

Feminism is for EVERYBODY

Passionate Politics



bell hooks

44

Most women in the United States do not even know or use the terms colonialism and neocolonialism. Most American women, particularly white women, have not decolonized their thinking either in relation to the racism, sexism, and class elitism they hold towards less powerful groups of women in this society or the masses of

GLOBAL FEMINISM

Individual female freedom fighters all over the world have single-handedly struggled against patriarchy and male domination. Since the first people on the planet earth were nonwhite it is unlikely that white women were the first females to rebel against male domination. In white supremacist capitalist patriarchal Western culture neocolonial thinking sets the tone for many cultural practices. That thinking always focuses on who has conquered a territory, who has ownership, who has the right to rule. Contemporary feminist politics did not come into being as a radical response to neocolonialism.

Privileged-class white women swiftly declared their "ownership" of the movement, placing working-class white women, poor white women, and all women of color in the position of followers. It did not matter how many working-class white women or individual black women spearheaded the women's movement in radical directions. At the end of the day white women with class power declared that they owned the movement, that they were the leaders and the rest of merely followers. Parasitic class relations have overshadowed issues of race, nation, and gender in contemporary neocolonialism. And feminism did not remain aloof from that dynamic.

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GLOBAL FEMINISM

freedom fighters all over the world have single-mindedly fought against patriarchy and male domination. Since the planet earth was nonwhite it is unlikely that the first females to rebel against male domination were white. The racist capitalist patriarchal Western culture sets the tone for many cultural practices. That is, it is based on who has conquered a territory, who has the right to rule. Contemporary feminist politics is being as a radical response to neocolonialism. In the 1960s white women swiftly declared their "ownership" of the movement, placing working-class white women, poor women of color in the position of followers. It was not until the 1970s that many working-class white women or individual women of color headed the women's movement in radical directions. The day white women with class power declared their leadership in the movement, that they were the leaders and the followers. Parasitic class relations have overshadowed race, class, and gender in contemporary neocolonialism. Feminist leaders in the United States proclaimed equality here they did not seek to find out if cor-

responding movements were taking place among women around the world. Instead they declared themselves liberated and therefore in the position to liberate their less fortunate sisters, especially those in the “third world.” This neocolonial paternalism had already been enacted to keep women of color in the background so that only conservative/liberal white women would be the authentic representatives of feminism. Radical white women tend not to be “represented,” and, if represented at all, they are depicted as a fringe freak element. No wonder then that the “power feminism” of the ’90s offers wealthy white heterosexual women as the examples of feminist success.

In truth their hegemonic takeover of feminist rhetoric about equality has helped mask their allegiance to the ruling classes within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Radical feminists were dismayed to witness so many women (of all races) appropriating feminist jargon while sustaining their commitment to Western imperialism and transnational capitalism. While feminists in the United States were right to call attention to the need for global equality for women, problems arose as those individual feminists with class power projected imperialist fantasies onto women globally, the major fantasy being that women in the United States have more rights than any group of women globally, are "free" if they want to be, and therefore have the right to lead feminist movement and set feminist agendas for all the other women in the world, particularly women in third world countries. Such thinking merely mirrors the imperialist racism and sexism of ruling groups of Western men.

Most women in the United States do not even know or use the terms colonialism and neocolonialism. Most American women, particularly white women, have not decolonized their thinking either in relation to the racism, sexism, and class elitism they hold towards less powerful groups of women in this society or the masses of

women globally. When unenlightened individual feminist thinkers addressed global issues of gender exploitation and oppression they did and do so from a perspective of neocolonialism. Significantly, radical white women writing in *Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain* emphasize the reality that "to not understand neocolonialism is to not fully live in the present." Since unenlightened white feminists were unwilling to acknowledge the spheres of American life where they acted and act in collusion with imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, sustained protest and resistance on the part of black women/women of color and our radical white sisters was needed to break the wall of denial.

Yet even when large numbers of feminist activists adopted a perspective which included race, gender, class, and nationality, the white "power feminists" continued to project an image of feminism that linked and links women's equality with imperialism. Global women's issues like forced female circumcision, sex clubs in Thailand, the veiling of women in Africa, India, the Middle East, and Europe, the killing of female children in China, remain important concerns. However feminist women in the West are still struggling to decolonize feminist thinking and practice so that these issues can be addressed in a manner that does not reinscribe Western imperialism. Consider the way many Western women, white and black, have confronted the issue of female circumcision in Africa and the Middle East. Usually these countries are depicted as "barbaric and uncivilized," the sexism there portrayed as more brutal and dangerous to women than the sexism here in the United States.

A decolonized feminist perspective would first and foremost examine how sexist practices in relation to women's bodies globally are linked. For example: linking circumcision with life-threatening eating disorders (which are the direct consequence of a culture imposing thinness as a beauty ideal) or any life-threatening cosmetic

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surgery would emphasize that the sexism, the misogyny, underlying these practices globally mirror the sexism here in this country. When these issues are addressed in this manner Western imperialism is not reinscribed and feminism cannot be appropriated by transnational capitalism as yet another luxury product from the West women in other cultures must fight to have the right to consume.

Until radical women in the United States challenge those groups of women posing as feminists in the interest of class opportunism, the tone of global feminism in the West will continue to be set by those with the greatest class power who hold old biases. Radical feminist work around the world daily strengthens political solidarity between women beyond the boundaries of race/ethnicity and nationality. Mainstream mass media rarely calls attention to these positive interventions. In *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*, Zillah Eisenstein shares the insight:

Feminism(s) as transnational — imagined as the rejection of false race/gender borders and falsely constructed "other" — is a major challenge to masculinist nationalism, the distortions of statist communism and "free"-market globalism. It is a feminism that recognizes individual diversity, and freedom, and equality, defined through and beyond north/west and south/east dialogues.

No one who has studied the growth of global feminism can deny the important work women are doing to ensure our freedom. No one can deny that Western women, particularly women in the United States, have contributed much that is needed to this struggle and need to contribute more. The goal of global feminism is to reach out and join global struggles to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.

the strategies they can use to have a good life. Substantial material lack are vital to the success of

st movement did not make economic self- its primary goal. Yet addressing the economic may ultimately be the feminist platform that onse. It may well become the place of collective on ground, the issue that unites all women.

RACE AND GENDER

No intervention changed the face of American feminism more than the demand that feminist thinkers acknowledge the reality of race and racism. All white women in this nation know that their status is different from that of black women/women of color. They know this from the time they are little girls watching television and seeing only their images, and looking at magazines and seeing only their images. They know that the only reason nonwhites are absent/invisible is because they are not white. All white women in this nation know that whiteness is a privileged category. The fact that white females may choose to repress or deny this knowledge does not mean they are ignorant: it means that they are in denial.

No group of white women understood the differences in their status and that of black women more than the group of politically conscious white females who were active in civil rights struggle. Diaries and memoirs of this period in American history written by white women document this knowledge. Yet many of these individuals moved from civil rights into women's liberation and spearheaded a feminist movement where they suppressed and denied the awareness of difference they had seen and heard articulated firsthand in civil rights struggle. Just because they participated in anti-racist struggle did not mean that they had divested of white supremacy, of

notions that they were superior to black females, more informed, better educated, more suited to "lead" a movement.

In many ways they were following in the footsteps of their abolitionist ancestors who had demanded that everyone (white women and black people) be given the right to vote, but, when faced with the possibility that black males might gain the right to vote while they were denied it on the basis of gender, they chose to ally themselves with men, uniting under the rubric of white supremacy. Contemporary white females witnessing the militant demand for more rights for black people chose that moment to demand more rights for themselves. Some of these individuals claim that it was working on behalf of civil rights that made them aware of sexism and sexist oppression. Yet if this was the whole picture one might think their newfound political awareness of difference would have carried over into the way they theorized contemporary feminist movement.

They entered the movement erasing and denying difference, not playing race alongside gender, but eliminating race from the picture. Foregrounding gender meant that white women could take center stage, could claim the movement as theirs, even as they called on all women to join. The utopian vision of sisterhood evoked in a feminist movement that initially did not take racial difference or anti-racist struggle seriously did not capture the imagination of most black women/women of color. Individual black women who were active in the movement from its inception for the most part stayed in their place. When the feminist movement began racial integration was still rare. Many black people were learning how to interact with whites on the basis of being peers for the first time in their lives. No wonder individual black women choosing feminism were reluctant to introduce their awareness of race. It must have felt so awesome to have white women evoke sisterhood in a world where they had mainly experienced white women as exploiters and oppressors.

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A younger generation of black females/women of color in the late '70s and early '80s challenged white female racism. Unlike our older black women allies we had for the most part been educated in predominantly white settings. Most of us had never been in a subordinated position in relation to a white female. Most of us had not been in the workforce. We had never been in our place. We were better positioned to critique racism and white supremacy within the women's movement. Individual white women who had attempted to organize the movement around the banner of common oppression evoking the notion that women constituted a sexual class/caste were the most reluctant to acknowledge differences among women, differences that overshadowed all the common experiences female shared. Race was the most obvious difference.

In the '70s I wrote the first draft of *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. I was 19 years old. I had never worked a full-time job. I had come from a racially segregated small town in the south to Stanford University. While I had grown up resisting patriarchal thinking, college was the place where I embraced feminist politics. It was there as the only black female present in feminist classrooms, in consciousness-raising, that I began to engage race and gender theoretically. It was there that I began to demand recognition of the way in which racist biases were shaping feminist thinking and call for change. At other locations individual black women/women of color were making the same critique.

In those days white women who were unwilling to face the reality of racism and racial difference accused us of being traitors by introducing race. Wrongly they saw us as deflecting focus away from gender. In reality, we were demanding that we look at the status of females realistically, and that realistic understanding serve as the foundation for a real feminist politic. Our intent was not to diminish the vision of sisterhood. We sought to put in place a concrete politics of soli-

darity that would make genuine sisterhood possible. We knew that there could no real sisterhood between white women and women of color if white women were not able to divest of white supremacy, if feminist movement were not fundamentally anti-racist.

Critical interventions around race did not destroy the women's movement; it became stronger. Breaking through denial about race helped women face the reality of difference on all levels. And we were finally putting in place a movement that did not place the class interests of privileged women, especially white women, over that of all other women. We put in place a vision of sisterhood where all our realities could be spoken. There has been no contemporary movement for social justice where individual participants engaged in the dialectical exchange that occurred among feminist thinkers about race which led to the re-thinking of much feminist theory and practice. The fact that participants in the feminist movement could face critique and challenge while still remaining wholeheartedly committed to a vision of justice, of liberation, is a testament to the movement's strength and power. It shows us that no matter how misguided feminist thinkers have been in the past, the will to change, the will to create the context for struggle and liberation, remains stronger than the need to hold on to wrong beliefs and assumptions.

For years I witnessed the reluctance of white feminist thinkers to acknowledge the importance of race. I witnessed their refusal to divest of white supremacy, their unwillingness to acknowledge that an anti-racist feminist movement was the only political foundation that would make sisterhood be a reality. And I witnessed the revolution in consciousness that occurred as individual women began to break free of denial, to break free of white supremacist thinking. These awesome changes restore my faith in feminist movement and strengthen the solidarity I feel towards all women.

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from all critical interventions on the issue of race. The only prob-
lematic arena has been that of translating theory into practice. While
individual white women have incorporated an analysis of race into
much feminist scholarship, these insights have not had as much im-
pact on the day to day relations between white women and women
of color. Anti-racist interactions between women are difficult in a
society that remains racially segregated. Despite diverse work set-
tings a vast majority of folks still socialize only with people of their
own group. Racism and sexism combined create harmful barriers
between women. So far feminist strategies to change this have not
been very useful.

Individual white women and women of color who have worked
through difficulties to make the space where bonds of love and po-
litical solidarity can emerge need to share the methods and strategies
that we have successfully employed. Almost no attention is given
the relationship between girls of different races. Biased feminist
scholarship which attempts to show that white girls are somehow
more vulnerable to sexist conditioning than girls of color simply
perpetuates the white supremacist assumption that white females
require and deserve more attention to their concerns and ills than
other groups. Indeed while girls of color may express different be-
havior than their white counterparts they are not only internalizing
sexist conditioning, they are far more likely to be victimized by sex-
ism in ways that are irreparable.

Feminist movement, especially the work of visionary black ac-
tivist, paved the way for a reconsideration of race and racism that
has had positive impact on our society as a whole. Rarely do main-
stream social critiques acknowledge this fact. As a feminist theorist
who has written extensively about the issue of race and racism
within feminist movement, I know that there remains much that
needs to be challenged and changed, but it is equally important to

celebrate the enormous changes that have occurred. That celebration, understanding our triumphs and using them as models, means that they can become the sound foundation for the building of a mass-based anti-racist feminist movement.

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ENDING VIOLENCE

By far one of the most widespread positive interventions of contemporary feminist movement remains the effort to create and sustain greater cultural awareness of domestic violence as well as the changes that must happen in our thinking and action if we are to see its end. Nowadays the problem of domestic violence is talked about in so many circles, from mass media to grade schools, that it is often forgotten that contemporary feminist movement was the force that dramatically uncovered and exposed the ongoing reality of domestic violence. Initially feminist focus on domestic violence highlighted male violence against women, but as the movement progressed evidence showed that there was also domestic violence present in same-sex relations, that women in relationships with women were and are oftentimes the victims of abuse, that children were also victims of adult patriarchal violence enacted by women and men.

Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force. This expanded definition of domestic violence includes male violence against women, same-sex violence, and adult violence against children. The term "patriarchal violence" is useful because unlike the more accepted phrase "domestic violence" it continually reminds the listener that violence in

the home is connected to sexism and sexist thinking, to male domination. For too long the term domestic violence has been used as a "soft" term which suggests it emerges in an intimate context that is private and somehow less threatening, less brutal, than the violence that takes place outside the home. This is not so, since more women are beaten and murdered in the home than on the outside. Also most people tend to see domestic violence between adults as separate and distinct from violence against children when it is not. Often children suffer abuse as they attempt to protect a mother who is being attacked by a male companion or husband, or they are emotionally damaged by witnessing violence and abuse.

Just as a vast majority of citizens in this nation believe in equal pay for equal work most folks believe that men should not beat women and children. Yet when they are told that domestic violence is the direct outcome of sexism, that it will not end until sexism ends, they are unable to make this logical leap because it requires challenging and changing fundamental ways of thinking about gender. Significantly, I am among those rare feminist theorists who believe that it is crucial for feminist movement to have as an overriding agenda ending all forms of violence. Feminist focus on patriarchal violence against women should remain a primary concern. However emphasizing male violence against women in a manner which implies that it is more horrendous than all other forms of patriarchal violence does not serve to further the interests of feminist movement. It obscures the reality that much patriarchal violence is directed at children by sexist women and men.

In a zealous effort to call attention to male violence against women reformist feminist thinkers still choose often to portray females as always and only victims. The fact that many violent attacks on children are perpetrated by women is not equally highlighted and seen as another expression of patriarchal violence. We know now

sexism and sexist thinking, to male domination domestic violence has been used as a term. It emerges in an intimate context that is threatening, less brutal, than the violence in the home. This is not so, since more women are in the home than on the outside. Also domestic violence between adults as separate from violence against children when it is not. Often they attempt to protect a mother who is being spanned or husband, or they are emotionalizing violence and abuse.

Most citizens in this nation believe in equal rights. Most folks believe that men should not beat women when they are told that domestic violence is sexism, that it will not end until sexism ends, a logical leap because it requires challenging traditional ways of thinking about gender. Significant rare feminist theorists who believe that the movement to have as an overriding agenda is violence. Feminist focus on patriarchal violence remains a primary concern. However emphasis on women in a manner which implies that in all other forms of patriarchal violence the interests of feminist movement. It obviates patriarchal violence is directed at children.

They call attention to male violence against women. Thinkers still choose often to portray female victims. The fact that many violent attacks are by women is not equally highlighted and patriarchal violence. We know now

that children are violated not only when they are the direct targets of patriarchal violence but as well when they are forced to witness violent acts. Had all feminist thinkers expressed outrage at patriarchal violence perpetrated by women, placing it on an equal footing with male violence against women, it would have been and will be harder for the public to dismiss attention given patriarchal violence by seeing it as an anti-male agenda.

Adults who have been the victims of patriarchal violence perpetrated by females know that women are not nonviolent no matter the number of surveys that tell us women often are more inclined to use nonviolence. The truth is that children have no organized collective voice to speak the reality of how often they are the objects of female violence. Were it not for the huge numbers of children seeking medical attention because of violence done by women and men, there might be no evidence documenting female violence.

I first raised these concerns in the chapter "Feminist Movement to End Violence" in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, stating:

It is essential for continued feminist struggle to end violence against women that this struggle be viewed as a component of an overall movement to end violence. So far feminist movement has primarily focused on male violence, and as a consequence lends credibility to sexist stereotypes that suggest men are violent, women are not; men are abusers, women are victims. This type of thinking allows us to ignore the extent to which women (with men) in this society accept and perpetuate the idea that it is acceptable for a dominant party or group to maintain power over the dominated by using coercive force. It allows us to overlook or ignore the extent to which women exert coercive authority over others or act violently. The fact that women may not commit violent acts as often as men does not negate the reality of female violence. We must see both men and women in this society as groups who support the use of violence if we are to eliminate it.

A mother who might never be violent but who teaches her children, especially her sons, that violence is an acceptable means of exerting social control, is still in collusion with patriarchal violence. Her thinking must be changed.

Clearly most women do not use violence to dominate men (even though small numbers of women batter the men in their lives) but lots of women believe that a person in authority has the right to use force to maintain authority. A huge majority of parents use some form of physical or verbal aggression against children. Since women remain the primary caretakers of children, the facts confirm the reality that given a hierarchal system in a culture of domination which empowers females (like the parent-child relationship) all too often they use coercive force to maintain dominance. In a culture of domination everyone is socialized to see violence as an acceptable means of social control. Dominant parties maintain power by the threat (acted upon or not) that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, will be used whenever the hierarchal structures in place are threatened, whether that be in male-female relationships, or parent and child bonds.

Male violence against women has received much ongoing media attention (highlighted by real-life court cases like the trial against O.J. Simpson) but awareness has not led the American public to challenge the underlying causes of this violence, to challenge patriarchy. Sexist thinking continues to support male domination and the violence that is a consequence. Since masses of unemployed and working-class men do not feel powerful on their jobs within white supremacist patriarchy they are encouraged to feel that the one place where they will have absolute authority and respect is in the home. Men are socialized by ruling-class groups of men to accept domination in the public world of work and to believe that the private world of home and intimate relationships will restore to them the sense of

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Women has received much ongoing media attention. Real-life court cases like the trial against O. J. Simpson has not led the American public to reassess the uses of this violence, to challenge patriarchy, to support male domination and the culture of violence. Since masses of unemployed and underemployed people feel powerful on their jobs within white-collar jobs, they are encouraged to feel that the one place where they have authority and respect is in the home. Middle-class groups of men to accept domination in the workplace and to believe that the private world of family relationships will restore to them the sense of

power they equate with masculinity. As more men have entered the ranks of the unemployed or receive low wages and more women have entered the world of work, some men feel that the use of violence is the only way they can establish and maintain power and dominance within the sexist sex role hierarchy. Until they unlearn the sexist thinking that tells them they have a right to rule over women by any means, male violence against women will continue to be a norm.

Early on in feminist thinking activists often failed to liken male violence against women to imperialist militarism. This linkage was often not made because those who were against male violence were often accepting and even supportive of militarism. As long as sexist thinking socializes boys to be "killers," whether in imaginary good guy, bad guy fights or as soldiers in imperialism to maintain coercive power over nations, patriarchal violence against women and children will continue. In recent years as young males from diverse class backgrounds have committed horrendous acts of violence there has been national condemnation of these acts but few attempts to link this violence to sexist thinking.

I conclude the chapter on violence in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* emphasizing that men are not the only people who accept, condone, and perpetuate violence, who create a culture of violence. I urge women to take responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence:

By only calling attention to male violence against women, or making militarism just another expression of male violence, we fail to adequately address the problem of violence and make it difficult to develop viable resistance strategies and solutions.... While we need not diminish the severity of the problem of male violence against women or male violence against nations or the planet, we must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to

transform and recreate that culture. Women and men must oppose the use of violence as a means of social control in all its manifestations: war, male violence against women, adult violence against children, teenage violence, racial violence, etc. Feminist efforts to end male violence against women must be expanded into a movement to end all forms of violence.

And it is especially vital that parents learn to parent in nonviolent ways. For our children will not turn away from violence if it is the only way they know to handle difficult situations.

In our nation masses of people are concerned about violence but resolutely refuse to link that violence to patriarchal thinking or male domination. Feminist thinking offers a solution. And it is up to us to make that solution available to everyone.