

Hen's night bunny feminism

By Katie Ellis

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Apparently post feminist women are reinventing hen's nights in order to (re)claim a male activity while men are becoming more "classy" with spa visits and golfing days. Yet for Hannah Pool, the hen's night is a traumatic, humiliating experience where feminists are expected to disregard their political beliefs. Pool contends that the first step in reducing the "very specific tyranny" of a hen's night is to make them bunny ear free.

My cousin just got married and I was invited to his fiancé's hen's night:

Yes, its dress up PLAYBOY BUNNY!!! Ears provided for those who think they are not the dress up type ...

Groan

Although these origins are dubious to me now; I became a feminist in the 1990s. I actually understood what the *Spice Girls* meant when they said "you gotta get with my friends", that female friendship was more important than a man. Although somewhat disturbed by their constant consumerist cash in on "girl power" I liked that they were seemingly in charge. The way they dressed appeared to be an important part of that and to me having long felt both controlled and judged by the way I dressed, I began embracing self control by wearing halter neck tops. Although still partial to a halter neck I'm feeling a bit troubled by Third wave feminism's evolution into post feminism. I feel like girl culture is letting us down.

The current crop of girl bands, such as *The Pussycat Dolls* as they sing "don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me", has got me depressed. There are so many contradictions regarding empowerment, girl culture, consumerism and the same old subjugation.

My soon to be cousin's Playboy-themed hen's night was a great text to think these ideas through. The Playboy bunny has become a ubiquitous symbol in modern life and has taken on new meanings of sexual self possession.

I love a themed party, but this theme confused me. Why was I dressing as a stripper to go and see a (male) stripper on a girl's night out? I got a little bit outraged in the Ariel Levy sense. Levy famously investigated the rise of what she describes as raunch culture and the "new empowered woman" in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. Levy is concerned that as women embrace raunch culture and the requisite objectification of women that goes along with it as empowering, they are sending the feminist movement back.

She takes particular aim at the Playboy phenomena, beginning with concern at the number of women wearing t-shirts with the Playboy bunny logo embossed across the chest and then taking issue with the rhetoric that posing nude for *Playboy* is empowering and a way for women to be in control of their lives and sexuality.

For Levy, the Playboy phenomenon as it has infiltrated the lives of ordinary women is a sad indictment on the direction feminism and post feminism is headed. Levy disagrees with the argument that raunch culture is evidence that "the feminist project had already been achieved." That, it's *because* of feminism we can look at and look like Playboy bunnies. She disagrees that looking like a stripper is empowering, I think I agree.

However, I'll admit I got into the hen's night theme, well I thought I did. I bought Playboy bunny ears, cuffs, bow tie, and fluffy tail; a hot pink boob tube and wore tight jeans and a fluffy white jacket (from my *Spice Girls* days). But when I walked through the gate I saw in front of me what looked like actual Playboy bunnies; fishnets, lingerie, corsets and tiny knickers were everywhere. I felt a little sad I had elected to wear pants. With the massive blow up penis, pornographic deck of cards and count the nipple games, the party was definitely an

arena for female self expression.

I thought the bunnies looked fabulous but still I was left wondering why the need to get all stripperised, and then my mother arrived. She had embraced the theme too with rolled up skinny jeans, bunny ears and a little crop top that showed a magnificent cleavage. "Put those away mum" I said. I had never seen my mother dressed like this before and to tell the truth was more than a little shocked that she owned such items in her wardrobe.

But my cousins, aunties, friends and total strangers seemed to think mum looked great and she posed for a thousand photos before making a quick getaway leaving everyone wanting more. I'll admit it took me a little while to accept my mother wearing sexualised clothing but I came around. I started to see how blurring the boundaries between everyday women and strippers could be empowering. For a woman who has been expected to behave in a certain way all her life this was a revolutionary act. It was her choice, she was in charge, and people were looking at her because she wanted them to.

Levy attributes the rise of raunch culture to a division within the feminist movement of the 1970s when so called "anti-porn" feminists were at loggerheads with "pro-sex" feminists. These labels are not as relevant today because female interest in sex is well asserted however the legacy of the man hating caricature of the woman's movement has remained. Playboy bunny merchandising has grown out of a rejection of this caricature with women keen to assert their own interest in sex, men and looking desirable. Perhaps in this way the Playboy bunny has become representative of sexual self-determination - a core feminist belief.

So if the Playboy bunny can represent both core feminist beliefs *and* the same old female objectification what can we as politicised women make of this contradiction and the hen's night in general?

It's important to stay aware of the commodified and depoliticised nature of bunny feminism as we're forced to wear those ears at hen's nights. Equally, we must acknowledge the revolutionary ways Playboy offers women an entry to the core feminist ideal of sexual self determination.

Dr Katie Ellis, the author *Disabling Diversity*, received a PhD in communications – disability and media – from Murdoch University in 2005 and has recently returned there to lecture in the School of Media Communication and Culture. Previously, Katie worked in disability support at The University of Western Australia. Katie also works as a freelance writer and journalist for Quenda Communications.