

# “How Can White Women Include Women of Color In Feminism?” Is A Bad Question. Here’s Why.

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When I’m invited to speak at universities, one of the questions I’m asked the most by young women of color and young white women alike is some variation of “how can white women include women of color in feminism?” My answer is always the same: **that’s not the right question to be asking.**

While I think it’s important to talk about the ways that mainstream feminism erases and devalues women of color, I also believe the language that we use to talk about it can contribute to that erasure and devaluing.

White women don’t need to “include” women of color in feminism. Here’s why:

## **1. Women of color have been doing feminism since forever.**

Asking how white women can include women of color in feminism suggests that feminism is the domain of white women, and that they are the ones who get to decide who’s included. This is the narrative of mainstream feminism, and it’s wrong.

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**Bring Black Girl Dangerous to your college or community event!**

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The fact is that women of color have been creating feminist movements (under whatever names we’ve called them), both formally and informally, since before “feminism” was even a word. Throughout history, women of color have fought for their rights, in ways both large and small, both documented and undocumented, and their fighting has impacted not only their lives and the lives of the women in their communities, but every feminist issue that has come after them. Women of color have always been here doing this work.

From Sojourner Truth to Ida B. Wells, from Gloria Anzaldúa to Yuri Kochiyama, from Leslie Marmon to Rajini Thiranagama, from Shirley Chisholm to Wilma Mankiller, from Coretta Scott King to Cherrie Moraga, women of color have shaped women’s movements in this country (and everywhere).

When we talk about feminism and “inclusion” we need to remember that feminism doesn’t belong to white women by default. **There is no feminism without women of color.**

## **2. The focus should be on *centering*, not on inclusion.**

Women of color feminisms are inherently more complex than white feminisms because women of color experience oppression at more intersections. Adding a racialized experience, and all of the things that come with one, to an experience of womanhood, necessarily complicates and deepens any feminist analysis.

There are oppressions that women of color experience that are unique to us as a group, and oppressions that we face in our different racial groupings that make our experiences further unique. A black woman’s experiences of oppression are very different from an Asian woman’s experiences of oppression. Add trans and queer womanhood and/or disability and the realities of those particular experiences, and even more levels of nuance and insight become possible. Because of this, women of color, and especially trans and/or queer and/or disabled women of color, etc., are the most necessary and valuable voices in any feminist conversation.

Our voices, our analyses, push feminist conversation forward to places where it would never be equipped to go without us. Our experiences, and our ability to articulate those experiences in ways that only we can, makes those conversations exponentially more valuable and useful to feminism and its goals of equality and equity for all women. To be able to fully benefit from these analyses, they must be *centered*, not simply “included”. “Including” them, as an afterthought of a much less robust mainstream, white feminism, misses the entire point.

A next-level feminism, a game-changing feminism, is a feminism that *centers* women of color.

## **3. It’s really white women who need to figure out how to be worthy of inclusion in feminism.**

Women of color feminisms being inherently more complex, and therefore more useful to feminist goals, means that when women of color fight patriarchy, in all the ways that we do, white women also benefit. White supremacy puts white women higher up on the ladder of privilege. So, whatever rights women of color get, white women get times a hundred.

Abortion rights are one example. Access to abortion is being challenged all over the country, for women across racial lines. However, black women, Native women and Latinas, who are disproportionately poor, are the most in danger of not having access to safe abortions. When we fight for women of color to have access, everyone who is above us on the ladder of privilege also benefits. (It doesn’t work the other way around. Women of color do not automatically benefit from access that white women achieve. See: what I just said about abortion.)

Because white women benefit from the work that women of color do in pursuit of freedom and equality, they really ought to do a better job of being worthy of women of color and the work we do for women. When someone else’s struggles benefit you, it behooves you to make those struggles easier, not more difficult.

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Still, white feminists continue to make themselves less and less worthy of women of color feminisms every day. From erasure of our unique experiences as women to the constant questioning of whether Beyoncé (and really any black woman who isn’t bell hooks or Audre Lorde) is really a feminist, white women are still reaching new heights of *WTF?* in 2015.

So, instead of asking “how can white women include women of color in feminism” we ought to be asking “when will white women make themselves worthy of the benefits they reap from the work of feminists of color?”

It’s essential that we change the way we talk about “inclusion” and feminism. Women of color are the necessary center of feminist movements.

## 4 THINGS SOCIETY HATES ABOUT BLACK WOMEN, LOVES ABOUT WHITE WOMEN

Living as a woman presents its own set of challenges; however, living as a black woman can be even more challenging due to inequality and prejudice. A recent article by the Atlanta BlackStar highlights some statistics that illustrate just how different being a black woman is than being a white woman in America. They do this by pointing out five significant things that white women get away with that black women cannot.

**The first area of difference is that statistics show the justice system does not support the notion that black women should be able to defend themselves in the same way that white women do.** A study conducted by the Urban Institute of Washington D.C. revealed that incidences where a white woman killed a black man were determined to be justified 13.5 percent of the time; however, for black women, that number drops to just 5.7 percent for the exact same type of incident.

**The second area where black women do not reap the same benefits as white women has to do with how their sexuality is viewed.** African-American female celebrities who have dealt with leaked dirty tapes have had their careers and image negatively impacted, whereas white women are more likely to receive a boost to their fame for such an occurrence. Jayne Kennedy, an African American sports broadcaster, had her career demolished after a dirty film involving her and her husband leaked to the public. On the other hand, Kim Kardashian, Pam Anderson, and Paris Hilton all saw rewards such as clothing lines, perfume lines, and TV Shows come from their leaked dirty films.

Black women are also revered as hypersexual and animalistic in a way that makes her objectified. White women do not have the same generalized type of derogatory images projected onto their sexuality.

**These negative stereotypes about black women's sexuality coexist with the media's presentation of black motherhood.** An example of the backlash from this negative media depiction is the criticism Michelle Obama faced for choosing to focus on raising her daughters while also traveling the world to promote her platform advocating for such issues as health and education, instead of more politically charged issues.

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**Last but not least, the cultural history of abuse, violation, and exploitation experienced by black women has created the cultural expectation that black women will always possess an almost super human sense of emotional toughness.** This expectation has meant that black women are not culturally given the same permission as white women to be emotionally vulnerable or to make her emotional health a priority. In summary, black women must fight stereotypes and cultural prejudices about who they are and what they are allowed to be or do that white women do not have to.