AMY RICHARDS INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Amy Richards
Writer & Activist
4/27/2011
Interviewed by Betsy West
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 12 minutes and 45 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The following video contains mention of sexual assault.

Viewer discretion is advised.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Amy Richards

Writer & Activist

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BETSY WEST:
When you were born, the women's movement had already made a lot of inroads and you were basically the "free to be you and me" kid. I'm wondering if you could describe what that was like?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I was literally a "free to be me" kid because I was raised by a single mother and I have never met my father. And my mother left my father when she was 7 months pregnant with me and it was 1969. And I didn't know until much later in my life what a radical act that was, and that I always experienced my mother as somebody who was willing to step outside the box and willing to take risks, but she was also my mother and she was kind of shy and sweet and nurturing and all of those things.

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And my story growing up was just that I didn't know my father and that was my story, but I do joke that as a consequence of my family life, I was a feminist since in utero. Because from day one, I watched my mother negotiating what it was to be the mother and the father, that she changed the light bulbs, she took out the garbage, she bought the house, bought the car and she helped make cookies for school and walked me to school every day and had to deal with calls from the nurse and calls from- take me to doctors' appointments, and so she played the role of mother and father.

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And she also was very consciously a feminist. She had her women's group that I was slightly embarrassed by as a kid. Because it would mean just women sitting around talking and soaking garbanzo beans and eating pita bread pizza. It was sort of the intersection of hippie-ism and feminism in the early 70s and I watched her, again, very bravely sort of take jobs that weren't always available to women.

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I watched her put herself back through college after she had supposedly been putting my father through college, and so I watched her negotiate both, personally, these decisions in life and then watched her politically sort of work them out with her friends, and work them out by watching *Alice* on TV. I went to first grade and the teacher said, "Today, we're going to learn the national anthem," and I sort of eagerly raised my hand and the teacher finally called on me and I said, "I know the national anthem. I want to sing it." And she said, "Ok," and I proceeded to sing Helen Reddy's *I am Woman*, Hear me Roar.

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And I mean, to make the story even more comical, I'm a terrible singer. And I defended myself by saying, "Well, my mother told me this was the national anthem," because I think to her it really was the national anthem. It was sort of about strength and power, and my mother also raised me… I think she didn't want me to have Barbie, but then I sold popcorn and made enough money that I could buy Barbie. And she didn't push me so much into sports,-

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-but the second I sort of showed an interest in it, she really encouraged me. And I remember from a very young age, people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and my grandfather had been a teacher and my aunt had been a flight attendant and my mother was back in school at the time, and I said, "I want to be the first female president of the United States." And I think that was very common for women of my generation. I think that we were instilled from a very young age with the sense of, we can do anything.

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Everything is available to us. I also think that I was saved because I had a mother who was not negotiating, I think, conventional relationships. I think that feminism of the 60s and the 70s did a much better job of changing the world than it did changing our family life. And so I think I was free from some of that by just having one parent. When I compare notes with a lot of my peers, I think there was some confusion because they watched their mothers in particular, but sometimes their fathers, politically argue one thing but then personally practice another.

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And so they would hear their mothers say, "Equal pay for equal work," and, "I'm not your slave," and, "I didn't marry you to be your wife or to be a missus. I am an equal person in this relationship." But then, they would see how their house broke down and would watch the mothers assume a disproportionate amount of the responsibilities in the home, and the men assume a disproportionate amount of responsibilities outside the home, and so I think

I was free from observing that. Doesn't mean I was free from absorbing the sexism of the time,-

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-because being a child, from a young age who was athletic, I remember sort of the first incarnation was that if you were a girl that was good at sports, you played the boys, and you got picked to be on the boys' team. And then later, you got the girls sports teams but we had to wear the boys' old uniforms and we had to play on the fields that were a mile down the road and we had this sort of less advantageous start time. And so I sort of negotiated throughout my life what I think a feminist path as it were.

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Sort of from having no space to having a space that was more women-friendly and that was women-exclusive, but to having it still be ghetto-ized and marginalized, and then sort of evolving to a place of having that women-centered space be more empowered.

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BETSY WEST:
Did you ever rebel beyond buying Barbie?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I rebelled by not acknowledging that I was a feminist until much later in my life. I think I needed a non-familial, non-mother example of being a feminist

before I could sort of embrace it on my own. And I certainly- I remember I think in sixth, seventh grade when my mother would say, "Do you want to go out for dinner?" And I would say, "With you?" Because I think there was something so fearful about being exposed in this relationship at the same time as I was empowered by it. I knew it didn't feel normal, at the same way.

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Just being a typical teen daughter and having a mother who- And at the end of the day, I was so saved by a mother who just instilled me with sort of "be whoever you want to be," and didn't care about my looks and didn't- was never saying, "Lose weight," or look a certain way, and I know a lot of girls who feel very conflicted because their mothers would say it doesn't matter what you look like and then they would watch their mothers spend endless hours in front of the mirror worrying about what you look like.

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And as a child I think that's a very conflicting message to grow up with. I think more politically, what was going on is I think that for my generation of women, we grew up- Let me back up and say that I think for another generation of women, what was so penalizing is that there was one expectation for what it meant to be a good woman, and I think in my generation there were now two expectations. You could either be a traditionally good woman which was to adhere to society's standards of femininity-

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-or you could be a good feminist woman which was to depart from the societal standard a little bit but you were still adhering to something. And I think that that left confusion, because you were either failing womanhood or you were failing feminism.

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BETSY WEST:
Was there a turning point moment in your childhood that kind of propelled you toward your adult life in any way?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I think I was always sort of growing incrementally as a feminist, and I remember because I was a child who was good at sports and good in math and sciences, I remember being the only girl in certain places, and at first feeling empowered by that and thinking, when we would be on the school playground and they would pick who would be on the kickball team and I was often one of the first girls picked and thinking, "Oh, I'm so cool that I get picked." And then realizing how lonely it was to be the only girl picked and then realizing that I wasn't competing against boys, I was competing against girls, and where was that going to leave me at the end of the day.

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And being in advanced math and science classes in high school, I took an advanced physics class and there were only a dozen of us in the class and I

was the only girl, and it came time to give the prizes at the end of the year and I got the prize in honors physics and I had had a GPA that was similar, my grade was the same as two boys in the clas, and I said, "Why did I get the award?" And he said, "'Cause you had to work so much harder." And on the one hand, it was a compliment because I do think I had to work harder and on the other hand, it was a total insult.

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It was just total projection that as a girl, I had to work harder. And there were many moments like that. It wasn't that one moment but there were many moments. When I was in high school, I had gone to a high school that had been all boys and had been co-ed about 4 years before I got there and there was a- The high school was about a hundred years old and there was a wall lined with all of the heads of schools that had come and their names were inscribed and it was James and John and Jim and on and on. And I remember saying this is not going to change until more girls run, so I ran for head of school knowing that I was going to lose.

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And it was a great political lesson because my campaign slogan was purely, "It was time for a change." But I was basing change purely on gender. I wasn't giving anybody incentive to vote for me, except being a girl. And I remember doing that, knowing I was going to lose. But doing it because I knew that I had to change the perception of who could even run. And I think that that was one of the first times where I remember sort of stepping outside of my comfort zone a little bit because I don't think any child wants to set themselves up to

fail but I think I could see beyond my failure and see it ultimately as somebody else's success.

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BETSY WEST:
So you were kind of aware of blazing a path or at least going a little bit down the road. Not completely.

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AMY RICHARDS:
Yeah. Not completely. I interned for Ted Kennedy when I was a junior in high school and there's a sort of standard protocol for all pages that work in a senator's office. And yet I noticed that a lot of the girls had to do phone duty when it was lunchtime and the main secretary would go off, and I knew early on that if I made myself indispensable in other ways, I wouldn't be stuck with phone duty, and so I sort of took on this project of re-doing another traditionally feminine job but I was re-doing the filing cabinets,-

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-and made myself so valuable in that way, that then I got to go along when the senator would come to town and I got to get this special access, and I remember that time noticing that gender was both a blessing and a curse. There was this sort of curse because there were these expectations, and then it was a blessing because then you could manipulate it. And I remember being the- I was the only girl intern in there and sort of having to step aside,

and I remember I have a friend in high school who was far more overachieving than I ever was,-

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-and I think we were in 7th grade and she said, "We're going to take typing. It's going to serve us later in life." And I was like, "Really? I don't want to take typing." But I took typing because I believed her and she was so overachieving, and it did serve me later in life but it was one of those things that I remember when I would get into these jobs and they would look to the girls and say, "You're a good typist." But then I would intentionally make a lot- I said, "I make too many mistakes though." I mean so again, it was sort of, you could use it when you wanted to but kind of manipulate it in other ways.

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BETSY WEST:
You majored, after all of that science and math, you majored in art history in college. I'm wondering if you were to ask your college self what you would be doing now, would you be really surprised at what your life has turned out to be?

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AMY RICHARDS:
It's more, I think, confusing that I ended up as an art history major than I ended up where I am now. And I ended up majoring in art history because I had started college, and because that was just what you did when you went to

sort of a more competitive high school, you went to college. I got two months into it and I thought, "I don't want to be here, I want to leave." And so I left and again, my mother really encouraged me, and I traveled around Europe for four months by myself when I was 19 and when I was alone and in these youth hostels, I would spend infinite amounts of time at museums. And I realized that I didn't know other languages but I could communicate with these paintings.

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And so it became my way of learning religion and history and culture, and I was learning so much that then I sort of came back and realized—somebody who had never identified with the arts—realized that arts could be more scientific, it could be more historical than I ever realized. But looking at where I was in high school, I wouldn't say that this is where I thought I would be. I thought that- I mean the shared attributes as I thought that I would be overachieving and successful, I mean that was sort of what I projected into my future.

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I never thought that I would have stayed in more exclusively feminist space, and more so in a more makeshift career space. Because I always thought that I was such a good rule follower that I would do so well in corporate America and in a more like- working at a law firm and sort of working my way up a path that was already laid out for me in some ways. And so it's more a surprise that I've sort of stayed in this profession that I just keep having to make up.

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BETSY WEST:
You have kind of invented a life for yourself. How did you get the courage to do that? I mean, how did that happen?

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AMY RICHARDS:
When I was graduating from college, it was 1992, and earlier that year had been the Anita Hill Clarence Thomas hearings, and then shortly after that had been the William Kennedy Smith date rape sort of debacle, and then there had been the Rodney King verdict. And the Rodney King verdict was sort of the last straw for me. And I remember sort of turning to peers and for the first time thinking, how can this happen in this day and age?

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And I went to a lunch and it was actually to celebrate Susan Faludi's book *Backlash* and it was at the Rainbow room and it was in the spring of 1992, it was the day or two after the Rodney King verdict. And they cut the luncheon short because they were worried that New York was going to start rioting. And they said, "You should go home, get home safely. We encourage everybody to leave the lunch now." And I remember leaving and walking up town to Barnard from- to the Upper West Side from Midtown, and people were shutting their gates and their doors.

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They were looking at- And it was the first time—and I was a White person—where I realized how much fear there was still in this country of something that I thought was historical. I thought that we had dealt with the civil rights movement and it was in that moment where I realized how current it still- that struggle still was, and I identified with that struggle as a woman and feeling that they were looking at me just because I was somebody who was a aligning with the sort of the anger that was going along with that. I wasn't rioting but I was upset and I was angry.

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And there had been many moments where I felt angry and felt like my country wasn't representing me in instances, but it was the first time where I remember thinking that I had to do something about it. If I really cared, I had to do something about it, and sort of came and talked to different friends of mine and ended up planning something that became the inaugural project of Third Wave foundation and it was Freedom Summer '92 and it was a cross country voter registration drive.

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And it was the moment where I felt that I just couldn't be a bystander anymore. There had been union fights when I was in college, and in high school, there was a sort of living wage campaign that was going on, and I was sort of always participatory. But it was more sort of, I was signing my name to a petition. And it was the first time where I sort of said, "Wait I can't just- I have to be an actor in this. I can't just be sort of a passive participant."

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BETSY WEST:

So can you explain to me what's the Third Wave?

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AMY RICHARDS:

Third Wave remains, today, a national organization for young feminist activists and it prioritizes young women and men between the ages of 15 and 30, and it shows that age demographic because of, I think, what personally happens in so many people's lives during that age time frame, which is that you often come out. If you're going to come out, that's when you come out. if you are going to abandon your religion of origin, that's when you abandon your religion of origin.

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When you are going to start to acknowledge that you don't really like your parents or your siblings or your family, that's when you're going to do it. So it was to provide a comfort for people during those years as they were coming into, into their own, and very specifically coming into their own as a feminist identified person or as a person sort of committed to social justice using a feminist lens.

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BETSY WEST:

So tell me a little bit about that. Why wasn't good old 1960s feminism good enough?

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AMY RICHARDS:
It's not that 60s feminism wasn't good enough for my generation, it's that it wasn't applicable any more. I think that what was so appropriate about the expression of feminism in the 60s and early 70s is that it was creating a women-only space, whether that was a sort of emotional space or a language space or a physical space that had never before existed. And my generation grew up knowing that that space already existed. We already had women's studies programs. We had women's clubs in our high schools. We had women's sports teams.

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And so the notion of access was no longer applicable. What my generation needed was more ways of taking that space and mainstreaming it, of taking it into spaces that weren't exclusively women, but making those spaces more applicable, acceptable.

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BETSY WEST:
A lot of women of your generation feel like, "Okay, it's over. We don't need this."

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AMY RICHARDS:

I used to hear from a lot of women and I particularly hear from women who are on college campuses and they say to me, "But I have everything." And I always sound back to them, "It doesn't' surprise me at all that you don't feel oppressed. You are at college. I mean, 28% of this country graduates with a college degree, what about the other 72% that don't even make it to a four year college?" That's who I think feminism is trying to focus on. It's not the people who have already been able to successfully acclimate.

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It's those who haven't even had that opportunity yet. I also think that feminism has been too dependent on very simplistic ways of measuring feminism's success, and it's often, "Well, Hillary Clinton ran for office, and Sarah Palin, and look at how many senators there are and look at how many women are university presidents and look at how many women are in corporate America. We have corporate CEOs." And I think that those examples are wonderful and they do show progress, but I don't think that they reflect the status of the majority of women's lives.

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I also think that feminism's goal has never been exclusively about acclimating women into the world as it were, but it was getting society to change to fit who we were, not just asking us to fit into society. And I think that that is the challenge of this generation, is pushing feminism to that next level. Making us

not have to accommodate ourselves to fit in, but changing society so that it accommodates us.

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BETSY WEST:
What are the biggest areas in that?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I was just having a conversation, as I often do because I have little kids, about parenting and whether it's appropriate for gender stereotyping kids, and somebody was asking about the uber big strollers today and how annoyed people are by the big strollers, and, "It's just these moms that take up so much space on the sidewalk." And I said, "It's funny though because when the dads push the strollers, they get sympathy. It's not the strollers, it's the moms." And I think that that is a little bit where we are. I mean that's a sort of more superficial example of it but I think that we are still not used to women taking up space.

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And so our reaction to that is to be mad at the women who do or seemingly do. I think that we also have done a great job of making individual women powerful often by making it known that they can do masculine things. But I still think that femininity as a concept is devalued but more importantly, I think we overinflate masculinity.

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There was a moment in the fall of 2008 when Biden was crying and wars weren't working and financial markets were crashing, and it was the first glimmer for me that maybe we had become too dependent on these institutions that had been here long before I was, of what it meant to be good political leader and what it meant to sort of achieve world domination and what it meant to achieve the American dream.

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And it was the first moment where I thought, maybe they're not smarter, maybe they don't know more, maybe we've lived behind this assumption for too long, and to me I saw that's symbolic of something much larger, which is that I think we've over inflated the importance of masculinity and feminism fell into that trap too. Because I think there was this resistance to, "Don't say I throw like a girl," but then the response to that was the only way to be a good girl is to throw like a boy.

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I went to a great lecture at the Rockefeller University and it featured the one Icelandic financial services company, unfortunately named Audur Capital. But they were the one, they were run by women and they were the only company not to close in Iceland during the sort of economic meltdown there. And their sort of conclusion, and they were paired with the scientists, is that these economic meltdowns would not have happened, had more women been a part of the conversation. And I don't think that ultimately men and women are as different as society-

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-I think we're much more different as individuals than we are across genders. But I do think, and I've been convinced of this in a scientific way as well, that women are much more thoughtful when they make their decisions and they take into consideration so many more people. They take into consideration their families, their communities, their religions, their churches, before they make the decision.

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BETSY WEST:
Can you tell me about meeting Gloria Steinem and what she's meant to you?

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AMY RICHARDS:
When you meet any famous person for the first time, I think many people's first reaction is, "They're so much smaller than I thought they were going to be." That was my first reaction when I met Gloria. I was a senior in college and I had had what I thought was the best job in my life, which was working at Christie's auction house in the press department and I was being paid $10 a week and Gloria offered me a job at $10 an hour, and so I was one of the first people who came to feminism for financial reasons. And when I went and she sort of asked me to come over on a Saturday or a Sunday,-

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-and I sort of walked over and she opened the door and she was on a phone call and sort of quickly just said, "Oh here, read these pages and let me know what you think." And here I was a senior in college, I wasn't sure that I had much to offer, I was intimidated, I didn't- Gloria didn't mean so much to me personally but I did grow up in a household where *Ms*. was really respected and I had gone to a college that sort of taught feminism directly and indirectly, and so I was definitely influenced by it.

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But immediately read the manuscript and had a bunch of comments and said, "I wouldn't say this and I wouldn't say this, but who am I to say that?" And she says, "No, you're somebody who I would expect to read a book like this and so I care what you have to say about it." And I think that that set the tone for our relationship because I think that from the get go, I was able to be very honest with her and I think she, from the get go, said to me, "What you have to say matters," and I think that those two things have really shaped our relationship over the years.

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I continue to provide honesty when I can and she continues to say, "You can do that," and I think that that makes each of us, in some ways, a better person. And Gloria has been an incredible role model in a very personal sense. One of the first things I learned with Third Wave foundation was how to fundraise, and one of the things Gloria does best is fundraise, and I think I was very intimidated by fundraising because I was not somebody who came from

tremendous amounts of money and at first thought, "I don't know people that have money." And then I sort of in a silly way sat there and made my list.

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And I thought, "Well, I do know somebody who got a Volvo when I graduated from college, and I know somebody else that has a summer house and oh, that one friend, her family went on safari in Africa when we were in high school. She must have money," and was scared to sort of use them, those connections. And Gloria said, "But if you're passionate about it, people are going to invest." And so she really role modeled to me that what mattered was that you believed in what you were doing, and then other people would come along. It wasn't that I had to convince them, I only had to convince them that I was passionate about something.

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BETSY WEST:
What has Gloria meant for the movement?

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AMY RICHARDS:
She, as a journalist, gave a political voice to women, both as to other female journalists I think, when she was writing and trying to write about politics in a way that had traditionally been not acceptable for women to do. I think she changed not only the world for other journalists to say, "Oh, I can write about

more than celebrity profiles and nail polish," but for readers, I think she showed them that women's news was as serious as-

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A female interpretation of the news was as important and was something that they were missing. I mean to me one of the- There are sort of these profound moments I've had where I hear Gloria say something and then it's ten years later where I'll say, "Oh my gosh, now I get what she was saying," and I think that that sort of is the effect she has on the world at large in some ways. She sort of credits it to not being educated in a traditional way until she was in her sort of early teenage years.

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But she said she didn't have to go through the process of relearning, whereas I think many of us have to unlearn what we had assumed was right. Or she just got to learn from the get go and I think that that trained her in some ways to just- We think of it as thinking outside the box, but for her that's her box. And so it's not thinking outside the box. It's just thinking in a more nuanced way, and I think that she inspires that in other people.

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I think she also is- And she's somebody who didn't get married until later in life, didn't have kids, was very independent, and I think showed that she could make her own living, and I think that's a place that many women want to be, but I think many of them are scared to go there. And I think that a lot of people revere her in part because they see themselves in her, and maybe it's a part they weren't able to actualize.

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BETSY WEST:
Talk a little bit, if you could Amy, about feminism and motherhood.

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AMY RICHARDS:
I think there's sort of many questions people ask when you're a feminist. They say, "Do you like men? Do you shave? Do you like Valentine's day?" And then there are many things that challenge people when you say, "I am this," and then you are a feminist and they think that they're not, it's not possible to hold both of those spaces. And I think one of them in particular is to say that I am somebody who embraces motherhood and I'm a feminist. And I think that's a challenge to most people because motherhood is seen as this sort of extreme expression of femininity,-

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-and feminism is seen as trying to counter femininity or at least to change what femininity is and the expectations on women, and so I think for women to embrace motherhood and feminism is a challenge. Because it is seen as a contradiction. I don't see it that way. I see motherhood as something that, yes, most women end up choosing in life just as most men ended up choosing fatherhood. I do see unfortunately among my generation-

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-and this was the generation that was raised to be anything we wanted to be, I see an over-dependence upon motherhood because it is the one area where women's power isn't as challenged. I think a lot of women that embrace motherhood—and you see it in the mommy blogs and you see it in women who start these mommy and me groups and baby clothing lines—a lot of what they are expressing is, I have noted, is a reaction to not being respected as women but they can be respected as mothers.

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And as wonderful as it is that women ultimately find that power, to me it's with great sadness that it had to come through the journey to motherhood. And I see it metaphorically just when women become pregnant, they all of a sudden are allowed to ask for things that they don't normally ask for and it's as silly as, "Do you mind if I sit down? My feet are tired," or, "Honey, can we have dinner early? I'm just feeling really tired." And then it sort of goes into-

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"Oh, I just really don't want you to smoke in my presence because I am pregnant," and then when they have kids, it's sort of this, "Oh, I can't come to the family reunion because I have small kids." And a lot of what I see women doing is asking for things that they don't otherwise feel entitled to ask for. Because they are women, because they have been conditioned to play a more, sort of quieter role or a more accepting role in society, and motherhood gives them the permission to sort of step outside of that.

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I also saw a number of- There was sort of a lot of media in the last ten years sort of on, "Has feminism failed?" because women are embracing motherhood. I mean the fact is women- the average length of time any woman takes away from her career is 2 and a half years, so women are only leaving temporarily and for the vast majority of women, that's not even an option to leave temporarily from your job. But keeping the conversation on the assumptions, I think that if women are leaving their jobs, it's not so much because they love childhood, it's because they don't love their jobs.

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And I think that for many women it was this moment to say, "Why suffer at something that I'm not appreciated in and that I don't really love, when there is this thing that I can love?" I think in the long run, there's a danger for women who embrace motherhood at the expense of other priorities in their lives, because I think that it's a perishable power, and I think that it-

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And I say this having conversations with many women who are on the other end of it, and that it's wonderful while it is something you can prioritize, but when that priority moves on to other priorities, you're left with less and less.

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BETSY WEST:
Yeah, what's the danger specifically?

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AMY RICHARDS:

The danger for women who embrace motherhood to such an extreme is that they often sacrifice their individual priorities for what their families' needs are, and I think that is not only unhealthy for the individual women who then might feel resentful at a later age, "Oh well, I couldn't because I gave that up for you, I gave that up for you," but I also think it doesn't serve the family.

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Because it was not my experience, but when I was growing up, I can't tell you how many people would say to me, "Oh, my mom doesn't work. She just stays home. My mom doesn't work, she just stayed home." And then feminism sort of brought into that conversation, "Oh, no, your mom works, she just works at being a mother. She works at the home, she's a homemaker." And there was this sort of consciousness raising that went along with how much value we should place on the work being done in the home. But I don't know that we really valued it. We learned to say it in a way that was more polite,-

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-But I don't think that we, at the end of the day, valued the work that was being done there. And I say that because I look at women and given the choice, they often will make other choices.

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BETSY WEST:

Talk a little bit about your own decision to become a mom, to become a mother, and whether or not things have surprised you, your boys have surprised you.

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AMY RICHARDS:

I loved my childhood. I loved the family that my mother and I created. I loved just the wide eyed notion that kids have. I loved being dirty and playing kickball, and have- I loved that sense and I really wanted to recreate that for somebody and knew that I always would. And because of my atypical family, I also knew that a marriage wasn't a requirement for children nor was a conventional relationship a requirement for children.

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So I don't think I ever sort of put a sort of timeline on, "Well, when this happens, then that will happen." I just sort of knew that at some point in my life, I would have kids. And having kids I assumed, given my own upbringing, that I would only have girls, and I was in such a female centered world, and then I had two boys and the second one threw me off less than the first one did. And I realized right away how just, they're little people, they're not as gendered as I think I assumed they would be.

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I also think I got lucky and had boys that are just naturally more petite and I've never had a superhero in my house, I don't think. I have never had a boy who is begging me to go see Batman or Spiderman or something like that. So

I feel like I have been reprieved from some of the more traditional boy behavior. And I don't know how fierce I am about saying no, and it's more when they'll go to McDonald's with their grandmother and then a Batman car will appear in our house at noon and by 8:00 I throw it in the trash.

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And I have never had them sort of say the next day, where did that go? And I… more I think, just shun toys in general. I sort of say, "Well, there's cardboard and tape, you can play with that. Or let's go outside and play kickball. Let's go play tennis, let's just do something athletic," which are my instincts. Truth be told, I think I would have, and I think women of my generation have a much harder time having girls than having boys, because I think that our expectations for what girls want are so much more raised than our expectations for boys.

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And this is among I think progressive feminist minded women. I think it's more challenging for us when our daughter wants to wear pink and play with Barbies than it is for our boy who wants to play with Batman, because one is more assumed and the other one, we thought because of our own example, we would be able to interrupt that. And I think it would be much more challenging for me to have a seven year old girl saying, "I don't want to play soccer. I just want to sit inside," than it would for me having a 7 year old boy saying, "I just want to go rock climbing today. I just want to go swimming,"-

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-because it would challenge my assumptions about myself. Whereas having a boy, I feel like is a clean slate. I also live in New York City. I also have a atypical relationship in the sense that I am the breadwinner and their father is the one to cry after the Disney movie more than me and he's there to make dinner as much as I am, and so I feel lucky that I have been able to by dint of sort of circumstance, create a family that is more equal than I think what was available to many other people purely as a consequence of sort of economics.

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I also think that- And I struggle with parenting because- And I wrote a book about parenting and I struggled with whether or not to call it parents or mothers and fathers. And I ended up calling it mothers and fathers, because when I looked around, I saw women still assuming the majority of those responsibilities and I thought to call it parenting was to further render those women invisible and to not name it in that way.

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And I think that men are taking a bigger role in their families than they ever have before and I think that's wonderful and I think there has been a lot of transition in the workforce. There is a wonderful man by the name of Stewart Friedman who is at the Wharton School of Business, and he has made the switch to calling it the work life balance rather than the work family balance. And when you call it that, all of sudden men feel okay about taking it. Because it's not about family and kids, it's something that can benefit your life. And I think that this generation is sort of picking up on that and taking advantage of it.

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I think that at the same time there is a security that women get hiding behind the sort of façade of motherhood, and that's sad for me that women still feel the need to use that and be dependent upon that. And I've seen many instances where fathers try to take more of a role but stop because they are tired of being told they are doing it wrong.

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BETSY WEST:
You have written in your book about feminism's resistance to encouraging procreation. I am wondering what examples do you have of that, either personal or otherwise?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Well, the current debate in feminism is procreation to what extent. I just wrote a piece called The Right to Reproduce and before I had to answer that question, I had to answer who has the right in the first place. And I think feminism rightly for the last 30 years has made one of its biggest priorities, access to abortion rights and protecting abortion rights, and has been very dependent upon that moment in 1973 when Roe v. Wade was passed by the Supreme court.

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But when you read Roe v. Wade, Roe v, Wade is as much about giving women the choice to continue a pregnancy, as much as it is giving women the choice to terminate a pregnancy. And I think it's interesting that we've spent the last 30 years debating the one half of it, when I think people who are opposed to Roe v. Wade as opposed to women having control whether it's for abortion or continuing the pregnancy, it's against giving women that control.

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And I think feminism has been conflicted about spending, expending too much energy talking about procreation, because abortion seems the more vulnerable issue. And so it's not that it hasn't prioritized it, I just think when it comes to debating it publicly, abortion has sort of superseded the other issues of reproduction. Today I see a real danger in the United States because I think we are challenged by no restrictions when it comes to mostly specifically assisted reproductive technologies,-

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-whereas most other industrialized countries have some restrictions. And the reason we have the Octomom, is the same reason that Sarah Jessica Parker gets to have twins, because we don't put any restrictions or we put too few restrictions and it is very dangerous to be encouraging production, reproduction, I think, to the extent that we are in the United States at the expense of women in India and China who can only have one child. And I think that from a feminist perspective, you have to take that whole conversation into consideration.

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That in order for some women to be able to produce to an extreme, it's going to curtail another woman's reproduction. And I think politically, feminism is debating these issues but it's very hard because then it becomes so personal, because you don't want to take that right away from any woman.

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BETSY WEST:
I was going to ask you about the story that you wrote in the Times when you found out that you were pregnant with triplets. Could you tell me about that story and your reaction to it?

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AMY RICHARDS:
When I was 19, I was pregnant, and went in thinking I was 8 weeks pregnant and that was the earliest you could have an abortion and the doctor at the clinic said, "Oh, you're 12 weeks pregnant," and I said, "No, I'm not." And it turned out I was pregnant with twins, and had an abortion when I was 19. And when I was 33 and very much embarking on a planned pregnancy, I was utterly shocked, having done no fertility treatments that I was pregnant with triplets. And because I had already been pregnant with twins,-

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-I thought, "Well, I would never be pregnant with multiples again," and the doctor was as shocked as I was that I was pregnant with triplets. And the first thought out of my mouth was, "Is there any way to get rid of one of them?"

And the doctor was immediately very supportive of my decision because from a medical perspective, carrying any more than two babies is a danger to both the mother and the potential children.

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And from a medical perspective, you want healthy babies and you want healthy mothers. And so, sort of went on this journey of learning about something called selective reduction and there were several sort of iterations of what I learned along the way and it ended up being there were two identical twins and a stand alone, and from a medical perspective, it was better to preserve the one stand alone than to preserve the identical twins. And I was shocked that as somebody who had spent, by that point, 15 years working in the reproductive rights movement in the United States, that I had never heard of this procedure before.

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I had never heard of selective reduction and was more fascinated that what happens is that the matter, the fetus, it reabsorbs into your body, and a lot of what is used as an argument against abortion is these tiny little hands and feet that you show people and say, "Look what you did. You're killing a baby." And I thought politically, it was so fascinating to me that there was not even that matter to point to, that there was this sort of just reabsorption.

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So when I was debating personally what was going on in my life and what was the best decision for me and my family, I was also sort of exploring politically what this meant for the future of reproductive rights and decided

that I wanted to write something about it. I initially wanted to write a very political piece about the future of reproductive rights in this country, and who had access and who didn't. And after talking to people at the Times, they sort of said it would be a more sympathetic story because it was such a new issue if I took a more personal approach.

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And I did, and did it within the Life section of the New York Times and got tons of hate mail and got tons of thank you's for being really brave. And the shock to me was not that Rush Limbaugh wanted to call me a baby killer 'cause he had done that before, the shock to me was how many people who were on the board of Planned Parenthood, and who were otherwise very sympathetic to the choice that I had to make and to the availability of options to women in my situation, that said,-

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"Couldn't you have been a little bit more sympathetic? Couldn't you have been a little bit more sad?" And it was shocking to me because these same people often argue that we have to stop using the extreme example for the women who are raped and the women who are poor and we have to sort of mainstream these issues in order to make us realize the full range of women who these issues impact. And so it was shocking to me that this same community that seems to want a greater range of spokespeople was mad that I wasn't sympathetic enough.

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The other thing that people say more often than not when they have had selective reduction is, “Oh, my doctor told me I had to have it.” Because they don’t want to accept the responsibility, I think, for what they did and so they sort of use this lens of making their doctor say it for them. And obviously no medical practitioner would make the decision on the part of their patient. They would say to their patient, “These are the options I am going to give you and then you have to choose.” But it is shocking to me how many women reached out to me and said, “Oh, but my doctor said I had to have this.”

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BETSY WEST:
You wrote about it, as you said, in a very straightforward and graphic way.

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AMY RICHARDS:
I was trying to be detailed in part to take out the mystery of it. I think that there is so much… I think that we have allowed—and when I say we, I mean those of us who want women to be able to do whatever they can with their bodies, understanding that sometimes no choice isn’t going to be a good choice, it’s just going to be a better choice—but I think that we don’t let ourselves be honest with what’s happening.

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And I think that the progressive left, and it's very specifically the abortion rights movement in this country, has lost ground because we have not been

more honest about the decisions that we're making and what's being put on the table. I think that we have kind of always brought the argument back to, "Oh, but it's a choice between a woman and her physician." It's "keep your laws off my body." And I think that that argument hasn't led us to a better place.

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I think that it's led us to a place that seems that we are more cowardly or that we are not sympathetic, and more often than not I have people that say to me, "Can I be pro life and be a feminist?" And initially I heard that as, are you asking me if you're going to bomb an abortion clinic and be a feminist? Absolutely not. But what they were saying to me is, "Do I have the right to be conflicted about this? Do I have the right to sort of acknowledge that it's murder? Do I have the right not to make that choice in my life and still call myself a feminist?" And absolutely.

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What women are more often debating is not, "Can I go through with this procedure or can I not go through this procedure?" More often than not women are debating, "Is this the right relationship for me to have a child in? Do I have enough money to have a child right now.? Do I feel secure enough? Am I too young to have a child?" It's all these other things, because Catholics have a higher rate of abortion than any other religion, I would say that women who are staunchly abortion providers talk about this all the time, having their picketers in, having abortions.

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And that if you know that it's ultimately the best decision for you, not that it's the best decision but it's the best for you, you'll have it. you'll get over that. And so I think some of my desire to be more graphic and more detailed was to just sort of say it for what it is. It is a medical procedure and I didn't see my choice as any more selfish than a woman who has IVF because she desperately wants to have her own child.

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And I think that I wanted to sort of point that out, that we all make decisions that are going to be uncomfortable for people. And I have the same discomfort with friends who have 7 embryos implanted and then keep having miscarriages, and you think, "Well maybe your body is trying to tell you something." And I know that they have a discomfort with my story, and so the point for me is that we're never going to know what's right for the other people but we should be able to know what's right for us.

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BETSY WEST:
Can you explain what it is 'cause I don't think a lot of people know… What happened to you?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Yeah, I mean selective reduction is, I mean they do a shot of potassium chloride into the heart of a fetus and they often do the procedure after 12

weeks, especially with multiples. So often there is a miscarriage of either one or both or all of them depending on how many are being carried, but there is a lot of natural selection that happens, and so they wait until around week 13 or week 14 to do this procedure and even to kind of put it out there as an option, because they want to see if nature can kind of take over before any intervention has to happen.

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And the procedure, you don't even have to take your clothes off. You lay on a gurney and you basically pull your pants down and a needle goes into your stomach, and the doctor and the nurse are monitoring with a sonogram the whole time. And it takes about ten minutes total, from the time- it's the same procedure as an amniocentesis. And so the odd part is more having a needle in your body that's moving around and you're sort of thinking, "Where is that thing coming from?"

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And because at that stage, I mean I remember being handed a sonogram photograph probably a week before and I was looking at it going, "I don't see a baby in here. Really, there is a baby here?" It didn't- My eyes weren't conditioned to sort of see a child yet, and maybe it was because I didn't want to see a child but I did not yet see a child. So I think for me it was easier because I wasn't looking at a baby and then looking at the heartbeat, I was still sort of like, "What's inside me? What's growing?" And the doctors, I think, are very sympathetic to not wanting you to watch that.

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And there is no sort of aftermath. Like I said, it sort of gets reabsorbed, or the matter gets reabsorbed into your body. And in my instance, I went on to have a very healthy pregnancy and they sort of wave goodbye at the door and say, "You're fine. That's it." I think that there is- I mean the sort of statistics that they give you are if something goes wrong, it probably would have gone wrong anyway.

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But as long as we're going to have the extent of assisted reproductive technology that we are having in this country that's going unmonitored, we're going to have more and more selective reductions. Whether or not we're talking about it is one thing, but we're going to continue to have that and that's I think why- It's not that I want to expose people, excuse the expression, but elite women who want to have babies that are as close to theirs as possible, then we're going to have to deal with something like selective reduction because it's just a natural part of having an unnatural number of fetuses that are implanted.

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BETSY WEST:
You talk very casually about getting hate mail and about doing this, does it sometimes upset you? To put yourself out there, I mean, you are revealing something extremely personal that you did, you're writing about it in a very straightforward way, you're getting- What is that like for you? How do you deal with that?

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AMY RICHARDS:

Well, any time I have written or spoken very publicly about either having an abortion or being raped or being… I'm trying to think being in situations as a white person or as a non-rich person or sort of whatever it was—exposing my vulnerabilities, I usually have one person that comes up to me after the fact and says, "Thank you so much for saying that. Thank you so much for doing that. I couldn't do that." Or somebody emails me anonymously and say, "I am so happy you said that because that happened to me."

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And that one person who you've made feel understood in their own life and in their own choices makes up for all of the hate mail. And it's not that the hate mail is easy to digest but some of it is just so not personal. I went into the New York Times after the piece ran and read all of the mail that came into the Times, and first of all so many of them were just form letters that were clearly sort of generated from some probably Baptist church, I don't' even know where it came from,-

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-but the most common response I got was, why didn't I just give those twins to a family who wanted a child. And to me, that choice didn't make any sense. So I think, also, it wasn't that- I just didn't agree. And so it wasn't that I wasn't feeling what they were saying to me, but I didn't agree with what they were saying to me. But more often than not, I think that the hurt, or the sadness

that I sometimes feel by people's reaction is made up for by making the people feel understood.

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BETSY WEST:
Why do you think that people reacted so strongly about that? And why do you think it is about selective reduction that caused this big reaction?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Well, I think people react strongly to women who are decisive, and I think that what people wanted from my story was for me to be ambivalent. And I wasn't ambivalent. I knew exactly what choice I was making. I knew it was stopping a beating heart and I think that what they wanted me to say was, "That was just so difficult for me." And it was difficult that I had to be in that situation, but it wasn't difficult for me to make a choice that was the best decision for me, and ultimately, for my family.

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But I think that the larger concern was that I wasn't ambivalent and were used to women saying, "My doctor made me do this," or it was, "I was under severe physical pressure."

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BETSY WEST:

There was something unfeeling about it all.

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AMY RICHARDS:
Yeah, and I think that you could say that about the women who we're more sympathetic to, when it comes to issues of abortion and selective reproduction, are those who say, "It was a planned pregnancy. I was 14 weeks pregnant and then I had to terminate the pregnancy." It's people who give justification for their choice and I didn't give justification. I didn't go into detail. I could have gone into detail and said,-

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-"Well, having triplets is a burden on me as a mother. It's a burden on the other two fetuses should they survive. It's a burden on all of the fetuses 'cause they have to feed off one placenta." I could have tried to pull on people's heart strings a little bit more, but at the end of the day, I didn't think that that mattered. I thought that what mattered was that I was in control of my decision.

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BETSY WEST:
I want to ask you about your column. How did you get into the column business?

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AMY RICHARDS:

Well, feminist.com, I would say right after Al Gore created the internet then this wonderful woman named Marianne Schnall created feminist.com. And I remember I had a meeting with her about 1994 and she said, "I want to create- I have registered this domain name feminist.com and I want to create a virtual space for feminism." And I still was trying to process how email even got sent, I was like, so the letters get squished up and they get sent through the phone line… And so I wasn't really comprehending what she said but I sort of gave her a long list of every feminist organization that I knew of and had worked on.

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And feminist.com became the host of most national feminist organizations, the Ms. Foundation for Women, Girls Inc., National Pay Equity, and became their first sort of foray into the internet, and obviously all of them went on to have their own sites. And very early on, the site would get questions emailed to them, just sort of saying, "What is feminism," "Help me with my paper," "I am so sad," "I hate you."

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That was I think- In the early incarnation of the Internet, you could get an email that came from about 2 AM to 4 AM, you could just easily write it off because that was usually when the hate mail came in the most vociferously. But I started just answering questions and students would say, "I need to find a famous woman in history that I can write a report on." You have to kind of go back in time, that I think this was- I mean, I don't even know if it was

pre-literal-Google, but it was pre- people really understanding that, and so it was a gateway for people to kind of ask questions,-

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-and it was allowing people to feel like they could just throw something up there that seemed absurd and see if somebody could answer. And I just started answering and there were generally three types of questions. One was the sort of research based, "Can you help me with this," "I want to start a group in my community, can you connect me to like minded people." The next was very serious questions that had sort of led me on this whole sort of feminist jurisprudence journey of,-

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-"My daughter works at Sammy's Clam Shack in Fort Myers, Florida, and she was fired 'cause she was pregnant. Isn't that illegal?" Yeah, it is illegal but how did it happen? And then tracking down a lawyer in Florida and finding somebody to take on this case or finding somebody to arm her with information, so it was more sort of legal cases that needed help, that I needed to sort of establish a group of experts that could help me with. And then the third, and continues to be the most challenging are,-

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-"I'm so ugly," "Why do people not want to be my friend," "I was raped when I was 4 and I have never told anybody," "My father and my mother have a terrible marriage, how do I just tell them they should get divorced." It was those very personal questions. and over time I realized that they often didn't need me to answer their question, they just needed me to listen to it. And so

even though I did answer, it was often just a great space for me to sort of sound back to them what they already knew.

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And *Ask Amy* became such a great litmus test for where feminism was, and I realized that while I was sort of hearing in more organized settings, "Why aren't young people more feminist?" I was simultaneously getting all these emails from young people saying, "I think I'm a feminist but what does feminism mean exactly?" And I realized it wasn't that people didn't consider themselves feminists, they didn't think they were good enough to be a feminist and they didn't understand that it didn't mean a very specific thing.

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It could just be something they could define and more specifically for themselves. And so it became a great basis for me to continue practicing feminism in new ways, and I would go to meetings and I would feel like I was my own polling place because I would have all of these questions that would have come in. Years ago, I remember saying, "Somebody's gotta do something about dress codes in high schools because girls are being imposed dress codes under the assumption that their clothing is too distracting to boys."

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And sure enough, when I would raise this, when I would have a moment to have a group of college women together, 300 college women, I would say, "Did any of you ever have dress codes?" All hands would shoot up. "I did! I did! It's so unfair. The girls had it." And so you get 1, 2, 3 letters, and you think, "Well, these aren't just 2, 3 weird people. These are people that are…"

It was like what *Ms*. Magazine was doing in 1973. It was sort of just shining a spotlight on something that was existing already.

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BETSY WEST:
Sort of an early warning system, or a way of reporting stories. Is there anything you're seeing now? What kind of stories are people writing in?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Divorce reform just remains something that has not been dealt with, but I think it's more because we haven't dealt with marriage reform, so… And that's something I see over and over again, that there is not a right way to get divorced and there's not a fair way to get divorced. And I think traditionally, I mean, I would never say that men have had it more fair, that women have had it more fair, but I think the traditional approach to divorce law was that men are the breadwinners and women are the homemakers, and men should provide for women as a lifestyle they have grown accustomed to and sort of, it lets women financially off the hook a little bit.

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BETSY WEST:
Where do men stand in third wave feminism, or current feminism? What is their goal now?

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AMY RICHARDS:

Well, men have always been allies to feminism and men- You know, they had Jimmy Carter on the cover of *Ms*. I think and Alan Alda used to show up at Ms. Foundation benefits, and I think men have always played an important role within feminism, in the same way that straight people have always played a very important role in the gay rights movement, and white people have played an important role in the civil rights movement. I think the people with the perceived power need to be advocating on those who are seemingly disempowered.

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I think currently though, men's role or where we need men to be active in feminism is on their own behalf. I think that men need to be taking advantage of the family leave that is available to them, that is available to women. I think men need to be finding out how you even detect HPV on men, because we know how to detect it on girls and women but men are just as susceptible to it and just as susceptible to having long term negative health consequences-

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-and just as susceptible to spreading it. So men need to, sort of, be empowering themselves in the same way that women 35 years ago said, "Why are women dying of cervical cancer? How do we detect this? How do we back up this conversation?" I think men need to be having that same conversation.

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BETSY WEST:
I think a lot of men don't think that gains for women come at their expense.

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AMY RICHARDS:
And I think that men are as penalized by an over-dependence on masculinity as women are, and I think that once men realize that feminism isn't about replacing men with women, but about deflating our dependence on masculinity, and they'll see how much they can gain from that as well. Especially 'cause I think very few men naturally fit into that stereotypical masculine spectrum, and so I think that it has been as penalizing to men to conform to that as it has been as penalizing to women to conform to conventional femininity.

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BETSY WEST:
So you've talked to a lot of young women. Why is it that feminism does continue to be this dirty word?

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AMY RICHARDS:

Many times people will say to me, “Can’t we come up with a new word? Why are we human rights activists or why don’t we call ourselves just women’s leaders?” And I think at the end of the day, regardless of what we could call it, that thing will become a bad word. Because what is behind feminism is an acknowledgement that life is more fair for some than for others, and I think not only does feminism ask you to acknowledge that, but it asks you to do something about it.

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And I think I used to fall into the camp of, “Oh, but maybe we could just- Anybody could be a feminist as long as you’re self-respecting, but I have grown to think that I would rather have 25% of the population authentically identifying with feminism and practicing that in their everyday lives, than 50% merely identifying with it. I think that feminism is frightening because it is asking us to be uncomfortable. It’s asking us to perhaps sacrifice some power that we have had.

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It is asking us to sort of look inside of ourselves and say, “Maybe I did just assume this role, maybe I did think this was an easier way.” I don't know, at the end of the day, that we’re going to make much different choices living in a world more infused with feminism, but I do think that more people will be more thoughtful about their choices.

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BETSY WEST:

So Amy, you're a hard woman to define. You're not a lawyer or a doctor, you know, those traditional things. How do you define yourself?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Well, it depends on who I'm talking to for one thing. I have learned to sort of say, "What do you do?" before I say what I do. Because I think it makes my life- I can find a relatable career path. I can say, "Oh, I'm a writer. I'm a published author. I write this column on the internet." Or I learned to be a little bit more contemporary and say, "Oh, I blog, and I write books. I consult to a lot of organizations and make my living running a organization called Soapbox-" Speakers who speak out and I represent myself to go speak on college campuses and represent lots of other people.

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Soapbox has also started something called Feminist Summer Camp and Feminist Winter Term, and I bring about 40 students to New York City twice a year and sort of immerse them in feminism. And I spend the majority of my time in my unremunerated work, which is sort of, somebody will call me and say, "Oh, I want to have an event at that gallery, don't you know the owner of the gallery?" "Oh, sure, let me send them an email." Or, "We're planning, a group of us, a conference at Hunter to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Anita Hill Clarence Thomas hearings, and oh, we want these three people on a panel, can you email them to be on the panel?"

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So I spend a lot of my time, what is better defined as being an organizer or being a networker, and I struggle with how to define it in part because it's not always paid work that I'm doing and how to best explain what it is. That said I recognize that networking and that organizing is so crucial to feminism in my instance but it can be applied to anything. I sort of like in Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* came out 'cause I felt that there were some people he described in there that were doing that but…

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BETSY WEST:
Connectors

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AMY RICHARDS:
Connectors.

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BETSY WEST:
But I mean, is the overriding work an activist?

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AMY RICHARDS:
When I am asked to sort of give my two sentence, "Hi, I'm Amy, I'm a feminist, writer, activist." And activist has been more of a challenge for me to assume,

because I think people assume that activism is very out there in the streets and that I'm there protesting Obama or the Gulf War, and to me, activism is much more every day. It sort of is saying to my doctor's office, "Why do you ask married or single? Can't you just ask married or unmarried, because it's really alienating to gay people who can't be married in New York?" And it's those more subtle suggestions of how you can make accommodations so society doesn't feel so limiting to some people.

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BETSY WEST:
Do you think that the younger women you talk to really understand what older feminists went through, and conversely, do you think older feminists really understand the world that these younger women are navigating?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I don't think younger women have to necessarily understand what older women went through and I think that access to abortion is sort of one of the overused examples… sort of that organizations like Planned Parenthood and NARAL say to young women is, "But you aren't going to know what it's like when you go back to the back alley." You're right, they don't know what it's like, and they shouldn't have to know, because that is the benefit of growing up post-that. But they do know what it's like to pay an exorbitant amount for birth control.

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They do know what it's like to have abstinence-only sex education in their high schools. They do know what it's like to be a sister and have a curfew, and have a brother who doesn't have a curfew. They do know what it's like to be a girl and negotiate being called a slut if you have sex and a boy who doesn't. So I think that they have their own versions of what women of another generation experienced and it shouldn't be the same thing. I think that what is important about history is not that we repeat it, but that we find how it's continuing today in this generation.

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I think that older women don't see the contributions that younger women are making as feminist because they are not happening exclusively in feminist bases. I see a lot of the work that's happening around the environment, a lot of work that's happening around immigration reform, a lot of work that's happening with living wage campaigns and part time leave for sick workers, is all being led by young feminist women. And it's not that they don't care about increasing the number of female firefighters,-

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-or decreasing the pay gap, but they feel that that's a party that other people are making, and so they should find a way to make their own imprint. I also think when you look from down even one generation younger, it disturbs me that there is so much concern for young women and that, "Oh my gosh, look at the way they dress. They're so scantily clad. Don't they know what's going to happen to them." I think that young women come of age with much more

confidence than another generation did and it's not that bad things don't still happen-

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-but I think that we are as aware of the bad things, as we are of how empowered we can be. It used to be that rape was just a bad date, and now we know it's rape. And in this generation I think we think, "Oh, they don't know about what the consequences are." They know what the consequences are, but they also know that they can be empowered.

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BETSY WEST:
It is a generational change. Women like Madonna who asserted their right to be sexy and still be powerful.

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AMY RICHARDS:
I mean, who knew that Lady Gaga would come around and make Madonna really look like the Virgin Mary. I mean, in my generation, she seemed so radical but that was just because she had leather bracelets up to here and wore a bustier, and now, you have Lady Gaga that took that one step further. And I think that there is- Women musicians are hard to sort of categorize because there is so much that goes along with that, and I think Madonna, and probably to some extent Lady Gaga, did a good job of accepting what was

being asked of them and playing with it a little bit and ultimately getting to a very powerful place.

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And I never took from Madonna that I had to be scantily clothed. I took from Madonna that I could dance around crazily in my room and blare music that I really related to.

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BETSY WEST:
You are not tempted though, to pull young women aside and say, “Please, that cleavage is a little bit much,” or, “Come on.”

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AMY RICHARDS:
I have this great moment where I had gone to a high school in New York City, and it was on Valentines day and they were raising money for their high school prom and they were selling brownies, and I walked down the line with these girls, and I watched one girl take a brownie and then I watched the next girl take a salad and then I watched the first girl put her brownie back. And I realized that in feminism we have put too much emphasis on telling women that they don’t have to buy the images and that the images are having a negative impact on them, when in fact, they are so much more taking their cues from us.

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And not that I walk around showing cleavage, but I do think that I dress in a maybe, a more feminine way and so for me to sort of impart that message to a younger woman is probably going to feel contradictory. For me to say it doesn't matter what you look like, is saying, "I don't care what I look like," and I do care what I look like. And so I think that that- I think what young women challenge is not that the media is negative and limiting to young women,-

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-but that older women aren't susceptible to the images as younger women are. And I think young women are so tired of being told, "You just don't know better. You just don't know what can happen." And so I'm very sort of adverse to sort of passing on that advice.

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BETSY WEST:
What's your opinion about prostitution? Do you think it should be legalized, what's your thought on that?

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AMY RICHARDS:
I very much stand intentionally at the sort of intersection of what is the more old school feminist approach to prostitution and more so to sex trafficking, and saying that it hurts women and that it is not legitimately a choice for any women, and then on the opposite side of the avenue as it were, you have a lot of young women saying, "But some women do legitimately choose this."

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And it's been fascinating to me that the most vehemently anti-prostitution, and the women least likely to believe that a woman would legitimately choose that profession, are the same people who are the most vocally pro-choice when it comes to abortion, and I thought it's so fascinating that you can believe in that instance that a woman would make a choice that other people would deem inappropriate or wrong, but in that instance you wouldn't believe that she had a choice.

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And I was in India, maybe 5 years ago, and I was at a hostel that had worked with young girls who had been HIV positive, and I assumed that they had contacted it neonatally, but they had contacted it because they had been sold into prostitution at a very young age. There was a 3 year old there and that was the youngest member of the hostel. And I very naively said, "But don't they have a family member who would take care of them?"

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And they said, "Well if they had a family member who took care of them, they probably wouldn't have been sold into prostitution." And when I was talking to the woman about it, she said, "Don't you understand that if you support prostitution for some women, you have allowed it for all women?" And she said it to me not knowing what my personal opinion was, and I wasn't even sure I had one, but it had a profound impact on me, and what I interpreted her as saying is that those Western women who want to say that it's a choice for some women,-

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-then confuses the dialogue and the interpretation is, then it's a choice. It's not the choice for the women to choose it, it's the choice for people to do with those women what they want. And so whether it's the 21 year old NYU student or the 3 year old in India, she was sort of saying it's the same, and it was sort of the biggest impact on my perspective. I have changed. I still have seen women who, again… I liken it to the abortion because I think it's not a choice that some women want to make, but it's a choice that some women have to make.

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BETSY WEST:
I feel like you're almost too young to ask this question but it's the legacy question. What do you want to be remembered for?

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AMY RICHARDS:
Oh my gosh. I think I want to be remembered for—and I mean I still have time to do this, so there is some…

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BETSY WEST:
No, yeah, it can be in the future.

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AMY RICHARDS:

I think I'd prefer if I had one thing that people will say, "Oh, Amy is somebody who listened." And I think that I- And took people's stories and made them more acceptable to other people. And I think that that has been what I've done, whether it was through the Third Wave Foundation or whether it was through my books or whether it was through *Ask Amy,* I have become a vehicle for telling other people's stories and to take what feels like a one-time personal event and connecting it to something larger, whether it's 20 other women that have the same story or whether it's 200,000 women who are experiencing the same injustice.

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