

feminism is for everybody

passionate politics

bell hooks



ROUTLEDGE

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.



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PASSIONATE POLITICS

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Preface to the New Edition

Engaged with feminist theory and practice for more than forty years, I am proud to testify that each year of my life my commitment to feminist movement, to challenging and changing patriarchy has become more intense. More than ever before, I work to share the liberating joy feminist struggle brings to our lives as females and males who continue to work for change, who continue to hope for an end to sexism, to sexist exploitation and oppression.

From the very onset of my engagement with feminist practice, I was most excited about building a mass feminist movement. Believing at twenty years old that it was feminist movement for social justice that could change all our lives I worked to envision ways of bringing the meaning of feminist thinking and practice to a larger audience, to the masses. And while much of my work did reach folks who had not yet thought about feminism, especially black folks, the fact that almost all my work was written while I was a student or a professor meant that it did not always reach that larger audience. The primary way that the reading public knows that a book exists is either they see it displayed in bookstores and/or they read reviews of the work. When work is dissident and progressive it is unlikely to receive very many mainstream reviews.

I have been fortunate to have published books that although they were rarely reviewed, they found an audience. Definitely course adoptions became one of the ways books that received little mainstream attention found an audience. And of course when writing books that readers proclaim “this book saved my life,” word of mouth sharing about the work sells copies. As I look back at forty years of writing feminist theory I am awed that my work still finds readers, still educates for critical consciousness.

Through the years as more diverse female and male voices have come to the table writing awesome feminist theory and cultural criticism, academic settings became and have become the primary settings for the dissemination of feminist thought. This trend has had positive impact for college students as it provides greater opportunity for folks to learn the power and significance of feminist thinking and practice, but it has impacted negatively on the work of broadening the engagement of a large public in feminist movement.

I came to full feminist consciousness as an undergraduate, my mind changed and altered by women’s studies classes, by the books we read. However born into a family with six girls and one boy, I wanted my mama, my siblings, everyone I knew to be as intoxicated with feminist thinking as I was. The picture on the cover of this book is of me and my best friend from our first year of college. Race did not stand in the way of our bonding as it was shared working class issues that brought us together. We are in our late teens, almost twenty, in this photo. When I became excited about feminism April came with me to feminist conferences to learn what it was all about. After more than forty years we are still attending feminist lectures together. We learned the truism that “sister is powerful” by learning and experiencing life’s journey together.

When thinking of what to write I have always worked from the space of concrete experience, writing about what was happening

in my life and the lives of females and males around me. For years I would listen to folks within the academy and without share their sense that they did not understand the theory and practice of feminism. Often students taking women's studies classes who had developed critical consciousness would share the reality that it was difficult to explain their new ways of thinking to family and friends.

Listening to all of the complaints that feminist theory was just "too academic" or "too full of words folks could not understand" I just felt that somehow the movement had failed if we could not communicate feminist politics to everyone. I would often say that we needed to go door to door to share feminist thinking (that never happened.) Then it occurred to me that I should write an easy to read book that would explain feminist thinking and encourage folks to embrace feminist politics.

There has never been a time when I believed feminist movement should be and was a woman-only movement. In my heart of hearts I knew that we would never have a successful feminist movement if we could not encourage everyone, female and male, women and men, girls and boys to come closer to feminism. I would tell my students I intend to write a book that will explain feminist thinking, one that you can take home and share with relatives, with your parents, your grandparents, your church members.

The title *Feminism is for Everybody* was like a slogan proclaiming all that the book was about. Clear, concise, easy to read, for me it was a dream come true. For it does invite us all to come closer to feminism.



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Introduction: Come Closer to Feminism

Everywhere I go I proudly tell folks who want to know who I am and what I do that I am a writer, a feminist theorist, a cultural critic. I tell them I write about movies and popular culture, analyzing the message in the medium. Most people find this exciting and want to know more. Everyone goes to movies, watches television, glances through magazines, and everyone has thoughts about the messages they receive, about the images they look at. It is easy for the diverse public I encounter to understand what I do as a cultural critic, to understand my passion for writing (lots of folks want to write, and do). But feminist theory — that's the place where the questions stop. Instead I tend to hear all about the evil of feminism and the bad feminists: how "they" hate men; how "they" want to go against nature — and god; how "they" are all lesbians; how "they" are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance.

When I ask these same folks about the feminist books or magazines they read, when I ask them about the feminist talks they have heard, about the feminist activists they know, they respond by letting me know that everything they know about feminism has come into their lives thirdhand, that they really have not come close enough to feminist movement to know what really happens, what it's really about. Mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry

women who want to be like men. They do not even think about feminism as being about rights — about women gaining equal rights. When I talk about the feminism I know — up close and personal — they willingly listen, although when our conversations end, they are quick to tell me I am different, not like the “real” feminists who hate men, who are angry. I assure them I am as a real and as radical a feminist as one can be, and if they dare to come closer to feminism they will see it is not how they have imagined it.

Each time I leave one of these encounters, I want to have in my hand a little book so that I can say, read this book, and it will tell you what feminism is, what the movement is about. I want to be holding in my hand a concise, fairly easy to read and understand book; not a long book, not a book thick with hard to understand jargon and academic language, but a straightforward, clear book — easy to read without being simplistic. From the moment feminist thinking, politics, and practice changed my life, I have wanted this book. I have wanted to give it to the folk I love so that they can understand better this cause, this feminist politics I believe in so deeply, that is the foundation of my political life.

I have wanted them to have an answer to the question “what is feminism?” that is rooted neither in fear or fantasy. I have wanted them to have this simple definition to read again and again so they know: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” I love this definition, which I first offered more than 10 years ago in my book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. I love it because it so clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-male. It makes it clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it

would be naive and wrongminded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men. To end patriarchy (another way of naming the institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts; until we let go of sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action.

Males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are superior to females and should rule over us. But those benefits have come with a price. In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress us, using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact. Most men find it difficult to be patriarchs. Most men are disturbed by hatred and fear of women, by male violence against women, even the men who perpetuate this violence. But they fear letting go of the benefits. They are not certain what will happen to the world they know most intimately if patriarchy changes. So they find it easier to passively support male domination even when they know in their minds and hearts that it is wrong. Again and again men tell me they have no idea what it is feminists want. I believe them. I believe in their capacity to change and grow. And I believe that if they knew more about feminism they would no longer fear it, for they would find in feminist movement the hope of their own release from the bondage of patriarchy.

It is for these men, young and old, and for all of us, that I have written this short handbook, the book I have spent more than 20 years longing for. I had to write it because I kept waiting for it to appear, and it did not. And without it there was no way to address the hordes of people in this nation who are daily bombarded with anti-feminist backlash, who are being told to hate and resist a movement that they know very little about. There should be so many little feminist primers, easy to read pamphlets and books, telling us all