"An energizing critique of the feminist movement's preference for white women."
—BookPage

"Mikki Kendall tells it like it is, and this is why she has long been a must-read writer for me: incisive, clear-eyed, and rightly willing to challenge readers when necessary. Her exploration of how feminists' fight for liberation has too often left poor people, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color behind is critical reading for anyone who is or wants to be involved in work addressing complex and longstanding inequalities."
—Nicole Chung, author of All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir

"Mikki has been writing for years about protection, 'problem children,' the limits and the usefulness of different kinds of anger, and the way sisterhood can be wielded as a demand. She's here for her community, and this book has everything to do with expanding access to it."
—Daniel M. Lavery, author of Texts from Jane Eyre and Something That May Shock and Discredit You

"Mikki Kendall has established herself as an important voice in current feminist discourse, and Hood Feminism cements that place. With a compelling, forceful piece, Kendall has written the missive that feminists—especially white feminists—need to remember the racist history of who we are as a movement and to move forward with an intersectional and deliberately anti-racist focus."
—Dianna E. Anderson, author of Problematic

"Every white lady should have this book assigned to them before they can talk about feminism in the same way that every human should have to work in the service industry for a year before they can talk about the economy. Ain't nothing but truth in these words."
—Linda Tirado, author of Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America
My grandmother would not have described herself as a feminist. Born in 1924, after white women won the right to vote, but raised in the height of Jim Crow America, she did not think of white women as allies or sisters. She held firmly to her belief in certain gender roles, and had no patience for debates over whether women should work when that conversation arose after World War II. She always worked, like her foremothers before her, and when my grandfather wanted her to stop working outside their home, and let him be the primary breadwinner, well, that seemed like the most logical thing in the world to her. Because she was tired, and working at home to care for their children was no different to her from working outside the home. To her mind, all women had to work. It was just a question of how much, and where you were doing it. Besides, like a lot of women of that era, she had her own creative and sometimes less than legal ways of making money from home, and she utilized them all as the need arose.
INTRODUCTION

She mandated education for her four daughters, who gave her six grandchildren between them, and for any number of cousins, friends, and neighborhood children around, the mandate was the same. Her answer to almost everything was “Go to school.” It never occurred to any of us that dropping out was an option, because not only was her wrath to be feared, her wisdom was always respected. High school was mandatory, some college strongly encouraged, and your gender didn’t matter a bit. As with work, education was something she believed everyone needed to have, and she didn’t much care how you got it, or how far you went, as long as you could take care of you.

My grandmother remains—despite her futile efforts to make me more ladylike—one of the most feminist women I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing, and yet she would never have carried that label. Because so much of what feminists had to say of her time was laden with racist and classist assumptions about women like her, she focused on what she could control and was openly disdainful of a lot of feminist rhetoric. But she lived her feminism, and her priorities were in line with womanist views on individual and community health.

She taught me that being able to survive, to take care of myself and those I loved, was arguably more important than being concerned with respectability. Feminism as defined by the priorities of white women hinged on the availability of cheap labor in the home from women of color. Going into a white woman’s kitchen did nothing to help other women. Those jobs had always been available, always paid poorly, always been dangerous. Freedom was not to be found in doing the same labor with a thin veneer of access to opportunities that would most likely never come. A better deal for white women could not be, would not be, the road to freedom for Black women.

She taught me to be critical of any ideology that claimed to know best if those espousing it didn’t listen to me about what I wanted, much less needed. She taught me distrust. What progressives who ignore history don’t understand is that just like racism is taught, so is distrust. Especially in households like mine, where parents and grandparents who had lived through Jim Crow, COINTELPRO, Reagonomics, and the “war on drugs” talked to their children early and often about how to stay out of trouble. When the cops harassed you, but didn’t bother to actually protect and serve when violence broke out between neighbors, lectures from outsiders on what was wrong with our culture and community weren’t what was needed. What we needed was the economic and racial privilege we lacked to be put to work to protect us. Being skeptical of those who promise they care but do nothing to help those who are marginalized is a life skill that can serve you well when your identity makes you a target. There’s no magic shield in being middle class that can completely insulate you from the consequences of being in a body that’s already been criminalized for existing.

There’s probably some value in being seen as a good girl. In being someone who values fitting in and embracing the status quo. There are rewards, however minor, for those who value being seen as that middle-class model of respectable with no inconvenient rough edges. I’ve never found my way there, so I won’t pretend to be able to detail the value, or to judge those who
can fit into that mold. I've just accepted that I never will, that I'll probably never even want to cut away the parts of me that protrude in the wrong directions. I like not living up to the expectations of people who don't like me. I enjoy knowing that my choices won't be acceptable to everyone. My feminism doesn't center on those who are comfortable with the status quo because ultimately that road can never lead to equity for girls like me.

When I was a kid I thought there must be some way I could perform being good, perform being ladylike to the point of being safe from sexism, racism, and other violence. After all, my grandmother was so determined to make it stick, it had to mean something. What I discovered was that it offered me absolutely no protection, that people took it as a sign of weakness, and that if I wanted to do more than survive, I had to be able to fight back. Good girls were dainty and quiet and never got their clothes dirty, while bad girls yelled, fought, and could make someone regret hurting them even if they couldn't always stop it. Trying to be good was boring, frustrating, and at times actively hurtful to my own well-being.

Learning to defend myself, to be willing to take the risks of being a bad girl, was a process with a steep learning curve. But like with so many other things, I learned how to stand up even when other people were certain I should be content to sit down. Being good at being bad has been scary, fun, rewarding, and ultimately probably the only path that I was ever meant to walk. I learned that being a problem child meant I could be an adult who went her own way and got things done, because I am not so focused on pleasing other people at my own expense. My grandmother was wise for her time, but not necessarily the best judge of what I needed to do. She embraced middle-class ideas of being ladylike because for her that was a path to relative safety. For me, it just left me unprepared, and I had to learn on the fly from my community how to navigate the world outside the bubble she tried to create for me. I am not ashamed of where I came from; the hood taught me that feminism isn't just academic theory. It isn't a matter of saying the right words at the right time. Feminism is the work that you do, and the people you do it for who matter more than anything else.

Critiques of mainstream feminism tend to get more attention when they come from outside, but the reality is that the internal conflicts are how feminism grows and becomes more effective. One of the biggest issues with mainstream feminist writing has been the way the idea of what constitutes a feminist issue is framed. We rarely talk about basic needs as a feminist issue. Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues. Instead of a framework that focuses on helping women get basic needs met, all too often the focus is not on survival but on increasing privilege. For a movement that is meant to represent all women, it often centers on those who already have most of their needs met.

As with most, if not all, marginalized women who function as feminist actors in their community even when they don't use the terminology, my feminism is rooted in an awareness of how race and gender and class all affect my ability to be educated, receive medical care, gain and keep employment, as well as how those things can sway authority figures in their treatment of me.
Whether it's a memory of the white summer camp teacher who refused to believe that my vocabulary allowed me to know words like sentient or the microaggressions that I experience in my day-to-day life, I know that being a Black girl from the South Side of Chicago makes people assume certain things about me. The same is true of anyone who exists outside an artificial “norm” of middle class, white, straight, slim, able-bodied, etc. We all have to engage with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be, and that makes the idealized feminism that focuses on the concerns of those with the most the province of the privileged.

This experience does not mean that I think of myself or anyone else as being so strong that human feelings need not apply. I am a strong person; I am a flawed person. What I am not is superhuman. Nor am I a Strong Black Woman™. No one can live up to the standards set by racist stereotypes like this that position Black women as so strong they don’t need help, protection, care, or concern. Such stereotypes leave little to no room for real Black women with real problems. In fact, even the most “positive” tropes about women of color are harmful precisely because they dehumanize us and erase the damage that can be done to us by those who might mean well, but whose actions show that they don’t actually respect us or our right to self-determine what happens on our behalf.

I’m a feminist. Mostly. I’m an asshole. Mostly. I say these things because they are true, and in doing so, the fact that I am not nice is often brought up. And it’s true: I’m not really a nice person. I am (at times) a kind person. But nice? Nope. Not unless I’m dealing with people I love, the elderly, or small children.

What’s the difference? I am always willing to help someone in need, whether I know them or not. But niceness is more than helping; it is stopping to listen, to connect, to be gentle with your words. I reserve nice for people who are nice to me or for those who I know need it because of their circumstances.

There are people in feminist circles who are nice, who are diplomatic, with soothing ways and the warm personality that enables them to put up with other people’s shit without complaining. They have their lane, and for the most part I think they handle things well. But my lane is different. I’m the feminist people call when being sweet isn’t enough, when saying things kindly, repeatedly, is not working. I’m the feminist who walks into a meeting and says, “Hey, you’re fucking up and here’s how,” and nice feminists feign shock at my harsh words. They soothe hurt feelings, tell people they understand exactly why my words upset them, and then when the inevitable question of “She hurt our feelings, but she has a point—how do we fix things so that we don’t harm a coworker, community, the company again?” comes up, the same nice feminist voices say the same things they had been trying and failing to convince people of before.

Only now people can hear them, because my yelling made folks pull their heads out of the sand. After the pearl-clutching about my meanness passes, what’s left is the realization that they have wronged someone, that they have not been as good, as helpful, as generous as they needed to think they were all along. That’s the point of this book. It’s not going to be a comfortable read, but it is going to be an opportunity to learn for those who are willing to do the hard work. It’s not meant to be easy to read,
nor is it a statement that major issues facing marginalized communities cannot be fixed—but no problem like racism, misogyny, or homophobia ever went away because everyone ignored it. I don’t and won’t pretend to have all the answers. What I do have is a deep desire to move the conversation about solidarity and the feminist movement in a direction that recognizes that an intersectional approach to feminism is key to improving relationships between communities of women, so that some measure of true solidarity can happen. Erasure is not equality, least of all in a movement that draws much of its strength from the claim that it represents over half of the world’s population.

I learned feminism outside the academy first. You could almost see the ivory tower from my porch, but while reaching it was supposed to be a goal, there was minimal interaction from the students and staff at the University of Chicago with the residents of my neighborhood, Hyde Park. For all practical purposes, between the university warning students away from engaging with the neighborhood and the lack of information about how someone could even begin to access the opportunities that the university offered to people who weren’t us, the ivory tower might as well have been the moon. Getting a job as a caregiver, as a custodian, or in a dining facility was relatively transparent, but as for accessing anything else? There was no clear path. The feminism at the University of Chicago on offer to the low-income Black women living in the neighborhood might as well have been a scene from *The Help*. The idea that we might have greater aspirations than to serve the needs of those born into a higher socioeconomic level didn’t seem to be more than a fleeting thought for most; for a very few who were committed to a sense of equity, access came with the price of respectability. It was like getting the proverbial Golden Ticket of Willy Wonka fame, only the odds were probably better at the Chocolate Factory.

Hyde Park has gone through a lot of changes, for the better in terms of services as the population grows, and financially for the worse as gentrification means the housing prices are going up and pushing out the very people who need those services the most. Resources for residents are pouring in as many long-term residents are being forced out. Currently, the university is slightly more welcoming to locals, but is still primarily interested in being accessible to those who are (or aspire to be) middle class or wealthy. I don’t know how the new Hyde Park will engage with the locals who remain the working poor, but so far all signs point to heavier policing and a complete lack of interest in maintaining the area as mixed race and mixed income.

These days, although Postcollege Me is welcome and has, in fact, spoken several times at the University of Chicago, I doubt that the girl I was would be able to even see the ivory tower, because gentrification would have forced me so far away from this beautiful area. It wasn’t until I went to college at the University of Illinois that I really engaged with feminist texts as things that were meant to provide guidance and not simply to be part of the same literary canon as all the other books in the library that reflected a world I had not been able to access. There were some exceptions, but so many feminist texts were clearly written about girls like me, instead of *by* girls like me. By the time I reached a place to engage with feminism versus womanism—the former
being paying more lip service than actual service to equality, the latter being closer but still not inclusive enough of people who were engaged in sex work, in vice, as a way to pay the bills and as a way of life—neither felt like they fit me or my goals completely. Girls like me seemed to be the object of the conversations and not full participants, because we were a problem to be solved, not people in our own right.

This book is about the health of the community as a whole, with a specific focus on supporting the most vulnerable members. It will focus largely on the experiences of the marginalized, and address the issues faced by most women, instead of the issues that only concern a few—as has been the common practice of feminists to date—because tackling those larger issues is key to equality for all women.

This book will explain how poor women struggling to put food on the table, people in inner cities fighting to keep schools open, and rural populations fighting for the most basic of choices about their bodies are feminist concerns, and should be centered in this movement. I will delve into why, even when these issues are covered, the focus is rarely on those most severely impacted. For example, when we talk about rape culture the focus is often on potential date rape of suburban teens, not the higher rates of sexual assault and abuse faced by Indigenous American and Alaskan women. Assault of sex workers, cis and trans, is completely obscured because they aren’t the “right” kind of victims. Feminism in the hood is for everyone, because everyone needs it.

As debates over last names, body hair, and the best way to be a CEO have taken center stage in the discourse surrounding modern feminism, it’s not difficult to see why some would be questioning the legitimacy of a women’s movement that serves only the narrow interests of middle- and upper-class white women. While the problems facing marginalized women have only increased in intensity, somehow food insecurity, education, and health care—beyond the most basic of reproductive needs—are rarely touted as feminist issues. It is past time to make the conversation a nuanced, inclusive, and intersectional one that reflects the concerns of all women, not just a privileged few.

In 2013, when I started #solidarityisforwhitewomen, by which I meant mainstream feminist calls for solidarity centered on not only the concerns but the comfort of white middle-class women at the expense of other women, many white feminists claimed it
was divisive and called it infighting, instead of recognizing that the problem was real and could not solve itself. They argued that the way to fix feminism wasn’t by airing its proverbial dirty laundry in public. Yet, since its inception, mainstream feminism has been insisting that some women have to wait longer for equality, that once one group (usually white women) achieves equality then that opens the way for all other women. But when it comes right down to it, mainstream white feminism often fails to show up for women of color. While white feminism can lean in, can prioritize the CEO level at work, it fails to show up when Black women are not being hired because of their names or fired for hairstyles. It’s silent when schools discriminate against girls of color. Whether it is the centering of white women even when women of color are most likely to be at risk, or the complete erasure of issues most likely to impact those who are not white, white feminism tends to forget that a movement that claims to be for all women has to engage with the obstacles women who are not white face.

Trans women are often derided or erased, while prominent feminist voices parrot the words of conservative bigots, framing womanhood as biological and determined at birth instead of as a fluid and often arbitrary social construct. Trans women of color, who are among the most likely targets of violence, see statistics that reflect their reality co-opted to bolster the idea that all women are facing the same level of danger. Yet support from mainstream white feminists for the issues that directly impact trans women has been at best minimal, and often nonexistent. From things as basic as access to public bathrooms to job pro-
addressing the needs of sex workers, incarcerated women, or anyone else who has had to face hard life choices. No woman has to be respectable to be valuable. We can't demand that people work in order to live, then demand that they be respected only if they do work that doesn't challenge outdated ideas around women's right to control their bodies. Too often mainstream feminism embraces an idea that women must follow a work path prescribed by cisgender white men in order for their labor to matter. But everyone, from a person who needs care to a stay-at-home parent to a sex worker, matters and deserves to be respected whether they are in their home or in an office.

This tendency to assume that all women are experiencing the same struggles has led us to a place where reproductive health imagery centers on cisgender able-bodied women to the exclusion of those who are trans, intersex, or otherwise inhabiting bodies that don't fit the narrow idea that genitalia dictates gender. You can have no uterus and still be a woman, after all. Employment equality statistics project the idea that all women make seventy-seven cents to a man's dollar when the reality is that white women make that much, and women of color make less than white women. Affirmative action complaints (including those filed by white women) hinge on the idea that people of color are getting the most benefit when the reality is that white women benefit the most from affirmative action policies. The sad reality is that while white women are an oppressed group, they still wield more power than any other group of women—including the power to oppress both men and women of color.

The myth of the Strong Black Woman has made it so that white women can tell themselves that it is okay to expect us to wait to be equal with them, because they need it more. The fact that Black women are supposedly tougher than white women means that we are built to face abuse and ignorance, and that our need for care or concern is less pressing.

In general, white women are taught to think of whiteness as default, of race as something to ignore. Their failure to appreciate the way that race and other marginalization can impact someone is often borne out in popular media. Consider the ham-fisted misstep of Lena Dunham's HBO show *Girls*, which featured an all-white cast of twentysomething women and men living in Brooklyn, New York, being heralded as a show for all young women despite its complete exclusion of women of color. Or, more recently, Dunham and Amy Schumer's cringe-inducing conversation about whether Odell Beckham Jr. was in the wrong for not expressing any interest, sexual or otherwise, in Dunham while they were seated at the same table at the Met Gala.

Somehow the fact that Beckham was absorbed in his phone meant that he was passing judgment on Dunham's attractiveness, and not that his mind was simply elsewhere. Despite the fact that he never said a negative word, he was dragged into their personal narrative in part because of the unspoken assumption that he owed a white woman who wanted it his attention. Now, I don't expect Dunham or Schumer or feminists like them to listen to Black women or other WOC. It's not an innate skill for white people, and for white feminists who are used to shutting out the voices of men, it can be especially difficult to hear that they have the power to oppress a man. But that doesn't
change the history of Black men being demonized or killed for expressing an interest in white women. Nor does it change the negative impact that a white woman's tears can still have not only on a Black man's career, but on his life. The fact that Dunham apologized and that she didn't mean to do harm is pretty much meaningless. The harm was done, and her casual racist assumptions still meant Beckham spent days in the news cycle for imaginary body shaming.

When white feminism ignores history, ignores that the tears of white women have the power to get Black people killed while insisting that all women are on the same side, it doesn't solve anything. Look at Carolyn Bryant, who lied about Emmett Till whistling at her in 1955. Despite knowing who had killed him, and that he was innocent of even the casual disrespect she had claimed, she carried on with the lie for another fifty years after his lynching and death. Though her family says she regretted it for the rest of her life, she still sat on the truth for decades and helped his murderers walk free. How does feminism reconcile itself to that kind of wound between groups without addressing the racism that caused it?

There's nothing feminist about having so many resources at your fingertips and choosing to be ignorant. Nothing empowering or enlightening in deciding that intent trumps impact. Especially when the consequences aren't going to be experienced by you, but will instead be experienced by someone from a marginalized community.

It's not at all helpful for some white feminists to make demands of women of color out of a one-sided idea of sisterhood and call that solidarity. Sisterhood is a mutual relationship between equals. And as anyone with sisters can tell you, it's not uncommon for sisters to fight or to hurt each other's feelings. Family (whether biological or not) is supposed to support you. But that doesn't mean no one can ever tell you that you're wrong. Or that any form of critique is an attack. And yes, sometimes the words involved are harsh. But as adults, as people who are doing hard work, you cannot expect your feelings to be the center of someone else's struggle. In fact, the most realistic approach to solidarity is one that assumes that sometimes it simply isn't your turn to be the focus of the conversation.

When feminist rhetoric is rooted in biases like racism, ableism, transmisogyny, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, it automatically works against marginalized women and against any concept of solidarity. It's not enough to know that other women with different experiences exist; you must also understand that they have their own feminism formed by that experience. Whether it's an argument that women who wear the hijab must be “saved” from it, or reproductive-justice arguments that paint having a disabled baby as the worst possible outcome, the reality is that feminism can be marginalizing. If a liberation movement's own representatives are engaging with each other oppressively, then what progress can the movement make without fixing that internal problem?

Feminism cannot be about pitying women who didn't have access to the right schools or the same opportunities, or making them projects to be studied, or requiring them to be more respectable in order for them to be full participants in the
movement. Respectability has not saved women of color from racism; it won't save any woman from sexism or outright misogyny. Yet mainstream white feminists ignore their own harmful behavior in favor of focusing on an external enemy. However, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" only works as clichéd shorthand; in reality the enemy of my enemy may be my enemy as well. Being caught between groups that hate you for different aspects of your identity means none of you are safe.

So how do we address that much more complex reality without getting bogged down? Well, for starters, feminists of all backgrounds have to address would-be allies about the things that we want. And when we act as allies, feminists have to be willing to listen to and respect those we want to help. When building solidarity, there is no room for savior myths. Solidarity is not for everyone—it cannot realistically include everyone—so perhaps the answer is to establish common goals and work in partnerships. As equal partners, there is room for negotiation, compromise, and sometimes even genuine friendship. Building those connections takes time, effort, and a willingness to accept that some places are not for you.

Although the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen rose out of a particular problem within the online feminist community at that moment, it addresses the much larger problem of what it means to stand in solidarity as a movement meant to encompass all women when there is the distinct likelihood that some women are oppressing others. It's rhetorical shorthand for the reality that white women can oppress women of color, straight women can oppress lesbian women, cis women can oppress trans women, and so on. And those identities are not discrete; they often can and do overlap. So too do the ways in which women can help or harm each other under the guise of feminism.

There is a tendency to debate who is a “real” feminist based on political leanings, background, actions, or even the kinds of media created and consumed. It’s the kind of debate that blasts Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj for their attire and stage shows not being feminist enough, while celebrating Katy Perry for being empowering—via the fetishization and appropriation of cultures and bodies of color. Real feminism (if such a thing can be defined) isn’t going to be found in replicating racist, transphobic, homophobic, ableist, or classist norms. But we are all human, all flawed in our ways, and perhaps most important, none of us are immune to the environment that surrounds us. We are part of the society that we are fighting to change, and we cannot absolve ourselves of our role in it.

Liberation rhetoric cannot be lubrication for the advancement of one group of women at the expense of others. White privilege knows no gender. And while it makes no promises of a perfect life free from any hard work or strife, it does make some things easier in a society where race has always mattered. The anger now bubbling up in hashtags, blog posts, and meetings is shorthand for women of color declaring to white women, “I’m not here to clean up your mess, carry your spear, hold your hand, or cheer you on while I suffer in silence. I’m not here to raise your children, assuage your guilt, build your platforms, or fight your battles. I’m here for my community because no one else will stand up for us but us.”
And if white women's response to that is, as it has been, more whining about how we're not making activism easier for them? We don't care. We're not going to care. We can't afford to, because while Patricia Arquette was being lauded for a speech on equal pay that she delivered at the 2015 Academy Awards, one that called for “all the gay people and people of color that we've all fought for” to “fight for us now,” untold numbers of women of color were and are still fighting to get paid at all. That demand for solidarity, beyond being utterly tone-deaf, was more of the same one-way expectation.

It's not silencing, or bullying, or toxic to refuse to make anyone else's comfort more important than our lives or the lives of our children. We're not here to be Mammy or whatever other convenient archetypes movies like *The Help* often reinforce. We're not supporting characters in feminism, and we can't afford to wait for equality to trickle down to us eventually. We can't afford to believe that helping white women achieve parity with white men means that someday white, mainstream feminist ideals will reflect our needs. A hundred-plus years of history and day-to-day life teach marginalized women every day that making it easier for white women to become CEOs isn't the same as making life easier for all women.

Cultural norms that center on the advancement of the individual at the expense of the community make that kind of feminism impossible to accept as a model. For many marginalized women, the men in our communities are partners in our struggles against racism even if some of them are a source of problems with sexism and misogyny. We cannot and will not abandon our sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, or friends, because for us they don't represent an enemy. We have our issues with the patriarchy, but then so do they, as the most powerful faces of it aren't men of color.

My husband may not always understand how misogyny impacts me, but he can absolutely grasp what it means when a boss's or a coworker's racism is an impediment. We sit together at that table, even if we don't face the exact same battles in every aspect of life. Women in communities of color must balance fighting external problematic voices with educating those inside our communities who are bad actors, and we expect feminism to do the same work on itself.

Intersectionality isn't a convenient buzzword that can be co-opted into erasing Professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who coined the term to describe the way race and gender impact Black women in the justice system. An intersectional approach to feminism requires understanding that too often mainstream feminism ignores that Black women and other women of color are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine of hate.

It's not always easy to confront a problem when it occurs, but ignoring it is dangerous. Take Hugo Schwyzter, the man whose predatory and abusive behavior sparked the conversation about what solidarity in feminism means. When Schwyzter admitted on Twitter that he had spent years alternating between abusing students and spouses and targeting women of color, the response from feminist outlets that had published him was to distance themselves. Many white, mainstream feminists claimed not to have known what he was doing; one of the reasons that
argument didn’t hold up was the years of blog posts, emails, and articles written by him for their publications where he gleefully detailed his history. It was a redemption narrative that required no actual change or even accountability for prior behavior. Not only was the emperor naked, so was everyone else in his court. What happens to us first will eventually happen to white women, so enabling abusers like Schwyzer can only lead in one direction, yet unchecked racism often renders women who should be allies as complicit in the abuse until they are targets too.

Fast-forward slightly to Gamergate, a loosely connected campaign of misogyny, racism, and harassment. Zoë Quinn was the first target, but the men who went after her, who churned up the rage and stoked the hate, practiced their craft on Black women first. Because Black women are seen as having no selves to defend, it was us standing with each other while mainstream, white feminism looked the other way. By the time the threats were aimed at big-name white feminists like Sady Doyle, Jessica Valenti, and Amanda Marcotte, the question shouldn’t have been “How did this happen?” It should have been “Why didn’t we do more to stop it sooner?”

Many white feminist pundits were shocked in 2016 when Trump was elected, and it became clear that despite his abominable record on women’s issues, race, class, gender, and education, the majority of white women voters (some 53 percent) voted for a man who promised to mistreat them. One who made jokes about grabbing their pussies because he was certain his fame would sway them into accepting his atrocious behavior. Trump wasn’t offering a bright, shiny future with equality for all. In fact, most of his campaign promises centered on the idea that the real problem was immigration. He promised a future with lower competition levels, where white women who live in fear of a mythical Black or Muslim man could feel that their fears were justified, that their racism was justified. Instead of appealing to women on the basis of equality, he appealed on the basis of fear, and for many white feminists, they were shocked to discover that the solidarity they had never offered wasn’t available to them either.

The shock that 53 percent of white women voted for Trump was sadly hilarious. It turned out that even among white women, solidarity was only for some of them. For women of color, especially Black women, it wasn’t a surprise. It was the same racism we had always seen masked as feminism playing out in real time. Feminism that could ignore police brutality killing women of color, that could ignore the steady disenfranchisement and abuse in local and national politics of some women based on race and religion, wasn’t about equality or equity for all women; it was about benefitting white women at the expense of all others. There was a sense that when the targets of oppression weren’t white, it was fine to vote based on “economic distress” and not solidarity with other women. Only it turned out that the policies that followed have so far served to increase that distress, disadvantaging everyone who isn’t a rich white male.

When I first met the writer Gail Simone, I made her gluten-free triple-chocolate cupcakes as a gift. While we were talking that day, she asked if I was interested in writing comics. The comics industry is a white, male-dominated space, and Gail
could have treated the niche she has carved out for herself as something to defend from other women. Instead when I said yes, she went out of her way to help me get into the industry. I’ve since learned that she does this pretty often. She knows she has power and privilege and she uses it to help others whenever she can. Sometimes being a good ally is about opening the door for someone instead of insisting that your voice is the only one that matters.

Gail’s a great writer and editor. She pushed back against a misogynistic trope of killing women in comics to further the stories of male heroes. She started out as a hairdresser and probably fails to meet someone’s definition of respectable every day. She’s doing the work, though, and changing the way an industry functions for women and with women, one book at a time. Sometimes solidarity is just that simple. Step up, reach back, and keep pushing forward.
My first marriage ended in divorce, and afterward, I was on food stamps, I had a state-funded medical card that gave me and my son access to medical care, and I was living in public housing. I was fortunate at the time that this particular set of social safety nets allowed me to leave my abusive ex and stay gone. I could raise my child in relative comfort and safety. Today, many of those safety nets have been greatly diminished, and in the case of public housing, it has nearly fallen away completely in many areas. We know in the abstract that poverty is a feminist issue. Indeed, we think of it as a feminist issue for other countries, and that we are in a place where bootstraps and grit can be enough to get anyone who wants it bad enough out of poverty. But the reality is that it takes a lot more than gumption. I was lucky: I'm educated. My grammar school and high school curricula prepared me for a college education. I joined the army to pay for my degree, and since I was in Illinois, a state that has
a tuition-free Veteran Grant Program for state schools, it didn’t matter that I was doing this in the days before the GI Bill paid enough to be useful.

I was poor, and it wasn’t easy, but I had the handholds it can take to be upwardly mobile when you’re marginalized and life is working against you in other ways. A childcare subsidy meant that when my ex didn’t pay child support, my child was still able to attend the high-quality preschool on my college campus. I got a bachelor’s degree in four years, went on to work full-time, and took a host of other perfectly boring but necessary steps that brought me to where I am today, with an advanced education, a wonderful family, and a career that I enjoy. If this were the usual heartwarming, feel-good tale about single parenting and poverty, you might come away thinking, “Well if she could do it, why can’t everyone else?” And you might expect me to say, “It was hard, but I learned so much, and I remember that time fondly.”

What I remember is hunger. And crying when I couldn’t afford a Christmas tree. I remember being afraid that I couldn’t make it. That I would lose my child because I couldn’t provide. It’s hard to take a rich woman’s children; it is remarkably easy to take a poor woman’s, though. As a society, we tend to treat hunger as a moral failing, as a sign that someone is lacking in a fundamental way. We remember to combat hunger around the holidays, but we judge the mothers who have to rely on food banks, free or reduced lunches at school, or food stamps for not being able to stand against a problem that baffles governments around the world. Indeed, we treat poverty itself like a crime, like the women experiencing it are making bad choices for themselves and their children on purpose. We ignore that they don’t have a good choice available, that they’re making decisions in the space where the handholds are tenuous or nonexistent.

The women in these circumstances may not have a grocer that sells fresh produce, or at least not one that sells produce they can afford. They may be working too many hours to be able to prepare food, or they might be dealing with food storage issues. The story behind that pack of chips and soda at a bus stop is often far more complicated than any ideas of a lack of nutritional knowledge, laziness, or even neglect. Sometimes the food you can access comes from gas stations, liquor stores, and fast food restaurants and not a fully stocked grocery store, much less a kitchen.

We know that food deserts exist, areas where groceries are scarce and what is available may be unfit for human consumption. But food insecurity is more complicated than simply the ability to access food. There’s the question of what food costs versus what people can afford. If you live near a grocery store but you can’t afford to shop there, then it doesn’t matter that you’re not in a food desert. You’re still hungry. And hunger doesn’t have an age limit; there are food-insecure children, food-insecure college students, and food-insecure elders. Some forty-two million Americans are struggling with hunger. Statistically at least half of that number are women, but given gender bias in wages, the real percentage is something like 66 percent of American households struggling with hunger are headed by single mothers.

Women and children account for over 70 percent of the nation’s poor. Unfortunately, existing safety net programs have
failed to take into account the reality of poor women's lives. The money a household makes for many state and federal programs, like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), as well as childcare subsidies, leaves a wide gap between what is needed and what is available. Take Illinois, for example, where a single parent receiving TANF for one child is eligible for a maximum of $412 a month. Even the most ardent proponent of mandating independence should realize that that isn't enough money to cover the basic needs of two people. As a culture, we don't have sufficient provisions for helping women and families escape poverty. In fact, we often create artificial and unnecessary barriers, like limiting unemployment insurance to full-time workers, which leaves part-time workers with no assistance if they lose their jobs. We rely on charities to address acute hardships like hunger before the food stamps come in, and to respond to the homelessness crisis when HUD has a waiting list that can span decades in some areas.

We know that without a home, individual families suffer and fall further into poverty. Yet eviction rates and the price of food continue to rise while wages remain stagnant, and the cycle gets even harder to navigate. Especially when work requirements are introduced, ones which ignore that childcare is a necessity for women with very young children. Is it possible to work a full-time job when you can't even afford part-time childcare? Or is this a policy guaranteed to create even higher hurdles? Paid maternity leave is a wonderful cause, but what happens after the baby is born and you weren't making enough money to support one person, much less navigate these new, higher expenses?

Alleviating women's poverty is a critical feminist issue. Yet when we talk about hunger and food insecurity, we rarely talk about it in these terms. Why? Because in many mainstream feminist circles, the people talking about these issues don't know what it is to be food-insecure in the long term. Things like food stamp challenges, where someone lives on a budget similar to that of someone living on food stamps for a week or a month, make good stunts, but they don't influence public policy. If anything, people who engage in those stunts are more likely to put themselves on the back for making it through and perhaps donate to their local food bank, and then forget that the problem exists.

Hunger has a lifelong impact, shaping not only someone's relationship with food but also their health and the health of their community. Hunger, real hunger, provokes desperation and leads to choices that might otherwise be unfathomable. Survival instincts drive us all, but perhaps none so strongly as that gnawing emptiness of hunger. Whether we call it being hungry or something else, hunger is painful even in the short term. And yet we rarely speak of it as something for feminism to combat, much less as something that is uniquely devastating for women.

Consider the way that we handle programs like SNAP or WIC in America. We place myriad restrictions at the federal and state levels on how those funds can be used. As a society, we then try to rationalize the limits by pointing to cases of fraud, which, aside from constituting less than 1 percent of all public welfare cases, are usually the kinds of things that can best be explained by the ways you have to manipulate your life to get through poverty. It's easy to say no one should ever sell food
stamps, harder to justify that stance when you remember that people need things like pots and pans to prepare their food. They need working refrigerators, stoves, and storage solutions to keep out the vermin so commonly found in the subpar housing that is often the only option for those living at or below the poverty line. Food stamps don’t even cover basic household cleaning and hygiene products, much less things like diapers and menstrual pads.

You can be very comfortable asserting that poor people don’t know anything about nutrition if you ignore the fact that perishable fresh foods require not just the space to store and prepare them, but the time. Boycotts of terrible retailers are a wonderful idea until you realize that they are the only option in some areas. The question that the would-be protestor should then ask themselves is, who is being hurt more? The corporation, or the people who rely on it for access to food? These are questions without easy answers, to be sure. But that’s life in the hood. That’s being poor not just in America, but around the world.

Mainstream feminism pays excellent lip service to the idea that poor women are supported, but in practice, it often fails to interrogate what constitutes support. Hood feminism as a concept is not only about the ways we challenge these narratives, it is about recognizing that the solutions to many problems—in this case hunger—can be messy and sometimes even illegal. Poverty can mean turning to everything from sex work to selling drugs in order to survive, because you can’t “lean in” when you can’t earn a legal living wage and you still need to feed yourself and those who depend on you. When mainstream feminism fails to consider these options as viable, when it relies on the same old tropes rooted in respectability, it ignores that for many, a choice between starvation and crime isn’t a choice. Feminism has to be aware enough, flexible enough to encompass the solutions that arise in a crisis. When feminists fail to recognize the impact of hunger, they can unwittingly contribute to the harm done by failing to offer the slightest bit of compassion or grace to those who are facing only bad choices. But hunger is devastating, its impact painful in the short term and horrifying if it endures over time or across generations. If we’re going to say that this is a movement that cares for all women, it has to be one that not only listens to all women but advocates for their basic needs to be met. You can’t be a feminist who ignores hunger. Especially not when you have the power and the connections to make it an issue for politicians in a meaningful way. Fight against hunger as hard as you fight for abortion rights or equal pay. Understand that this isn’t a problem that can be addressed later.

As income inequality increases and the wealth gap widens across racial lines, there is no question that for some women, for some communities, hunger is going to move past bad nutrition into outright malnutrition. If we don’t make combating hunger a priority now, it will make itself a priority when far too many women and their families are suffering from it.

**Why is it** that we’re more inclined to create programs to combat obesity than ones that meaningfully address hunger? Proponents of things like a soda tax hold their plans up proudly,
but never talk about why soda is such a staple in homes where food insecurity is a problem. They don’t talk about the fact that soda is shelf stable, is cheaper than juice, and it tastes good. They don’t consider the fact that low-income consumers don’t have to worry about it going bad, about it containing mold like Capri Sun products did before their most recent packaging changes, or fungicides like some orange juice brands did before the FDA increased testing. And they would never acknowledge that consumers don’t have to worry about soda manufacturers facing the same risk of lead-tainted water like residents in Flint, Chicago, and so many other cities, because those companies can and do buy the filtration systems needed for clean water in creating their products in any setting.

Instead, proponents of policies like soda taxes insist it is about health, and they point to dubious claims that obesity is a disease that can be cured by taxing soda. Messages declaring “Soda is so bad for children” play out with images of kids going to a soda machine and receiving diabetes instead of a ginger ale. If sugar was a toxic chemical guaranteed to bring about illness in all who consumed it, then these images might make sense. But the hyperbolic assertions that obesity can be cured by taxing soda ignore studies published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that prove that numbers on a scale have very little to do with health outcomes.

Politicians use fatphobia and make obesity a scapegoat to deflect attention away from the policies that have adversely affected the health of low-income communities. Fitness is a much better measure of health, and one that requires a multipronged approach that’s much more labor intensive than a tax. It includes children having access not just to recess at school, but to safe neighborhoods where playing outside doesn’t put them at a greater risk of violence. It requires them to have access to food on a regular basis. Research shows that things like exercise, fresh produce, clean water, clean air, and access to health care are all major factors in good health. Midnight basketball and other after-school, weekend, and summer programs didn’t just reduce violence by giving at-risk youth an outlet, they also created patterns of healthy behavior. They made it easier for families to be active and to feel comfortable sending their kids to play outside without fear. These programs and others like them provided food, nutrition classes, and more without judgment—and they have largely been shuttered.

In the end, soda taxes have very little to do with health. It’s an easy platform for politicians and their backers, but if the concern were really public health, the focus wouldn’t be on regressive taxes as a solution. Nor would the counties that adopt such taxes be using revenue from it to fund everything but measures that would bring healthy, affordable food options into low-income communities. What’s more, if the aim is to lower overall sugar consumption, it hardly makes sense to target only one form of it. A can of regular soda has 39 grams of sugar, but a cup of cocoa has 49 grams of sugar. Frappuccinos? Some can have as much as 102 grams of sugar. Those other options are socially acceptable, and the dairy is a source of protein and vitamins, but the amount of sugar consumed is significantly more. Socially acceptable sugar isn’t healthier simply because it costs more than
a can of Pepsi. It’s clear that the concern here is less about the healthfulness of sugar and more about finding another revenue source for cash-strapped municipalities.

Soda taxes hit the people with the fewest options the hardest, because in a food desert, too often the “healthy” options are also the most expensive. Low-income parents already struggling with food insecurity and neighborhood violence are now being told that their children’s health problems (symbolized by weight) are their fault for having only hard choices available. Which option is healthiest when your choices are tap water with lead in it, bottled water that already carries an additional tax, overpriced juice, milk being sold past the sell-by date, and soda? What problems are solved by putting one more tax burden on the backs of those least able to afford it? Policies that serve as “food police” tend to raise stigma rather than help families and individuals who need better access to food.

And this isn’t just a problem in the inner city. Indeed, grocery prices on a reservation or the lack of options in many rural areas with only one or two stores are a testament to how difficult it is to keep food on the table. Hunger is a problem in every country and in every county for those who lack the resources to feed themselves or their families.

A woman stopped me one day years after I was done with hunger as something to manage in my personal life, and she asked for help buying groceries. I gave her what I could and went on with my day. It cost me some money that I could afford to lose, and we parted ways pretty quickly. I almost forgot about it, to be completely honest—I subscribe to my own internal version of the butterfly theory when it comes to kindness. One day, I was in the same area, and a woman I didn’t recognize paid for my groceries. She wouldn’t take my money and looked at me when I tried to argue and said, “I didn’t argue with you now, did I?”

It hit me then that she was the same woman who had asked for my help with groceries. She had been my neighbor the whole time. And while I didn’t remember her, she remembered me very well. This isn’t a story about how great I am. You see, when I bought those groceries, I said something offhanded about remembering how hard it can be at the end of the month when stamps run out. I assumed she was there because she was getting inadequate help. Actually, she wasn’t getting any help; she’d lost her job and her spouse, and her life was just crumbling, and I had insulted her somewhat by suggesting she was on food stamps. It hadn’t been intentional, and when she mentioned it, I apologized. She laughed at me and said she’d eventually gotten over it, that being able to eat and feed her kids for those few weeks got her to get some help.

It worked out, she got back on her feet, and she was doing fine when I saw her, but she had been both grateful and angry at me for a while. It’s a funny place to be, and I understand it, but I might not be able to explain it to anyone who has never experienced that loss of pride, that shame that you simply cannot do it all on your own no matter how hard you work. What she needed was the food, the cash. What she didn’t need was my
assumptions. Or to have to feel grateful, or that there was something to be ashamed of in seeking help. And maybe if we could admit that most women are poor, that many are struggling to feed themselves and their children or their other family members, we could start addressing this issue that affects most women with all the power it requires. We could stop acting like food insecurity is a sin or a shame for any individual and treat it rightfully like an indictment of our society.

The good news is that women in these communities are working to combat hunger with everything from community gardens to food cooperatives. Whether it is transportation for those who lack access to well-stocked stores or pooling resources à la Stone Soup to feed kids in the summer when school is out, there is no shortage of grassroots initiatives devoted to bringing food to those who need it the most.

The bad news is that none of those programs are enough to effectively combat hunger on their own. They need more. More resources, more employees, more efforts by the government to solve the problem across the country. And they don’t have the connections, resources, or time to lobby politicians and provide services. Charity may begin at home, but it is fundamentally incapable of solving a societal ill without some measure of government-funded programs that are less focused on being restrictive or punitive and more focused on making sure that the most vulnerable are cared for regardless of income.

Attempts to tie access to food programs to labor, to respectability, to anything but being a human in need are ultimately less about solving the problem of hunger and more about shame. While proposed cuts to SNAP or other government food security programs are often justified by the perceived prevalence of private programs, it is incredibly unlikely that food banks or charities would be able to fill the gap should food assistance programs be reduced or dissolved in the coming years. SNAP provides approximately twelve meals to every one meal provided by charities. Programs like WIC and SNAP exist because prior administrations have understood the massive disparity between what private charities and the government can do.

We know what happens when charities can’t make up the difference: the pictures of bread and soup lines in history books and the stories from our grandparents about starvation and the Great Depression are easy to mine. Despite conservative narratives about “lazy people,” roughly 40 percent of SNAP recipients are already working, and simply using food stamps to supplement their salaries and keep themselves capable of being in the workplace. Many of the remaining 60 percent can’t work because they are minor children, elderly, or caregivers for vulnerable family members. Even if the working poor who make up the SNAP population are able to pick up a second job, get a raise, or find another way to cut living costs to afford food, there’s still the question of the effect on the children and seniors who may depend on those working relatives for caregiving.

Because issues around affording childcare, elder care, or other services bring about other difficulties for those people who are already struggling, the addition of proposed work requirements
would move people into the workforce who are not prepared and can’t afford to be there. And then there’s the question of what jobs they will be able to access. After all, if you don’t have the skills, need more education, have health issues, and so on, then losing SNAP benefits would only make your chances of staying employed nearly nonexistent. It’s a no-win situation that hinges on bootstrap rhetoric instead of logic or facts. Food stamp recipients are mostly children and elderly or disabled people, in households where at least one adult is working but doesn’t make enough to pay for all of the household expenses. There is a very small percentage of recipients without dependents, and among that group of able-bodied adults without dependents, most already work or are seeking work. They’re cycling in and out of low-paying jobs that have a lot of turnover: seasonal employment, retail, or other industries that regularly experience lulls in demand for labor. These recipients are on SNAP on a temporary basis and rely on the program when they’re unemployed or underemployed. The myth that they are somehow a burden ignores decades of job statistics that show that combating hunger is a boon to the economy.

Increasing access to food should not be a controversial topic, but apparently we live in a culture that begrudges children, elders, unemployed people, and the working poor full, nutritious meals. Even though marginalized people who need help with food security are seen as second-class citizens, they are a key part of the food economy. In rural areas, migrant workers cultivate and collect the food that ends up on the tables of the people who want to write policies that would starve them. Despite the fact that seasonal labor is the bulk of the workforce for our food supply, their access to resources is severely curtailed. And once the food reaches the market, workers in grocery stores are often underpaid and among those who have issues with food security.

Women in the workforce are a key part of the food processing and preparation that makes feeding families possible, but at every level, they are at risk of exploitation and deep discrimination. Between low wages and a higher-than-average risk of sexual harassment and assault, marginalized workers in rural and urban areas are responsible for unpaid and low-paid work only to be excluded from decision making and leadership positions around food security. The people responsible for making sure that food is safe, accessible, and palatable are some of the lowest paid.

For families headed by women and by other marginalized people, feminism has to come through to combat food insecurity, from higher prices for fresh foods to insufficient government funding for programs that address hunger on a systemic level. Without support from feminists with privilege and access, families facing food insecurity will suffer despite their best efforts. Hunger saps your energy, your will; it eats up the space that you might have used to achieve with the need to survive. As feminist issues go, there are none that span more women and their families than this one.

Food is a human right. Access to adequate food and nutrition allows communities to thrive; it allows women to fight for all their rights. Food security allows for marginalized women’s participation in political and other organizational spaces, key for
defending their interests against other forms of structural oppression.

Bringing about feminist changes will only be truly possible if mainstream feminism works to combat discrimination in all its forms, from gender to class and race. True equity starts with ensuring that everyone has access to the most basic of needs.

LIKE A LOT OF OTHERS, I WAS A FAST-TAILED GIRL BEFORE I REALLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT THOSE WORDS MEANT. IT'S ONE OF THOSE COLLOQUIALISMS YOU HEAR AS A CHILD IN CERTAIN COMMUNITIES THAT IS HALF-WARNING, HALF-PEJORATIVE. TO BE A “FAST-TAILED GIRL” IS TO BE SEXUALLY PRECOCIOUS IN SOME WAY. YOU ARE WARNED BOTH NOT TO BE A FAST-TAILED GIRL, AND ALSO NOT TO ASSOCIATE WITH “THOSE FAST-TAILED GIRLS.” SOMETIMES IT IS SHORTENED TO “FAST,” BUT EITHER WAY, IT IS PRESENTED AS A BAD THING. THE ELDERS WHO TYPICALLY USE IT ARE OFTEN ATTEMPTING TO PROTECT YOUNG WOMEN FROM BEING PERCEIVED AS JEZEBELS. WHEN I STARTED THE #FASTTAILEDGIRLS TAG ON TWITTER WITH MY FRIEND JOURNALIST JAMIE NESBITT GOLDEN IN DECEMBER 2013, THOUSANDS OF WOMEN CAME TOGETHER IN AN OUTPOURING OF EMOTION. WHEN YOU CONSIDER THE LONG HISTORY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE PERPETRATED AGAINST BLACK WOMEN IN AMERICA, THE ROOTS OF THIS PARTICULAR ASPECT OF RESPECTABILITY POLITICS ARE EASY TO GRASP. HERE RESPECTABILITY POLITICS ARE NOT JUST ABOUT CLOTHES OR SPEECH, THEY