

**Feminism: social theory and political praxis. A debate from and for the 21st century with María José Binetti, Rosa Cobo and Sheila Jeffreys. Sheila Jeffreys` s answers**

**CONCEPTUALIZING IS POLITICAL**

**- CS.- We would like to start the interview by conceptualizing what feminism is. For us, feminism involves thought and action at the same time; it is a theory of power that has an emancipatory horizon, not only for the female collective but for society as a whole. What is feminism for you?**

This is a rather large question and I have written many whole books answering what feminism is for me. I will speak of how my feminism developed. I call myself at this time a radical feminist. Back in the early 1970s I was a socialist feminist. I found it was impossible within socialist feminism to talk about men's oppression of women. In 1977 I wrote a paper for the national Women's Liberation Conference called The Need for Revolutionary Feminism. The paper argued that we feminists needed to work out how men's power operated and how to defeat it from the ground up. I considered, and still do, that issues concerned with reproduction were crucial, how and in what circumstances women gave birth and argued for what I called 'worker control of reproduction', meaning control by women. What we now have, by contrast, is a world in which women's bodies are increasingly bought, sold and used in the marketplace and the children they give birth too are trafficking in the industry of surrogacy. I understand control of women's bodies to lie at the root of male domination. The paper titled The Need for Revolutionary Feminism from 1977 is on my website at: [sheila-jeffreys.com](http://sheila-jeffreys.com)

**- CS.- What social, political, cultural, etc. contributions has feminism made throughout its history? And what do you think current societies owe to feminism?**

This is too big a question for me to answer and I am not an expert on the history of feminism. Obviously feminist campaigns from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the US and the UK (which is the limit of my knowledge) created very considerable changes. In UK feminists got the law changed so that that married women had a right to their own property, the right to leave their husband's home without his permission and some rights to custody in children. In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women in the UK had the low status of women in parts of the Middle East today. Women then fought for the right to vote and the right to divorce. These achievements were hugely important in improving women's status.

I can more easily say what I think are the crucial contributions from the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s to today. One was the creation of lesbian feminism. I chose to become a lesbian in 1977 as did many thousands of other feminists. We understood heterosexuality to be an institution which is the foundation of male domination. Escaping heterosexuality was necessary to build our community and activism with other women. We saw lesbianism as a form of resistance. Lesbian feminism was an extraordinary phenomenon which I write about in my book *The Lesbian Revolution* (2018). Lesbian feminists analysed heterosexuality, exposed its dynamics and how it worked to maintain women's oppression. We offered an alternative and showed that women were not doomed to be heterosexual, it was not biological.

That extremely radical analysis, going to the root of women's oppression is mostly gone today and a new generation of feminists know nothing of it. Many lesbians today believe their love for women is biological, and fight against any ideas that women can choose as somehow anti-lesbian in itself. Lesbian feminism is transformative, not just about chipping away at individual manifestations of men's power.

The other great achievement of the Women's Liberation Movement was to analyse, research and campaign around men's violence against women. We understood that men's violence functioned as the social control of women in the home, at work, on the street, in places of entertainment. Sexual harassment, the threat of rape and murder function to remove from women all the much-touted rights that they should in theory have. Women's freedom of movement for instance is limited by men's violence in many forms.

Presently, of course, we are in a stage of serious backlash against feminism. Our feminist foresters would have imagined it was science fiction if they found that legal systems and institutions were making it compulsory for women to respect the rights of men with the sexual fetish of being excited by women's subordination, transvestites (now most often called 'transgenders'), to enter all women's spaces and sports and compete for any prizes or parliamentary places set aside for women. The erasure of women in language is being undertaken which will prevent women being imagined as a category and this will make feminism impossible to conceptualise or fight for.

## FEMINISM AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

**- CS.- Feminism has a long intellectual history and a long history of political claims that should be known. Our current capitalist societies are ruled by a paralyzing presentism that impedes us question the past, challenge the present and imagine ourselves as collective in the future. In your opinion, what past thinkers should still be read or need to be re-read?**

The radical feminist thinkers who inspired the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 1980s are mostly omitted from university 'Gender studies' courses today. They are rejected as old fashioned and irrelevant in a way that the thinkers who inspired socialism are not. Political theory courses include Marx and Lenin, even Freud. Collections on social theory usually only include men. The women, mostly lesbians, who inspired the WLM and who need to be greatly respected and studied now in the way that male political thinkers are, include Kate Millet, Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Janice Raymond and many more. The work of these women is now very hard for a new generation of young women to come across because it has been deeply buried. I am involved in running a webinar series Rad Fem Perspectives which involves feminists discussing significant radical feminist books on Sundays. It seeks to introduce this work to women who would otherwise not know where to start on their quest for feminist theory. The young women tell us that there is nothing like this in their universities. Radical feminist theory was nurtured by feminist presses and feminist bookstores which no longer exist and must be recreated. This is happening in the case of women's presses which are being set up again in Korea (Yeolda Books) and in Spain (Labrys).

**- CS.- We are aware that the possibility of generating discourses is a form of power; it is a way of intervening in reality. For this reason, constructing theoretical frameworks and analytical and heuristic categories — epistemologies— from feminist theory is essential. Some key categories for feminism are *patriarchy* or *gender-sex system*. From your understanding, what other concepts/categories have been and/or continue to be key for a feminist political theory?**

Biological sex is of crucial importance. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was based on the understanding that women are oppressed on the basis of their sex. The word gender was not used. When feminists did, mistakenly in my opinion start to use the term 'gender' in the 1980s it meant sex stereotypes. More recently the transvestite rights movement has adopted the term to mean an internal essence of femaleness that exists independently of sex. This use of 'gender' which leads to men being included in the category of women makes theorizing women's oppression and feminism itself impossible.

But another key concept is that heterosexuality is a political institution and that women can choose lesbianism as a form of resistance. This understanding goes to the root of women's subordination rather than just seeking some ameliorations of its worst expressions.

The idea of men's violence as social control of women is also crucial to understanding the way in which women's everyday lives are circumscribed.

**- CS.- Spheres of academic knowledge production have been and are predominantly patriarchal. In your opinion, what role has the academy played, if any, in revealing the structures of domination between men and women? In the last few decades, the neoliberal shift of universities has involved a dangerous technocratic drift and a reduction of feminism's critical capacity. In relation to Women Studies, Feminist Studies, what consequences has this drift had and does it have?**

As early as 1979 when I was a Phd student, I was involved with other women from the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group in writing a conference paper on how academia

was in contradiction to feminism. At that time women's studies courses were entering the academy and feminists were starting to get academic jobs, as well as existing female academics becoming feminists. We considered that the masculine academy would not allow women's studies or what I preferred to call Feminist Studies, would force feminist scholars and teachers to mould their work in a way which would not offend the forces of male domination or would come to exclude them completely. Unfortunately, we were right, but not immediately. I got my position teaching Sexual Politics at University of Melbourne in 1991 to great fanfare. I was feted by the establishment and invited on to university committees.

The biggest threat that developed to feminism in the academy was the advent of poststructuralism. The male scholars who were lionized in poststructuralism, Foucault, Lacan etc. barely mentioned women and their analyses made it hard to conceptualise male power and male domination. Feminism is a structuralist analysis. Indeed, it is hard to avoid wondering if their popularity and the faux progressivism which was attributed to them was a useful tool in defeating the feminist challenge. These anti-feminist ideas were dominant in the academy by the mid to late 1990s. Judith Butler, who popularized them, was a compulsory reference point in women's studies by the early 2000s. The advent of queer theory too, of which Butler was seen to be the key theorist, was a great challenge to feminism. It was created out of a gay male practice and interests that were constructed from the oppression of women as I explain in my 2003 book *Unpacking Queer Politics*.

The other threat to the existence of feminism in the academy was the advent of managerialism and the turning of universities into money making 'corporations'. Women's studies was seen as superfluous to this project. The consequences have been the abolition of Women's Studies in the academy either by cancelling them outright or by transforming them into 'Gender' Studies which is framed by poststructuralism and queer theory.

The consequences today are that young women and lesbians are inoculated against feminism with absurd ideas about how men can sometimes be women. They have no access to the treasure trove of feminist theory and knowledge that we older feminist academics built up over decades.

## CAPITALIST GLOBALIZATION AND FEMINISM

**- CS.- In the era of neoliberal globalization, the forms of domination have changed; we are no longer dealing with what Foucault terms *disciplinary societies*, but with others of (*self*) *control*. In our current context, the neoliberal ideology has also reached the left and apparently progressive movements that embrace proposals that are supposedly positive for all humans under concepts such as *freedom of choice, identity, diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion*. Why do these concepts become popular in neoliberal societies? What political implications do they have and how do they affect the feminist movement?**

Poststructuralism is a product and fundamental philosophy of neoliberalism. These concepts become popular because they eliminate any challenge to the power of capital and the extraordinary enrichment of the ruling class in the last 40 years. They support the redistribution that has taken place from the poor to the rich. The elimination of structuralist analyses of power, analysing who has power and how they organise it, is totally suited to the priorities of this period in the history of capitalism. It promotes individualism and the ideas of choice, identity, diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion.

**- CS.- From a 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminist perspective, do you think that concepts such as *internationalism* (that is, a common denominator that unites the women as a relegated subject) can be combined with a respect for the specific situations and experiences of women from different social and cultural spheres?**

Radical and revolutionary feminists like me see women as having a common oppression. This oppression does take common forms internationally, violence against women as social control, rape and enforced pregnancy, restrictions on women's lives and bodies. But the way in which men control and restrict women takes different forms but are directed towards similar ends. The religions that promote the oppression of women may be different in different cultures and societies, but, as I described in my book *Man's Dominion: the Rise of Religion and Eclipse of Women's Rights* (2012), the monotheistic religions of judaism, christianity and islam which were formed in the same geographical and cultural crucible, have precisely similar understandings of how women must be owned, controlled and exchanged. Harmful cultural practices against women may differ, but have common roots. In some cultures like the West, women are exposed for men's sexual arousal and in others they are covered to protect men from

having to be aroused. There is no requirement to expose or cover men who may wear comfortable and dignified clothing as befits their superior status. The oppression is common but the forms differ.

I explain why western beauty practices such as makeup and high heeled shoes should be understood as harmful cultural practices in my book *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (2005/2014). The West is usually exempted from the understanding of harmful cultural practices which are usually understood to include female genital mutilation but not labiaplasty, for instance. Women in the West are seen as having 'choice'. Women are seen as joyfully choosing beauty practices, breast implants, cosmetic surgery, depilation etc., rather than being forced to engage with them. But, of course, women are subject to a whole culture which trains them to feel inadequate without transforming their bodies in these ways. They are subject to forces of power which do not impose any of these practices on the ruling class of men.

#### THE SYSTEM OF PATRIARCHAL DOMINATION TODAY

**- CS.- Within feminist theory, a distinction is made between patriarchies of coercion (that is, openly and explicitly brutal) and patriarchies of consent in which symbolic violence seems to be made invisible, as occurs in Western societies. How do you think patriarchy is reproduced and legitimized today in societies that declare themselves to be egalitarian between men and women**

My new book, *Penile Imperialism: the male sex right and women's subordination* (2022) argues that the male sex right protected and enforced by the state and the culture plays a crucial part in reproducing and enforcing male domination. I tend not to use the term patriarchy because the problem goes beyond the fathers and is enforced by all men so I use the term male domination. Science and the legal system assume that men's demands for sexual access to women must be accepted, in relationships and in prostitution and pornography.

The idea of consent is of crucial importance. It is used to justify and enforce the male sex right in all areas where women's bodies are treated as objects, used, abused and exchange, such as the unwanted sex that women have to perform in relationships and in prostitution and pornography. The notion of 'consent' is based upon the idea that it is natural for men to demand sexual access from women. The male 'sexual initiative'



is assumed. In fact, in order to deliver women from the constant demand to engage in sex they do not want, it is men's importunate sexual demands which must be challenged. Boys and men need to be retrained to see such demands as the problem of and unreasonable sexual urgency which can be controlled and rechannelled.

The necessity of consent exists only in a situation of unequal power, where something is to be done that one party may not want, such as a surgical intervention. The problem of 'consent' is not a problem in lesbian relationships because it is unlikely that one partner would want to use the other's body as a tool for their pleasure whether the other woman was enthusiastic or not. It is the unequal power relations of heterosexuality that create the problem that 'consent' ideology was created to solve.

The idea of 'consent' is woman-blaming. The assumption underlying the fuss about consent is that men's sexual use and violence towards women is the result of women not expressing their noes with sufficient force. Women are the problem. In many countries the issue of sexual assault on women by men is approached by governments and universities through 'consent training' which trains women in how to give or withhold consent. This is entirely unrealistic. Women and girls are already less powerful, as is shown in all the literature on violence against women. Saying no has been found in research on miscommunication to be something that everyone finds very hard. For teenage girls, for instance, it is a completely unreasonable expectation and likely to create anger and aggression in men.

The expression of male sexuality in the form of the male sex right is fundamental to male domination and a central problem for feminists to address. It has to be changed. Men and boys must be trained to recognise that they do not have an imperative sexual urge that women have the duty to satisfy. It is important to imagine a world in which women and girls are not constantly forced to engage with men and boys who demand sexual response, on the streets, in lecture theatres, in the home and the marital bed, in galleries, museums and music concerts, at work and on public transport. This would be a very different world of opportunity for women.

**- CS.- Both patriarchy and capitalism have benefited from the implementation of practices that objectify women and exploit their sexual and reproductive capacity, such as trafficking, prostitution or the so-called 'surrogacy'. Could you explain how this symbiosis currently works in the context of globalization?**



In my book *The Industrial Vagina* (2008), I used the concept of 'outsourcing women's subordination' to explain the development of the sex industry globally. Where women develop more ability in some cultures to say no sexually and in other ways to men, the sex industry, including the male (sic) order bride industry offers men the chance to buy the subordination of women who are too poor to say no.

**- CS.- The global Campaign Women's Human Rights Campaign, WHRC, now called Women's Declaration International, was started in 2019 to show that women's rights based on sex were being threatened by the political proposals of the so-called "Queer transgenderism". How is it possible that it is still necessary to show that women, the females of the human species, are oppressed precisely because of their sex?**

The backlash against the Women's Liberation Movement was very effective. By the early 2000s there was no movement. We had lost all our institutions, women's centres, conferences, bookstores, etc., etc. I detail this in my autobiography *Trigger Warning: A Lesbian Feminist Life* (2020). As transgender activism picked up pace there was no movement to oppose it. It piggybacked onto gay rights activism which was backed by very large, well-funded and influential organisations. Funding from big pharma has been important because 'transitioning' generally involves considerable profits from people who are on harmful drugs for their whole lives. The activists pressured first the medical profession and then policymakers and governments to promote the sexual fetishism of transvestites as constituting the human right to express 'gender identity', which is best understood as 'sex stereotype identity'. But there were other forces at play too, such as the industry of pornography in which a large niche is dedicated to transvestites and now contains sissy hypno which hypnotises men into thinking that they are becoming women. Importantly the transvestite rights movement is a powerful weapon against feminism, through denying women the words to describe their bodies and their sex on the grounds that these are 'transphobic'. In the present the very concept 'woman' is being wiped out by the idea of essential 'gender' which a man can inhabit any time they please.

**- CS.- What political impact is having the Campaign that defends human rights of women based on sex? In relation to the questions formulated above, many**

**theorists have pointed out that we are facing a new “patriarchal reaction” in response to the demands and advances of feminism in recent decades. In your opinion, how is this reaction articulated in the 21st century?**

It is mostly articulated through the growing international feminist campaign to challenge the concept of sexual stereotype identity and roll back all the gains that these men's rights activists have achieved in changing legislation, language and policy to erase women and girls and our rights and opportunities. Organisations are being set up internationally to defend women's sex-based rights. There are groups to save women's sports, to defeat the transgenering of children, to get men out of women's prisons, to establish women's right to state biological reality, i.e. that men cannot become women, in their workplaces. There are professional groups of psychologists, for instance, and groups in all the political parties. This is an avalanche of feminist activity after a couple of decades in which there was no feminist movement. The transvestite activists can take the credit for this. It is their campaigns that have stimulated this huge reaction. I am pleased to be involved in Women's Declaration International (previously called the Women's Human Rights Campaign) which was set up in 2019 to promote the Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights which we created to oppose the activities of men with sex stereotype identities from destroying our rights. WDI now has nearly 30,000 individual signatures on the Declaration and more than 400 women's organisations internationally are involved.

#### **AGENDA AND POLITICAL PRACTICE: HORIZONS OF STRUGGLE**

**- CS.- Our world is currently facing the threat of climate change, the productivist and extractivist model of capitalism, a deep crisis of representative democracies and their international institutions, and a worrying global rise of "post-fascist" movements. In your opinion, what is the place that the feminist struggle occupies in this (not very optimistic) framework?**

I don't know what place feminism occupies, except that each of these developments is extremely harmful to the status of women and girls. I am very conscious, however, that women in the West had about 50 years of increasing opportunities. Women gained the chance to work outside the home, to earn independent incomes and to divorce. They

approached full human status. Then the forces that would destroy the world as we know it became very extreme. They include all of the above. It seems a bad joke. Fifty years is a very short time in human history. Though we continue the fight and there is so much to fight for to achieve women's liberation, we conduct the struggle against a nightmare background that none of us could have imagined back in the 1970s. The lack of hope and the end of any idea of progress creates a particularly challenging context for feminist struggle today.

**- CS.- Feminism has always maintained debates and disagreements with (and within) progressive movements (socialism, communism, anarchism...). At present, for example, there is the paradox in Spain that, although from different perspectives, the ultra-right and progressive currents converge when advocating for policies that harm women's rights: the ultra-right does so from biologicalism ('biology is destiny') and the progressive currents from social constructivism ('sex does not exist'). In this confusing panorama: What possible alliances can feminism establish at the present time?**

I have always been a socialist and I do not find it easy to work politically with those on the right. However, in situations that could be seen as emergencies, strategic forms of working together may be necessary. I have always been, as a radical feminist, concerned with issues such as prostitution and pornography, surrogacy and now the men's sexual rights movement in all forms but particularly that concerned with the 'rights' of transvestites. There have always been persons with religious interests (I am an atheist, of course, and all the radical feminists I have worked over the years have been atheists too) and persons who saw themselves as allied with the right who have understood feminist concerns on these issues and given some qualified support. The Left has always, with exceptions of course, identified itself with libertarian and anti-women approaches to these issues. We need to have, and some of us are having, deep conversations about how we can work between and amongst these political interests as feminists.

**- CS.- In relation to "queer gender", theorists like Jennifer Bilek have analyzed the power of the lobbies that sustain it — Big Pharma, technoscience, the sexual**

**reproduction market... With a position of clear disadvantage, how should feminism present its replies, express its positions in this regard?**

We need more research and Jennifer Bilek's work is crucial in this regard.

We can only do what as feminists we have always done, research and write, carry out protests and actions to teach our politics and influence law and policy. We set up groups and institutions of our own to hone our ideas and support action. Ultimately, we have to work towards the recreation of a feminist movement and culture because one off actions and groups are hard to sustain. We need the nurturance of our women's feminist community.

**- CS.- Since patriarchy continues to exploit and subordinate women on the basis of their sex, some feminist struggles remain the same as those fought by the radical feminism of the 1970s, such as the abolition of stereotypes, prostitution, pornography, plus the added practice of 'surrogate bellies'. What is the horizon of all these struggles?**

I'm not sure I understand the word 'horizon' here. If it means what should be our goals, then we must work towards a world without prostitution. That means that it should be illegal for anyone to pay a woman in order to extract sexual access. The trade in women and babies that is the surrogacy industry should be outlawed, but also so-called altruistic surrogacy. Altruistic surrogacy still treats a woman as a machine to be used and babies as exchangeable goods. It can cause terrible grief and alienation in the same way for mothers, problems in families and for the children who were produced to order in this way.

**- CS.-To conclude, feminism as a movement seems to have resurfaced globally in recent years, particularly led by younger generations. This movement has been conceptualized as a "new wave" of feminism. What social and ideological factors are making this wave possible? What is "old" and "new" about this wave?**

My understanding is that a new wave of feminism has developed internationally because men's sexual rights activists have engaged in imperial overreach. They went

too far in demanding men who impersonate women for sexual excitement should be allowed into all women's spaces and activities and that the very idea that a woman was an adult human female should be expunged from language and policy. Though feminism had been dormant for more than a decade, it is now on the rise and women are very angry.

This new wave is different in many ways from the Women's Liberation Movement. Though many of the most urgent issues are the same, men's violence against women in all of its forms, the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality, pornography and prostitution, the need to abolish marriage, there are some considerable new challenges.

One big difference is the behaviour of men in relation to feminism. Back in the 1970s and 1980s men pretty much ignored feminism. They did not object to our women only marches and events. They did not picket and chant against us and send death and rape threats. Men did not care. Now it is very different, probably because of the way that the mature pornography industry has created a rage in men against women. Transvestite activists and their supporters in particular are dedicated to preventing women from meeting or speaking critically about their prerogatives. It is scary and risky now to speak out and can lead to loss of livelihood and actual violence in a way that could not have been imagined in the earlier time when men took no notice.

The possibilities offered for organising by social media has been seen as a positive change, but it is doubtful that this has been more useful than the myriad newsletters, pamphlets and books that were published in the previous movement. At that time we had many feminist publishers, feminist bookstores. The development of feminist ideas and radical feminist theory was possible in a way that does not exist now. Women were able to meet together in person and engage in the passionate and creative development of ideas, something which cannot happen on social media. On social media which are overwhelmingly owned and controlled by men, women are monitored, doxed, thrown off platforms. Women have none of the control that women only newsletters presented.

Books of feminist theory which addressed the big questions of why and how women are oppressed are no longer published. There is little discussion or practice of 'living the revolution now', i.e., changing everyday life, behaviours, appearance, living situations that were engaged in by the previous wave of feminism. The possibility that women can choose to become lesbians is now widely and furiously rejected by many lesbians

who see it as an insult to suggest that lesbianism is not biologically created. In the WLM, however, many thousands of women did choose to become lesbians and created the beating heart of the feminist movement at that time. Women who might become lesbians are impeded now by lack of any spaces in which they might meet others, and told that their ambitions to become lesbians are unacceptable because they can never be real ones if they have ever related to men.

The new wave of feminist activism is then, a weak plant. It is not supported by a burgeoning women's community and culture. It would be hard today to live and move in a separatist universe of women, as I did then. It is hard to live, as Janice Raymond put it, as an 'insider/outsider', earning a living in the world of men whilst spending all the rest of life with women and trying to create feminist change. The recreation of a women's community of love, friendship and activism rather than just a network of activists, is crucial to the future of this wave of feminism.