer Miley Cyrus over the latter’s overtly ‘sexualised’ behaviour. EPA/Inga Kundzina

Second-wave responses also agree with O’Connor’s questioning of the long-term effects of Cyrus’s “choice” to cultivate a highly sexual persona. O’Connor emphasised that at 46 years old, she has not found herself “on the proverbial rag heap” as do many middle-aged female artists “who have based their image around their sexuality”. Shaping a career around sexual desirability in a culture that fetishises the appeal of young women means accepting a built-in expiry date.

The third-wave perspective that lauds Cyrus’s choice to be a “raging, naked, twerking sex-pot” rests on the problematic idea that gender equality has been achieved and that women are already fully liberated. Can we really say that the career choices available to female musicians are equivalent or comparable to those available to male musicians?

In her book Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, American journalist Ariel Levy proposes that women’s “choices” to express their sexuality through exhibiting their bodies for men are created by selling them an extremely limited model of sexuality in the guise of sexual liberation. Levy’s view is approximated by O’Connor’s plea to Cyrus:

They [the music industry] will prostitute you for all you are worth, and cleverly make you think its [sic] what YOU wanted.

Third-wave feminists would argue that O’Connor’s statement suggests Cyrus possesses a false consciousness. Cyrus only thinks she wants to lick sledgehammers and simulate.
masturbation with a foam finger because she has internalised patriarchal ideas about women. However, a second-wave orientation would counter that it’s impossible to talk about free choices in a world where gender inequality persists and women’s options are overtly and unwittingly constrained.

A war of words among privileged entertainers seems a trivial story in comparison with the major political and social upheavals of the present moment. Nevertheless, the stoush between Cyrus and O’Connor attracts page views, not only because of our thirst for gossip. We are also interested in this debate because we remain uncertain about the rights and freedoms of women and how best to foster them.