

**Nikki van der Gaag, *Feminism: Why the World Still Needs the F-Word* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2017). 141 pp. Paperback \$13.95.**

Nikki van der Gaag's book on feminism is an accessible and excellent read on the relevance of feminist ideas, theorizing, and strategies for a contemporary global world in which women confront a myriad of persistent problems such as poverty, inequality, workplace discrimination, violence, sexism, and misogyny. A key message is that hard-won rights that are often taken for granted should not be viewed as guaranteed for all time, as in many societies women face critical setbacks and backlashes. The author celebrates the fact that "feminism is back in fashion"! Diverse feminist movements, shaped by contextual, societal, and grassroots realities, have emerged over time. These movements have been fueled by activism and vigilance in response to a clear sense that gains made by women's struggles in the past—from North to South—are under threat and need to be defended.

One of the strengths of the book is the frank way in which it allows for divisions within the feminist movement to be explored and for interrogations of early and later waves of feminism. It does this through interviews with feminists such as Kamla Bhasin and Lilian Evans and through insertions of narratives and voices from all over the globe. Reference is made to the work of feminist writers such as Alice Walker, Nawal El Saadawi, and Urvashi Butalia, and to bloggers such as Jessica Hoffman, Minna Salami, and Juliana Britto Swartz. Despite revealing shades of difference, feminist movements are shown to be united in wanting to instigate "trouble," in disrupting patriarchal institutions, and in creating the framework for transformed societies. The four "Cs"—capitalism, conflict, climate change, and religious conservatism—are identified as needing to be unsettled. They have harmed women's lives, historically, culturally, and politically, reinforcing their subjugation and oppression.

Van der Gaag does not simply make claims. She offers much evidence (some surprising!) to illuminate women's statuses. For example, she presents data that reveals that women in European countries might be worse off than women in African and Latin American countries in some respects. Here one can refer to gender representation in parliament (Rwandan women fare the best). With regard to the number of hours spent in unpaid care work, North American women are not strikingly different from African women. Women are raising their voices against gender pay gaps, gender education gaps, gender technology divides, and life chances affected by race, ethnicity, class, caste, "disability," and sexual identities. Against this background, the structural constraints need to be constantly probed. A number of chapters, most notably chapter 4, refer to the barriers that prevent the progress of

women in all spheres—particularly the political-economic spaces of society.

Given the above, Van der Gaag contests views, such as that presented by Hanna Rosin, that women have been liberated to the point that they hold crucial power in the economy. In suggesting that women are held back, she importantly points out that there is much blaming of women for their own failure to rise to the top. She cites Sheryl Sandberg, who, in her book *Lean In*, talks about the ways in which women are debilitated by barriers that exist within themselves, through a lack of confidence and failure to take up opportunities (80). This kind of argument has been very popular in the North, where empowerment, coaching, and mentorship projects are regularly designed to “shape women up,” equipping them to take on key decision-making positions. Accompanying this is the call for changes in attitudes, which van der Gaag considers to be highly essential.

The discussion on violence against women and girls in Chapter 5 is very strong. Feminist action historically was ignited by efforts to challenge physical, sexual, and psychological assaults on women which men, especially the powerful, got away with without much consequence. I particularly liked the presentation of evidence from different parts of the world on the steady shifts away from pro-patriarchal thinking of men (and some women) as legislation and media campaigns make people aware of women’s rights and the problematics of cultures that keep intact abusive practices, misogyny, and discrimination. Violence, and the fear of being violated, silences women, curbs their movements, makes them blame themselves when they are victimized. On-line abuse has become a new reality, and law enforcement agencies have not as yet understood how to address this issue. The book focuses on women’s need to understand and take charge of their bodies, the way exposure to sexualized images affects their self-esteem, and the necessity to campaign for, and achieve, sexual and reproductive rights. The book also does not shy away from looking at sex work and pornography and the debates surrounding them.

Van der Gaag’s book reveals two strategies that are important to emphasize: enlisting the support of progressive men and building solidarities that could impact more significantly at a macro-level. At different points in the book, she takes the position that progressive men ought to be included in the struggle for gender equality. She says, “we need ... men who oppose [misogyny], who are for equality and against violence against women, to stand up and say so” (25). Solidarity as active intervention is introduced as a concept and picked up in the last chapter. In line with this, gender equality can be attained through “re-energized” feminist movements with clear strategies, seeking to make institutions accountable, and to influence changes in thinking and practices.

Although I enjoyed the book and would recommend it for teachers, students, and activists, there are two aspects that can be developed should the author want to produce an updated edition in the future. The “brief history of feminism” makes a genuine effort to integrate women of the South, but could benefit from a more robust engagement with work on feminist mobilizing in Africa, Asia, and

Latin America. Published in 2017, the book seems to have just missed the explosive and transformative impact of the #metoo movement and its reach around the globe.

*Kammila Naidoo*  
*University of Johannesburg*