Gloria Steinem on fighting back: If they call you a slut, say ‘Thank you’

- "Humor is an interesting non-violent weapon."
- "If they call you a slut, say 'Thank you.'"
- "My deepest and best advice is to not listen to me."

Gloria Steinem has spent the best part of her 83 years leading the progression toward gender equality.

The feminist and writer famously went undercover as a Playboy bunny; founded *Ms.* magazine, where she raised widespread attention on female genital mutilation to the American public; and helped lead America’s feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Her outspoken and gritty nature has earned her many controversial headlines.

Her bestselling books include *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, and most recently *My Life on The Road.*

She lives in New York City and lectures on inequality, child abuse and women’s rights. She presents Viceland’s latest series, *Woman*, on violence against women. She spoke with us from her house over Skype in September about modern feminism.

Q: How would you compare the women’s rights movement now to how it has been over the years you’ve been active? What would you say is the main difference?

A: One of the big differences is now it’s a majority movement. It was relatively few people who were regarded as a little crazy in the beginning, as if we were challenging nature, not just a political system. To see it now as a majority movement, is great. I can’t tell you how heartening that is.

Do you think priorities and attitudes have changed?

Yes. Fewer of us think that race or gender are inevitable or real conditions that we’re born with. There’s much more of a general understanding. However, the fact that it is now a majority movement means that there is a backlash, a very powerful and angry backlash from people who are threatened by challenging the old hierarchy. The third of the United States that elected Donald Trump exemplifies that.

In India, the people who elected a leader who is essentially a Hindu fascist in a country that cherishes, and was founded on, diversity by its own independence movement are an example of that backlash.

How do you respond to the men’s rights movements that have been established in the last few years?

They are trying to restore an old hierarchy. I don’t want to speak for them, but I think the very term “men’s rights” is deceptive as they’re really talking about male privilege.

I’ve been thinking a lot how now there seem to be so many issues that modern feminism addresses. You’ve got rape culture, equality in the

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workplace, motherhood. There's not one clear objective. What do you think is the most important issue that needs to be tackled right now?

Nothing can fail to be affected by half the world. I suppose in terms of simple priority, it's the ability to be alive and be safe in one's body. The degree of violence against females, whether it's sex trafficking, or the annihilation of female infants, or domestic violence, or sexualized violence in war zones or forcing women to have children.

I'm not trying to make somebody else's priorities for them, but I think the fact that now, for the first time, there are fewer females on planet Earth than male — which is a first, as the United Nations told us a few years ago — tells us that the dangers of just physical annihilation, or the occupation of our bodies, are the ones that cover the most ground.

Feminist icon and writer Gloria Steinem (Photo: Joan Roth/Jewish Women's Archive via Flickr)

We don't usually hear in the mainstream about abuses elsewhere in the world. What places concern you most when it comes to women's rights?

We're all dealing with degrees of these problems. For instance, in the United States, more women have been murdered by their husbands and boyfriends than Americans that were killed in 9/11, in two wars in Iraq, and 14 years of wars in Afghanistan. We need to know that.

In many parts of Asia, the undervaluing of female infants means there are various forms of female infanticide. There is now a daughter deficit and a son surplus, which leads to all kinds of problems.

In the Congo, where there has been warfare exacerbated by external mining interests and old colonial slaughter, women are especially endangered. It takes different forms in different parts of the world. There's no competition of tears. Tears are tears.

It's normally portrayed that the lesser evils are less important, like catcalling. It's all a part of the same system.

It's all a part of the same thing. We need to say I'm going to call it out or oppose it or try to make human contact beyond whatever, wherever we experience it every day.

I've been having an internal battle about the right way to respond to being catcalled. What do you think is the best way to respond in the moment?

Trust your instincts. It's good to surprise them. If they call you a slut, you can say, "Thank you."

If they try to touch you, say, "My body is mine. Thank you very much." If you want your body to be yours, we have to stand up for this right. He doesn't want somebody to touch him either without permission.

It's kind of fun to think of responses. You can take it seriously, but humor is a great ... Actually, in public opinion polls, what women fear most from men is violence. What men fear most from women is ridicule.

Humour is an interesting non-violent weapon.

Gloria Steinem at news conference, Women's Action Alliance, January 12, 1972 (Photo: Warren K. Leffler)

Human rights and equal rights are often seen as the ultimate goal. What goes amiss, do you think, when we just aim for rights?

It's not a bad frame. It depends how you define the rights. Bodily integrity is a human right. The power of the government stops at your skin and my skin. The government may put us in prison, but they can't tell us when and whether to have children. They can't force us into involuntary testing. It's just establishing bodily integrity, which has not been established in law even to the degree that national integrity has. Right now, the law protects objects more than people.

In what way?

If you invade somebody's house, you're more reliably punished than if you invade somebody's body by sexual assault and rape. If you steal an object or money, you're more reliably punished than if you force someone into servitude of some kind or sex trafficking.

You can't immediately prove a rape. You can't really immediately prove a robbery either, but they're always viewed as different.

Because women are only a half century away from being viewed as property ourselves legally.

One last question. What would be one piece of advice to a young woman making her own way today?

My deepest and best advice is to not listen to me. Just listen to yourself. To trust that voice and instinct inside you. You know what's there and what makes you feel put upon or empowered. My advice is just to listen to that voice inside you, and to find other people who support you. We are communal animals. We do need each other.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

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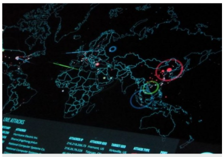

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