

How to start a consciousness-raising group for men

WG writingonglass.com/content/practical-activism-part-2

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This is the second installment of a special feature that will go live every Tuesday for the next three weeks. Read [part one](#) to clarify your feminist agenda, or get started by jumping in below.

bell hooks: start a consciousness-raising group for men

If you haven't already heard me mention the feminist scholar [bell hooks](#), welcome to Writing on Glass. She's a huge inspiration for me. This bell hooks [Infographic](#) covers her key lessons, but today, I wanted to hone in on one specific action item she provides: involving men in feminist consciousness-raising groups.

What are consciousness-raising groups?

Consciousness-raising groups were one of the primary ways for women to teach each other about feminism in the 1970s. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks dedicates several chapters to exploring the history of these female-only get-togethers. The gatherings generally consisted of around 12 women and were hosted in a group leader's home. Over the course of an evening, women were encouraged to examine how sexism influenced their circumstances, dismantle their own limiting beliefs, and learn about what actions they could take to advance women's rights.



The Amazon TV series “Good Girls Revolt” reenacts what a typical consciousness-raising group might have looked like. One major component, bell hooks writes, was that these groups “emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination.”

The point, as hooks says, is that “Feminists are made, not born.”

All of us, regardless of gender, need to learn about feminism before calling ourselves feminists. Otherwise, we’re in danger of believing we’re feminists, while really still perpetuating “internalized sexism”: those unconscious yet prescriptive notions of gender that generally work in men’s favor (one example: double-standards around sex, like the slut vs. player dichotomy).

While consciousness-raising groups for women are as important as ever, feminism won’t succeed unless men also join in. **That’s why bell hooks recommends feminist get-togethers specifically for men:**

“Without males as allies in struggle feminist movement will not progress. As it is we have to do so much work to correct the assumption deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that feminism is anti-male. Feminism is anti-sexism.”

She makes the key point that men are welcome into feminism, because despite media stereotypes, **feminism is not anti-male! It’s anti-sexism, and women can be as sexist as men any day:**

“Feminist consciousness-raising for males is as essential to revolutionary movement as female groups...A male who has divested of male privilege, who has embraced feminist politics, is a worthy comrade in struggle, in no way a threat to feminism, whereas a female who remains wedded to sexist thinking and behavior infiltrating feminist movement is a dangerous threat.”



bell hooks speaking at the New School in 2014.

inviting men to talk about feminism isn't as daunting as it sounds.

When I first thought about starting a consciousness-raising group for men, my mind raced immediately to how on earth I would secure affordable space, get a hundred men to sign up for a female-oriented talk, and figure out exactly what to discuss.

When I starting thinking on a smaller scale, things got a lot easier. I could use my apartment and aim to get only 3-5 men to show up, men whom I know support me. I could come to the table with one idea, talk about my feminist perspective for 5 minutes, and then we could open up a conversation. I could even call the "consciousness-raising group" a "feminist chat," or something more contemporary. Reframing the idea in these terms sounded much more doable, and more exciting, too.

HOW TO HOST YOUR FIRST CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUP FOR MEN

DECIDE ON A space:

- Your home or a friend or family member's home
- Public library
- Public park
- Common space within apartment buildings (courtyard, rooftop)
- Socially conscious spaces (e.g. [New Women Space](#) in Brooklyn)

MAKE Preparations:

- **Keep it simple.** For your first time around, I recommend hosting 3-5 guests. Preferably, these guests will be people whom you're comfortable around and who already care about you. Whether this includes a boyfriend/husband/partner, a brother, a dad, an uncle, a best friend, a colleague -- it doesn't matter, so long as you know they won't undermine your efforts, make you feel uncomfortable, or contribute to a negative vibe.
- **Set the tone.** If you're worried about the discussions getting out of hand, set some rules. Mine would include no yelling (I'm conflict-averse; what can I say), no interrupting, and no insulting. In my view, reading rules in the beginning is stiff and formal, so I'd rather email people beforehand with some casual guidelines.
- **Gauge your guests' comfort level.** If you're inviting a group of veteran political activists into your home, they'll probably know more about feminism than your 20-year-old neighbor studying math. But maybe not. You can gauge how comfortable your guests are with feminism by simply asking. When you invite your guests, see if they're able to rank on a scale of 1-5: a) their comfort level re. feminism, and b) their background knowledge of feminism. This will both break the ice and flag whether you'll be starting with "Let's define feminism," or "Let's discuss patriarchal language, implicit bias, and recent progress with reproductive rights."
- **Relax.** Just because feminism is a serious political movement, it doesn't mean that these gatherings can't be fun social events too. Order snacks, play some music, chit-chat before or after getting down to business. People are at their most open-minded when they feel comfortable, so creating a welcoming atmosphere has great implications.

SET AN Agenda (75 minutes):

- 15 minutes to chat, eat, joke around, set the tone
- 2-3 minutes to briefly recap any ground rules
- 2-3 minutes of introduction (if people don't already know each other). Have everybody state what they're most nervous or skeptical to discuss. Maybe someone is really hesitant to talk about abortion, while someone else feels odd talking about sexual assault. Good to get this on the table before diving in.
- 40 minutes to pose 1-2 questions and dig into the discussion. Download our recommended questions list below.
- 10 minutes to write down everyone's 1-3 takeaways from the meeting.
- 5 minutes to debrief, clean, decompress, hand out our free reading list (below).

Use our free resources:

Starter Questions for Your Feminist Consciousness-Raising Group (for Men)

Stumped for how to break the ice for your consciousness-raising group? Here is a (by no means comprehensive!) list of questions to get you started.

BASICS:

- What is your perception of what feminism means?
- What do you think of when you picture a feminist?
- Are there women in your life who consider themselves feminists? Why? What are they like? Do they match your stereotypes?
- How do you think feminism got its current reputation?
- How would you feel about publicly calling yourself a feminist? Why?

GENDER ROLES:

- How did you learn as a child what "feminine" and "masculine" meant?
- Do you worry about being seen as "masculine?" Why?
- What do you think of the concept of "emasculation?"
- What does "femininity" mean to you, in terms of how you see women?
- What did you do as a boy that was different from what girls did? Why?
- Did your parents have different rules or standards for daughters vs. sons?

WORK:

- Do you make more money than the women in your life (romantic partners, colleagues, etc.)?
- What do you think led to this discrepancy?
- How many women work with you, and how happy do they seem at work? How are they recognized for their contributions?
- Did you picture growing up and having a working wife? How might this be informing your views of women at work, or your romantic partners?
- If you have a female romantic partner, do you like the idea of her staying home to raise children? Why or why not?
- Did your mother work? How do you think her working status informed your views around having a working wife yourself?

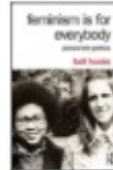
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Feminist Reading List: 6 Favorite Books



Sister Outsider
By Audre Lorde

A collection of essays, speeches, and interviews addressing the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality.



Feminism is for Everybody
By bell hooks

A feminist primer introducing key concepts about the patriarchy.



The H-Spot
By Jill Filipovic

A feminist exploration of several major topics: marriage, parenting, sex, friendship, work, and eating.



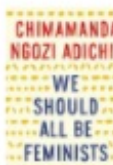
Men Explain Things to Me
By Rebecca Solnit

An essay collection from the scholar whose work inspired the term "mansplaining."



Bad Feminist
By Roxane Gay

An essay collection that reassures you it's okay not to be a perfect feminist. No one is.



We Should All Be Feminists
By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

A speech-turned-book that explains why feminism is not just for women.

Discover more great feminist books at
writingonglass.com.

Part 3 of this series will be here next Tuesday, September 26.

books Mentioned

feminism is for everybody

passionate politics

bell hooks



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