

Feminist Fight Clubs Battle Sexist Workplaces

Feminist Fight Club: An Office Survival Manual for a Sexist Workplace. NY: Harper Collins, 2016.

Reviewed by Marli Delaney

This entertaining book is a modern guide to the ways that working women can and do try to overcome the many forms of inequality they still confront on the job. Jessica Bennett, a contributing writer at the New York Times, has a keen eye and plenty of evidence for the words and deeds of male bosses and colleagues that subtly discredit and undermine women, thereby perpetuating patriarchal traditions and hierarchies. Her core thesis is that women today possess enough strength to join together to expose all this and create positive changes toward more gender equality.

Bennett began her journalism career in New York at Newsweek. There, several decades earlier, it was common for the magazine to hire female valedictorians of Seven Sister colleges and assign them “job duties including pushing mail carts and delivering coffee as well as real research and reporting, all three requiring handing something over to a man.” It was common to be told “women don’t write.” In 1970, 46 female staffers launched a landmark gender discrimination lawsuit against the magazine. Though much had changed by the 2000s, Jessica Bennett was surprised to see male colleagues still climbing the job ladder far faster than women who were just as talented and hard-working, if not more so.

She and a few like-minded professional women decided to start meeting regularly in what they called their Feminist Fight Club. They were inspired by the “consciousness raising groups” of the 1970’s, women who would meet at each other’s homes, at coffee houses, or any male-free space where they could discuss with their ‘girl gangs’ what was bothering them and what made them feel like they weren’t being heard. These kinds of groups influenced Jessica Bennett’s mother and many other women in the baby boomer generation to become more observant and critical of gender inequality at home, in politics and on the job.

In early April, I interviewed Jessica Bennett for a radio program before her appearance as the featured speaker at Hofstra University’s Equal Pay Week event. In writing FFC, she told me that she “made a really conscious effort to format it in a way that was like a guide book. You can essentially open it to any section, whether it’s negotiation or knowing the different enemies in your office and find the parts that are applicable to you and use it.” Her goal was to help a broad audience of people to gain awareness of the everyday issues faced by women in workplaces nowadays and also to create a guide

for women to combat these inequalities. She combines a vibrant, funny, and supportive tone of writing with flowcharts, illustrations, and mad-libs to keep the audience engaged. “I wanted to speak to young people in the language that I think we use. The tone is casual; it is written of my generation, and I wanted to capture the way that we actually talk.” The target audience that she wrote for is primarily the young female demographic, for whom she utilizes a humorous and rebellious tone that young women can easily relate to. However, women of all ages can appreciate *Feminist Fight Club* and men can read it as well in order to learn about gender issues that they might have never realized existed. The book certainly could not have been released at a more appropriate time. Ever since Donald Trump’s shock election as president, protests over women’s issues have been on the rise and women have been seeking better understanding of the country’s persistent gender inequalities.

The book is organized into six main sections, each with a problem-solution style that offers strategic solutions for both women and men to use in order to fix these issues. The first section, “KNOW THE ENEMY,” brings awareness to the types of behaviors that people act upon that undermine women. The author makes it a point to elaborate on the fact that the people who engage in these behaviors might not actually be enemies because they might not yet realize that their behavior is flawed. The first way to approach an enemy is to calmly observe the behavior and kindly ask the person who is acting up if they could act more respectfully. But Ms. Bennett mentions many “Feminist Fight Moves” for the situations in which the enemy is continuously ignorant and disrespectful. A popular example that the author uses of an enemy is the “Maninterrupter,” who tends to be the male in the workplace who disrespectfully speaks over a female colleague when she is trying to pitch an idea or share important information. The fight moves Bennett uses for this enemy includes the ‘Kanye-Free Zone’ which involves passing a talking stick or the “Womaninterruption” with interjecting oneself back into the conversation or getting more women directly involved in the situation.

“KNOW THYSELF,” the book’s second section, focuses on how women tend to feel timid and to unintentionally discredit themselves in the workplace when they have many more reasons to be confident for their work. This segment includes ‘saboteurs’ that explain each way that women might undermine themselves such as how they might apologize over situations that they shouldn’t have to apologize

for as well as the woman's tendency to not accept compliments. Bennett encourages her audience to learn about themselves and learn how to stop any self-discrediting habits so that they can have the confidence necessary to succeed in the work world.

The third part of FFC is "BOOBY TRAPS", which discusses the common subconscious stereotypes that people give to women but not to men. An example of this trap is the way that women tend to be expected to always smile while men don't have to, and when a woman has a serious face she possesses an RBF ("resting bitch face"), while a man with a serious face is just seen as displaying passion. Bennett notes that this exact situation happened to tennis superstar Serena Williams when she was asked "why aren't you smiling?" in an interview. However, a person like Tom Brady would never be asked such a question. Another example is how women who work in male-dominated fields may have trouble finding a mentor to look up to. The author recommends adopting a "Personal Board of Directors" approach rather than having the traditional single mentor. In my interview with Ms. Bennett, she explained how "research shows that it can be just as effective to have a large flock of different people to mentor you, who may be more peers than someone in a senior level position." The PBOD can be informal or formal, and consists of several different people who you can go to when you have a professional problem and look up to like you would with a mentor.

In "GET YOUR SPEAK ON," she elaborates on how female natural speech tendencies differ from male speech tendencies, and then transitions into an explanation of how to use both female and male speaking qualities to improve one's personal speaking skills. In a developmental perspective, young boys and girls generally begin speech differences from early on in elementary and grammar school. Boys will run around and yell commands to each other, while girls will more often share whispered secrets. These childhood tendencies then grow into the styles of speech that make male and female speaking habits so different from each other. The author shares which female speech qualities are positive and negative as well as what women can adopt from male speech qualities in order to self-actualize general speaking skills.

The next section, "F YOU, PAY ME," explains the tricks to negotiation and how to gain a raise or promotion in the workplace. This part of the book is important to the gender wage gap because

many women don't get paid as much as their male equals simply because they don't ask for more money the way that males would. Bennett gives useful direction on how to prepare for negotiation situations with discussion points, comebacks, and follow-up conversations.

The last section of FFC is "WWJD – WHAT WOULD JOSH DO?" Bennett created the character "Josh" as a hypothetical male colleague who is lazy by nature and doesn't put much effort into his work, yet still somehow manages to get promoted. Bennett offers situations where this would happen, like the way that 'Josh' might confidently ask for a raise (because, why not?) followed by how to "femulate him." That is, how to emulate him as a woman who might be more heavily judged in the process.

Jessica Bennett's Feminist Fight Club is informative and insightful, not only for young American women, but for all readers. Women currently make seventy-nine cents to the male dollar, a 21% gender wage gap that is the narrowest America has ever seen. Her work showcases creative ways to make this gender wage gap narrow still more. Besides the consciousness awareness groups mentioned in her introduction, she cites other Feminist Fight Clubs that have been established by women all over the world, including: "The Newsgirls," "Nuns on the Bus," and "Weenie Wackers." Anyone educated about gender inequality in the United States and around the world is well aware of the fact that equality won't occur tomorrow or within the next year or even within the next decade. Working women have been fighting for their rights for centuries and, though their efforts have gained them many opportunities they didn't have in the past, there is no reason to stop fighting when they're so much closer to equality. If anything, there's more of a reason to continue the protests. Feminist Fight Club by Jessica Bennett shows how women can ensure they will NOT be silenced in the work place any longer.

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