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FAYE WATTLETON INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
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Faye Wattleton
Reproductive Rights Activist
5/21/2007
Interviewed by Betsy West
Total Running Time: 38 minutes and 9 seconds

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America
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BETSY WEST:

Tell me, do you remember when you first heard about the women's
movement?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, I think all of us have a recollection of the women's movement from college. I mean, just in the context of American history. The march to gain the right to vote is very deeply embedded in everything that we learned about American life. I became much more conscious of it however in my early 20s, my late teens, my early 20s, when there seemed to be a convergence of the women's movement with the civil rights movement.

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And, while I always say that I knew that I was a girl before I knew that I was an African-American, it was a time in which there was a convergence of many movements that created a tremendous amount of turbulence in American society around the injustices. So it was a consciousness that came from a number of fronts. It was the Vietnam war, it was the sexual revolution. There was really, a tremendous effort and energy in the country that raised consciousness about women and the inequities that we were encountering, that were structural inequities but that really were deeply embedded in the values of America.

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BETSY WEST:

Did you ever have what Gloria Steinem has called a click moment?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, I'm not a big click person, and I'm not one that says, "Well, I had one idol and that was the person that converted me." As the daughter of a minister, I suppose that one could say that I ought to believe in conversions and instant transformations. But I think that life and the values that we form over life is really an extended process.

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And it's an extended process that comes about as a result of our personal experiences, how we may encounter inequity or injustice in a very personal and a very visceral, very emotional way. I don't think that there's anything that triggers this more than to confront it right in our faces, right in our souls and to really feel the pain and the burden of being treated wrongly. See, there was not a time that I can recall anyway, in which I can say, "This is my conversion and boy, I'm going to really mount the barricades and go fight."

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I've always seen injustice as a child. Growing up, as an African American child, I was born and spent my early years in St. Louis, Missouri. It was not a northern state, it wasn't really a southern state, it was sort of a border state. Slaves had been traded down on the riverfront. My parents used to take me down to show me the slave blocks. So I think there was a consciousness about it. My parents were up from the South, near descendants of slaves.

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I'm in the midst of doing my memoirs now and I'm looking at the history of slavery. Turns out that my great-great grandmother was owned by the former

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governor of Mississippi. And my great grandmother, whom I knew and remember and I have pictures taken with her, was born the year before Emancipation. So the sense of aspiring to enjoy and to receive the best promise of America is very much a part of my familial legacy. And so I grew up with it.

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I grew up with a mother who was an evangelist, and we traveled all around the country. And in the South, we had to go from one stop to another before night because we couldn't stay in a hotel. It was just accepted. We cannot stay in a hotel because we are Black. We cannot go to a gas station and ask to use the facilities because we are Black. And so there were many times that I had to relieve myself on the side of the road between two car doors.

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So it's these experiences that really have a way of embedding in you a sense of, you as a person are not qualified in this society in which other people have great entitlement to sort of the basic sense of human dignity and human rights. And I think that over a time, I evolved into a much more radical person about these inequities than perhaps I might have if I had lived a more privileged lifestyle.

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BETSY WEST:

Some people have said that the women's movement was kind of a White middle class thing, that it really didn't take into account the experience of African American women. Can you talk about that a little?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I'm not very sympathetic to that point of view. Yes, we as African-Americans have unique issues with respect to human dignity and justice in this country. Our legacy is very deep in slavery. When there is a temptation to compare African-Americans to our goal for equal opportunity with that of any other immigrant, I just say, "Where are those other immigrants that came over on slave ships?"

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I mean, we arrived here differently, our history is different, human evolution doesn't really move that quickly. And so yes, I acknowledge and there's no question that our history in this country- I look different from every other person who is non-White. And so we do carry that legacy and that has to be taken into account.

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But I think that when you're fighting for human justice, there's really no room to stop and say, "Well, your movement doesn't relate to my movement." W.E. Dubois was very involved in the early 20th century women's movement because he saw it as really, a very important alignment to make with the

efforts that were being made during Reconstruction, and ultimately against Jim Crow laws.

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Margaret Sanger, who founded the reproductive rights movement, was very involved with women and men ministers in the South, because at that time, she believed that they were the most powerful voices. Believe it or not, the eugenicists were more popular than birth control. And so she aligned her movement with those people who were engaged in their own struggle and their own movements because she felt that they could advance her movement.

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So I think we have to find common places in which we can collaborate and can work together. I don't know of any movement that has not been supported by middle class folk. Most people who are engaged in the day to day struggles of life don't have time to put down a pitchfork and go march in the street or to go lobby. The abolitionist movement was really driven by middle class and upper class people. And so I think we have to really sort of be a bit restrained in making accusations.

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Injustice is injustice. Whomever you may align yourself with, it is still a basic sense of fighting for human dignity.

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BETSY WEST:

Young women today don't quite understand what it was like to be a woman when you were growing up.

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, I'm glad that the young women of today- that my daughter doesn't know what it was like when I was growing up because we would not have made much progress, would we have, if she were experiencing the same barriers and the same mistreatment and ill treatment. So there has been progress, but the danger is a perception that the job is finished, that there is no more need to continue fighting.

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It is now more individual. A lot of the structural barriers to equality have been theoretically terminated or reversed. There are a lot of people who want to retrench and go back to some of the old practices in which women were clearly in a secondary role, at the same time that women are making a lot of progress in many institutions but still not in the proportion to our presence in society. So I'm glad that my daughter doesn't experience a time in which she cannot control her reproduction.

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I'm glad that she feels that she can be a lawyer. I lived at a time when women had fairly narrow options in their careers. They were teachers, they were social workers, or we were nurses. In my case, I was a nurse and believe it or not, I got two degrees in nursing and did not ever nurse. I went on to a career

as an executive, and ultimately as the head of a large international organization.

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So that their hopes and promises are cast in a very different prism. A prism of progress but also a prism of unfinished business. They will encounter barriers. In the organization that I now head, the Center for the Advancement of Women, we find that women in their early 20s don't recognize sexual discrimination or sexual harassment. They say it's just flirtation and that sort of thing. By the time we look at women in their 40s, they will say, "Yes, I have encountered sexual discrimination and sexual harassment."

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So part of it is just living a life and really experiencing the continuing residual values that place women in a secondary- in a less than equal status, and women then gain a different understanding. I don't really think that we should be so quick to indict young people. I'm very, very—as I said earlier—I'm very happy that my daughter is a lawyer and it never occurred to her to be a nurse. It occurs to her that she doesn't want to do the same thing all of her life, that she can have two or three careers.

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So we've made enormous progress, but we have a long way to go to achieve the agenda that we all would like to see accomplished.

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BETSY WEST:

Tell me, you were radicalized by your experiences as a young nurse. Can you tell me a little bit about what you saw, what you experienced?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, as I said earlier, I don't think that I was radicalized per se. I think that those experience built on the experiences of my childhood growing up as an African American in this country and facing all of the residual Jim Crow laws. As my mother had hoped me to be, I trained as a nurse. She had also hoped that I would become a missionary. I didn't become a missionary, although I guess one could say I was a missionary of sorts, but it wasn't the kind that she had in mind.

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And I'm really sort of grateful that I selected that profession to pursue training, because it opened my mind and it exposed me to the circumstances of people's lives that were quite different from the narrow, more protected life that I had lived as a child and growing up as the daughter of a minister. And so I saw things that I'd not seen before. I saw the life circumstances of kids who were battered.

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I put myself through college working at a pediatric hospital in Columbus, Children's Hospital at Columbus, and I saw the evidence. And it was whispered. We didn't ever really want to accuse families of abusing their children. But now that I look back on them, they were abused children, they

were unwanted children. As a nurse trainee and ultimately training at Harlem hospital in midwifery, I saw the evidence of women who came in that did not want to be pregnant, they didn't know how to prevent themselves from being pregnant, who had massive complications.

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I was in delivery with one woman who was having her eighth baby, and I was delivering her and she wouldn't stop bleeding. And it was a horrifying experience. The doctor had to come in and had to impose very, very quick emergency measures to stop her bleeding. But that was a bit radicalizing. Why is this woman having her eighth child when she doesn't really have any... This child is not likely to have any prospect for a bright future.

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In that setting, I took care of a girl who was 17, and she and her mother had instilled bleach and Lysol into her uterus to end an unwanted pregnancy. I mean, it's along the way. It's not a matter of somebody saying, "Ah, aha. That's an aha moment." But it's a period in which you feel enormous compassion, enormous sadness, that this has to happen and that it shouldn't be. And that's what we have to work for.

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I mean, I have the same gene that works today, pretty much so, 40 years later, that worked when I was in my late teens working at Children's Hospital, that it shouldn't be. This is an injustice, and particularly in a country that has so much to offer as America does.

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BETSY WEST:

Your mother was a religious woman who opposed abortion on moral grounds. What gave you the strength to defy her on this issue?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I didn't defy my mother. And I think that it's really important to make a point here that we do not have to live our lives in the image of our parents. And not to live our lives in the image of our parents doesn't mean defiance. It means that we have charted a path that feels right for ourselves. And there are those, including our family, close family members, who will not agree, who philosophically do not agree.

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And I believe that is because they have not had the same experiences. As I said a moment ago, if I had chose the teaching profession, I probably would not have had the same philosophical perspective as the one that evolved within me as a nurse, training to be a nurse, and seeing that first of all, everyone that I cared for was not going to go to hell because they weren't saved, as I had been taught all of my life. That these were people who were trying to make their way through life, who had very difficult circumstances.

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My religion didn't need to be imposed upon them. I just needed to care for them and to give them the most compassionate care possible. To cast the

work that I've done as a defiance of my mother is to one, suggest that somehow I thought about my mother's opinion in selecting a profession, but rather that I pursued what felt right for me. And it felt right for me to feel compassion for other people's circumstances.

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It felt right for me to understand that my life was not their life, and that the experiences that brought them to the hospital or to the clinic in which I served, were not those of my life. And it felt right for me that people- that women should not suffer disproportionately, because I have perhaps the two disadvantages of being both a woman—or an advantage as I really believe it—but within our own society, two struggles as a woman and as a minority woman.

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So it's really the constellation of elements of living that really helped me to evolve. Now I'm very respectful of my mother's opinions and my mother's values. She reads the Bible three or four times a day, still, at the age of 91. I don't ridicule and scold her. I mean, I think a lot of the Bible is about history and it is not so much about divine anointment, but she believes that. And it would be very disrespectful of me not to respect her opinions.

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And I think that this is really an important aspect of national debates. That we should recognize that we have very different opinions, and isn't that the wonderful thing about living in America? That you can hold those views, theoretically without persecution. And while I'm sure that my mother has

prayed for me many long nights, she's sought not to, or she's restrained herself from engaging in prosecutorial or for that matter for persecution, even though I know that she has a different view of the work that I've done than I do.

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BETSY WEST:

Did you have role models in this?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, no, I didn't have role models. My mother perhaps is the most powerful role model in that she was a minister. She is still a minister, actually. She still actively preaches from time to time. And so I sat through a lot of speeches in my early childhood. One would say they were sermons but they were actually oratories and I spent a lot of time on church benches, going to church meetings. Sunday—sometimes it's an all day affair when you are a part of a fundamentalist denomination.

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And so, I guess it was somewhat- And my grandfather, my mother's father, was a minister. So I guess in some ways, I was prepared for the oratorical part of my career. Although I must say that when I came to Planned Parenthood as the national president, there was no expectation that I would become the public figure that I evolved to be. I sort of have tried to meet the challenge that is before me in whatever I've done.

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And so I had to get makeup and I had to figure out how to do my hair, and I figured that, mhm, this television stuff is pretty powerful and you can really get a lot across to a lot of people. But it has to be a package that people want to look at and want to listen to. And so I learned early that this was going to be a very, very important tool toward leading the organization, and also toward compelling society to support the principles of the organization.

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But my day to day work was really the grind of a CEO. I mean, I might do Good Morning America for seven minutes at 7:15, but for the rest of the day, I had the same headaches that any executive of a large nonprofit, far-flung organization had. We had offices in Bangkok and Nairobi and Miami, and we had regional offices around the country. And all of the personal headaches, all of the fundraising headaches and all of those issues that a CEO has to deal with were on my desk when I got in from makeup at Good Morning America.

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BETSY WEST:

Now as Planned Parenthood became more powerful and more effective, the organization was vilified, you were vilified to some extent, can you tell me about that? What was that like? What was said about you and how did you handle that?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

It was really a pretty turbulent time. The anti-abortion groups were up in the woods in Wisconsin, training in terrorist techniques to be used against abortion clinics. Even though Planned Parenthood then and now primarily provides preventive services, that is reproductive contraception, and as the largest organization preventing the need for abortion, it was still under the focus of attack.

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But it didn't occur to me one time to shy away and to try to avoid the controversy, the struggle. It seemed to me that this was a struggle that was really at the heart of women's real liberation, the most important and private decision. If we can't make that decision, then what do the others matter? And so it, it was really- it just seemed to me that it was logical. It had a 60-some-year history at that point.

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It was an organization, as I said, far-flung around the world. And I, interestingly, found more difficulty internal to the organization and the many internal political struggles that go on in activist organizations- found that more difficult than the external. Yes, in time, I always had to have security at public appearances. I always encountered picketers. I was called the princess of death.

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But those things didn't seem to ever really penetrate for me. If anything, they gave me even more determination to fight against these elements that

seemed to disparage women's circumstances so completely that if we didn't resist them, what hope was there for women to live lives unfettered by the opinions and the domination of others? And so, I'm not a princess of death, so people can call you-

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I mean, what did we used to say as children? Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but yet words are very powerful, so I don't dismiss the words. But at least, in that part of my work, I just felt that it came with the territory. I also felt that if someone really wanted to harm me while everyone- All of the people that cared about me felt that I needed to have security, security, security, and that's very prudent and well and good, but I always felt that if someone really wanted to harm me, they could. And I couldn't worry about that. I wasn't going to stop doing what I was doing.

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Every time I went abroad and saw the circumstances of women in developing countries, how poor, how deprived, how hopeless their lives were, I would come back even more energized to go to Congress and to fight for more aid for them. So I feel that, our time- maybe I'm somewhat fatalistic and I do believe in our having a certain destiny, and I was there to fulfill that particular part of my destiny and when my time was up, it was up. I don't think that the organization has continued to have that kind of public profile and I think a lot of ground has been lost as a result.

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BETSY WEST:

What was the need that you saw? Why did you move beyond reproductive rights?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Yeah, that's really an excellent question because it really is at the heart of what I do now because... Over the 14 years that I was president of Planned Parenthood, I listened to a lot of rhetoric from the opposition. And while the focus was on abortion rights and rarely was there a desire to engage with us in education and prevention, there was often rhetoric that was demeaning to women, that conveyed a value about women that was very disturbing to me.

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And I believed- really, I came to believe in time that while the focus and the fulcrum of the energy of this battle was on the uterus and a woman's sexual decisions, the real issue was women. And that if we really trusted women, if we really believed that women had the right to that level of power, that we wouldn't fight women's decisions, because we would assume that the woman knows what is best for her.

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And so I began to broaden my perception, and again as I said earlier in our conversation, while I don't think I had any moments of epiphany, I have tended to be a person who evolved over time, based on what I've seen and how I've worked and what I've heard and listened to and thought about. And

I thought, this is really bigger than just reproductive rights. If it weren't, we'd have much more of a conversation about prevention. This is really about controlling women's lives.

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And then you look around and look at the evidence of how little women are represented in the upper echelons of all of the institutions of our society, whether you speak of political institutions, economic institutions, religious institutions, across the board. Yes, we've made progress at the lower levels. Yes, we are in medicine, but we're not in the hierarchy of medicine. Medicine is now corporatized, so the economic advantage is not as great. And you can go on and on and on.

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And I believed that there needed to be a capacity to track what goes on in the individual lives of women. It's a day to day struggle now because theoretically, we are not supposed to be discriminated against. And if there isn't a capacity to ask women, "What's going on with you? What's your opinion about this or that issue," a lot is lost in the conventional wisdom basket. It's conventional wisdom that we have equality and that everything has been done and that eventually, women will get there.

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And I heard recently a calculation that at the rate that women are going to Congress or being elected, it will take almost 200 years for us to reach a representation in parity. Well, that's a very long journey but I think it also gives us some perspective of how difficult the battle continues to be.

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BETSY WEST:

What are some of the surprising things that your research is showing about issues that matter to women?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

Well, our first project was released about seven years ago, seven or eight years ago, and that was a big surprise. We found that women were increasingly religious. We had used some of the studies or some of the questions that had been done by earlier pollsters and we found that women said that they turned now to the religious communities for answers to their day to day problems, not to civil institutions. That was the first- I believe it was the first report, I think I'm accurate, that women now believed that abortion rights should be severely restricted.

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We were surprised to see that the largest group of women in the survey—and this was a nationally representative survey—believed that it would be better for women to stay home and take care of the family and men to go out to work at the same time that 70 percent of us are in the workforce. So there were some really disturbing trend lines that had not been anticipated. We have repeated some of those same questions for national surveys with very large samples.

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We oversample to get meaningful data from African American and Latina women, and in the upcoming research, we hope to also get data from Asian women, so that we're able to make some sort of ethnic comparisons and definitions about their opinions. One of the largest that we've done, 3,300 women, entitled *Progress and Perils*, we found that women said that domestic violence and sexual assault was the number one issue that should be addressed by the women's movement.

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That was a really big surprise, because as usual, conventional wisdom, right? We thought that it would be equal pay for equal work and they were pretty much statistically dead heat. But we hadn't expected it to poll that high. The retrenchment or the erosion in support for reproductive rights as they now stand continues to be pretty well-embedded now. 34 percent of women say that abortion should be restricted to rape, incest and life of the woman, and 17 percent say it should be outlawed altogether.

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So that combined 34 to 17 is a little over half of women now believe that abortion is too widely available, too frequently used, and there need to be restrictions.

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BETSY WEST:

What do you do about it?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I think we have to keep talking about it. We've done some follow-up research on trying to probe why there's been such a decline in support. There's an enormous level of ignorance. There's a perception that women can have abortions up until the moment of delivery. The blending of early abortions with late-term abortions seems to have become fairly well established, even though 90 percent of all pregnancy terminations occur in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

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The rate of abortion has been basically flat for 30 years, and yet there's a perception that women are irresponsible when they become pregnant and don't want to be. Now quite frankly, I don't know what having an unintended pregnancy solves by continuing it and denying a woman the ability to terminate a pregnancy and have an unwanted child. I don't know how that's appropriate punishment. But there is that perception, that if women didn't have access so easily, they might be better contraceptors.

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We are human beings, we make mistakes, there are no perfect forms of contraception, and so there will always be unintended pregnancies. The reproductive rights movement really got underway in a very meaningful way when a middle class White woman from Arizona had to go to Europe to receive an abortion because she had contracted German measles. That was in

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the same climate that a lot of children were being born as a result of their mothers having German measles and having various birth anomalies.

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So sometimes it's a conversion of experiences that has to occur to raise a belief consciousness that this is real, that it could happen to me and then people wake up. But unfortunately, people get hurt in the balance. And I'm afraid that that's what's going to happen in this situation as well.

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BETSY WEST:

You've spoken out against Imus' sexist and racist remarks about the Rutgers basketball team.

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I believe that words are powerful. Never mind that I already said that, sticks and stones but words don't hurt me, I think words are enormously powerful. I think that words that come from the mouths of powerful people, to whom others listen and shape and form their own opinions, are enormously powerful. And when we have an opportunity to occupy those platforms of enormous influence, we have to be very responsible and very careful about the management of that power and the execution of that power.

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I believe that comparing Imus to a rap musician is a rather bizarre comparison. Misogynist language is unacceptable and we should reject it and we should speak against it and we should not invest and buy it in whatever format. But there is a hierarchy of influence in any society. The pope has a higher order of influence in the Catholic Church than do the local priests.

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And Imus had a very important and powerful platform, one that he did not exactly fulfill the obligation and the responsibility with the greatest amount of care and, I believe, just sensibility. I don't describe what he said as sexist, I'd describe it as misogynist. He didn't say that these were nappy-headed, and- My daughter listens to rap music a lot and she said to me, "Mom, I've never heard a rap musician characterize women as nappy-headed ho's. I've never heard that in a rap song."

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So he was racist because he chose to pick a characteristic of African descendency—our hair which tends to be tightly curly or tightly woven. But he didn't say nappy-headed girls, he said nappy-headed ho's. And so he went to the misogyny. He went directly to the lowest, the basest, the most coarse way of characterizing young women who did not—not that any woman deserves it—but they were not engaged in any kind of debate that presumably had upset him, to make him be so intemperate.

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In fact, they were young women who had risen to the highest level of sports competition, attending a very prominent, very prestigious academic

institution. It was uncalled for and hopefully, it is a lesson to those who have the privilege of speaking on the broad public airways—it's a privilege, it's not a right—understand that when you do that, you have to discharge responsibility with great care.

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As despicable as Imus' words were, he was speaking to an audience that does support his misogynist and his racist statements. That's what ought to bother us more than just the man. That there is a segment in our society who likes to hear, and who perhaps supports and doesn't see anything particularly wrong with what he said—that really is a reflection of the work that we have to do.

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BETSY WEST:

We talked about your daughter before, and about her generation. What do you see as the biggest challenges for her ahead as a woman?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I think that the biggest challenges for her will be the unexpected, the presumed, and not experiencing the presumptions of their lives. That is that they presume that they have equal opportunity, they presume that they can do anything that they want to do. They don't understand yet, the barriers that they still will have to overcome.

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And in a way, this is wonderful, that there is optimism that perhaps the women of my generation did not have, but I think it's going to be perhaps a bit of a shock for them when they come against these barriers because they have not been toughened by the early experiences of discrimination and the denial of equal opportunity and equal rights. So I worry about that for her. How will she deal with that?

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Maybe that will be the radicalizing force; When an assumption made is not one delivered, can create a degree of anger and resentment. I think, interestingly, I find that they have so many choices. That is often more difficult than the two or three or few choices that we of my generation had, that we knew that was basically what we were going to do. And a few other- There were some women who were doctors and some women who were lawyers, but you weren't thinking of that generally across the board.

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Well, I'm coming to school to go to law school. So, while there is a vast array of opportunities for them, there is also an enormous number of obstacles for them to realize their full potential to those opportunities.

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BETSY WEST:

Do you think that documenting stories, telling them, reminding them, is that part of this?

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FAYE WATTLETON:

I think it's absolutely part of it, and I think it's at the core of it. I think that's why this project is so important and so wonderful, because the loss of those experiences as they should be because we fought them so that we could make progress. We don't need to relive bad times again. We need to live where we are in the reality and accept the reality and make them better times for my granddaughters. And yes, I believe that we sometimes have lost it.

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And there were a few years during the early days after Roe v. Wade when there were a lot of speak-outs on abortion. This was my experience with abortion. Somehow we've gotten so polite about that. We don't talk about that anymore. I'm delighted that I will have an opportunity to talk about that in a very personal and direct way in the upcoming memoir that I'm writing for Farrar, Straus. God save me, they want that book and it's so hard to get it written, but I'm going to talk about my illegal abortion and I'm going to talk about what it was like to go to a doctor's office late at night and to have an abortion without anesthesia.

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I'm going to talk about that occurring when I was an adult, a nurse, teaching labor and delivery nursing, and too embarrassed to ask the doctors with whom I worked on a daily basis for birth control and having a birth control- I mean, a contraceptive failure. And I—maybe it's because of my age—I don't have anything to lose anymore. I'm not ashamed to talk about it. I'm ashamed

to think, however, that if I didn't talk about it, that some ground will be lost because women, young women, will believe that it was all manufactured and it wasn't all that bad.

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It was bad. I'm going to talk about how upset the doctor was when I didn't come back for my post abortion examination because he was afraid that I had gone to the police. And when he saw me in the hospital, he grabbed me and said, "What happened to you? Why didn't you come back? I told you to come back." And he scolded me and rebuked me in the hallway of the hospital, and all I wanted to do was just to get on with my life and not to talk about it any longer.

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So I think that our stories can be enormously powerful because they're about living, real human beings, not about theoretical descriptions in feminist literature. And wherever we can do that, it's really, really important to connect and not to be ashamed of the journey that we made for which there may be values that reject and rebuke us, but recognize that these were really real human struggles that we've had. And we've got to tell our children that we can't repeat that history.

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