In the United States, each wave of feminism has fought its own battles with body image. The suffragists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rebelled against corsets and fought the characterization of women's righters as unfeminine, homely and pretentious "blue-stockings." In the 1960s and '70s, the second wave of feminists fought stereotyping that pegged them as humorless, ugly and anti-sex. Women struggled to be taken seriously, to be more than just pretty faces and pin-up girls. They wanted to be defined by their minds rather than their bodies.

In the late 1990s, among the rising third wave of feminists, image and body are at the center of feminist analysis. For many women, our bodies have become the canvasses upon which our struggles paint themselves. Body image, in fact, may be the pivotal third wave issue—the common struggle that mobilizes the current feminist generation.

The first two waves of feminism were organized movements, with clearly defined goals. The first wave fought to establish women's right to be citizens—to vote, own property, divorce and inherit money. The second wave's agenda was to elevate women's status to that of men.

In the third wave, we've expanded the fight for equal status. We are aware of the need to express our various identities—racial, ethnic, sexual, political, religious and class—as well as our feminist identity. This individuality is necessary, but it also poses a challenge. Because we now have many different paths to—and definitions of—empowerment, it's become difficult to organize a unified movement. In this wave of feminism, you're as likely to run into women who defend, enjoy and create pornography as you are to come across feminists who see pornography as the ultimate oppressor. You are also likely to find women who are tired of the pressure to act and look "perfect." Others pack their feminist toolkits with lipstick and nail polish, forgetting that while lipstick and nail polish aren't feminist concerns, the right to choose—or not choose—them is.

It's also difficult to unite everyone under an umbrella term like feminism when the third wave feminist vocabulary has been co-opted by the media. For example, "girl power" has been transformed from an expression of individuality and empowerment to a slick marketing slogan. And many women have taken the bait, assuming that the "girl power" label comes complete with feminist securities such as reproductive freedom, freedom from violence and other issues played out on women's bodies.

To unite today's young women, we need to focus on a particular issue and then bring together the diverse feminist opinions on the matter to create a rich, complex dialogue. Better to disagree than to be silent, to fill out feminism rather than trim it down.

Second wave feminists named our struggles—domestic violence,
sexual harassment, equal pay for work of equal value, which had lain silenced until then—and lobbied for laws that would protect us. Now, our generation has turned the focus inward. Tellingly, our relationships with our bodies often signal how far we still have to go. It is evident not only in how we treat them, but in how their role continues to permeate our existence and dictate our lives.

So where do we begin? Although “body image” won’t make it into Congress, related issues will—for instance, sports, reproductive rights and affirmative action. As young feminists, we can point out how these individual and personal issues are linked to a larger political agenda.

Body image is significant as a rallying focus because it speaks not only to the converted but also to the “I’m not a feminist, but... I’m tired of measuring myself against an impossible-to-achieve beauty standard” contingent. It can catalyze our dormant or displaced activism, primarily because it’s both a cultural and a political issue—and we are a pop culture-driven generation. Mention teen magazines, for example, and many young women react viscerally, offering stories of how fat/ugly/ethnic/misfitting/self-hating the magazines made them feel. Even young women who don’t identify as feminists offer heartfelt and complex emotions on the topic.

Perhaps that’s why much of third wave feminism has centered on pop culture, rather than legal and political strategies. Our activism is directed at our most visible “oppressors”—the media and entertainment industries. Rather than holding marches or rallies, many young women create zines, websites, music, films and videos that counter images we deem insulting or dangerous.

In the visual world of the late twentieth century, however, the outside counts as well as the inside. We use our appearance—bodies, clothing, style—to express our inner convictions, our pride, our affiliations, our identities, our insecurities and our weaknesses. In a generation focused on identity issues—and unafraid to show them to the public—our bodies, and how we adorn them, can express who we are.

But, as young women redesign feminism, we run the risk of being misinterpreted as all image, no substance—as having no collective agenda. Too often, image becomes a convenient cover-up for issues we haven’t resolved, just as eating disorders often manifest more deeply rooted problems such as childhood abuse.

We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of only having our bodies and our images speak for who we are—what we think, what we feel, what we do. Images and slogans are too easily co-opted and robbed of the substance they have the potential to convey. Instead, we must take this opportunity to seize control of our bodies and the forces that manipulate them—mostly the advertising and entertainment industries.

A feminist world is often where women find themselves when they get fed up with the representation of women in the media. It’s a place to express all the rage, realization and healing that follow—and to find a support community of people who have had similar experiences. Once feminists reach a point of understanding that we are not these images—that we don’t have to look like Claudia Schiffer to be beautiful—then what? The silence, at that point, is deafening. We’re supposed to go out and educate other women about loving their bodies, to save them from eating disorders. But if, as leaders, we dare to expose our own unresolved body image issues, we have to worry about tarnishing our feminist credibility. We’re not supposed to have those problems anymore.

But we do. I do. As a feminist, I feel helpless at times, caught in a double standard. At “Ask Amy,” my online feminist advice column, I confront painfully honest letters from young women who are dealing with their own eating disorders or body issues. What do I tell
them? I could ignore the fact that the women we see thriving are those who fall under the rubric of athletic, attractive, slim, good-looking, fit, healthy. I could forget that, statistically, thin women have a greater chance of being accepted to elite colleges than heavier women do even if their credentials are identical; and that it isn’t poverty that causes obesity, but obesity that causes poverty. But I see it as my responsibility to be honest with my correspondents. Body image issues, like most any other painful life experience, become less difficult once an open dialogue begins. So my advice usually includes my own experience. I tell them how I struggled with bulimia and how I eventually realized that developing my own identity is more important than pleasing other people.

The road to a solution is certainly a feminist one. It includes women creating our own beauty standards rather than following those dictated by corporations. It includes pointing out that this problem affects men, too. (Men are only slightly less likely to be concerned about their body image than women are, and a reported 10 percent of those suffering from eating disorders are men.) It means better sex education and more forums to talk about body image. But we can’t stop there. We must create a dialogue that extends beyond these forums and into our daily lives, a dialogue that leads us to less shame, less denial and more room for individuality. It’s up to the third wave of feminism to make sure this conversation continues and that a support network exists.

What did it mean to grow up a girl in white, middle-class America in the 1970s if you didn’t want to be a girl—that is, be treated like a girl, with people assuming that you were weak, worth less than boys, that you’d rather be shopping or playing with dolls than kicking some ass? For me, it meant listening to Aerosmith and Kiss and fighting my mother for equal access to Lee jeans and flannel shirts from Miller’s Outpost. It meant your mother might be schizo, because for the second time in American history, following those primo babes in Seneca Falls, New York, who first raised the idea of women’s rights in 1848, gender equity was being questioned. My mom, raised with traditional family values, tried to impress on me traditional girl-ness—obedience, mildness, acquiescence and servitude. But, in some ways, she was also a feminist and tried to impart values to me that refuted traditional girl-ness, like independence.

The fighters who launched the second wave women’s movement...