Chapter I
Demyth-ifying Feminism: Reclaiming the “F” Word

OBJECTIVES

This chapter aims to help you understand the following:

• Why feminism became the “F” word and why you need not fear it.
• How we created our dominator social system, an overview of its characteristics, and the characteristics of a partnership social system.
• How an understanding of privilege and oppression in our social systems will carry us further than simply emphasizing equality.
• How understanding the ways in which social institutions (such as family, media, language, education, and business) influence individual identity formation can reveal a richer understanding of gender than simply focusing on the nature/nurture debate.
• How social power and leadership are gendered.
• Why an understanding of race matters to us all.
• Why we all must be allies in co-creating a partnership society.

INTRODUCTION

One barrier to more people understanding the work of feminist scholars is a fallacious view of “feminism” that has transformed an entire area of scholarship into the “F” word. The term itself (as well as the purpose of feminist movement) is poorly understood, and in most cases misunderstood, even in academic circles. In
Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, renowned cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks (2000) describes her experience of conversing with people about her work. Although most people are excited to ask questions about her work as a cultural critic of mass media since they participate in popular culture, hooks describes how the tone of the conversation typically changes when she mentions feminism:

_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._ (hooks, 2000, p. vii)

When hooks asks these same people about feminist authors they have read, or feminist lectures they have heard, or feminist activists they know, she usually discovers that all of their knowledge about feminism has come to them third hand and largely through the messages of mass media. In “The ‘F’ Word: How the Media Frame Feminism,” Debra Baker Beck (1998) supports hooks’ suggestion that stereotypical images of feminists and feminism in mass media (including broadcast, print, and film) have affected “society’s acceptance or rejection of the movement and its goals” (p. 139).

In her now classic work _Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women_, Susan Faludi (1991) engages in an in-depth exploration of the patterns in messages from mass media which are largely anti-feminist. Faludi documents how many forms of media (including movies, television programs, fashion magazines, political reporting, nonfiction writers and scholars in a variety of disciplines, and popular psychology) engage in a two-part process that both “blames” feminism for women’s sense of distress in a time of great social change and systematically undermines women’s progress in their own eyes. At best, mass media delivers a distorted message about feminism which contributes to a reticence, even on the part of women, to seek knowledge about the real work of feminist movement today. However, this backlash against feminism is ultimately good news according to Faludi who explains that backlash is a natural social pattern that results during times of great social change; when voices that are not usually part of the discourse begin to be heard, there is a concurrent attempt to silence them and return to the status quo. This means that a backlash is a sign that previously marginalized voices are actually becoming part of the dominant discourse.

The power of this false social perception about feminism is evidenced in the fact that many women reject feminism largely because they do not want to be viewed as “angry, man-hating, lesbians.” Of course, they often qualify their rejection by stating their support for issues that have been championed by feminists such as
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