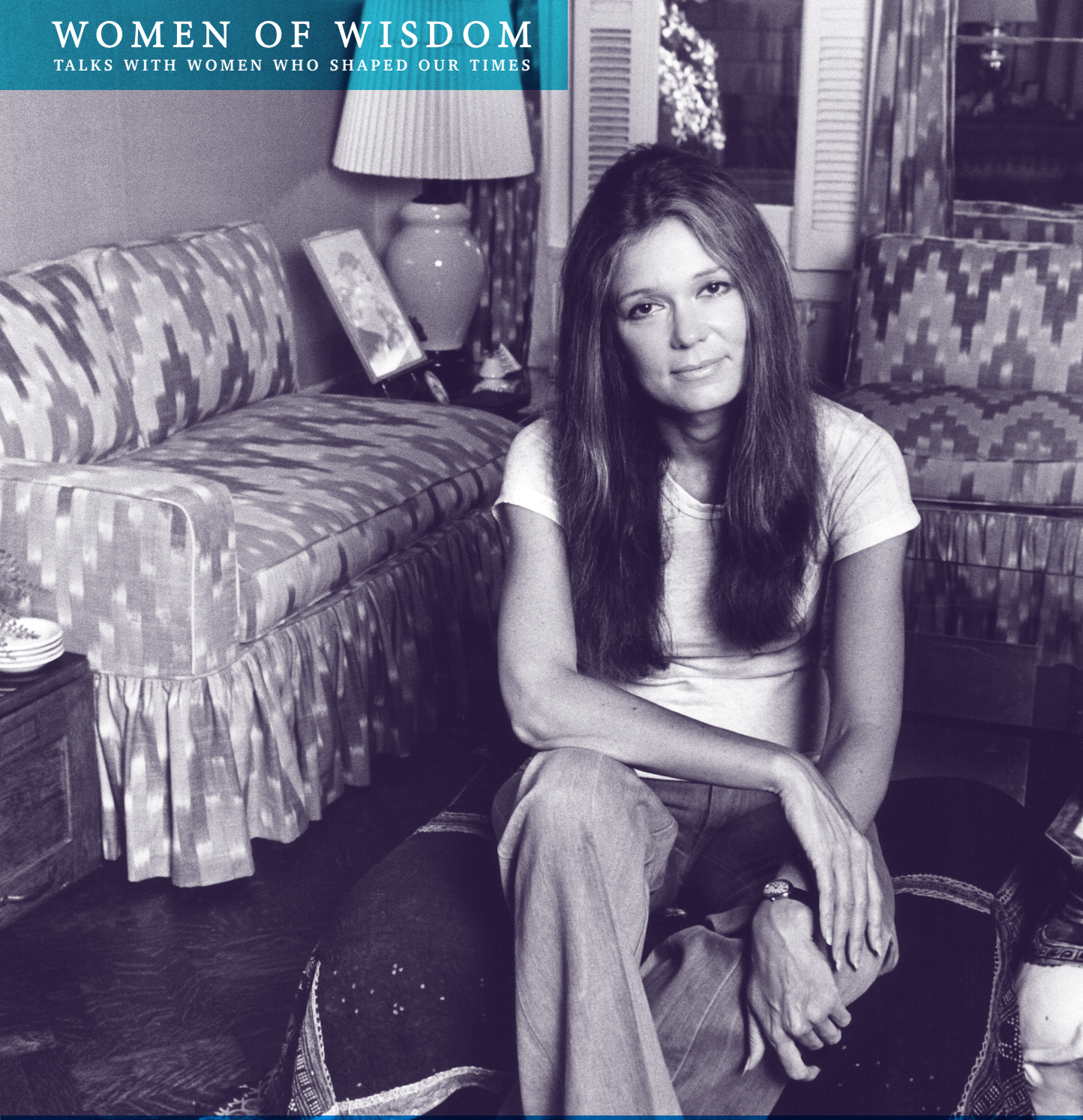
WOMEN OF WISDOM

TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



# Gloria Steinem

By Lynn Gilbert

with Gaylen Moore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# Particular Passions: Gloria Steinem

By Lynn Gilbert with Gaylen Moore
Published by Lynn Gilbert

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# Dedication

*To the women of the past, who made a difference,*
*the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,*
*and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.*

— Lynn Gilbert

Gloria Steinem in her apartment, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

## Gloria Steinem

(born 1934, Toledo, Ohio) has worked for more than a decade for the equal rights of women, as a writer and lecturer, and as editor and co-founder of *Ms.* magazine. Her name has become synonymous with the women's liberation movement and she has been one of its most rational and effective spokeswomen. She convened the National Women's Political Caucus, helped found the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and is a member of the National Advisory Board of the National Organization for Women.

IN THE LAST TEN YEARS I think the women's movement has gone through a couple of stages. One was the middle-sixties stage, which was very important though not yet feminist. It seemed to me more reformist than feminist because it was women, well-educated women in the suburbs, saying they had a right to be in the job force and the system as it exists. I support that, but I was already working at that point. It seemed to me that what they were saying is that they wanted to be where I was, and I was already getting screwed so I supported their right, too, but it didn't hit me as something that spoke to all women.

It wasn't until the late sixties, early seventies, that real feminist statements began to be made. It wasn't just some women who were in trouble, but all women. Radical feminists began to talk about patriarchy and about sexual caste and women as a group. That set off all kinds of recognition in my head, as in millions of other women's heads, because I think many of us, especially those of us who were in the civil rights movement and the old left, had identified with all other "out" groups, all other powerless groups, without understanding why we felt such a strong sense of identification. Women were not "serious" enough to be an out group ourselves.

I think that this understanding is what has made this last decade so mind-blowing and exciting and angering, because we have realized we are living in a sexual caste system and it's unjust, as is the racial caste system. We've begun to question and challenge and discard all of those arguments that say biology is destiny and that we were meant to be supportive, secondary creatures. So if you can generalize, which is awfully hard to do, I guess this decade has been about consciousness-raising and building a majority movement and getting majority support for the kind of basic issues of justice for women, whether it's reproductive freedom or equal pay or equal parenthood.

Also in this decade we're accumulating a few important tools and symbolic victories, legal victories and particular kinds of legislation and so on, as well as the examples of individual women who've served to raise all our hopes because now we can say, Ah, yes, a woman can do that. But we haven't really yet begun to initiate institutional change. So we have a long way to go. Well, the last wave of

feminism lasted a hundred and fifty years, more or less. We're only ten years into this one.

The feminist movement is the only major movement in the country that's really moving. Much more is happening around the country than in New York. The problem with New York, for me, is that it's more rhetorical here than real. People talk revolution but it's harder to organize. In Cleveland, there's a women's center for all the local women's groups. One group is a job placement group at the executive level. Another group does part-time placements. There's a displaced worker group, a battered women's group, a rape group, a newspaper, theater groups, rock groups, poetry readings—a whole range of activities going on. The problem for women today is communication and information, trying to stop leaving notes in hollow trees and whatever it is we do. It's very hard to communicate with each other.

I think part of the reason why the women's movement isn't as visible today is that it used to be so small that it was one story in the newspaper. You would read about these women libbers doing such and such. Now it's become a part of many stories. If you see a story about unemployment, you're likely for the first time to see the statistics broken down for women—black women, white women, different groups of women. You don't see that enough but you're beginning to see it. Or if you see a story about the presidential election, you may also see stories about the women's issues. The candidates are rated on the women's issues. They never were ten years ago. Those issues are now part of party platforms. Many social policy issues weren't ever diagnosed as being women's issues; welfare, for instance. It started out as a mother's allowance—it's women and kids, that's who it is—but until this decade it was never perceived as a women's issue. It was a racial issue, perhaps. It wasn't diagnosed that way and consequently you could never do anything about it because unless you got rid of the sex discrimination in job training programs and got child care, you could never do anything about welfare because women and kids were the ones on welfare. And yet nobody ever looked at it that way. So it's part of every story.

I see it with our readership. As the women's movement gets bigger it gets younger, but people go out on the campus and say, Where is it? It's there, even if you don't see it. We had a campus issue of *Ms.* We asked questions like, "What's the big political issue on campus?" We'd hear, "Divestiture, get rid of the stock that's in South Africa." "How has this manifested itself?" we'd ask, and be told there was one four-hour demonstration all year long. That's because they've been trained like all the rest of us to see what's male as political and see what's female as cultural. In other words, women themselves don't take themselves seriously enough to know that they're the biggest issue on campus. They've got an antirape network, a women's center. Women's faculty members are involved; it's the only issue involving lawsuits. There are sexual harassment suits, tenure actions. The women who are the nonprofessional workers on campus, who work in the cafeteria, they organize with the students and faculty; it's a revolution. Nobody ever crossed those lines before. But if you go on the campus and ask women what's the big political issue—it can't be us, we're not political. So it's our own definition sometimes.

We've gotten where we are today, I think, mainly through individual women telling the truth. I mean, the consciousness-raising group is still the cell of the women's movement. That means that one woman dared to say that she thought it was unfair that she had to both have a job and take care of the kids while her husband only had a job, and she said this unsayable thing that all of *Ladies' Home Journal* was devoted to keep her from saying. And then ten other women said, "Oh, you feel like that? I thought only I felt like that." And we began to realize that was political, there was a reason why that was true. Or one of us, or a few of us, spoke out about having an abortion and what it meant to have to get an abortion and risk your life. As more and more people spoke out, we began to realize that one out of three or four adult women has had an abortion, so we began to see the politics behind that, that we're the means of reproduction and that patriarchy was the basic reason for our being in the trouble we were in the first place.

The problem is that the ideas are there but not the structure. For instance, you've

got the hope that parenting can be equal and certainly you've got lots of women who are not having children until that's true. They're on kind of an unconscious baby strike. If we have to have two jobs while men have one, well, forget it. But we don't have the structural change to make it happen. We don't have parental leave instead of maternity leave. We don't have shorter work days or work weeks for parents of young children, men and women. So I think we're in a very uncomfortable period now because we've got lots of hopes and aspirations and changed ideas of what our lives could be, but not the structural change that would make it possible for most people.

The way to bring about structural change is to look to the groups that have the greatest bargaining power. What are these? Unions. So unions, especially teachers' unions, are beginning to bargain for parental leave. Then it gets to be a demand on employers, then it starts to spread. That's the way. It's not fast. Obviously structural change is much slower than consciousness-raising, so we're in for a really long haul. We've probably gotten as much as we're going to get by working through the political parties, in my opinion. I think we're going to have to be able to turn out our own vote, regardless of party, on specific issues, women and men who care, say, about reproductive freedom, who say, "Wait a minute, reproductive freedom is like freedom of speech. I'm not going to vote for somebody who doesn't support this, and whether I'm a Republican or a Democrat is immaterial because neither party supports it." So on the electoral level, it's true that there's going to have to be much more orchestration of women together as individuals.

The first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century had a big advantage, which was that women identified with each other on the basis of their condition. So you had shopgirls and prostitutes working together with Mrs. Rich Person without being self-conscious at all because they came together on the basis of their condition. In the intervening years, Marx came along and did two things, one bad and one good. One was that his theory divided up women falsely, by class, so that by Marxist theory, the wife of a middle-class person is herself middle-class, or the wife of a rich capitalist is herself a capitalist—which is bullshit, she's not. She has no power. She can be traded in on a younger model. That's been unhelpful

because it's kept us from making connections.

However, what has been helpful is that Marxist theory got into the culture enough to say, It's environment, not nature, not biology. So I think we now understand that it's the individual difference that matters, and the gender is just one little part of that unique person that is each one of us, male or female, and that there's less difference between men and women as groups than there is between you and me, that sex and race are just one element of a thousand elements that make up each individual.

What we're really talking about is populist revolution—overthrowing or humanizing, you can pick your verb depending how patient you are, a sexual caste system that's also dependent on race. So it means you actually have to deal with the restrictions on white women and the exploitation of black women at the same time. The sex and race caste systems are very intertwined and the revolutions have always come together, whether it was the suffragist and abolitionist movements or whether it's the feminist and civil rights movements. They must come together because one can't succeed without the other. We're trained to focus on the differences between us because there's so much fear of our getting together. You can see that especially by looking at the first wave of feminism. It's too bad we didn't learn from history when there was a majority coalition of all women and black men. They both had the status of legal chattel in one degree or another and everybody had common cause. The white liberal men divided this coalition very consciously by giving the vote to black men first. And it was another fifty years before women of any race got the vote.

There's a constant effort to divide us, but the truth is that the women's movement, for all of the problems we have on race and class, is the most integrated social movement this country's ever seen. The environmental movement isn't, the antiwar movement isn't, the black movement wasn't enough, by itself. There weren't enough white people who saw their self-interest in it and there were many more men than women, for obvious reasons, who were working in it.

I'm not trying to downplay the problem of division, because we need to work on it constantly, but we also have to be conscious of the effort of employers who try to get us to fight over 5 percent of the pie while they have 95 percent. I mean, nobody walks into the Republican Party and says, "This is a white middle-class group," but they would walk into a women's movement meeting which has a third black and Hispanic women and it's maybe the only meeting in this town that represents the town, and they'll say "It's mostly white, middle-class . . . " It's a way of downgrading it, of saying these people are silly, not serious, not united.

The populist movements In this country had a very clear ideology, whether they were antitax or whatever. I think populist just means an ideology that arises out of shared individual experience, rather than an ideology that is written by one person, with a lot of words that end in tion, that is imposed. I used to say feminism is a revolution, not a reform, which is certainly true. Then I realized that the reason I was saying it was because my male colleagues on the left took revolution seriously, as a word. I was trying to make them see that feminism was serious.

All the years I spent trying to make my experience fit into Marxism weren't nearly as constructive and changeful as just seeing my own experience and seeing that that was feminism. There's value in all of these things and we have to look at them all, but you can't build a house from the top, you can't build a revolution from the top.

What my male colleagues meant by revolution was taking over the army and the radio stations. I mean, that's nothing. That's very small potatoes. What we mean by revolution is changing much more than that, not just on the top. It means changing the way we think, the way we relate to each other, what we think divides us or doesn't divide us, what we think our power relationships are in our daily life.

I think the fact that I've become a symbol for the women's movement is somewhat accidental. A woman member of Congress, for example, might be identified as a member of Congress; it doesn't mean she's any less of a feminist but she's identified by her nearest male analog. Well, I don't have a male analog

so the press has to identify me with the movement. I suppose I could be referred to as a journalist, but becauseis part of a movement and not just a typical magazine, I'm more likely to be identified with the movement. There's no other slot to put me in.

I've been attacked viciously on a personal level for my ideas. It makes you want to go home and cry and never do anything ever again. The attacks are sort of inevitable. It's hard to be opposed by men and/or women who feel women are inferior. That's hard. They do a lot of things to you. They're always attacking you sexually or saying you're abnormal as a woman, that's the most prevalent kind of attack, 98 percent. But I think what's harder for all of us to take is attacks by other women who appear to believe the same things we do. It's a tiny percentage of the attacks but it's much more painful. It isn't as if women had a choice. We're all damaged people in some way. If you're a woman who hasn't been able to do what you want and need to do as a human being, and you see some other woman who is apparently more successful, then you want to say, "How dare she, she's just another woman like me." It's self-hatred. It's something that happens in the black movement. It happens in every group that's been told systematically that it's inferior. Ultimately, you believe it. You believe that your group is inferior, then it makes you angry at the other members of it and it makes you devalue them. There's no solution for it, I don't think, except to make a world in which women can be whole people. I only speak about it because it hurts the most.

I do get burned out from time to time. In the beginning I thought, Well, this is something I'll do for a couple of years. It's so reasonable. Certainly if we just say what's wrong, people will put things right. So I didn't pace myself. I just went flat out, lecturing, organizing. I felt that this was a flat-out effort for a few years and then I would stop doing it and do something else. Since then I've realized that it's something that will take a lifetime. It's not just a year or two, it's our whole lives. So that helps you to pace yourself. You realize you can't be flat-out active all the time, that you need time to think and read. You've got to be active in cycles.

It's always hard to see yourself, so I'm not sure that I know what my role has been in the women's movement. You get up every day and do the best you can. But I

think because I'm a writer by trade and because I'm an in-between person from a generational point of view (when the movement started I was neither the mother nor the daughter), I see my role as a bridge between generations, between ideas and action, trying to state things in a new way so that it frees our brains of the old ways of thinking and leads to action.

In later years, if I'm remembered at all it will be for inventing a phrase like "reproductive freedom" because before that we talked about "population control," which meant that someone else was going to make the decision, not us. It meant minority groups were understandably fearful that they were going to be controlled more than others. It wasn't a feminist phrase because it implied control elsewhere instead of by us as individuals. So "reproductive freedom" as a phrase includes the freedom to have children or not to have children, both. So it made it possible for us to make a coalition. I think the revolutionary role of a writer is to make language that makes coalition possible, language that makes us see things in a new way.

I'm not sure, frankly, what direction the feminist movement will take in the future or what my role will be in it, because a lot of it is running as fast as you can to stay in the same place. Money is a constant problem. It's very hard, but I hope that I will be lecturing, organizing and traveling less and writing more, because I think I could contribute more that way. It's much more efficient. You can travel six months and not reach as many people as you can if you just write one thing. But you have to have the solitude and concentration to sit down and write something, not to mention the discipline to say no to a bail fund benefit or things like that where you feel you can't not go. But I would prefer to be writing.

The kind of writing I'd like to do has to do with both theory and reporting. These two things have to be hooked up. I think that's what feminism has to contribute to the world at large; that you can't just write theory out of no reality, that you have to start as we started, in consciousness-raising groups, and say, Here's the real situation and here's the theoretical conclusions that the real situation leads to. The separation between experience and theory is part of the whole split between the intellectual and emotional that's such a problem. I mean, it just doesn't exist. It's

part of the male/female split in our culture that has caused us to cut off qualities in ourselves. It's not that there aren't two sides to some things. I'm sure there are, but there aren't two sides to everything. There are eleven, or a hundred and fourteen or one, and it's a gross distortion of reality to say there are two sides or to say there has to be a winner or a loser. Reality is much more diverse and interesting than that, and all the splits of intellect and emotion and body and mind should be mended. Feminism is the belief that women are full human beings. It's simple justice.


# PARTICULAR PASSIONS

recounts the rich oral histories of pioneering women of the twentieth century from the fields of art and science, athletics andlaw, mathematics and politics.

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