

Feminist Myths about Sisterhood



by Phyllis Chesler

You can neither stand your ground nor forge ahead without feminist friends and allies.

The feminists in my generation empowered each other in ways that nothing else ever did or could. Together, joyfully, we participated in a quantum leap forward in consciousness. Many of us believed our own ecstatic rhetoric: that we were “sisters.” I certainly believed this. We understood how important women were to each other in terms of emotional intimacy. We also began to understand that we’d need to encourage boldness and rebelliousness in other women—partly by becoming like that ourselves.

We sometimes succeeded at this; more often, we failed.

This task remains.

I expected so much of other feminists—we all did—that the most

ordinary disappointments were often experienced as major betrayals. We expected less of men and forgave them, more than once, when they failed us. We expected far more of other women, who, paradoxically; had less (power) to share than men did. We held grudges against other women in ways we dared not do against men. We were not always aware of this.

Be aware of such unspoken double standards. Try and behave more evenhandedly than we did.

As feminist women, we knew we were doomed without sisterhood so we proclaimed it, even in its absence. We wanted to will it into existence, verbally, without wrestling it into being. We didn't understand that the sisterhood we so eagerly proclaimed was, like brotherhood, only an ideal, not yet a reality, that we'd have to create sisterhood, daily; against considerable odds.

As individuals, most women I knew were unable to "love our sisters as we loved ourselves." We didn't love ourselves enough.

This was true for anti-feminist women too.

It is a myth that women are more "peaceful" or "compassionate" than men are. Women, like men, are hard on women. Like everyone else the feminists of my generation did not automatically trust or respect women. We thought we should. We said we did. However, our need to pretend to ourselves that we were less woman-hating than the rest of the human race was unfortunate.

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In 1980, when I first told friends that I had begun to interview women on this very subject, most of them were disapproving. One feminist leader told me that "some of my best friends were women." (Yes, she actually said that.)

Another leader said that "I've had a very good relationship with my mother so what you are saying can't be true." A third leader said that "men will use this against us so you'd better not publish anything." A fourth asked, worriedly, "Are you going to name names?"

"Name names? I might as well publish the telephone book annually," I'd responded.

Within a decade—it took that long—these same feminists all asked me, repeatedly, where that study of mine was, that they/we needed it.

My feminist generation psychologically arose one morning, or so it seemed, like the goddess Athena, newly hatched from her father Zeus's brow, we experienced ourselves as motherless "daughters."

We were a sibling horde of "sisters." Although we were many different ages, psychologically, we lived in a universe of same-age peers. We knew of no other way to break with the past. There were no living "mothers" moving among us. Of course, in real life, some of us were mothers, some of us even loved our real mothers, but when we stepped out onto the stage of history we did so primarily as motherless daughters/sisters/sibling rivals.

Psychologically, we had committed matricide—the equivalent of what Freud said that sons do to fathers. Of course, Freud had it wrong, it's the other way round: fathers "kill" sons, despite which sons still continue to hunger for their fathers' love and to scapegoat their mothers for its absence.

Most feminist daughters did not notice what we'd done, or why. Many of us rather hotly denied that this was so: To this day, some of the most brilliant voices of my feminist generation continue to speak in the voice of The Daughter Risen, and not that of The Mother-Teacher.

Behind closed doors, we behaved towards women the way most women did: we envied, competed with, feared, and were ambivalent about other women; we also loved and needed them. My feminist generation ate our leaders. Some feminists who were really good at this became our leaders.

I saw feminists do the same things to each other that anti-feminists did: seduce each other's boyfriends or girlfriends, endlessly confront each other, or, more maddeningly, refuse to say anything directly, wreck each other's reputations, never acknowledge doing so, turn personal rivalries into "political" issues that demanded that everyone choose sides or become automatically seen as the enemy of both sides.

"My feminist generation ate our leaders."

Typical sorority—hardly revolutionary—behavior. Over and over again, feminists would choose one woman (not one principle) over another, and, once they did, they often failed to hold their chosen sister to any ethical or political standards. If your sister plagiarizes the works of others—so what? If she tells lies—who's counting? If she commits immoral and illegal acts—doesn't sisterhood demand a cover-up?

Our male patriarchal adversaries used brute force and guns to wipe their competitors out. Feminists sometimes accomplished this psychologically, with words only, using our powers of slandering and shunning.

As much as we longed for sisterhood, we only started the process; we failed at the task.

Feminists are not unique; this behavior is typical of any oppressed group. Therefore, you must act generously—not enviously. Do not ostracize the woman who refuses to bend to a party line, or the woman who is willing to die for one. Remember: It is amazing that women are fighting back at all; we are not meant to. Respect other feminists, but don't worship them. Learn to recognize what a cult is and how to

avoid it.

For example, some of us revered, rather than became, the women we most admired. Sometimes we found ourselves drawn to a feminist who was quite abusive to women. We believed in her work and wished to bask in the light of her fame or ideas; as women, we were used to glory via association. Perhaps we also hoped that if we loved and served The Great Woman well and long enough, that she'd turn into the kind of mother/sister/daughter we longed to have.

If not, we'd just pretend she had, or we'd make her pay in other ways. (Groupies always get even.) Always, we'd use our association with her to keep other women in awe of us.

Try not to repeat this mistake.

While I encourage you to become a leader in at least one area, let me be clear: there is no shame in being part of a team. A feminist must learn to do both. Not one or the other: both.

Feminists who commit psychological matricide and feminists who form cults are not mutually exclusive phenomena. The same feminists who formed cults around needy, damaged women were also quite capable of destroying less needy, less damaged women. Women in groups often try to destroy spontaneity and strength in women; men in groups try to destroy the man who is seen as weak.

"Sometimes we found ourselves drawn to a feminist who was quite abusive to women."

The daughter in us all often treats a well-endowed, generous woman as a natural resource. We use her like we use the Earth itself, and when the well runs dry, we discard it and move on in search of another.

The way mothers are often discarded. The way I discarded mine.

Beware of one of my generation's most mistaken assumptions:

namely, that no special skills are required in order to accomplish a great task. There are—and you must develop those skills in order to accomplish yours.

We called each other “sisters.” Thus, we had no vocabulary for the things that happened between women, quite apart from our real political differences. Resentments built, then exploded into take-no-prisoner emotional showdowns. Eventually, feminists did begin to confront each other about our racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, even classism—a real American unmentionable. Blood boiled, tempers flared, hearts broke. And then, we often never spoke again. There was no safe space to talk about what we were doing to each other.

Please remember to always create safe spaces to discuss how feminists also internalize patriarchy.

Doing feminist work is not a way of getting your every psychological or economic need met. Movements cannot flourish if their members are there mainly for therapeutic or career reasons. You have a responsibility to see that your wounded selves do not get in the way of your warrior selves.

Oppression is real. It works. Torture, especially sexual torture, demoralizes, cripples, and induces self-hatred and self-destructiveness. Being traumatized does not necessarily, in and of itself, make one a noble or productive person. Some rise above it; others don't. Some victims of rape and battery want feminist support and advice; others don't. Some women want to save themselves; others are too damaged to participate in their own redemption.

“What we have is hard work which we must do together.”

It is crucial that you acknowledge your psychological problem areas—at least to yourself. Try not to humiliate, exploit, bad-mouth, alienate others because you, too, are hurting. Act in spite of it, try not to use the fact of your abuse as explanation or justification for why you (unconsciously) hurt

others.

You will make terrible mistakes. Acknowledge them. Leaders will disappoint you. Expect this.

A leader is not always a mentor; a mentor is not a fairy goddess-mother in charge of an “old girls network.” We don’t have an “old girls network,” not yet. You must know this, and not assume that one exists that is kept hidden from you. What we have is hard work which we must do together. Sometimes a woman who is married to the right man, or born to the right family, may choose to use her access to benefit a protégé or a cause. This is fine. It is not an “old girls network.”

Young feminists often talk about mentors as if one can’t proceed without them.

You can. We did.

In my view, a mentor is neither an all-giving mother or a feel-good goddess. She is not the final authority, you are not the lowly peon. What you bring to her (or him) is also crucial. Reciprocity is everything.

Also, please remember: a pioneer is someone who breaks with the past. She is not easy to mentor—nor should she be—for she does not automatically obey authority. A mentor is more mother than friend, but more midwife than mother.

I shortened this letter for *4W* but if you want to read it in full—together with all the other letters, you may purchase *Letters to a Young Feminist*, [here](#).

First published in [4W](#).