

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

CHARLOTTE BUNCH INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Charlotte Bunch
Author & Activist
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Makers: Women Who Make America
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INTERVIEWER:

I think what would be great is if we could kind of start, how would you identify yourself, what you do?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

I identify myself as an activist, as a writer, as a teacher, as an organizer. I see my work as working as a part of a movement to give strength to ideas of feminism and human rights in the world, and I do that in all of these ways. Probably my work is best known as an organizer and a writer because those are the things that people see in the world, and my effort to organize a movement to bring women's rights as human rights onto the international agenda has been the core point of my last 20 years.

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And to do that, I helped to found a center for women's global leadership that has worked with training women around the world for how they can use the international human rights system, what it means. In the beginning, much of our work was on, "What does it mean to see women's rights as human rights?" What does that actually mean, and how does it strengthen your work? Also on how to have access to the United Nations, to human rights treaties, to make them viable at the national and local level. So that's been the work of my center—building networks. We helped create many networks.

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One on women human rights defenders that works to defend women who are working as activists around the world, who are under attack because of the positions that they're taking. Networks around resources, and how to build the resources for this work. This is the kind of work that I do according to the moment, including-

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I should probably mention that the last five years, I've been very active in something called the Gender Equality Architecture Campaign, which has been working to create a new agency in the UN, which we just achieved this year, called UN Women, to make the UN be a stronger voice on women's rights throughout the world. So sometimes that work is within the UN, sometimes it's on the ground, but it's constantly bringing the local and the global into communication to support each other in a more effective way.

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INTERVIEWER:

Why is it important that women get involved in leadership positions internationally?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

Well, I think there's two reasons that it's important. I think it's important for the world, in the same way that it's important that women get involved in monitoring and engaging with governments at the national level or with city councils at the local level. The United Nations and the bodies that work with the United Nations are the only form of global governance we have today. This is where decisions do get made that have a lot of impact on women's lives.

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How development money gets spent, what kind of family planning policies there are, what campaigns and global standards we have around violence against women. So, the first reason to get involved is because it has an impact on women's lives. What happens in the international level often sounds obscure to people, but it actually does have an impact and it is a place where women can engage with their governments in a larger picture.

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I think the second reason is that, by getting involved in that, we have found that women who work nationally or locally are strengthened in their own activity. So even if they aren't primarily working on, say, UN policies, knowing about those policies gives them greater tools for work at the local level. We found after women have been in the international picture, whether coming to the Commission on the Status of Women or engaged in monitoring the women's convention, the CEDAW convention, all of these ways of being engaged actually make them more powerful with their own governments when they go back home.

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They know what their government has said it's supposed to do. They can use that international arena as part of their own lobbying strategies. So, in that sense, it's to continually see that the local and global feed each other. They're not separate, they have an impact on each other.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about what womens' issues are right now, around the world?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

I think the issues for women around the world are really very similar to the issues for women in the United States. They just often take different forms. To me, it's not so much that the issues are different, it's how the power and the way in which these problems manifest in women's lives. So, the big issues for women around the world, and I include the United States, are issues of violence against women. It may manifest in the US as date rape, or we have certainly many, many women who are killed by the partners, which I think is the domestic version of honor killings, where men feel that they somehow have the right to control a woman's sexuality.

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That may take a different form in Jordan, or it may take a different form in Brazil, where it's crimes of passion, but the core issues are violence against women, women's poverty and economic empowerment. Everywhere in the world, women are still very far behind in economic power and this affects their lives. And women's control over their bodies in terms of reproductive rights, sexuality. I think these are the big issues for women everywhere.

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What is different—and this is how I see the work we do—is the way it manifests. The particularities. So, you may have female genital mutilation in one country, but to understand that that's a particular form of the control of

women's sexuality and violence is to see that it's a particularity, but it's not a totally different issues than the issue of violence that women are working on in a domestic shelter in the United States, where they're also looking at how women may be abused because someone thinks they should control their sexuality.

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So I really think it's important to see that, fundamentally, women are working for empowerment, for economic and political empowerment, to have a voice in politics, for the sake of changing these conditions of their lives that have to do with what I see as the big picture of poverty and violence around the world. In situations where there is war and conflict, you have very particular and important manifestations of that like sexual violence. Rape in war, we now understand as a human rights issue because women have worked to bring this into the public.

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But those same women who are raped in war have been abused before that, and in post-conflict situations, violence actually often increases. So it's not that you can end rape in war as an isolated issue, it's that you need to get some kind of accountability for that, but to put it in the picture of, why are women abused and used as pawns in a war, because they are used that way in peace time as well.

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So I think that's the way in which we try to work, to see that women are defining the particulars of their own manifestation of these problems, and

that their voices need to be the one saying what the problems are. What we do is to help give space to that in the United Nations, and to link them to people who are working on similar questions to see how they can strengthen each other.

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INTERVIEWER:

A lot of people would say these are personal issues, not political ones. Can you talk about what's wrong with that?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

Well, I think it's important to understand that violence in all situations is used to keep people under control. You look at human rights, what is human rights about? It's about not having the ability of the state or people who are in power to abuse others. Torture is about violence, it's about one form of violence. You look at many human rights issues. They are actually about who has the right to violate someone else. We have laws about murder. A brother can't murder his brother in the family. That's a personal sphere. But we have laws about what people can do to each other.

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So often, I think we somehow cut those off when we think about women. We say, all of a sudden, that violence against women is a cultural or a domestic issue. Well, why is violence against women any more of a domestic issue than

violence of any other type? Most violence occurs in the private sphere. We don't say that you have the right to abuse each other just because you live together in a family. I think that what has happened is really an extension of what used to be, even in law, in the West as well as other parts of the world, that women are the property of men.

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They are the property of their fathers, their brothers, their family, and that's now extended to the notion that somehow, in culture, women can still be the property of the culture rather than seen as individuals who have the right not to be violated. I think it's really a matter of rethinking, what are we talking about when people tend to say, "Well, these things can happen to women because it's cultural." Well, everything in human rights is cultural. The death penalty, which is a big issue in human rights in the United States, is a cultural question. The issue of segregation and racial segregation was a cultural question.

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Everything that we fight for to make people's lives better as human rights are questions of changing our cultures. I don't think any of us, if we think about it, really want everything to be back as it was- I don't even know when would you call the original point? 1000 years ago? 100 years ago? I think we've gotten off track about what we mean by culture, and rather, we should be looking at how does everyone, women and men and people who are marginalized and disempowered, participate in the evolution and changes in culture?

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One of those big changes in our century is the changes in how women are seen. So this change is only quite recent in the West. It isn't like the West has been having these laws that were good for women for very long. If you put this in the picture of human history, this is an evolution that's happening around the world. When I saw the women from Yemen demonstrating in their *chadors*, saying, "Yes, we have the right to be out on the street," and the women in Ukraine taking off their clothes to protest sex slavery.

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Women everywhere are saying, "We have the right to also determine what our culture will be." So I think that's where the violence against women issue comes, is an understanding that worldwide, we are, as a people, changing the way we accept the violation of women, and I think it is actually key to changing the way we accept violence in the world overall. Because I think, when we stop thinking that women can be violated, we will also be better able to question racial violence, violence between ethnic groups, and ask ourselves, why do we turn to violence as a solution to conflict?

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So, in my mind, this is a cultural issue, but it's a profound part of a broader cultural picture, and it's not about the West telling some other culture what to do. The West has plenty of problems of violence against women, unsolved, of our own, yet to deal with. In that sense, my work internationally is about solidarity as a woman who spent many years in my own country, trying to change my country, with women who are trying to change their countries. We

don't view it as anybody having the answers. We're all working together to see how we can make a positive human rights change for women in the world.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you find you encounter a lot of resistance?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

Of course, this work meets a lot of resistance. Women have always met resistance when we try to organize. If you look at the early days of feminism in the United States, the backlash was very intense. It still is. These are entrenched powers, entrenched ways of being, that have been identified with women's role with gender stereotypes that we are all seeing change. Some of that change comes from just the world. The changes in our economy. The changes in technology. And some of it comes from a conscious feminist or human rights analysis of what it means to make sure that these changes liberate everyone rather than oppress us.

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So of course, there is resistance. I see resistance in many different forms. Most countries have entrenched powers, whether they are political or cultural or religious, that identify their own view of life with the way things have been, with the power they have had. At the same time that there is

resistance, there is also an incredible amount of energy for change. As I said, it's not only change because someone says it should be. It's change because the conditions of women's lives are changing, for better and for worse.

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Today, women have entered the workforce everywhere, often in oppressive and exploitative conditions. But when women start entering that workforce, the public workforce, they have public lives in a way they didn't have before. They have exposure to different ways of seeing issues. They have some economic power. And they begin to see the possibilities of what they could do differently. And also the roles they had before have been diminished. So the power they had in their own communities, when those communities were powerful, even the kind of power women did have, is often eroding.

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So they're kind of renegotiating what it means to be a woman. And within that, you have these larger movements, like feminism and human rights, that are trying to figure out how to defend women in that situation, whether they're in maquiladoras being exploited as labor, or caught in sex trafficking, trying to figure out how to help women negotiate those changes so that their own lives will be better rather than worse.

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INTERVIEWER:

So, Charlotte, you're known for this famous phrase that you coined. Can you tell us what that is and what the meaning is behind it?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

The phrase, "Women's rights are human rights," has been a very important rallying cry for women. And I think it emerged out of the late '80s feminist movement as many of us, myself included, were looking at women's issues globally and trying to figure out, why are these not seen as human rights abuses? In particular, in my case, I was doing some work at that time on the problem of sex trafficking, and the whole sexual tourism issue in Europe and the United States.

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And we kept asking, "Why do the women who are victims of this not have access to refugee status? Why do they not see them as victims of human rights abuse? Why are they treated as criminals rather than as human rights victims who should be helped by the state and by the social forces to do whatever they want to do with their lives?" And if they are in any way caught, they get deported rather than being given access to refugee status or to asylum or something like that.

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So it was a very particular problem we were looking at and we began to say, why isn't this seen as human rights? For me, that was the moment of, "Why aren't all these issues of women understood as human rights? What is the separation that we have made between women's rights and human rights that is holding women back at this point?" And it started for me, from that

particular, and I began a seminar on a global feminist view of human rights to try to understand that.

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And other women in America, women in the Philippines, were also starting to talk about women's human rights. And in that late '80s feminist period, moving into the world conferences of the UN in the 1990s, we began to realize that the only answer was for us to assert that, indeed, women's rights are human rights. I spent a couple of years trying to convince human rights organizations that violence against women was a human rights issue.

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But the breakthrough for me came when I saw a group of Filipino women having a big conference in, I think, 1988 called Women's Rights Are Human Rights. And I said, "Yes, that's what we've been saying! Women's rights are human rights. It's not about convincing someone else to accept this. We have to assert it." And when we assert it, and then we have to show it. So much of the work I did in that period at the center at Rutgers was to build the case, to build the conceptual case.

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To make the parallels of violence against women in particular to other human rights abuses. To show when domestic violence becomes torture. To show how mass rape and gang rape is a form of sexual terrorism. To connect what happens to women to human rights terms.

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INTERVIEWER:

What would you say to someone who doesn't agree with that point?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

I think the argument to understand why women's rights are human rights is made best by showing the particular things that happen to women. Because abstractly, you can get into this ongoing discussion, "Well, what is human rights?" After all, what is human rights? Human rights is defined by what people think is fundamental to human dignity. If you take the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which we have done, and you take all those principles and then you ask, well, where does that happen in a woman's life? You're supposed to be free from degrading treatment.

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Well, violence against women is one of the most significant forms of degrading treatment that women experience. Where does it say that you should not be arbitrarily detained, as they say, meaning held- Well, women who are kept in their homes and not allowed to go out of their homes are arbitrarily detained. It doesn't matter if it's the father or the brother or the husband who's doing it. To not be allowed to leave your home is the same issue that human rights people are fighting for about arbitrary detention.

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Extrajudicial executions is a human rights term for people who are killed not through any judicial process, not through a death sentence, which we could

also even argue whether that's a human right. Women are killed all the time in what human rights people would call extrajudicial executions. So, what we did is to show each of these concepts in human rights that have been adopted by the UN in all the different areas of life are things that happen to women all the time.

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But because human rights was initially shaped primarily around thinking about, what does the state do? We had to shift people to thinking about, what is the state responsible for making sure doesn't happen? Which is also a human rights demand. After all, slavery- The state wasn't doing slavery. Individuals were owning people. That's what slavery is. The state had to make it illegal and prohibit it from happening. That's the same thing we're talking about. When women are violated in their homes, it's not the state doing it, but the state is responsible for outlawing it.

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And most of the laws on domestic violence throughout the world have changed in the last 20 years as a result of this work. And now we are working on, how do you make sure the state actually produces the conditions where those laws will be implemented? Because you can have the laws and women still don't have access to them.

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INTERVIEWER:

What was the moment for you when you realized that this was your calling in life? How did you get to that point?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

In a way, all my life, I was kind of, being prepared to be there. I was outspoken. I was in a small town. I had a family that encouraged me to take my own life seriously, not so much in career terms, but in terms of doing something. So I went to college in the 1960s in Durham, North Carolina, at Duke University, and I landed there in the midst of the Black civil rights movement in the US. And this issue immediately galvanized me.

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And I saw a movement around a social justice issue that really shaped my whole life, and really made me think about, how did I want to spend my life and what did I want to work on? And as a part of doing that, I began to participate in various what we think of now '60s movements, activities eventually against the war in Vietnam and issues of racism.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about what the atmosphere was like as a woman at the time?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

Sure. I grew up in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, and they gave me my political perspective on the world. So I'm a very strong advocate of what the importance of the movements were. But within those movements, there was very, very deep sexism. The attitudes of the day towards women were not yet challenged. And it took many different forms. There are, of course, famous phrases like Stokely Carmichael, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone," which was one of the more outrageous statements of it, but it was everyday kind of life.

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I remember when one of the women spoke at the counter-inaugural at the time of the Nixon administration, and started to talk about feminism and women's liberation, one of the men yelled out, "Take her off the stage and fuck her!" This notion that somehow you could answer women's demands in that kind of way. Not everybody, of course, agreed with that, but it was acceptable because the culture accepted that kind of treatment of women.

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In my case, I was always a more serious organizer, so I experienced it more in these kinds of ways that you felt that your voice wasn't allowed to have the same authority. I went on one of the anti-war trips to Vietnam in a group of two women and two men. The four of us were there to represent different strands of the anti-war movement. And the two men spent the entire trip competing over who would be the spokesperson for our group and never would they even consider that the two of us who were women could be the spokespeople.

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I mean, they were constantly competing over who got to speak for the group first. At some point, we said, "This is not about who gets to be the leader of this little group. This is about a major war in the world, and you're reducing it to this kind of level." In that particular moment, it was just the way the world was. I mean, these were not individuals who were mean or bad. These were individuals whose life was committed to social justice, but they had incorporated the cultural attitudes of the day.

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And so, the women's movement that came out of that was really about how do we change the attitudes towards women as a part of an understanding of social justice or liberation as we called it in those days, or human rights as I would call it today. To me, these have been different moments of understanding what it means to try to work for a better world that includes the interaction of men and women and an understanding of sexism as another aspect of the dominations that we want to end.

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INTERVIEWER:

There was a kind of broadening of... one central idea, I guess.

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

We used to have a phrase that I've come to embrace again in the '60s movement called, "Revolution is a symphony of liberations." In many ways, I think there was something very profound about that. That to have change—you can call it revolution, you can call transformation, you can call it many different things—but to have change that really changes the world in terms of how people live, requires many different players. The orchestra has to hear from many different players.

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And sometimes in the United States, we reduce that to a kind of competition of who is most oppressed, and identity politics. I think that's the narrow view of it. The wide view of it is that all the identities and different experiences—I would call it the life experiences of people—need to be heard if we're really going to have the best solutions. If you're going to do something about the problems in the country, it's not just that you should let everybody be heard, it's that the solutions are going to be better if you hear from many different experiences of how these problems are created and how they might be changed.

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There's a kind of popular notion in the world today, which we're trying to build on, that women are a part of the solution. I think that's where I'd like to go with this, which is to understand that it's not just that some people, whether it's women or gay people or people of color, Roma people in Europe—there are many different ways you can describe oppression, but the

ultimate goal is all of these people have views of the world and what's going on and what's happening to people that are part of the solution.

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If we really want to make the changes that I think we have to make in the globe today to rescue a world that seems to be going quite rampantly toward greed and toward self-destruction, it's going to take hearing from many different people how to begin to do that.

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INTERVIEWER:

What do you think are the most important issues as we look forward?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

The interesting thing about issues is that, in my mind, I see that there are certain constants about what are the big, dynamic issues, and as I said earlier about the world globally, those are violence against women, women's control of their bodies, women's economic empowerment and poverty, and women's right to be in political participation and to have a voice in all the places where things get done. So to me, those big issues haven't changed.

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What has changed is how the problems are manifested. So that if you look at a problem like women's political voice, I mean, we used to be fighting just for women to be heard. Today, we have to struggle with the fact that there are

many right-wing conservative women's voices that have been trained and brought up to speak against feminist ideas. The issue isn't just getting women into political participation, but it's also fighting for a certain set of ideas in that political arena, and often, that means allies with male politicians who share those ideas.

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My view of working for women's leadership is about a particular set of issues and concerns, and not only just getting women there, because I see all over the world—not only in the US, all over the world—that conservative forces have also mobilized women. And that's fine. They have the right to be there too. But our work has to then shift a little and to focus on how the problem is today a little bit differently. Same in an issue like violence against women, which I work on more.

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The forms of violence that the students in my classrooms talk about are sometimes different. The use of drugs in date violence is a big issue on campuses today. My own university, Rutgers. A male student just killed his partner because he was on drugs and he was out of his mind. These are different, in some ways, than the forms we had of violence or what we saw as the issue, but the issue of violence hasn't gone away.

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Reproductive rights. We have the right to abortion, but we see all these ways in which it's being narrowed, being cut away. So the struggle has to respond to a different political moment around each of the questions.

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INTERVIEWER:

Is there only one point of view women should have about reproductive rights?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

I don't think there is one point of view that women should have about anything. Because I think if you said, "Should men have one point of view?" I mean, half the population? Men, women. We don't expect men to have one point of view. I don't expect women to have one point of view. I do think that there is a feminist point of view about reproductive rights. And I do have problems with women who try to call themselves feminists who oppose reproductive rights, because I think the core of a feminist point of view is about the control of your own body and reproductive rights are important to that.

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I don't deny that women will not all agree on that, or that other women have to agree with my point of view. But I do feel that feminism as a way of looking at the world has certain core principles, and, to me, that is one of those core principles.

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INTERVIEWER:

You've done so many things in your life. This might be a hard question to answer, but what is the thing that you're proudest of?

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CHARLOTTE BUNCH:

What I'm proudest of is my ability to survive, and to continue to change, and to rethink ideas and try to be relevant to the next phase and the next moment of movement. The accomplishment that I'm known best for, and I'm certainly proud of, is really, organizing the campaign that put women's rights as human rights onto the world agenda, and I have great satisfaction with that.

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But I also feel that being a part of the early days of the feminist movement, helping to bring issues of lesbian rights and a broader understanding of sexuality—these are also important to me. And I think maybe what makes me most proud is that I've been able to continually grow, and see the opportunity and the need for change and to adapt, and to keep the vision alive in new moments and new ways.

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