ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Eleanor Holmes Norton
U.S. Politician
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INTERVIEWER:
So tell me, where did you grow up, as a girl, and how did your parents view your prospects in life, as a black female, and how did you?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well, I'm a third generation Washingtonian, born in a city, uh, where residents had no vote in Congress, no vote for President of the United States, paid federal taxes, and had segregation in all of its facilities and schools, mandated by the Congress of the United States. Uh, that didn't sit well with my parents, but I must say that I was fortunate enough to grow up in a community of African-Americans who thought something must be wrong with white people would segregate us. We all wanted to be educated, you know, so this was a, this was an up-South community where we never felt uh some inferiority ourselves, but thought some, something must be wrong with them. Um, I'm the oldest of three girls. Uh, with parents who were, like many parents of, of uh, my parent's generation, where few of African-Americans had a college education. My parents had worked their way through college. And as far as they were concerned, uh, when you got to the 12th grade, you went to the 13th grade, which means you went to college. So that was always uh, a part of the aspirations, my family made it pretty easy to continue to do and to think about what you're going to do with your life.

INTERVIEWER:
So tell me, uh you went to Antioch and then to Yale. Was it a lonely place to be as a black female student in the early '60's?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

Um…I was uh, among the um, the first generations of blacks in any numbers to go to, to predominately white institutions. For college, uh, interestingly, they, they all flooded into my high school. Dunbar High School was storied because for years it was the only college preparatory school for 'negro children.' Uh, and some very accomplished African-Americans graduated from that high school. Uh, interestingly, Senator Edward Brook, who became the first African-American senator by popular election, of Massachusetts, is a graduate of Dunbar High School. To give you some sense of what kind of high school it was. You didn't have to take a test to get into the school; you simply had to, to want to go, uh, to college. Therefore, this, the, the, when I went to college in the late '50's, most African-Americans, much less women weren't going to college then, so you had really a tiny number going. But you can imagine that um, black youngsters who wanted to go away to college are not about to feel lonely anywhere. If you're going to feel lonely, look, we had a flagship university right here, a great university, Howard University. So if you were inclined to, to, uh, be intimated by white people, well, you know, you had the best college for African-Americans right here in your own home town. So I, I never felt, uh, lonely; I felt strange, when I went to college, by the time I went to law school that was absolutely gone. This contrast to the, the, the great wave of African-American who came after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and people began to recruit in earnest uh, to, to, to get African-Americans to go to colleges, these were before those days. Uh, so that while it certainly felt very different, very, very different, to have come from a city where everything was segregated, um, except the buses, uh, where you

had had almost no contact with white people, young or old, to finally find yourself in a sea of, of, white people- but after that wore off, and it better wear off quickly, or you won't survive in that environment, uh, I had a terrific time in college and law school.

INTERVIEWER:
…I think you're right, I don't know that the word Yale came out, so that would be helpful just to know that that's where you were.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Oh, at, at Yale, I um…I…By the time I got to Yale Law School, I knew exactly what I wanted to do and why. I have, um…I spent four years at Yale. I have a masters in American Studies and a law degree. An-And I got these degrees um, in part because of the way I was raised and in part because of my college education where everyone from Antioch wanted to get the PHD, and going to law school was like going to trade school. So, somehow the part in me that really wanted to be an intellectual went to Yale graduate school and Yale Law School at the same time, studied under some of the great historians; C. Van Woodward, the great Civil War historian, and John Morton Blum, one of the great American historians, I got to do that. Who would pass that up? At the same time I was going to law school, uh, so that I got to feel that my education was fulsome. That I had gotten all that you're supposed to get.

INTERVIEWER:

And you said that by the time you got to Yale Law School you knew what you wanted to do, so, what was that?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
At the time I, I went to law school there were very few African-American lawyers. Most of them represented criminal defendants uh, who needed help. Um, there were very few civil rights lawyers. The NAACP legal defense fund, of course, so it was natural for someone raised the way I was to want to be a civil rights lawyer. I was raised in a city of great consciousness, great black consciousness, and black pride. I remember thinking, um, when I was in college, 'well, why don't people just get up and demonstrate and somehow get rid of segregation?' I was impatient as young people will be, for why it had taken so long, a hundred years after a, a civil war and still uh, segregation laced the country, and where you did not have straight legal segregation you had rampant discrimination anyway. So I, I saw the law as one way to get involved. Remember there was no civil rights movement, so if you wanted to do something that, that helped move black people out of their virtual apartheid state, being a lawyer seemed to make good sense.

INTERVIEWER:
This is going wonderfully. Alright, so then something brought you to the South, where you joined SNICK, and can you just detail that part of your life, and I'm gonna, we're gonna do that briefly, to the point of understanding how a feminist consciousness perhaps had it's roots in that earlier activism.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

I, I, I…The civil rights movement didn't wait for me to get out of college, to start. So, I had to find a way to get in it without sacrificing my education. Antioch was located in southern Ohio, when the sit-ins in North Carolina broke out, we, we searched around knowing that southern Ohio was not the, the, the essence of equal opportunity, we searched around and found that there was a bar in nearby Asignia that purportedly did not serve African-Americans. And lo and behold, by, word got out that we were coming and they served us. So I said is this the best I can do? Um, I, um, therefore, uh, sat, went through my senior year while the sit-ins were breaking out, got home that summer, prepared to go to law school, um, and got deeply involved with people working, students here in Washington working with civil rights. I got to go to Mississippi, um, recruited by a very storied, brave man, named Bob Moses, who had led the student non-violent coordinating committee we called it 'SNICK,' and still do, in Mississippi. SNICK had broken open, every state except Mississippi, so of course I wanted to go there. Um, and Bob um, recruited me to come, the- he came to Yale Law School to speak, he wanted me to come to do a prototype for the, what became the summer of '64, when huge numbers of students from all over the country came, and the prototype I did was simply a workshop with local people, talking about the Constitution. And helping them to, to be able to answer enough of the questions to get up there and answer the questions so that they could actually do it. Um, at that time, I went to Greenwood Mississippi, there were all of, all of, maybe half a

dozen SNICK workers. All that was in Mississippi was the NAACP, and it was so rare for civil rights workers to come into Mississippi that I was met…um, now how can, hold on a minute, Eleanor, how can you forget? I was me- (unintel) who was murdered-

INTERVIEWER:
Medger Evers?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Yeah. I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER:
That's ok!

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Yeah, Medgar Evers um met me at the airport, he had just, this is a grown man who had children, he had led the sit-ins, because it was so, so treacherous to engage in sit-ins in Mississippi, and he took me all around Jackson, Mississippi, to try to convince me to stay there. I said, 'oh, I told Moses I was coming to Greenwood, I've got to go to Greenwood.' He took me um, to the bus station that evening, and I got on a bus, it took several hours to get there. As he went, when he went home, he was shot in the back, and assassinated. I learned that not that evening, I, I came to an old house where SNICK people had gotten a place for me to stay, the farm couple said they

would be out picking whatever they picked, and they left me, they, they show me that evening a round tub and they said that's how they bathed. I said, 'alrgiht,' and I was in that tin tub, that washer man's tub when a little girl came and knocked on the screen door, and she said, 'are you the lady from the law school?' I said, 'yes.' She said, 'Medgar Evers has been shot.' I quickly got my clothes on, went down the street to the SNICK office, Moses, Bob Moses was still in the north, on one of his fundraising trips. And there was nobody there of any age. I, who in my, by that time, my second year in law school, was the oldest person there and that just put me in charge. And they told me that the person who had been left in charge, a native Mississippian, Lawrence Giullot, had gone to jail, Fannie Lou Hamer that she had come in on a bus, and that's why he wasn't there. And I looked around me and I said, 'what are these children, they're in high school,' you know, what am I to do? So they said he had been put in jail, and they asked me what to do, since I was the one in law school. Uh, what I did was to ask them a lot of questions, and learn that the local police chief in Greenwood was not one of them. He was every bit as much of a racist, but he did not engage in violence. I went to see him. And I said, I told him, I said, 'my name is Eleanor Catherine Holmes,' I told him how I had just come, I told him, 'I go to Yale Law School, Lawrence Giullot, I understand has just been arrested in Leona, Mississippi. I am the oldest one here, I just got here, I gotta go to try to get him out, asking only one thing of you. Would you call him and tell, tell him everything I've told you, but tell him this too, I've called everybody up north to tell them where I'm going, and I don't want to be put in jail the way Giullot has been put in jail simply for

trying to get Ms. Hamer out.' I came over, and Giullot had been in jail overnight, a couple, couple, three nights, had been turned out to the white citizen's councils in the evenings, had been beat mercilessly, he had no clothes on. They had to take him away to put some clothes on when I came he was so uh, hurt. Fannie Lou Hamer had been beat unmercifully by a trustee, that was met a woman who was to become my mentor. I came face-to-face with Mississippi violence uh, when I had barely set foot on Mississippi soil.

INTERVIEWER:
I wish we were doing Eyes on the Prize part 2!

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I'm sorry to tell you all that.

INTERVIEWER:
No, wonderful. (chatter) So, during your time working on the civil rights movement, some women began to feel that there was a need to have a women's movement, and to speak for women's right as well. And Robin Morgan did say that both you and she were in an early feminist group within SNICK. Talk about that transition, when did the dawning of the need for a feminist movement begin to come to you?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

Well, Betty Friedan deserves the credit for waking up American women, but wherever women were, they began to feel this awakening. Um, and uh, certainly no less in SNICK than elsewhere. SNICK was very male-dominated, as all the great organizations, civil rights organizations were then and you might expect to have been then. Um, the, the, uh, black women were initially, not in SNICK alone, but throughout the country were initially perplexed about how they should respond to the women's movement. Its first face was a white face, uh, they associated white women with white men, that meant white privilege, how are we to respond? Well, some of us were, felt pretty clearly how you can respond. That you can be both female and black at the same time, if you didn't think you could, you are, you need to come to grips with that. Um, how to clear up this confusion, there were a few good women, older than me, mentors of mine, who certainly were very helpful. Shirley Chisholm was among the great leaders who did not hesitate to speak out as a woman. Um, Dorothy Height, another mentor, did not hesitate. And we were able to sort it out by yet women of my generation, women of their generation, few in number, but with uh, enough of, of, a spotlight so that black women were in fact listening uh, we were, they, they started by forming their own groups. They, they do have now, and did have then, then, problems that were unique to them and issues that they had in common not only with every American woman but with every woman in the world. And the point was to make us understand that. But do not think that any of us who became strong feminists were instinctive feminists from the beginning. Um, when I was in law school, there was a woman again of another generation, an

African-American woman named Pauline Murray. Pauline Murray was a straight-out feminist. Uh, she had come back to law school uh, to get a degree that most people don't even pursue, it's a doctor of laws degree. And she was a very pronounced feminist. That was the first time I had come in contact with a black feminist. Now, Pauline was in her own ways quite peculiar-brilliant, but quite peculiar. But we listened to her. Um, at, and, and I realized that this was something one had to learn. It was not nearly as instinctive as having black skin and being put in a school because of that black skin. In fact I knew, one of the reasons that, that I never felt instinctively feminist, I'm the oldest of 3 girls, there was no boy competing with me, we were all, we were all being, being urged to be whatever we could be. But I do remember something that strikes me as amazing today, that when I applied to law school, besides applying to Yale which I really wanted to go to, but you always apply to other schools and you want toop drawer schools, another school I applied to was New York University. But I didn't simply apply to the law school, I applied for a very special fellowship. Now, t- law schools don't give fellowships. This was the only law school I knew of where you could get a very large fellowship. I applied for it, I got back a letter admitting me to the law school, giving me a scholarship of considerably less worth, and indicating that that fellowship was available to men only. Tell you, I did not say, 'oh, how terrible,' I said, 'I should have read the fine print.' So if somebody tells you she was born in this world as a feminist, uh, I think she's giving herself too much credit. Uh, it, it was so inculcated in us that that was the way the worlkd was. And for me, that came from a two parent family with 3 girls, all being

encouraged to be all that you could be, uh, feminism or what men did verses what women did, never really much crossed my mind when I was a kid. My mother was a teacher, my father also worked. So we had two working parents, uh, encouraging uh, that their 3 girls would go to college. And then I came in touch with the real world, were lots of girls hadn't had that kind of upbringing and would- one, wouldn't have thought of going to college, and two, if they did, certainly wouldn't have thought of doing much with the degree they had earned.

INTERVIEWER:
So did you have a 'click moment?' When was the moment when you realized that you were feminist?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I don't believe in 'click moments.' You listen, you study, you learn. You learn, I learned to be a feminist by being black. I learned to be a feminist by being denied my rights as an African-American. That woul- that should educate every African-American as to anybody who is denied uh, her rights or his rights. And over time it became absolutely clear, it wasn't a moment in time, it, it was my experience in the civil rights movement uh, what I read, uh, being a part of a burgeoning movement in itself that is itself an educational process. That came together and it became clear that, that, what uh, had begun with the right to vote had never been finished.

INTERVIEWER:
Alright, let's move on to Newsweek, when you were the ACLU legal director, you were hired to bring a class action suit against Newsweek- again, the audience won't hear me introducing that, so tell me how you came to be in that situation, and what the situation was at Newsweek at that time for women.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well I th- A, a woman called me up and told me, who worked at Newsweek, a-I was the assistant legal director and she told me about women at Newsweek and how they were employed. I said, 'are you sure? I need to meet with these women.' What she told me, and what turned out to be true, was that Newsweek at the time was hiring uh, the, top of the lot, the best of the best women, and employing them as researchers. And hiring their counterparts and bringing them in as reporters. I had to satisfy myself that this was a, an, systemic and what I found was that was virtually with very few exceptions a two track system, one for women and one for men, and was one of those extraordinary cases a civil rights lawyer yearns for.

INTERVIEWER:
Can I just ask you, can you clarify that they were hiring the men as reporters? You said 'counterparts.'

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

What are the counterparts of women? I don't- Oh, I'm sorry, they were hiring the women as reporters- They were hiring the men as reporters and the women of course, as researchers. Uh, the um, I met with the women, and, and I must say it took some uh, meetings and consciousness-raising at first. These women had a lot to lose. Perhaps if they stayed they could rise in the ranks. And so in a real sense this was not simply an exercise in cross-examining; 'are you sure?' I mean, these were Phi Beta Cappas, these were, were women who had been Fulbright Scholars, these were women at the top of their classes at the best schools in the United States. I wasn't simply dealing with comparable people; I was dealing with the very best against whatever me Newsweek hired. But, uh, saying that is one thing when there have not been many lawsuits of the kind brought, in fact I don't know of any at the time. Uh, certainly not involving a, a, an entire group of women at a great corporation, uh, you, you need to meet with your clients to make sure they know what they're getting into. Uh, it was important to, to foster the notion of solidarity. That no single woman should ever have to do this. But if all of us do it, uh, then we have something real here, and so it took a number of meetings and I insisted that when we have the press conference, we're not going to have some representatives, we're going to have everybody there; 'is that alright with everybody?' Wanting to make sure that if people had fears we'd either overcome them or we wouldn't bring suit until we did. And I was working with extraordinary young women who, who were candid, who were analytical, who gave me the straight dope, uh who were willing to meet, willing to spend the time, uh, and we had a big press conference where we

laid it out. Not long afterwards um, I was then living in New York, not long afterwards, Newsweek reached out for a settlement.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, I think the next day, the publisher ran into one of the women and a spontaneous meeting took place, Oz Elliot, and you were invited into the office-

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
No. That didn't happen with me. It, you know the next day…uh, where was I? I was in New York, yes, and I was invited into the office by Oz Elliot, that's all true. But I didn't know it was the next day. It may have been. It may have been.

INTERVIEWER:
So what happened?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
It wasn't that I was invited into the office, that's not how it happened, the reached out- when you have a lawyer, they reached out, they want to begin to talk settlement. Um, I had um, two conditions, um, I would bring some of the women with me, but I would insist that Katherine Graham be there. Katherine Graham was the publisher of the Washington Post and of, of Newsweek Magazine, and it seemed to me important that this women, this

very accomplished woman, uh, hear what it was we were demanding. But this was…uh, Oz Elliot became a good friend, so did Kate Graham for that matter. But on this occasion, they didn't quite know what to make of me, because I was heavy with child. Uh, I was obviously pregnant. Uh, and so they were, were solicitous, and they sat on a couch. And so they quickly got me a chair to sit, so I sat on the chair but they were on the couch, so that put me on a kind of throne talking down to these men. I'm sure they never meant that, but they were over-solicitous of my pregnancy, so there I was, negotiation from on high with them kind of in the valley looking up. They did it, not me. But it was great fun. I never got to finish that. I had to turn the case over to another very fine lawyer, Harriet Robb, because lo and behold I was appointed to be the chair of the Equal Employment- uh, sorry, uh, I was appointed to be the chair of the New York City Commission on Human Rights. Um, the case was finally settled, and, and the rest is the history of the integration of women into the high sectors of America's signature publications.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

…no man quite got up the nerve to go that far. Uh, a lot has to do with, a lot had to do with being I think, the oldest child. How you hold yourself out, and uh, just as uh, when I went to law school, when I came into the Congress and I didn't have the same voting rights as everyone else; you come in there acting like you're equal and you'll be treated equal. I have had very few instances where I was not treated equal. When I was in the civil rights movement, um, women were not treated equal. But having a law degree set me so far apart

the men had to come to me. So I, I have had a, I had an interesting life, growing up in an all-female household which gives you a lot of, a lot of confidence, so by the time you go and meet men, we say, 'who are these people? What, are they supposed to be competing with me? Come on.'

INTERVIEWER:
Ok, just tell me your coffee story, that no man…

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well, I've never met a man who had the nerve to ask me to make his coffee. Uh, I'm not sure why and I think I've told you that already.

INTERVIEWER:
That was perfect. So just, if we could pick up the line that at the time Newsweek sued you were the assistant legal director at the ACLU.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I, at, at, at the time that uh, the women called me I was assistant legal director at the American Civil Liberties Union in New York.

INTERVIEWER:
Alright, in the early 1970's you signed the Black Women's Manifesto, a classic document of the black feminist movement. Why was there a need for a black feminist movement?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

We weren't gonna attract uh, black women on the heels of the civil rights movement, to a movement that seemed all-white, and seemed uh, by virtue of its experience not to reflect the lives of African-America women. So you start where you are with women were they are, and if you do, you will be able to make them understand in the long run what they share with other women in, in our country. But you don't just say to them, 'you're like everybody else.' That will really turn-off African-American, would have turned off African-American women, especially then. I think it would today as well, even though African-American women are integrated throughout the women's movement, they still jealously maintain their own organizations which are zeroed in, targeting their, their own special needs. You can do that and still be a part of the larger group.In fact, um, one of the best arguments that I believe we, we have ever had and ever used is the notion that, uh, the, the, the larger the number, the more diverse the number, the harder it is for them to ignore us. And this must be said, that the women's movement was the first great movement that I know of that in its initial documents spoke directly to race, and not simply to their own concerns. Uh, the movement understood what had raised its consciousness. Women had spent 10 years, essentially, seeing black women and men uh, take enormous risks for their freedom, and that consciousness-raising effect was with the great organizers of the women's movement. Uh, and they, in their initial documents, they reflect that. Black women had to understand first who they were as a part of a women's

movement. Remember black women were much as much a part of the civil rights movement. So what does it mean for you, as black women to speak up when you are doing so without black men in the room? That's what uh, organizing as black women was all about. I remember in New York, um, they had the first great women's parade down Fifth Avenue. In order to attract black women I did something that was completely uncharacteristic of me. I was not an afro-wearing, I was an afro-hair wearing, but I was not an afro-turban wearing, I wear my hair afro 'cause that is natural, it would have been unnatural for me to wear a turban. Well, I wore a turban. To say, 'look everybody, I'm black, I'm the human rights-' I was human rights commissioner I think at the time, so I said, 'I'm trying to make a statement, I'm, I'm walking down Fifth Avenue with white women, indicating I'm one of them, and one of you too.' And so, try to figure that out.

INTERVIEWER:

You're quoted, when you were in that position that Lindsay appointed you to, as stating that 70% of black women with children between the ages of 6 and 18 work. So, let's talk about some of the concerns that black women had. I mean, here are these Betty Friedan, Feminine Mystique women wanting to get into the work force, black women are in the work force. So what were some of the issues that were particular to black women at that time?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

Betty Friedan was, was uh, her thinking was central to the formation of the women's movement. No…movement, whether you're talk about the Russian Revolution, SNICK or the women's movement it's always started by people with some education. Uh, and indeed, Betty Friedan brought out of their homes, or made women in their homes think about their, their larger selves. Well, their larger selves in the age of the housewife was outside the home. This turned black women off. Black women had worked alongside black men in the cotton fields, with everybody picking his bale of cotton to make what the man said you, you had to pick in order to, to, to, to be in that, that place at all. So the notion of, of a foundation for the movement of being that that women should be allowed to work was a turn-off. Was, was one of the reasons why black women had to get in there and lead this, lead this black women's movement. It was a turn-off not because it was wrong, not because everybody thought that that shouldn't happen, but because it pointed out the difference between black women and black men- sorry, between black people and white people. That here we were, that we who were black women, so the story would go, unable to raise our families if people didn't get out and work, the, the, the civil rights movement was necessary for us even to get basic freedoms, and what you have among white people are women who had the leisure to sit at home with one, one earner, uh, household earners. What do we have in common with those people? Well, you begin to uh, to talk about elementary issues, like, open a newspaper. Um, you've gotten rid of black and white, but black women; you've still got a problem, don't you? Because the newspaper says these jobs are for men, these jobs are for women. So the

notion of the um, double problem begins to set in. And how you cannot work on one problem without working on the other.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you just clarify that, when you open a newspaper you're looking at the help wanted ads?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I'm sorry. Yeah, 'cause people…When you open a newspaper in late '60's, early '70's, help wanted ads divided between male and female.

INTERVIEWER:
Alright, um, you were at the National Women's Conference in Houston in 1977. What was significant-?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Don't ask me, I don't remember nothing about it. I remember it was the first of its kind, the first national-

INTERVIEWER:
Can you say that?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I remember Houston-

INTERVIEWER:
It was Bella Abzug who really, kind of marshaled the forces and got Congress to fund it, and that was unusual.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I wasn't in Congress at the time. No, I, I, I, no- look, I remember going to Houston, it was the place where every feminist in the United States felt she had to be. Um, important, um, national meeting for the solidarity that was finally going to led to the equal rights of women, the solidarity that got women all over the United States um, understanding that there was something deep that we could do, something grand that we could do, which became the ERA.

INTERVIEWER:
And, since you've turned the topic to that, what should we make of the fact that today, the ERA seems to be a story about Phyllis Schafly and about backlash than it does about putting women in the Constitution?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I don't think it's a story about backlash at all, we got within one state or so, really against the odds. When I say against the odds, uh, one has to come to grips with the kinds of, sometimes serious legal issues that were raised, sometimes frivolous. They weren't all frivolous, uh, so that there were serious

people who were against the ERA as well as people who would be against them for any reason, for, for us, uh, it seemed quite impossible that you could not have an equal rights amendment that did not deal with uh, that, that, uh, that did not trivialize the real differences between men and women. And to have gotten as far as we did, was, uh, with, with legislatures voting for the REA, uh, I think indicated that we had in fact reached the American people about inequality between the sexes. Uh, I don't believe there was that, that we were stopped because of a backlash. I think that when you need uh, one more state, and you have a time limit, please bear that in mind, a time limit on how long you can take to get the number of states it becomes very difficult.

INTERVIEWER:
Fair enough. When you then were appointed to the EEOC by President Carter, I've read that you were surprised that more women didn't come, with sexual harassment complaints. So can you set-

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well, it's was very important to, to indicate that in…In um, both um, both, both at the New York City Commission on Human Rights and at the Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission, I saw issues with women coming forward. When I came to the New York City Commission on Human Rights, I literally had to go around to women's organizations, and I said why is it that only blacks file c-complaints before my commission? I know that New York is a great progressive city, but is it, but I also know that there is deep

discrimination against women. So, uh, I remember uh, that I was so frustrated that I had what, what I believed was the first uh, comprehensive hearings on woman's rights, it was about 1970. It was so unusual that it was made into a pocket book. Because I had every prominent woman, academics, um, members of Congress to come and testify- That is a part of consciousness-raising so that women would see themselves not simply as people who should get outside of the workforce, outside of the home, for white women who found themselves there, but who should in fact do something when they found themselves in the work force treated unequally. Um, now, when I came to the Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission, the problem was not, a- Let me start that again. When President Carter uh, uh, appointed me to chair the comparable national agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the problem uh, really stemmed from certain kinds of, of complaints, that women did not feel- and most prominent among them was, was sexual harassment. Uh, and, and yet, what complaints we saw were horrendous. Sometimes I wouldn't call them sexual harassment; I would call the sexual assault. Um, in this case, I didn't have the luxury of going around the country, saying 'why don't you file some sexual harassment complaints?' Um, but I did have a tool at, at hand. Um, I could issue regulations, and we in fact issued the first um, um, sexual harassment guidelines. They were later affirmed by the Supreme Court; and once you get something into law that way, where, whereby the statute itself, which does not say sexual harassment, says there should be no discrimination on the basis of sex among other things, once you get an

interpretation that says that includes sexual harassment, then women begin to come forward. It's in law, it's been blessed, I met with employers who, who were besides themselves initially, that I would come forward with such regulations, and then we had a very good talk and I told them what to do. I said, uh, 'you are now in a very vulnerable position. Uh, because anybody can file a complaint against you, and you don't know what to do in your own workforce. Now you have some regulations, and you, you must use these regulations, uh, make sure that every supervisor has them- protect yourself. Uh, you don't have protection and women don't have protection when the law is not spelled out at it should be.'

INTERVIEWER:
So, fast-forward to 1991, do you remember watching Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas and what were your thoughts, and what was its significance?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I was stunned, uh, to see Anita Hill on television. I had watched the hearings-

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Uh, I'd watch the, the hearings, I, I uh- I'd watch the hearings and, and thought that Clarence Thomas would be just what he had become. But what I did not expect was what Anita Hill had to say. And as a lawyer, I looked at Anita Hill, and I said, 'this is the most credible witness that I have ever seen.' Moreover, she didn't come forward on her own. She, uh, her deposition was

taken, and finally she was almost forced out. And I was, if I was stunned by what she had to say, I was even more stunned by the reaction of the Senate. Because instead of moving forward right away to re-open it's hearings, it looked like it was moving forward to simply confirm him. Uh, the women in Congress, um, met on the floor, and we decided that some of us would speak on the floor, and some of us had better get over to the Senate, or this was gonna be a done deal. And 7 of us walked to the Senate, uh, in order to say, 'you must hear her out.' We came to the first floor of the Senate, uh, and the Senate Democrats were in session, uh, we were not let in, but television cameras had followed us, and they knew they had to do something therefore.

INTERVIEWER:
And is that what caused then the hearings to be televised?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Absolutely. We, it, it, it, they were set- Uh, the Senate was heard on television, not her, but heard on television what I heard on television, and seen to be rushing to bring the nomination forward without hearing further testimony. And it was only when the women here in the House, there were not women in the Senate in after all, made a commotion by marching over there, and staying on the floor, and doing what we called 'one mintutes' to, to call attention to the matter; that being stopped and finally hearings were held.

INTERVIEWER:

And what was the significance in the larger culture? I know that somebody we interviewed who runs 9-5, a labor organization for women in secretarial positions, said that that their switchboard just went haywire after these hearings with people calling in with similar kinds of complaints. What is your sense of how this did or didn't raise awareness about the issue?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well, I, the most important awareness- There's no question that when I woman is courageous enough to do and say what Anita Hill said of her experiences, she will inspire others to come forward in a process that is far more confidential, and far more protecting of your rights than national television is. But Anita Hill did something even larger for women. Because uh, her testimony was so compelling, uh, and the Senate confirmation of, of Clarence Thomas so contra indicated, given her testimony, that there developed the year of the woman. And that's when we got the first African-American woman in the Senate, and a horde of women, excuse me, a group of women, far, far larger than usual, uh, coming in, being elected to the House.

INTERVIEWER:
That's a nice ending to that story. So let's talk a little bit about women in politics. You mentioned Shirley Chisholm, tell me a little bit more about your thoughts about Shirley Chisholm and her quixotic run for the presidency.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Well, Shirley Chisholm, uh- Shirley Chisholm's experience in Brooklyn politics had been an experience of exclusion as a woman. Brooklyn politics had blacks in it, but they certainly didn't want to deal much with women. Uh, and when she wanted to run for Congress when a seat opened in Brooklyn, um, people made fun of, actu- absolutely made fun of, in front of other women, even, made fun of the notion that Shirley Chisholm would run. Well, Shirley got the last laugh, because she went to the women, and who elected women- who elected Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American Congresswoman, uh were the women of her district in Brooklyn. She uh, Shirley had, had been in the state legislature only a couple of terms. Shirley was a restless soul, so she had no sooner been to Congress for, I don't know, 2, 3 terms, and she was gonna run for president. And um, she had to cont- I was not in Congress at the time, she did have to contend with her own peers in the Congressional Black Congress, who were disinclined, I don't think because she was a woman, but disinclined put all of their uh, cards down on a candidate they didn't think was gonna be president. She had an enormous uh, if you want to go in moments of consciousness-raising for women, uh, Shirley's run for Congress would have to be not only a consciousness-raising moment for women, but for African-Americans as well.

INTERVIEWER:
And did you mean her run for Congress or her run for president?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
Now, you asked me about president, her run for Congress, uh, um- had, had huge national benefites to black women. There was no black women anywhere in the Congress, had never served in the Congress. And she was already a national figure, by, by having run and won a Congressional seat.

INTERVIEWER:
So it was the run for president that was the consciousness- can you just say that, 'cause I think that wasn't fully…

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
When she ran for president um, she raised consciousness at yet another level. But remember, most people did not think Shirley was going to be president. And she knew it. And yet she ran understanding what a run would mean. That run had, I think, far greater effect on, on what it mean for women than for African-Americans. But it had a huge effect on both. There was a black person, it happened to be a woman, at that convention running. T- I do not believe there had been any black person, or any woman, who could claim delegates before then.

INTERVIEWER:
So let's fast-forward to 2008, now we have a black man and a white woman both serious contenders for the presidency. How did you, as a black female respond to that?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

I did not respond as a black female. Every, you know, we, we who are black females do respond as political creatures, just like everybody else. As people who come out of, of a whole set of experiences. So, I didn't say, I don't say I'm gonna vote for president because somebody is black or because they are female. I happen, in this case, I happened to be in a very special position because I knew Hillary Clinton well and I knew Barak Obama well. So that's so, that's a wash. My being black or, or, or knowing one or not the other was not what decided my uh, my support for Barak Obama.

INTERVIEWER:

Ok, good. Let me just get to my wrap-up- Do you feel that the revolution for women is over? Was it an incomplete revolution in the sense that there's still a lot of work to be done, or how do you view the women's movement?

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:

Every uh, burst of um, energy for a new group has a moment which is legitimately called a revolution. Once that bust in fact breaks through, uh, that revolutionary moment may be gone, but the notions, the movement, the energy continues. So revolution is not a permanent matter, it wouldn't be a revolution. Uh, so the labor movement calls itself today a 'movement.' Well, it was more of a 'movement' in the '30's than it is today. It is, it is a very traditional and powerful part of society. We who are black, we who are

female, still refer to the women's rights movement, and the civil rights movement. Those words mean that it's going to take more, forgive me, movement, to go us to the full equality that we deserve. But the word revolution is one that women could genuinely put on those early years when we had huge breakthroughs in, in law, and in, in society, and in traditions. That continues, I, the revolution isn't over, the revolution had spawned energy that continues to carry forward uh, the, the revolution in what we now call the women's movement.

INTERVIEWER:
And last question, what do you make of young women today who want to distance themselves from the word, 'feminism?'

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON:
I don't think we should be put off by the fact that every generation finds its own way to its own issues. Um, the word 'feminism' has, by the time young women came to consciousness has been, has taken its hits. Uh, I am completely unimpressed with what they call themselves. Because they act like feminists. Uh, they insist upon um, expansions of their own limits that never crossed our minds. They are making demands we never had the nerve to utter. So the whole notion of what you call yourself in the next generation should be unimportant. Every generation has to find its voice. If they are speaking in the same voice we are, we have failed. It means that they think they still have to do what we were doing. It's as if when I was a young woman

I felt like I had to sound like a suffragette. Well, while I may have made fun of some of the things the suffragettes did, I revered them, but that was not me. I spoke in the language of modern feminism. They speak in their own language. I regret that there are some that have been so, uh, it's seems to me, um, uh- Let me start this again. I, I, I regret that in the age of mass media, its, its, its easy enough to see something that some of the media pillory, as something that you don't want to be associated with, um, but, but I regret that. I regret that b ecause it tends to slow down, to some extent some of the, some of the pace that had been set. Uh, but these women know who they are. They are not about to march back. And even when they slow done, uh, there's no, the trajectory is so clear, that I'm not in the least bit worried.

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