

# feminism is for everybody

passionate politics

bell hooks



# Feminism Is for Everybody

What is feminism? In this short, accessible primer, bell hooks explores the nature of feminism and its positive promise to eliminate sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. With her characteristic clarity and directness, hooks encourages readers to see how feminism can touch and change their lives—to see that feminism is for everybody.

A cultural critic, an intellectual, and a feminist writer, **bell hooks** is best known for classic books including *Ain't I a Woman*, *Bone Black*, *All About Love*, *Rock My Soul*, *Belonging*, *We Real Cool*, *Where We Stand*, *Teaching to Transgress*, *Teaching Community*, *Outlaw Culture*, and *Reel to Real*. hooks is Distinguished Professor in Residence in Appalachian Studies at Berea College, and resides in her home state of Kentucky.

First published 2015  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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First edition published  
by South End Press 2000

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

hooks, bell, 1952–

Feminism is for everybody : passionate politics / bell hooks. — [Second edition].

pages cm

Includes index.

1. Feminist theory. 2. Feminism—Political aspects. 3. Sex discrimination against women. I. Title.

HQ1190.H67 2014

305.4201—dc23

2014023012

ISBN: 978-1-138-82159-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-82162-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-74318-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Galliard  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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## Sisterhood is Still Powerful

When the slogan “Sisterhood is powerful” was first used, it was awesome. I began my full-fledged participation in feminist movement my sophomore year in college. Attending an all women’s college for a year before I transferred to Stanford University, I knew from first-hand experience the difference in female self-esteem and self-assertion in same-sex classrooms versus those where males were present. At Stanford males ruled the day in every classroom. Females spoke less, took less initiative, and often when they spoke you could hardly hear what they were saying. Their voices lacked strength and confidence. And to make matters worse we were told time and time again by male professors that we were not as intelligent as the males, that we could not be “great” thinkers, writers, and so on. These attitudes shocked me since I had come from an all-female environment where our intellectual worth and value was constantly affirmed by the standard of academic excellence our mostly female professors set for us and themselves.

Indeed, I was indebted to my favorite white female English professor who thought I was not getting the academic guidance I needed at our women’s college because they did not have an intensified writing program. She encouraged me to attend Stanford. She believed that I would someday be an important thinker and writer.

At Stanford my ability was constantly questioned. I began to doubt myself. Then feminist movement rocked the campus. Female students and professors demanded an end to discrimination based on gender inside and outside the classroom. Wow, it was an intense and awesome time. There I took my first women's studies class with the writer Tillie Olsen, who compelled her students to think first and foremost about the fate of women from working-class backgrounds. There the scholar and one-day biographer of Anne Sexton, Diane Middlebrook, passed out one of my poems in our class on contemporary poetry with no name on it and asked us to identify whether the writer was male or female, an experiment that made us think critically about judging the value of writing on the basis of gender biases. There I began to write my first book at the age of 19, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. None of these incredible transformations would have happened without feminist movement creating a foundation for solidarity between women.

That foundation rested on our critique of what we then called "the enemy within," referring to our internalized sexism. We all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. Sexist thinking made us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly. Feminist thinking helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness.

Male bonding was an accepted and affirmed aspect of patriarchal culture. It was simply assumed that men in groups would stick together, support one another, be team players, place the good of the group over individual gain and recognition. Female bonding was not possible within patriarchy; it was an act of treason. Feminist

movement created the context for female bonding. We did not bond against men, we bonded to protect our interests as women. When we challenged professors who taught no books by women, it was not because we did not like those professors (we often did); rightly, we wanted an end to gender biases in the classroom and in the curriculum.

The feminist transformations that were taking place in our coed college in the early '70s were taking place as well in the world of home and work. First and foremost feminist movement urged females to no longer see ourselves and our bodies as the property of men. To demand control of our sexuality, effective birth control and reproductive rights, an end to rape and sexual harassment, we needed to stand in solidarity. In order for women to change job discrimination we needed to lobby as a group to change public policy. Challenging and changing female sexist thinking was the first step towards creating the powerful sisterhood that would ultimately rock our nation.

Following in the wake of civil rights revolution feminist movement in the '70s and '80s changed the face of our nation. The feminist activists who made these changes possible cared for the well-being of all females. We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of the experiences of women and even shared sympathy for common suffering. Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes. Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy. Significantly, sisterhood could never have been possible across the boundaries of race and class if individual women had not been willing to divest of their power to dominate and exploit subordinated groups

of women. As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized.

As more women begin to opportunistically lay claim to feminism in the '80s without undergoing the feminist consciousness-raising that would have enabled them to divest of their sexism, the patriarchal assumption that the powerful should rule over the weak informed their relations to other women. As women, particularly previously disenfranchised privileged white women, began to acquire class power without divesting of their internalized sexism, divisions between women intensified. When women of color critiqued the racism within the society as a whole and called attention to the ways that racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and their hearts. And that was equally true when it came to the issue of classism among women.

I remember when feminist women, mostly white women with class privilege, debated the issue of whether or not to hire domestic help, trying to come up with a way to not participate in the subordination and dehumanization of less-privileged women. Some of those women successfully created positive bonding between themselves and the women they hired so that there could be mutual advancement in a larger context of inequality. Rather than abandoning the vision of sisterhood, because they could not attain some utopian state, they created a real sisterhood, one that took into account the needs of everyone involved. This was the hard work of feminist solidarity between women. Sadly, as opportunism within feminism intensified, as feminist gains became commonplace and were therefore taken for granted, many women did not want to work hard to create and sustain solidarity.

A large body of women simply abandoned the notion of sisterhood. Individual women who had once critiqued and challenged pa-

triarchy re-aligned themselves with sexist men. Radical women who felt betrayed by the fierce negative competition between women often simply retreated. And at this point feminist movement, which was aimed at positively transforming the lives of all females, became more stratified. The vision of sisterhood that had been the rallying cry of the movement seemed to many women to no longer matter. Political solidarity between women which had been the force putting in place positive change has been and is now consistently undermined and threatened. As a consequence we are as in need of a renewed commitment to political solidarity between women as we were when contemporary feminist movement first began.

When contemporary feminist movement first began we had a vision of sisterhood with no concrete understanding of the actual work we would need to do to make political solidarity a reality. Through experience and hard work, and, yes, by learning from our failures and mistakes, we now have in place a body of theory and shared practice that can teach new converts to feminist politics what must be done to create, sustain, and protect our solidarity. Since masses of young females know little about feminism and many falsely assume that sexism is no longer the problem, feminist education for critical consciousness must be continuous. Older feminist thinkers cannot assume that young females will just acquire knowledge of feminism along the way to adulthood. They require guidance. Overall women in our society are forgetting the value and power of sisterhood. Renewed feminist movement must once again raise the banner high to proclaim anew "Sisterhood is powerful."

Radical groups of women continue our commitment to building sisterhood, to making feminist political solidarity between women an ongoing reality. We continue the work of bonding across race and class. We continue to put in place the anti-sexist thinking and practice which affirms the reality that females can achieve



self-actualization and success without dominating one another. And we have the good fortune to know everyday of our lives that sisterhood is concretely possible, that sisterhood is still powerful.