

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode10: Gloria Steinem
Feminists Come In Pairs, Like Nuns
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ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hey, all, welcome back to All Ears. This is my last episode of season three and it's a really special one for me. I got to interview one of my personal heroes, Gloria Steinem, whom I've also been lucky enough to know and to call a friend for more than 20 years. So that's the good news. The bad news is that we did encounter some technical difficulties with this interview that you may notice. So bear with a couple of audio hiccups, and I apologize for those, but I am so pleased to bring you this interview.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hi, Gloria.

GLORIA STEINEM: Hi, Abby.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: How are you doing?

GLORIA STEINEM: I think after this year of staying home, which is rare for me, I'm getting fond of staying home.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs* That is a first.

THEME MUSIC

ABIGAIL DISNEY narration: When you think about it, there really aren't that many people you can say changed the world. Within that category, there are even fewer who changed it for the better. But my guest today has done just that.

For more than half a century, Gloria Steinem has helped carry the mantle of feminism for multiple generations of women. As an activist and a writer she uses real intelligence, wit and conviction to shape ideas and empower women with language that resonates across classes and cultures.

As an organizer, she has spent years crisscrossing the country and the globe to speak, inspire, and march in solidarity with women fighting for a living wage, bodily autonomy, legal recognition, and basic human rights. She has sought to create continuity, funding and institutional wisdom as pillars of the movement. On top of all these remarkable accomplishments, her legacy is also one of dignity, good humor, and grace. But there is a personal piece to this interview too.

When I was young in my household, Gloria Steinem's name was invoked to warn me about feminists. So, the very first time I met Gloria was in 1993 and I was hosting an event at my house for the Ms foundation and the doorbell rang and there stood Gloria Steinem. Now, I had been told that feminists were bitter, icy cold, and

humorless, and yet here was Gloria, beautiful, radiant, funny, and the warmest person I'd ever met. But she represented the devil to my parents.

So when I opened the door to let her in, I said, "I welcome you over my doorstep. You beautiful devil you. I welcome you into my home." And since then we have had a glorious friendship.

And maybe the highlight of it was Botswana at sunrise on the morning of her 80th birthday, in the Okavango Delta. She and I were sitting on a wonderful elephant named Cathy, striding across the savanna, looking at beautiful wildlife just feeling all of the joy of everything the earth had to offer. So, Gloria, I welcome you so much. I'm just so happy that you were able to take the time.

GLORIA STEINEM: Abby, that is the most generous hearted introduction. Thank you for ending up with elephants, who I think are the ideal people. Right? Thank you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you remember what happened when we went to that camp and that elephant Cathy remembered us the second time we went?

GLORIA STEINEM: Yes, I do remember that. We were standing at a rope line, and the elephants were behind it and somehow Cathy made clear that she remembered us.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, yeah. So to explain, Gloria and I had gone to Botswana together at the invitation of the bushmen. And this was in 2005, and we went to this camp where you go on a safari, but on the back of an elephant, and we both fell in love at the same time with this elephant named Cathy, who was sort of the matriarch, even though she'd never had her own elephant babies. But she was raising everybody and she was like the dream of the perfect matriarch and we just made contact with her. And then in 2014 we went back, and I arrived in one car separate from Gloria. And we walked and the elephants were behind the line and Cathy kind of broke away from her handler and walked straight up to me and wrapped her trunk around me, which was the most amazing thing. And then Gloria's car arrived and Cathy proceeded to do the same thing to Gloria, the two people who knew her already out of the maybe 18 people who were showing up then. It was one of the most beautiful things that's ever happened to me, honestly.

GLORIA STEINEM: I'm so grateful to you for telling that story, because it was a highlight of my life, somehow, that you were there, that Cathy was there, that it was a communication and love and recognition and memory across species. And I hope that while we're talking about them, that we can support some of the organizations that are supporting them.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: We'll put up on our website some info about the folks that we know there who are working with the elephant populations.

GLORIA STEINEM: Thank you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY narration: So it was the early nineties when I first met Gloria, and at the time the feminist movement felt pretty powerful and influential. Politically, we'd had a string of victories in both elections and policy and somehow 1992 got labeled "the year of the woman". It felt like we were on an upswing, but that was also the era of the Anita Hill hearings, welfare reform and Operation Rescue, just to name a few of the anti-woman agendas. And there were some pretty hideous men in positions of power, like Senator Jesse Helms and Reverend Jerry Falwell. The pendulum had swung the other way, and just as quickly it felt like we were losing ground. So, because I feel like it's hard to know if we're really making progress, I asked Gloria about how she sees the big picture, given the constant seesawing of wins and losses.

GLORIA STEINEM: I think we may confuse our first burst of understanding that it doesn't have to be this hierarchical way with an accomplishment of a more democratic way. But in fact, if we, generally speaking, think about the families we grew up in, about the workforce we look at every day, certainly about who earns what salary, who is in the White House, and other positions of power, we realize that we have the idea of equality regardless of race or sex or class and that's a huge step forward because of course you have to imagine change before you can create change. And so there are waves of changed imagination. So the important thing, I think, is to make our path there fun and exciting and full of community and jokes and anger and music. Everything that our human senses provide us with.

ABBY NARRATION: Gloria and I have traveled together a few times, but one of the most memorable trips we've taken was when we went to the Korean peninsula together in 2015 as part of a peace march. We were this group of 30 feisty activists who crossed the DMZ, which is the very militarized border between North and South Korea. We actually spent a week in North Korea, under very heavy supervision, and it's hard to put into words the theatrical display of complete subordination to authority that we witnessed. It's simply the purest form of patriarchy on the planet. And I remember Gloria saying this amazing thing to me at the time about how sometimes leaders can be like the worst kind of violent and withholding fathers and that we were in the presence of an entire state system that functioned like an incredibly dysfunctional family.

GS: the nature of the structure was very familial and patriarchal in the sense that every part of life experience was governed by the state. From who had a car, to who could march in the streets, or have any kind of demonstration, to whose child could go to music school. I mean, everything was regulated. It was by far the most regulated place I, personally, had ever been.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, it was positively surreal. And I remember in that moment thinking about my own family and how I was raised. And I thought, oh my God, in the United States, how we handle leadership, how some of us are looking for a strong

daddy to elect president. And it felt to me like, yes, a better family would be a better way to govern.

GLORIA STEINEM: It helps me to think of a tree. A tree does not grow from the top down. It grows from the bottom up. And change does the same thing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yes.

GLORIA STEINEM: So, how we behave toward each other, the authoritarian or democratic form of our families, how anything of value or necessity is distributed in our daily life... That is the beginning of our government. And we probably still even now spend too much time—though we need to spend time certainly, because we need to vote—thinking about power as starting from the top down.

If we have democratic families, truly democratic families in which men change diapers and take care of children as much as women do. And women are as active in decision-making as men are, then we're way, way, way more likely to normalize and root democracy that, you know, just cannot be changed.

You know, you had a way, way, way more patriarchal family than I did.

My father had two points of pride. He never wore a hat, which in his generation he was supposed to do. And he never had a job, which meant that he was a freelance person, always. And it also meant that I was with my parents often living in a house trailer. I'm trying to think, okay. Here's a story that I think symbolizes my father. When I was about six, we were in a little country store together and I asked him for a quarter and he said, what for? And I said, you can give it to me or not give it to me, but you can't ask me what it's for. And he said, that's right. And he gave it to me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Wow.

GLORIA STEINEM: So it shows you that how we get born out of the mystery, is accidental. You know, I would like to say that in our personal situations viewed from the outside, you would have been viewed as being more fortunate in conventional terms, but it seems to me quite the reverse because you had to deal with the patriarchy that was respected and entrenched in the world, in the way that I did not. So, I have such respect and admiration and awe for the fact that you were able to see and try to remedy the lack of democracy in the world in which you were born, since that world was admired by so many people around you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What I've learned in my life, a family can look really good on paper. And the story of how you grew up with, you know, not an easy father and certainly not a lot of material comforts and a mother who was emotionally, unable to hold herself together. There were a lot of reasons for you to be able to sing a sad

story about how you were brought up, but what you did have was people who really believed in you.

GLORIA STEINEM: I mean, I certainly never went hungry even though economics were a problem, but the important things, which were individual love and support and listening, you know, listening to children. I mean, what we forget is that every child is a unique, never-happened-before, could-never-happen-again, person who arrives in the world as a baby. And the question is not so much to put things into that baby as it is to listen to that baby and find out who is already in there. And because my mother and both of my grandmothers were Theosophists who happened to believe in reincarnation, they had this attitude. So I think I totally lucked out. And then I also was adopted by Louisa May Alcott when I was growing up, because I read her books, I adored her books. For children, for young adults, for grownups. I loved her. I used to imagine that she would come to life and what would I show her first? I mean, she was my best friend.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: How we become politically activated has everything to do with the moments when our personal experience intersects with issues that are politicized. And for me, having been raised in a strict Catholic family, I bought the party line on abortion early in my life, but then I got pregnant when I was in college. and suddenly I had to have my own opinion on abortion. I knew at 21 that I was not ready to have a baby and be a good mother to it. I decided to have an abortion. And in hindsight, I will tell you with a hundred percent certainty, it was the right thing to do. But what I struggled with was the way abortion played a central role in the feminist movement because it was so polarizing. And I knew we'd never be able to bridge the divide with certain women, particularly religious women, who would otherwise probably be on board with so much of the equal rights agenda. It was such a huge, political burden we were carrying. And I would ask myself if it was really worth it. But it's been through knowing Gloria that I have come to understand that abortion has to be a central piece of what we're fighting for.

GLORIA STEINEM: The only thing that is really fundamentally different between males and females is that females have wombs. And the very definition of patriarchy has been the desire to control those wombs, both for reasons of gender superiority, for reasons of maintaining racism and racial separation, class, caste, all of it. So the control of women's wombs, and therefore women, is absolutely central. When Hitler was elected—and we should remember that he was elected—the thing he did was to declare abortion a crime against the state and padlock all the family planning clinics. Mussolini did the same thing. So authoritarianism has generally started with controlling women's wombs because that is unique to us. That is our monopoly. And we see it in Texas, here, we saw it in Germany, we see it wherever patriarchy is establishing itself, or is striving to.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you think that there's a critical, key connection between racism and patriarchy?

GLORIA STEINEM: Yes, I do. Because for both of them, you have to control reproduction. If you're going to maintain the separation of races, you have to control

reproduction. So these kinds of authoritarian systems are intertwined at a minimum, and also you can see in the origins of human society you can also see that they once didn't exist. I mean, when we were a migratory species living off the land, women needed to control reproduction because literally we were migratory, and they fully understood how to do it. I remember when I was in Africa—I wonder if it was one of the times that we were together—talking to women there who showed me the herbs that they used as abortifacients and as contraceptives. So it isn't new. It's as ancient as humankind.

ABBY NARRATION: From the very beginning, Gloria understood that to speak as a white woman for all women was just plain unacceptable. I asked her to talk about how she came to realize this so early, when so many other white feminists did not see it. She always spoke accompanied by at least one woman of color when she was in public.

GLORIA STEINEM: What happened was a series of steps in my life. I was always a freelance writer; I had helped to start New York magazine, and so I had given myself a column and in that column I went to cover a very early women's liberation meeting, and it was titled, I think, "After Black Power: Women's Liberation" And I got a huge response to that, an incredible response, because there was not in easily available publications that much news about the feminist movement at that point. So I realized that there was an enormous interest out there. And I also knew I could absolutely not become a speaker on my own. As I was saying, I'd become a writer so I didn't have to talk. So I asked Dorothy Pittman Hughes, who I have written about—she ran the West 80th street childcare center here in Manhattan—not so much because she was a black woman, but because she was fearless. I had seen her at strikes and all kinds of public events, I knew that if I froze and couldn't speak, she would be fine. I asked her if she would consider trying this together. We began to travel together, Dorothy and I. Then she was pregnant, and had another baby and wanted to stay home more. So we mutually asked our friend, Florynce Kennedy—if people don't know Florynce Kennedy, they should definitely Google her. She was a civil rights lawyer, a feminist lawyer. An outrageously stylish, wonderful woman—So we spoke together, and then, when she was not so well, then Jane Galvin Lewis and others helped to fill in. So it just was an organic process that out of fear of speaking alone, we started to speak together. You know, in the eyes of the media, I think—I hate to generalize this much—but I think the women's movement was viewed as white females, the civil rights movement was viewed as black males and black females got left out of both. When, in fact, obviously, they were essential in both.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right.

GLORIA STEINEM: And it was clear that each of us got a much bigger audience, a more diverse audience than we would have had on our own. And so we became committed to speaking in pairs. Feminists come in pairs like nuns, we used to say.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So tell me about those early, early, consciousness raising feminist gatherings, because I don't know if younger feminists really understood how much there was to learn and experience together.

GLORIA STEINEM: The process, or the sequence, I would say, was that Dorothy and I, Flo and I, would speak each for maybe 15 minutes apiece, and then we would ask the audience to become a talking circle. And it was the audience that turned it into the most magical kind of event, you know, because a woman on one side of the auditorium would ask a question and a woman on the other side would answer it. And soon, you know, everybody was having a kind of communal discussion, which we could not have had because we did not know the community in the way that they did. I mean, there were just countless moments that came out of the experience and the mutuality of women meeting together.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: There was a lot of learning about rape and violence as well in these meetings. Am I right?

GLORIA STEINEM: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because that was an era when, if a woman was raped, the questions, even from authorities and her friends, were likely to be, why were you in that neighborhood at that hour? Why were you wearing those clothes? You know, it was all about, or mostly about blaming the woman. So that was the beginning of a very long process, greatly aided by women like Catharine MacKinnon and you know, many others, at a philosophical and legal level, of understanding that male or female, our bodies belong to ourselves that nobody has a right to touch or invade us without our permission.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, Catharine MacKinnon is one of those figures in the movement who is always being characterized by somebody with an agenda and therefore wrongly characterized. Can you characterize what her reputation is, but also what she really did?

GLORIA STEINEM: She's a lawyer and a brilliant legal theorist, and she raised, I would say—I don't know if she would describe it this way—but she raised sex discrimination to the same level as race discrimination or class discrimination. And she made clear that it was accompanied by, justified by, perpetuated by violence. So she was fearless and I have to say humorless.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs* Oh well!

GLORIA STEINEM: But in some ways that's important in describing this. And also she was and is a great legal theorist. So she was willing to take on the actual words and semicolons, and the law, to try to universalize it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, it's funny because I just believe that there's something about feminism that is so perplexing to the mainstream media, it just does not know how to talk about this movement. Why do you suppose that is?

GLORIA STEINEM: Because we live in a racist patriarchy, I think, you know, so they're accustomed to a person being personified pretty much as a white male. I find it kind of comforting myself to think about this country before Columbus showed up, because as far as I can tell, which of course is not that far, but from knowing Wilma Mankiller, who was chief of the Cherokee nation and other people, Rebecca Adamson, other people in Indian country, the cultures that were here before Columbus, before Europeans seem to have been at a minimum matrilineal.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Can you explain the difference between matrilineal and matriarchal?

GLORIA STEINEM: Matrilineal just means people are born of woman. It doesn't mean that there's any female superiority, so that a leader, perhaps, was male for the moment, but he had been chosen by the grandmothers. It was a system of balance between males and females and a system in which everyone was subject to every occupation. Without the invasion of monotheistic, patriarchal, racist Europeans, would have persisted and would have been very different. Sometimes when I'm wandering around the country, talking to groups, I ask them to think about vertical history. Don't think about it horizontally. Think about the land you're standing on and what was the history underneath your feet from the beginning of humankind forward? It's sometimes helpful.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Can we talk in the short term about 2022 and 2024: what do you see coming for us?

GLORIA STEINEM: Well, you know, I think Trump was a kind of aberration because he never represented more than a third of the country, but because of our system of electoral votes, even though he never had the majority vote, he still managed to get elected. So there are peculiarities of our system that we need to be aware of. So the question is not one of "shoulds", but "however we can". If we can possibly be active in local elections, great. If we can organize to get out the vote at our local school or polling place, whatever it is, but just that it has to be part of our everyday lives, like eating and breathing. Otherwise democracy will fail.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Right, how do we deal with a Supreme court that's now a six to three majority of, like, really Looney Tunes conservatives. How are we going to deal with that?

GLORIA STEINEM: Well, we need to continue to struggle, obviously, to make the Supreme Court more representative. But also the truth is that for most of my life, the Supreme Court has never been our friend.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

GLORIA STEINEM: So part of it is just saying, hello, we're going to do what we're going to do regardless.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So, let's say something cheerful about where we are as a people on this earth. What are you hopeful about?

GLORIA STEINEM: I'm hopeful about the degree of self-determination that I see in women. It's no longer as it was in my fifties and sixties generations, a feeling that you have to get married, you have to have children. You can do that if you want. Those are great and honorable things to do, but there's not just one way of living as there was then. There's a movement towards individual decision-making, regardless of race or sex or how we got born into this world. And perhaps I'm overly grateful for that because I remember when it was worse, and that's why we need age diversity in our movement because I probably feel overly impressed with change because I do have a long memory and young women are mad as hell because it isn't what it should be. So we need each other.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And I think 'mad as hell' is the only thing that's gonna get us where we need to go.

So, we just spent a year and a half hunkered down. You said earlier that you feel like you want to stay home more, but I think you have itchy feet too. What's your dream next place to go?

GLORIA STEINEM: I haven't traveled nearly enough in Africa and I really, really want to go back as soon as it's possible to travel. Of course India is my second home since I lived there for two years after I graduated from college. It was a good place to go if you were engaged and trying not to get married. So I went to India, fell in love with it and stayed for two years. As soon as Modi departs, I want to go back to India and especially to Kerala, which is at the Southern tip of India and is one of its most beautiful parts, and also still has some of the heritage of being matrilineal.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That sounds good. So, you know, I've got my bag packed. It's by the front door. You just give me a call.

GLORIA STEINEM: We can go together.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Let's go together, for sure.

Gloria Steinem is an activist, a journalist and a leader in the global feminist movement. And if mench is for men, I would call her a wench. You can find out more about the organizations she supports at gloriasteinem.com and follow her on Twitter

@GloriaSteinem. I'm so happy you found the time. I know how busy your life is, thank you.

GLORIA STEINEM: Abby, I'm so grateful to get to talk to you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY narration: This is our final episode of season three. We're going to take a break, but we'll be back with more episodes in 2022. Thanks for listening everybody. We'll be back before you know it.

THEME MUSIC

ABIGAIL DISNEY: All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show was produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com. And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening!

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Did you hear the dog barking? I was thinking the same thing: she has to stay.

SFX Dog barking