GLORIA STEINEM INTERVIEW
GLORIA: IN HER OWN WORDS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

GLORIA STEINEM
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt and Sheila Nevins

GLORIA: The Movement – Issues & Achievements

What is a Feminist?

03:27:20;05

GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, really-- you know, a feminist is what the dictionary says, which is a person, male or female, who believes in the full social, economic, political equality of-- of women and men, and I would say also acts on it. The dictionary (CHUCKLE) doesn't say that, just says, "believe". That's a feminist.

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And it's a world view, in fact, because once you question and-- and don't any longer believe in the-- in the first way we are divided into groups, which usually, for most people, is gender, that divides us into the leaders and the led or, you know, any way into two different groups, once you do away with that and start looking at us all as human beings-- it-- it does-- you no longer are likely to accept economic differences and racial differences and ethnic differences.

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It just doesn't seem so normal, you know, to group people. And also, since you have to control reproduction in order to continue racism, the two things

are intertwined, anyway. So, you know, you-- you have to-- uproot racism and sexism at the same time, anyway. Otherwise it-- it just doesn't work. So, you know, I do think it's-- fem-- feminism starts out being very simple, starts out being the instinct of a little child, male (CHUCKLE) as well as female, who says, "It's not fair. And you are not the boss of me." (CHUCKLE) It's something in us who knows that, right? And it ends up being a-- a worldview that-- that-- that questions hierarchy altogether.

Why do women lie about their age?

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Women lie about their age because the culture punishes women for being older in a way that it punishes men somewhat, but not nearly as much. And that comes from the idea that women are only valuable when they're potential or actual child bearers and child-rearers, and after that they have no value. So, it actually makes women get more radical with age incidentally. Whereas men get more conservative, because women lose power with age, and men gain power with age.

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But-- it does-- cause women to lie about their age more than men do. It's changing. After all, we think about Marilyn Monroe who thought her life was over at 30. Now there are viable sexual actresses in movies at 40 and 50, and Meryl Streep at 60. So, it's changing, a decade at a time, but there's still a big difference. We still remark upon it for instance, when we see older women with younger men, and we don't remark upon it the other way around.

Why do men hate women?

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, first of all, it's not all men. It's never all men. It's-- it-- it may be the dominant political system, but there have always been men who-- who have rebelled. You know, some-- somebody once said that the woman a man most fears is the woman inside himself.

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You know, I think it's partly because we all have a full circle of human qualities. Every one of us. And women are made to suppress more-- but men are made to suppress some too. And then told that they're not real people, they're not-- they'll lose their identity if they lose their so-called masculinity. And women represent that. I think that's-- that's part of it. And part of it is how we got in this jam in the first place, which is that women are the means of reproduction-- and male dominant systems think they have to control reproduction in order to decide who owns children and how many soldiers they need, and how many citizens and so on.

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And yet-- you know, we're-- we're together-- men and women in the most intimate way. So, if-- if-- if some men, especially men in leadership didn't-- distance themselves from women and-- and demonize women, they would be in danger of losing control in a big way, recognizing their own humanity, which is very scary. Because it means they're-- they recognize their own weakness and emotion and all the things they're not supposed to-- to have. So, it's hard to-- to keep on distancing somebody who is your mother, who is your daughter, who are your neighbors if you're-- you know, it takes a lot of

effort. It takes a lot of cultural training.

Women as Authoritative Figures

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GLORIA STEINEM:

There-- there was a sense of discomfort-- on the part of men who were interviewing and to whom this was new. I can understand that. But I thought-- I s-- thought of it again during the 2008 Presidential Elections because-- men were on camera, a serious journalist, saying things like, "I cross my legs whenever I see Hillary Clinton. Does anybody wanna see a woman growing old in public?" all of these things.

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And I finally had an "aha" about it-- that reaches all the way back to those men, which is that we are mostly-- women, as well as men, raised by women when we're children. And we come to think that female authority is only appropriate to childhood. And that's-- so I think especially for men, when they see a powerful woman or a woman supposing equality, that they feel regressed to childhood. And I think that's the discomfort.

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So, I think both at the-- at the level of those reporters and one day having a female President of the United States, it has to-- it's rooted in men being equal parents as well as women so that men are seen as nurturing as well and women are seen as authoritative in public life. Both are both.

Gender Roles

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I think-- the-- the men who've done well by women are the ones who defied the masculine role. And actually, they're the ones who are transformative leaders. Because the masculine role allows you to conquer, which is big. But it doesn't allow you to transform. So, it's Gandhi, you know, who-- who used, adopted the methods of the women's movement in India which were nonviolent, massive peaceful methods.

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He defied the masculine role by refusing to use violence. Mandela defied the masculine role, too. Cesar Chavez did in some ways, too, because he admired-- Gandhi and-- took to nonvio-- anybody who defied-- defies the masculine role then is able to make a connection with women. Olaf Palma, the Chief of State of Sweden. I didn't ever know him, but reading him, he's the only Chief of State I've ever known about who said that the gender roles are the deepest cause of violence on earth. That all violence, except that in that of self-defense-- is normalized by the idea that human nature, human beings are divided into active and passive, conqueror and victim, subject and object, whatever degree it is. And he said the-- the deepest role of all governments was to humanize the gender roles because they were the cause of violence, which we can't afford anymore on this planet.

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Wo-- women-- Margaret Meade always said that women were even more fierce in self-defense, but less likely to be aggressive. So, if we're-- if we're defending-- our children, ourselves, someone we love, we're quite capable of

being incredibly fierce. But not because we're better people or more moral, but just because we don't have our masculinity to prove, we're less likely to be aggressive.

Nature vs. Nurture

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GLORIA STEINEM:
Well, I-- I don't think it's nature or nurture. I think it's nature and nurture. You know, because if only about 15 percent of our brains are developed when we're born, and 85 percent grow-- you know, a baby's brain doubles in size in the first year or so. So, we're incredibly sensitive to our environment.

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But I think the main thing to remember is our uniqueness. You know, because the difference-- the generalized group differences between males and females are less great than the probable differences between two women or between two men. So, it's-- it's the individual difference that matters. Unfortunately, research money-- the same research money that used to go into proving racial difference, which lasted centuries, that deep belief in racial difference, now goes into proving sex difference. If it went into proven sameness, we would prove sameness.

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Unique individuality, but-- but not-- determined by-- you know, not-- I mean, you can't really divide human beings into males and females any more than you can-- I mean, race is a fiction. We know now. You know, and-- and clearly we all came from-- southern or eastern Africa and we just have minor adaptations of our selves to climate. But, you know, race is-- is a fiction, and--

and gender is also a fiction. It varies from one culture to the next.

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There's uniqueness from birth. There's two things at the same time. Uniqueness of each individual who-- I mean, if you think about it, we've been here-- we've-- you and I are-- represent millennia upon millennia of environment and heredity combined in a unique way in us. And there's a person inside every baby already. I mean, everybody who has ever met a baby knows there's a person inside every baby.

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So, the point is uniqueness, and the stop-- the point is to stop making group judgments and understand two things. Each of us is unique and each of us-- needs a community. And is part of the human community. I mean, we-- we're incredibly communal creatures. We're so sensitive to every single around us. If people think we're smart, we're smarter, and if they think we're dumb, we're dumber. You know, so it's not one thing, it's two things. It's uniqueness and community-- and the common humanity at the same time.

Do you ever wish you were born a man?

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GLORIA STEINEM:

No, I never wished I was born a man. Never. Never. And I understand why-- girls would, and maybe if I'd gone to school regularly, and been more subject to the society, I would have wanted to be a boy, but I-- I never did.

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Yes, I realize that somewhere I'm called a “manizer,” but I don't think it's comparable to a womanizer, because womanizer has a feeling of unkindness.

I think it's probably true that if you repress the ways that women can be powerful, and certainly, that was true in my growing up, and for many years, then the sense of power that women get for making men fall in love with them is-- you know, there are two kinds of power traditionally allowed to women, making men fall in love with you and shopping. (LAUGHTER)

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Well, as you-- the good news is as you are able to be yourself and find expression and power in other ways, you stop doing both those things. I mean, there-- you know, you don't-- the-- there are too many other-- other ways. But I think I was trying to learn through men. You know, you can enter into a world through a man because you're treated the same way he is. Which has its downside. Then you see people the next day, they don't remember you because you're not with-- with the guy you were with the night before. And I've mostly fell in love with men I admired – and wanted to learn from.

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Yes. I think women have a big problem being angry because there's such huge punishment in the culture for an "angry woman." I mean, we're called angry when we're just being clear. You know-- we're called-- there's really a double standard in what is perceived as angry in women and in men.

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I don't hate the word "lady" but I wouldn't use it because it has a class prison that comes with it. "Lady" was invented to distinguish some women from others so I'd prefer to use words that connect rather than divide.

Jealousy

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I think jealousy is attributed to women because it's attributed to any less powerful group who has to seek favors from the powerful one. So, servants were said to be jealous of each other. In the old days-- if-- it was said that Black people wouldn't go to a Black physician, for instance, because they didn't think he was-- you know, it's-- it's internalized aggression as-- as psychologists say. I don't think it's unique to women.

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But if you're supposed to compete with each other for the favors of someone else, that creates jealousy per se. And-- and what's so remarkable to me now is that women support each so much, despite all these centuries of telling us we're supposed to compete. I-- I used-- I-- a symbol of it to me is that I used to pass on 42nd Street on the way to the Ms. magazine office a-- Black woman traffic cop. And it was a very busy corner, and she was like Toscanini, you know. And every time she saw me going on the way to the office she said, "Give 'em hell, honey." (LAUGHTER) And also, when I get on planes, it's like getting on-- it's like flying girlfriends. You know, because the flight attendants sneak me meals from first class and tell me what's-- what their job issues are, and tell me stories and volunteer. And, you know, it's-- the rewards are much bigger than the-- the punishments.

Abortion and Sexuality

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GLORIA STEINEM:

What-- what comes at me on campuses is that they say to me, why is it that

groups are both against lesbians and contraception, which-- strikes them as irrational, if you see what I mean. They all laugh, you know. But actually, it is rational, because the-- the ultra-right wing, this-- the male dominant ultra-right wing is saying that all sexuality is bad unless it can end in conception.

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So, therefore they're-- against abortion, against the family planning that could reduce the number of abortions, they're against sex between two women and two men, which symbolizes non-procreative sex. All the groups are against the same thing. In fact, the moral majority once took-- a resolution against masturbation, which was my favorite-- in a national convention.

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So, you know, once you understand the logic of it, you see that they are indeed logical. For-- another example is that people will say, well, why are the same groups-- against abortion and for capital punishment, but that also is rational, because the point is who makes the decision. So, as long as the government, or the church, or the tribe makes the decision, it's okay, that's capital punishment. But if the individual can decide to give life or not, it's subversive. It's democratic. It's not authoritarian.

Her Own Story

01:26:46;23

GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I-- I was fleeing to India, partly because I wanted to go to India on this scholarship, and partly because I was engaged, and trying not to get married. So, I thought maybe I was pregnant when I got on the boat to go to London on

my way to India, but I wasn't sure.

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My visa to India didn't come, so I was working as a waitress in London in a very dark and depressing winter, realizing that I was pregnant and not knowing what to do about it. And I was really quite desperate. Really, really desperate. I did all the dumb things. You know, that-- you know, all the remedies. All the things that don't work.

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I was 22 when I was in London. And, you know, just the idea of going horseback riding, or-- you know, I don't know. I-- I went to-- a doctor who gave me some medication that was meant to bring on your period if you were not pregnant, but I was hoping it would in any case. I was-- I was quite desperate, because it just seemed the end of life. You know, it seemed that there was a choice. Either I gave birth to someone else, or I gave birth to myself. I couldn't do both.

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And ultimately, just in the nick of the time, I was lucky to find-- a doctor who said to me-- a wonderful man-- who said-- "All right," he said. "If-- if two doctors-- certify that this is against your health interests or something," even though abortion was illegal in London, "then two--" or in England, "You can get an abortion. And he said, "You must promise me two things. You'll never tell anyone my name, and you'll do what you want to do with your life."

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So, he signed, and he sent me to a woman surgeon-- who did the abortion. And there was no women's movement then. There was no companionship, so I never told anybody. Certainly not the man I was engaged to, because he-

- you know, wanted to get married. I mean, he would've used it I think and told everybody and tried to-- turn it into a marriage.

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But-- for years afterwards, I used to-- before the women's movement, I used to sit at the time that this child would've been born and think, "Okay, I'm going to make myself feel guilty now because I know I should feel guilty. And I'm going to think, you know, exactly--" and I could never make myself feel guilty. No matter how hard I tried. I just-- it was just for me, the first time in my life that I said, "Okay, I'm going to take control of my own life instead of just responding to events." It was always positive, even though I tried hard to make it negative.

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It-- you know, having-- having an abortion was formative in the sense that-- when I went as a-- as a journalist for New York magazine to cover a hearing at which women were standing up and telling their abortion experiences, having had an abortion myself, and never told anyone, I suddenly realized why is it a secret.

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You know, if one in three women has needed an abortion in her lifetime in this country, why is it a secret, and why is it criminal, and why is it dangerous. So, I-- I owe to the women who were having that hearing that realization. I didn't have it on my own. As always, I think everything comes out of shared experience, not just your own. Your own, you may think you're crazy or wrong, but when you realize that other people are having a similar experience, it's different.

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All of society said I should feel guilty – all of this – you know, abortion was illegal, people didn't talk about it. People in my college years who had had abortions had endangered themselves, injured themselves. It was hushed up, it was secret. If you got pregnant, you would go off to-- a home for unwed mothers, and that, too, was secret. So, I just felt from the pressure of society that it was supposed to be wrong, but I couldn't make myself feel that it was wrong.

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Blair Chotzinoff, who I had been engaged to, and who, you know, was the reason I had an abortion, but I never told because I knew that he would then tell everyone, you know, and-- use that a reason why we-- we had to get married.

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So, I never told him but as-- as time passed, and I-- said this, you know, because Ms. magazine had done a petition of, you know, hundreds of women who had had illegal abortions, when it was illegal, and I couldn't ask them to sign without signing myself. So, because of the timing and because of talking about it frequently I was sure that he knew. But it turned out that he didn't, because he only learned when Carolyn Hillebrand went to interview him. And he called me up afterwards, and he said, "Oh," he said, "That's so wonderful. It makes me feel so closer to you." And that was a-- wonderful response. He wasn't angry or shocked. You know, he just felt it was something that we'd gone through in a way together, and now he knew the rest of the story.

The Contraceptive Pill

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, I-- I-- I remember the arrival of the contraceptive pill first because I was assigned by Esquire to do the first signed piece I'd ever done for them. I'd only been doing unsigned pieces about the pill. And I got interested in it-- for its social impact, but also for its development. And I wrote a whole piece for Clay Felker for the first time he was ever my editor. And he said, "You know, you've performed the incredible fete of making sex dull." (CHUCKLE)

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So, he sent me home to completely rewrite it. And I-- I-- so I wrote it in a less scientific way. And-- and I remember thinking, "This is very important. And (NOISE) you know, the-- the (CLEARS THROAT)-- the sexual liberation of women is-- is happening. And are men prepared for it?" You know, that maybe they're-- I think I ended it that way, saying, you know, "There may not be enough sexually liberated men to go around," or something.

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But at-- now we mark the 50th anniversary of the pill. And I've been somewhat alarmed to see that the pill is given credit for starting the women's movement, which is absolutely not the case. The women's movement started the pill. I mean-- you know, it-- it was women's money and feminist money, research money because no company or-- and the government wouldn't touch it-- that-- paid for the research on-- on the pill. Margaret Sanger and a friend of hers who was a scientist-- paid for the research and supported the research into the pill, one.

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Two, the-- the-- there have been women's movements without the pill, you

know, certainly the whole suffragist era was-- was without the pill. And three, the pill really started the women's health movement in opposition to the pill because the first pill was so-- such an overdose of hormones that-- it was dangerous. And there was a book by Barbara Seaman called The Doctor's Case Against the Pill, which started congressional hearings on the pill.

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And women forced that to happen. So, you know, would there have been a women's movement without the pill? Absolutely. Is it-- is it an aid in providing another alternative now that it's safer? Yes. But it's not the cause of the Women's Movement.

Religion and Politics

14:24:41;11

GLORIA STEINEM:

Well, for instance, the whole-- Nazi movement was-- was secular. But used religion and was supported by religion. So, there are plenty of authoritarians who are not necessarily religious. But the religion helps a lot because it imposes a penalty or reward after death, un-provable-- but very useful to gain a kind of conformity on earth. And since all of organized religion has a certain politics to it-- otherwise, God wouldn't look so much like the ruling class all the time-- it-- it-- it has grown up as part of-- I mean, the idea of a male god has grown up with patriarchal political systems.

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But the good news is that it's quite recent. I mean, it is certainly less than five percent of human history. Before that, there was-- something was divine in

all living things. And it was quite-- it was much more democratic. I think we're trying to get back to that. You know, so you see people inside all the great religions that are trying to democratize from inside. I-- I would say there's a difference to me between spirituality, which is-- about the worth of all living things, including each of us, and religion, which often is quite political.