

1. OVERVIEW

Soon after the publication of my book *The Job/Family Challenge* (1995), I appeared on a popular Sunday night interview show in Milwaukee. The next day my husband went to buy a new bicycle. The guy behind the counter pointed to my name on the check.

“Do you live with *her*?” he asked.

“She’s my wife,” Larry replied.

The bike shop owner leaned over the counter as if about to divulge a secret: “I saw her on that show last night. And the amazing thing is, she didn’t say one thing I disagreed with. She even made me laugh.”

“What’d you expect?” Larry started to ask. But he didn’t—because he already knew (plus he really wanted to get home and ride that bike). When the shop owner clicked on my interview, he was waiting for me to say, “All men are pigs,” “All women are saints,” “Women who stay home with kids are wasting their lives.” Instead he heard how little this society values families, and how much men as well as women suffer when workplaces function as if everyone had a wife at home full time. He was surprised to learn that the changes feminists want are not favors to women, but a better way to do business, raise families, build society. And yes, most men have a lot of changing to do—but here I was, arguing they have much more to gain than to give up.

And what do you know, I had a sense of humor.

I wanted to tell you this story so you’d see what a nice, reasonable, and amusing person I am. But the more I thought about it, the more I

became, you should pardon the expression, *PISSED OFF*. Think about it—the majority of women in the United States earn less than \$25,000 a year. The average woman loses nearly a half million dollars over her lifetime because of pay inequities. Cameroon, Brazil, and India offer better maternity leave than we do. The percentage of female executives is down and the percentage of kids in poverty has gone back up. And feminists like me are the ones with a bad reputation?

It's hard not to be outraged. But I'm not mad at most people, not even most men. Who I'm really mad at are the Big Boys.

Who Are the Big Boys?

The Big Boys are what I call the relatively small number of men who have a real stake in maintaining gender discrimination. They're the ones who control wealth and power in this country. You may think of them as the "powers-that-be" or the ruling class or the owning class or "the Man." They profit from our labor, set the conditions under which we work, and create or greatly influence public policy. They may be executives, elected officials, lobbyists, pundits. I include their spokespeople, whether appointed or self-appointed, since these people help the Big Boys maintain power. Some may wear high heels and lipstick, but regardless of gender, they're part of this group.

It's not enough to run the show—the Big Boys also control its description. By their reckoning, the status quo isn't a particular system that serves their interest. It's inevitable and beneficial to all. Whatever perks they happen to have, they deserve. Because they're in charge, they get to tell the story of what's happening in the world—what's working, what the problems are, what solutions are needed. Anyone can put forward opposing views. But the Big Boys' version is the one we hear most often. The tales they tell, repeated over and over by the media they control, take on the appearance of objective truth. Yet as we'll see, these narratives are often myths designed to misdirect and confuse while they perpetuate the existing distribution of power.

The Big Boys don't function like a club or fraternity. They don't have secret handshakes or smoke-filled meetings where they conspire to keep women down. And they don't all agree on every point. But they do operate from the same general interests and often work together to preserve their authority.

Some men earn the title of "Big Boys" even though they have no

wealth and little actual power, based on the role they play at the workplace to keep women out or down. These folks may see themselves as part of “the people,” but their behavior toward women in fact helps cement the Big Boys’ domination.

By saying the Big Boys are relatively few in number, I certainly don’t mean to let men as a whole off the hook. Most men exhibit male supremacy—the notion that males are superior to females—in the way they view and treat women, and the majority don’t think that’s a problem. Guys who get kicked around in the rest of their lives grow up believing they can at least be “the boss” at home. They’re not eager to let that go. But as this book will point out in many different places, most men actually have much to gain from feminism. Only the Big Boys have a lot to lose (and even some of them can be transformed).

To understand how feminists—and women as a whole—got such a bad rap, we have to understand the role of the Big Boys and learn how to take them on.

Back to Basics: How Did This Happen?

The Big Boys didn’t always exist, and neither did gender inequality. Some would argue that men have always been masters, or brutes. I don’t buy it. Anthropologists have documented a very different story—tribes where gender played a role in how men and women spent their day, but not in how that work was valued.¹

Picture the earliest humans. The problem wasn’t that cavewomen were too emotional to go after a woolly mammoth, or men too macho to tidy up the cave. The men trooped out to hunt because the tribe needed food and they were mobile; women hung out near the cave and gathered edible food and other nearby supplies because they were usually pregnant or lactating. There’s every reason to think both forms of work were valuable and valued. When a child was born, the group always knew who the mother was, but the dad connection was much less clear. That reality often added to women’s status. In many human societies, mothers were revered and given significant power.²

Why did this change in many parts of the world? Here’s the most logical explanation I’ve heard: Most humans at first used up everything they got their hands on. They considered themselves lucky not to freeze or starve. As tribes were able to move beyond day-to-day survival and develop agriculture, land and tools were not scarce, but labor was. Therefore, tribes

with greater numbers of women and children were more successful. Tribes could and did steal women, but they needed ways to avoid constant warfare with each other. And at some point early humans learned the lesson that too much intertribal marriage weakened their offspring. Anthropologists have documented how these developments led to an “exchange of women” among tribes.³ Women—and in particular, women’s sexual capacity—became the first private property. In a world without paternity tests, there was only one surefire way to ensure that the woman a man received belonged only to him—preventing her from being sexual with any other man. As some men began to accumulate surplus land and goods, they also had to make certain the property got passed on to rightful heirs (as Samuel Johnson once put it, “The chastity of women is of all importance, as all property depends on it”).⁴ Controlling women’s sexuality went hand in hand with restricting their rights in all spheres. Those who began to accumulate property went on to restrict the rights of the majority of men as well.

Think of these men as the original Big Boys. Once in charge, they found ways to justify their actions. They created an ideology, declaring women to be weaker, inferior, of lesser value (just as it justified that men with wealth were in fact more “worthy” and destined to rule over others).⁵ As society developed, these beliefs about women weren’t just opinions—they were transformed into laws. Not good enough to own property, women could in fact be treated as the property of their husbands. (I stopped using the expression “rule of thumb” as soon as I learned its origins in British law: The stick with which a husband could beat his wife was to be no thicker than the size of his thumb.) In most cultures, women’s “natural” role as mothers didn’t translate into any rights to their children. Instead, as societies industrialized, women’s ability to bear children became an excuse to keep them out of all kinds of jobs. And the jobs they did perform were considered less valuable.

Flash forward to the twentieth century. Technology brought many changes that helped women, but perhaps none more significant than the development of birth control. Throughout the ages, some women had applied their knowledge of herbs and nature to prevent unwanted pregnancy. But for the majority of women, biology really was destiny. Access to modern contraception (for those not prohibited by pulpit or pocketbook) represented a monumental advance. Having some control over when and whether to have children laid the basis for changes in how women might spend their time—changes many women in this country had begun to demand but hadn’t had the power to effect.

Rise of Feminism

Social movements don't spring up out of nowhere. Usually before numbers of people act together in groups, some individuals have begun to make a case for change; isolated acts of rebellion have taken place. This was certainly the case with feminism in the United States.⁶ When people use the phrase "first-wave feminism," they generally mean the first time women in this country took action on their own behalf on a significant scale.

The movement started in the mid-nineteenth century when women abolitionists began to question why they were denied so many of the rights they were seeking for slaves. Since women at the time had fewer rights than men who'd been declared insane, it's not surprising that the original list of demands was pretty extensive. The Declaration of Sentiments drafted at Seneca Falls in 1848 called for, among other things, "securing to women an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce."⁷ In the next decades, women in some states scored a few victories, including the right to divorce, to own and inherit property, and to keep their own names. Pioneers like Margaret Sanger fought for women to have access to birth control. But women needed political power to gain reforms. The general list of goals was soon whittled down to the vote—a win white women didn't see until 1920; Puerto Ricans had to wait until 1928, and many African Americans decades more. In addition to massive opposition from the Big Boys, racist views held by many leaders in the women's suffrage movement helped narrow and weaken its outcomes.⁸

The movement appeared to hibernate after the suffrage victory. In fact, groups of women, including African Americans, immigrants, and other low-wage workers, continued to make demands and take action, often boldly, to improve their lot (see Chapter 6). But for the next burst of feminism we had to wait until the 1960s. Young women inspired by the civil rights and antiwar struggles demanded equality in the movement, in the bedroom, and in society at large. At the same time, women privileged to stay home with children began to feel stuck in suburbia and wanted more options. Both groups began to imagine—and then demand—entrance to occupations and status that had been off-limits. Women who'd been told they couldn't, or shouldn't, or wouldn't want to dig underground or fly in outer space or many other things in between found that they certainly could, and more and more of them did.

Today virtually all occupations have at least some females; gender discrimination has been outlawed for more than forty years in the United

States. But whenever a group has legally been declared inferior for centuries, there's bound to be a powerful legacy of inequality and a slew of structural barriers that remain. Imagine if all the best jobs were in buildings designed for short people.⁹ One day tall people are told, "Okay, you can work here, too, as long as you walk on your knees or stoop over so you don't bump your head." How many tall people would we expect to find in those jobs? It shouldn't be surprising that women still earn considerably less than men—even in the same professions—are in charge less often, and are treated badly more often. Nor is it surprising that today's Big Boys still try to justify women's lower status. In fact, their arguments have become more sophisticated. Feminism, they say, is not just the wrong solution for women, but the very cause of women's problems.

What Is Feminism Anyway?

According to the dictionary, feminism is the movement for social, political, and economic equality of men and women. The problem isn't that most people disagree with feminism—it's that they don't know what it is. When people are asked directly about this definition, they overwhelmingly support it, even if they avoid the label.

My own definition goes further than the dictionary version. *Feminism is a system of beliefs, laws, and practices that fully values women and work associated with women in order to help all people reach their potential.* It means an end to views of women and "women's work" as being *less valuable*. Doing away with discrimination against women opens the way to full participation and choices both for women and men.

What about the "men are from Mars, women from Venus" theory? Once gender stereotypes—assumptions and generalities about females and males—are eliminated, perhaps we'll still find more women than men in caregiving occupations and more men than women who are good with tools. Who knows? But clearly many in each group go against stereotype right now, and many more would if they weren't punished for doing so. Simply being female or male will one day tell us very little about someone's talents, interests, and dreams.

Like all social movements, the women's movement is not monolithic. The brand of feminism I'm advocating is what's known as "social justice feminism." It takes into account women's different experiences depending on class, race, and sexual orientation. We know there can't be full freedom for women if there's not freedom for *all* women. And we can't

end domination by the Big Boys in one area if we allow it to continue in another. That means the fight for gender equality has to be linked with systemic change that opposes all forms of injustice and domination.

In other words, our goal is not equal numbers of females among the Big Boys. What we want isn't just more women in power, but more power to women as a whole and others who have been disenfranchised. To achieve that, we have to do more than smash the glass ceiling—we have to redesign the building.

Why Big Boys Beat Up on Feminism

Ask yourself, Who gains when women get less? The extra money, power, prestige, opportunities do not land in the laps of most men. If I make a dollar an hour less than the guy working next to me, that dollar goes not into his pocket but into the profits of the business owner. Paying women less and treating them as if they *deserved* less has been very profitable for the Big Boys. That's not all. Workers who are divided among themselves because of the color of their skin or the country they were born in or which box they check under "gender" are less likely to band together to challenge the Big Boys' power. That means feminism or any other beliefs that do challenge that power inevitably run into resistance.

The Big Boys' arguments against feminism are often infuriating, sometimes stupefying, and usually predictable. One thing you learn early on is that they don't all take extremist positions. Instead, many exploit the misunderstanding and prejudice spread by those who do.

For example, some opponents of women's suffrage warned that victory would cause women physiological damage—larger, heavier brains and loss of unique feminine mannerisms.¹⁰ Female labor would bring even worse devastation, destroying not just women's nature but the home: "[I]t is the knife of the assassin aimed at the family circle."¹¹ Most Big Boys were less heavy-handed. They just asserted that little women had more important things to do than worry their pretty heads about sordid world affairs¹²—at the same time ensuring that suffragists who took to the streets were dealt with harshly.

The visible rise of feminist groups in the late 1960s and '70s was seen both as a bad joke and a big danger. While the National Organization for Men dismissed feminists as "brain-damaged man haters," some men also depicted them as causing massive trouble for the family and for society. "Forcing fire departments . . . to lower their standards to accommodate women," one

argued, “amounts to nothing less than the offering of human sacrifices.”¹³ Underlying these attacks was the equation of “women” with “inferior.”

The antifeminists’ argument went something like this: Women can be many things, but having men in charge is only natural. It’s been the norm forever. The norm is fine. Therefore, those who oppose the norm must have something wrong with *them*. Feminists can’t make it as women. They’re ugly women who can’t get a man. They’re resentful, they hate men, they envy men, they wish they were men. If you want to be like them, something is wrong with you, too.¹⁴

Although some pretty high-ranking people took this position,¹⁵ most Big Boys at the time were more subtle. As you’ll see throughout this book, they even admitted then (and now) that some areas need tweaking. Nevertheless, they took advantage of the image spread by these more outlandish comments to preserve the status quo (along with their own power and privilege). Feminism was made to seem extreme, ridiculous, outside the mainstream. Like pornography, the word *feminist* became associated with the adjective *hard core*.

What feminists actually stood for—the goals of equity and fairness—along with their documentation of inequity, disappeared in this man-hating/man-envying, unattractive/unhappy woman framework. With considerable help from the media, the framework stuck. The media dubbed feminists “libbers” (what other movement, however maligned, has ever been dismissed with such a name?) and described their objectives as freedom from bras and babies. Feminists were equated with lesbians, and lesbians were equated not with women who happened to love another woman, but with failed women who hated all men. Typically feminists were painted as sourpusses. The photo or quote featured the most strident or offbeat. A disproportionate amount of airtime and print were—and still are—given to the opponents.

The April 25, 2004, March for Women’s Lives in Washington, DC is a good example. A million supporters marched past a smattering of antichoice opponents. Yet most news stories featured “the other side” at length to be “fair.” As Gloria Steinem has pointed out, “An issue may be supported by a majority of women, 60/40 or even 70/30, but confining its discussion to two women arguing will give the impression that women are divided 50/50, also that two women can’t get along.”¹⁶ Focusing on these “catfights”¹⁷ between women was used to cast feminism as outside the mainstream. Despite the fact that the majority of women agree with

feminism's goals, calling yourself a feminist was tantamount to *isolating* yourself from those around you.

The Backlash

In the 1980s, the Big Boys added another dimension to their rhetoric. Not only had feminism failed to provide solutions for the majority of women, it actually was responsible for most of their problems. As Susan Faludi documented in painstaking detail, a backlash developed that told women they'd never had so much—or been so miserable. Feminism gave women equality, but was said to rob them of love and to cause “nearly every woe besetting women, from mental depression to meager savings accounts, from teenage suicides to eating disorders to bad complexions.”¹⁸

Today the backlash has a new feature. Women, we're told, can be whatever they want. If few are in the best jobs, it's because they don't want to be there. Those unwilling to work like maniacs are less competent and committed. If they leave, they're not driven out—they're “opting out” to be at home. Women with children who hang on to these jobs are selfish, handing over their kids to strangers to raise. They earn less than men, but that's okay, because motherhood is the most important job—except for women who are poor. They'd *better* work at whatever job's available regardless of hours, or they're lazy and bad role models. And if their kids are home alone and don't see much of Mom? Well, at least they have their pride.

As for feminists who would change the status quo, their image hasn't changed much. When I taught women studies in 1970, I asked students what their friends and loved ones thought about feminists. Their response: hairy, raging, humorless, man-hating dykes. Thirty-five years later, I'm teaching women's studies again and asking the same question. Incredibly, I hear the same replies, along with some new variations. “My grandpa said, ‘You're going to need a helmet in that class,’” Rob told us. Becky added, “My boyfriend begged me not to sign up.”

Adding Fuel to the Fire

Feminists can't put all the blame on the Big Boys. After a talk I gave in Worcester, Massachusetts in March 2004, a young woman came up to thank me “for being so reasonable.” I asked her to explain, thinking she'd been affected by the backlash. In fact, she'd been turned off by some other women students who told her, “Be just like us, reject all things feminine, or you're hurting the cause.” From Worcester I drove to Boston for a reunion

with a college roommate, a strong and strikingly independent woman. When I told her about this book, she expressed her view that the word “feminist” had taken on an aggressive connotation. “If I saw a notice for a meeting of feminists,” she said, “I wouldn’t go.”

What’s known as the women’s movement has a lot of work to do. Many women of color think of feminists as white women who are at best oblivious about white supremacy or at worst clinging to it. In fact, there are multiple women’s movements, including many groups invisible to the mainstream media but doing amazing work. I’ll tell you about some of them in this book.

But above all I want to show you that ending sexism—the view that women and work associated with women are of lesser value—means working together to take on the Big Boys, exposing the myths they tell to maintain power, while documenting the real problems women face and the need for feminist solutions.

How I Came to Feminism

I grew up on the wrong side of the rapid transit tracks in an otherwise wealthy community in Cleveland, Ohio. My father didn’t make much money, but our family of five (I have an older brother and twin sister) got by on one income. When we kids were teenagers, my mother decided to go back to work to save money for us to go to college. Shortly afterward, my dad slammed into a parked truck. Turned out he’d been driving blind for who knows how long, due to cataracts on his eyes. Between mending from the injuries and then from the cataract surgeries, he was out of work for more than a year. Suddenly my mother’s “extra” wages were the family’s only means of support—and we had a lot of trouble getting by. I got my first training in how to handle calls from bill collectors and bought my first rummage-sale dress, hoping it hadn’t come from a schoolmate’s closet. I knew my mom was smart and worked hard at her social work job. But I didn’t question why she earned so little money—that was life.

My reaction to growing up with so much less than my classmates was to reject the materialist world and become a scholar. Thanks to financial aid, I went to Cornell to study the classics. It didn’t take long to figure out that the ivory tower was as corrupt as the rest of the world. Still, I loved my studies and suddenly found myself in crisis at age nineteen: I knew I wanted to marry and have a family, but I also wanted to have a career. How would I choose? A favorite professor found me distraught outside our ivy-covered

building and asked what was wrong. When I told him, he handed me his hankie and said, “I know three women who’ve done both.” I listened to the names of those three professors, names I didn’t know and have long forgotten, wiped my eyes, and said, Fine. If there could be exceptions, I’d be one.

Although I wasn’t questioning unequal choices for women, I was caught up in the fervor of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. Like many Jewish people who grew up after World War II, I was preoccupied with the silence of those who knew about the Holocaust. Being a bystander was never an option for me. I graduated in 1966, spent the summer in Cleveland working against the Vietnam War, then went to Cambridge University in England, where I divided my time between arcane studies and protest. I also traveled to Athens to visit Kosti, a Greek student I’d dated at Cornell—someone I’d viewed as older, learned, and unattainable. To my surprise, he asked me to marry him and I said yes. A few months later, while I was in England and he was back at Cornell, a military dictatorship took control in Greece. We quickly became involved in efforts to restore democracy, writing letters, marching, speaking out. I assumed we’d live in his country when it was possible for him to go back, and that I would take his name. That’s the way it was done.

In December of 1967, I took the train from London to Greece to see Kosti’s family. The last night his father and I ended up alone in the study. While my future mother-in-law and I could always communicate, even when I knew only thirty words of Greek, my future father-in-law and I had never had a conversation by ourselves. He hadn’t sought me out. And I was a little awestruck, having heard many stories of his bravery in fighting the Nazis and going to jail for being part of the resistance. Eager to create a bond that night, I chattered about the wedding plans and mentioned the rabbi from my childhood who would perform the ceremony. This aging partisan stood by his desk, fiddling with a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils until I finished. Then he folded his arms across his substantial belly. Out of the question, he informed me. No one knew I was Jewish. How could he let his son’s friends, so jealous of Kosti’s scholarship to study in the States, gloat and say, “Yeah, but look what happened, he married a Jew.” Of course, my future father-in-law assured me, he himself wasn’t anti-Semitic. Several times he ticked off his wartime exploits and the number of Jews the resistance had saved. But surely I didn’t expect him to disclose my ancestry to his mother, a peasant woman in her nineties who still believed Jews killed Christian children and drank their blood.

Standing there as the sky darkened, I felt leaden. I didn't have the language skills or know the protocol—were you allowed to take on your father-in-law? Worse, it was as if he'd reached down my throat and yanked out some vital organ that controlled my joints and my voice. I don't remember how I got out of that room. But afterward, I couldn't rationalize my silence. I knew I never again wanted to be in a situation where my value was questioned and I didn't speak up.

My husband-to-be was appalled when he learned of his father's speech. (So was his mother, who said she told everyone I was Jewish.) A few months after we married (with a judge presiding, but only because the rabbi refused to perform an interfaith ceremony), Kosti and I moved to Montreal. There I was the only woman and only non-Greek who participated in meetings of the Greek movement for democracy. The other women sold raffle tickets and supported their men; I was grateful to be allowed into the action. But when a Canadian friend invited me to a women's consciousness-raising group, I attended as Ellen Bravo, my birth name. How heady those discussions were. So that's why my mother got paid so little! That's why there were so few professional women with families! To his credit, Kosti immediately accepted the need to change the way we lived. He took over the cooking and ironed his own clothes. How could we fight for equality in one sphere and deny it in our home?

Unfortunately, this early women's group, like many of the time, was all white and middle class. It didn't speak to the Greek women I was meeting whose lives were taken up with low-wage jobs and staggering interest rates. The women's group marched for abortion rights; my Greek friends searched for ways to feed their children. I kept looking for a women's group where these women would feel at home, but I didn't find one.

In 1970 we moved to southern Maryland, where the administration of the state college "allowed" me to teach a women's studies course so that Kosti would agree to teach economics there. My students, most of them the first in their family to go to college, were thrilled with the discoveries in our classes. They had new understanding, new role models, and new expectations. Many of the ones ready to graduate told me some version of this: "Okay, you've changed our lives, we're ready to change the world. Where should we go?" I didn't have a clue.

Soon I would join them in that search. After moving to Baltimore, Kosti and I split up—we'd grown in different directions, although we remain friends. No one was about to hire me to teach newfangled women's

studies. So to support the organizing I was trying to do with women in my neighborhood, I got a clerical job in a hospital (I type 100 words a minute)—and soon realized that this was what I should be organizing about. The women I worked with were smart and hardworking, yet like my mother, we earned meager pay. What before I took for granted, I now saw to be an undervaluation of women that had to change.

I began attending meetings of the Dump Nixon Coalition, where I noticed a bright, passionate (and extremely cute) guy named Larry Miller and asked him out. He worked at a steel mill and wasn't very savvy about feminists. On our first date, he protested when I went to pay for my meal. "People don't do that," he insisted. But he really listened to women, he loved spending time with kids, and he was fighting against pornography in his all-male work unit. He made me laugh. When we moved in together, he assumed we'd share chores. I was hooked.

In 1976 we married and over the next few years had two wonderful sons. We moved to Chicago, where I worked in the office of a small, left-wing publisher and took each baby to work with me for the first several months. When Larry's mother died unexpectedly, we decided to come to Milwaukee to be closer to his dad. One of us had to get a job with health insurance. Thanks to those typing skills, I got hired at the phone company—and ran smack into inflexible workplace rules (see Chapter 3). All those years I continued to search for a women's group that would look like the women I worked with and speak to their lives. And then in 1982, I found 9to5.

9to5: A Different Brand of Feminism

I had heard of the organization because it was then headquartered in Cleveland, where my parents and siblings still lived. That summer, I learned of a weekend leadership conference at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and drove eighteen hours to attend. I forgot about my exhaustion when I walked into the old brick building where 9to5's "Summer School" was held. Here was a multiracial group of women talking about all the issues that mattered to me—pay equity, family leave, sexual harassment. Their goal was to win raises, rights, and respect for women workers, especially support staff. Panelists included women who seemed to be speaking publicly for the first time, but were doing it well—this was clearly a group that valued leadership development. In breakout sessions under leafy trees, I heard women just like my coworkers describe action they'd taken on their jobs. And they knew how to use humor—I went home with a button that

read, “My consciousness is fine. It’s my pay that needs raising.” Back in Milwaukee, I found a group of women to start a chapter with me. After a few years, I began working part-time for the national organization. And when the founder, Karen Nussbaum, left to become head of the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, I took over as director.

During more than two decades at 9to5, I participated in historic campaigns in which we went up against a lot of Big Boys, including right-wing pundits, legislators and talk-show hosts, the head of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, representatives of the state and local chambers, and members of the conservative Independent Women’s Forum. (Often we lucked out—our opponents had names like Lump and Lawless.) Again and again my sisters and I had to learn how to take these Big Boys on.

How the Big Boys Operate

Four decades in the women’s movement has taught me that the Big Boys rely on a series of myths to prop up the reality that benefits them. Women are making great strides, they say, and where that’s not the case, women have only themselves to blame. When feminists challenge those myths and propose concrete policy changes, the Big Boys hustle to defend their positions. Following the well-known creed that the best defense is hardball offense, they rely on a variety of tactics to try to discredit us, shifting from one to the other with ease. One minute they dismiss us, the next they warn that the sky will fall if we get what we want. I came up with this shorthand to describe how the Big Boys operate. They:

- *Minimize*—What problem? (“Women have it made.”)
- *Trivialize*—That’s a problem? (“Feminism means ugly women will sue to get a man.”)
- *Patronize*—You don’t understand the needs of business. (“You think you can socially engineer behavior.”)
- *Demonize*—You’re the problem. (“Women shouldn’t have kids if they can’t afford to raise them.”)
- *Catastrophize*—Your solution will cause greater problems for the very ones you want to help. (“These laws you want to pass will lead to discrimination against women. You’ll drive business out and cause people to lose their jobs.”)
- *Compartmentalize*—If you get what you want, it will hurt some other group. (“Why should non-parents bear the burden of mothers taking time off from work to deal with their kids?”)

The ideology of sexism or male supremacy is different from racism or white supremacy, relying more on trivializing women's role and patronizing than on demonizing them. Yet whenever necessary, as you'll see throughout the book, the Big Boys take off the gloves. This is especially true when sexism and racism overlap.

What You'll Learn from This Book

Taking on the Big Boys makes the case for feminism and why and how we—men and women—should advance it. I see the economic arena as the key place to challenge sexism. We've got lots of work to do on personal relationships, but to be on equal footing at home or successfully leave an abusive relationship, women must have economic sufficiency. And if men are to share parenting, we have to end penalties on the job for those with caregiving responsibilities. My book examines the main issues for women in the workplace. Each chapter exposes the myths, clarifies the problem, proposes detailed solutions, and dismantles the propaganda against those solutions by showing how we took on the Big Boys. The examples of collective action all come from real-life experiences, mostly from the 9to5 movement; each chapter also highlights a victory won by some other grassroots organization. Some examples are very recent, others go back to the 1980s and '90s. I wish I could tell you the Big Boys' reactions would be different today, but the narrative, alas, remains the same. This book is also filled with stories told to me by many of the women I've worked with over the years. Except where otherwise noted, quotes refer to informal conversations.

Taking on the Big Boys will give you practical tips on everything from dealing with a sexual harasser to getting family members to share the chores—and convincing your mate that an equal relationship is the most rewarding. Reading this book, you'll find out the real impetus behind welfare reform, the lowdown on why women earn so little money (and what to do about it), and the advice of management consultants for keeping a group like 9to5 out of the office (and our success at exposing management's tactics). You'll see in detail what a feminist future would look like, why it matters to all of us, and how you can be part of making it happen. I'm delighted to share tales of Big Boys made humble—including business leaders on pay equity, former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson on family leave, Bryant Gumbel on sexual harassment, U.S. congressmen on overtime pay.

The Issues This Book Will Cover

Why Social Workers Earn Less than Accountants: Pay Equity. Chapter 2 knocks down the myths of women earning less because of personal choices or deficiencies. Instead, it lays out the history of the undervaluation of women's work and public policies to correct that. The chapter recounts our fight for pay equity in Wisconsin, where the Big Boys included politicians, corporate leaders, and women who claimed that they'd pulled themselves up by their high heels—and other women could, too. And it tells how a group of childcare providers in Rhode Island fought to have their work revalued.

Can You Have a Job *and* a Life? Work-Family Issues. The Big Boys claim it's all about balance, but in Chapter 3 you'll learn how the workplace is still designed for men with wives at home full time. You'll also learn what a family friendly workplace should look like and how to create a society that truly values families and time with loved ones, whether or not they're of the same blood or the opposite gender. Find out how we took on the business lobbyists and demolished their arguments in the successful fight for family leave, and how a group of women in Utah brought their kids to the governor's office to preserve childcare funding.

Can a Woman Do a Man's Job? Chapter 4 exposes the myths and practices that limit women's participation in certain occupations. It clarifies what it will take not just to smash the glass ceiling, but to redesign the building, and shows how we took on the Big Boys, specifically opponents of civil rights and affirmative action, some firefighters who said women didn't belong and senior executives who said they did—they just couldn't find them. You'll also meet a Cleveland group who made the hard hat a unisex item.

You Want to See My *What*? Sexual Harassment. Find out what sexual harassment is—and is not—and some sensible policies to prevent it or stop it quickly should it occur. Hear about women who've fought for change and the Big Boys we've taken on, including hosts on CNN and *The Today Show*, as well as some labor leaders. Chapter 5 explains why you can't care about women and hate gays. And it introduces you to an organization of military women fighting to end sexual mistreatment of female soldiers.

Nine to Five: Not Just a Movie—The Right to Organize. The Big Boys don't want women comparing notes or stirring things up. You'll find out

why the best way to get what you need for yourself is to work with others on behalf of everyone—and what specific changes would enable workers to make that choice. Chapter 6 describes how we went up against a big “union-free” management firm, and how our sister union took on the administration of a major university.

Working Other than Nine to Five: Part-Time and Temporary Jobs.

The growth in part-time and temp jobs has potential for women—but only if laws and practices change so that these jobs become voluntary and equitable. In Chapter 7 you’ll see how we took on various Big Boys, from a mayor’s chief of staff to the national association for temp agencies. You’ll also learn about a dozen Chinese garment workers in Oakland, California, who challenged a giant manufacturer.

What This Nation Really Thinks of Motherhood: Welfare Reform.

Nothing exposes the lie of mothers on a pedestal more than the treatment of mothers who happen to be poor. Chapter 8 lays out the myths about those on welfare and points to the real key to ending poverty: reform of *work*. From Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson to right-wing think tanks and liberal politicians, taking on the Big Boys has involved telling the truth about poverty and race and about the way women are valued. A New York group called Stand with Sisters for Economic Dignity found an unusual and powerful way to do this.

Revaluing Women’s Work Outside of Work. Chapter 9 looks at relationships and the home front. Contrary to claims by the Big Boys, greater rights for women does not mean equal rights or an end to violence against women. You’ll learn the cost of denial of marriage rights to same-sex partners. You’ll see why equal relationships are more loving, what men have to gain from being full participants in caring for kids—and how to make sure that happens. This chapter also looks at who’s doing the dirty work, why feminists shouldn’t be exploiters of domestic help, and what a group of Long Island immigrant workers are doing about exploitation.

How You Can Help Get There. In the final chapter, readers, even those with limited time and resources, will learn how to get involved. Activists and leaders will gain detailed tips on ways to be effective in taking on the Big Boys and building a movement for lasting and systemic change.