

A promise in progress

When a doctor came to her aid years before abortion was legal, Gloria Steinem vowed she'd do what she wanted with her life. At 81, the journalist, feminist and political activist is still making good on her word.

BY ANTONIA CHARLESWORTH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Fresh from college in 1957, then 22, Gloria Steinem headed to India to avoid her engagement to a man she describes as good, but wrong. En route she found herself in England, waiting for her visa.

"It was here I incidentally discovered I was pregnant and became desperate to find an abortionist," she said on a return trip to the U.K. 58 years on. "In those years, there was no publicly identified feminism in either of our countries so each of us thought we were searching as individuals for an abortion. It felt very isolated and very wrong."

A decade before physicians in England could legally perform the procedure, it was Dr. John Sharpe who came to her aid. Her new memoir is dedicated to him. In it, Steinem recalls his asking her to promise him she'd do what she wanted to do with her life. She's done the best she could, she humbly added.

For reproductive freedom, she co-founded campaign groups Voters for Choice and Choice USA. She has written about and campaigned on this, and many other women's issues, for more than 50 years. And she continues to be highly influential. In March, U.S. clothes retailer Lands' End removed an interview she had given to its chief executive from its website after socially conservative customers complained about her pro-choice views.

A key figure in the women's liberation movement of the '60s and '70s – often known as second-wave feminism – Steinem was one of 300 women who founded the National Women's Political Caucus to support women in politics. As a journalist, she was the only woman to help found the ground-breaking New York Magazine. She co-founded the radical feminist Ms. magazine, and she has been published in magazines internationally. Her books include "Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem" and "Moving Beyond Words."

She says her career has meant she has spent half her adult life traveling – and much of her childhood, too, as her father was a traveling antiques dealer.

"The road is perceived as dangerous, so most road books are written by men," she said. "I think there is an understandable feeling that home is safer than the road, when actually, statistically it's the other way around."

On a rare sunny February day in Manchester, the morning after an event for Manchester Literature Festival, she arrived at the Malmaison Hotel to meet local street paper Big Issue North. Wearing large dark sunglasses and dressed elegantly from head to toe in black – apart from her signature Native American hip-hugger belt – her appearance belies her 81 years. Her looks have been a contentious source of interest over the years – on one hand dismantling the feminist stereotype, used to alienate women from feminism, and on the other an ongoing tool to undermine her.

They enabled her to write an exposé of the working conditions in the new New York Playboy Club for Show magazine in 1963. By getting a job as



Gloria Steinem has written about and campaigned on women's issues for more than 50 years.

PHOTO BY PHIL MCCARTEN/REUTERS

a Playboy Bunny, she revealed exploitative working conditions underneath the phony glamour, including a controversial requirement that would-be Bunnies have a pelvic exam. Playboy subsequently scrapped the exam, which checked for sexually transmitted diseases, and working conditions improved for the club's employees, but Steinem also lost serious journalistic work and still believes it was a mistake for her career.

"People still say, 'She's just a bunny,' and I'm always torn at that point," she said. "Should I say I was actually a journalist writing an exposé? And then I think, no, I shouldn't do that because that's like abandoning the women who were really working there. Why am I saying I'm different from them? I'm not different from them."

In an updated intro to "A Bunny's Tale in her 1995 collection "Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions," Steinem points out triumphantly that the piece outlived the clubs. This month marks the end of Playboy's nude centerfolds, but Steinem is less than jubilant.

"Playboy saying they're not going to publish nudes is like our National Rifle Association saying we're not going to sell handguns anymore because now we have assault rifles," she said, acknowledging the Internet porn that makes Playboy centerfolds look twee in comparison. And, to her dismay, the Playboy clubs are making a return in India, where Ghandian activism first inspired her.

"It's like colonialism – our leftover shit is still floating out there somewhere and being imposed on other countries."

What does she think is the key issue for global feminism?

"We know our problems and solutions better than anybody out there, but collectively I do think that its violence in many, many different forms," she said, pointing out that for the first time we know of there are fewer females on Earth than males because of

violence against women. "And reproductive freedom – being able to decide the fates of our own bodies."

The war on women has perhaps no more high-profile example than the systematic attacks on women's rights from the Republican Party.

Steinem's political campaigning precedes her feminist campaigns, and she began her career with ambitions to be a political journalist. With her parents having divorced and her mother suffering from mental illness, she went to Smith College, the private liberal women's college in Massachusetts where an earlier pioneering feminist, Betty Friedan – who later accused Steinem of being a disrupter of the movement for her inclusion of lesbian women within it – had also studied. There, Steinem found herself stuffing envelopes in the campaign offices of Adlai Stevenson. She has backed Democratic presidential candidates since then, including Hillary Clinton today, with fundraising, speech writing and campaigning. She's faced countless barriers as a woman along the way – famously being denied the chance to join George McGovern's 1972 campaign when one adviser told him flatly: "No broads."

During the 1968 election, she supported the only anti-Vietnam War candidate, Eugene McCarthy. "He turned out to be an empty promise – which I knew from the moment I met him," she said with a dry laugh. "He ended up supporting Reagan."

It felt like progress then when in the 2008 election she was spoiled for choice.

Clinton and Barack Obama "were both wonderful, excellent, principled, caring candidates, and they were almost identical on the issues so it wasn't drastic, in that sense," said Steinem, who praises Obama as a feminist and Clinton as a civil rights activist. She chose to campaign for Clinton, writing in her memoir that in the end, Clinton might have felt betrayed if she hadn't, where Obama wouldn't.

"It was really about experience," she said. "She was way more experienced than Obama, and by

experience I mean with the ultra-right wing. We have a very crazy ultra-right wing that is now in control of the Republican Party, and you can see in the first two years of the Obama presidency that he, being the decent, good person that he is, tried to reach out to the other side – and you can't. If they had cancer and Obama had the cure, they wouldn't accept it. I think had she been president, we would not have wasted the first two years and there would have been a chance toward progress.

"What was sad to me was that we had two good people that were the firsts of their group running against each other. And our media kept saying, which is more important – sex or race? Excuse me, that's like saying which is more important – air or water? And what about women of color? It was just maddening, but they were looking for conflict, and they created conflict."

Conflict has been created during the current campaign too, with female support for Clinton and rival candidate Bernie Sanders being framed as a generational divide after Steinem suggested young women might support Sanders because "the boys are with Bernie" during an interview with talk show host Bill Maher. A storm of outrage was fueled by the first female secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who declared the next day at a Clinton rally that "there's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other," cuing laughter and applause from the audience and Clinton, who stood awkwardly beside her.

Steinem believes she was goaded by Maher, a comedian.

"He is terribly sexist, but I knew that going in," she said, adding that the only reason he tolerates her, "against his better judgment," is because she defended him when he was censured following controversial remarks denying that the 9/11 attackers were cowardly.

it. I didn't get how he was taking it to sex because I was talking about power. I said how justifiably angry young women are because they're graduating in huge debt and not earning nearly as much as men to pay it back. I didn't quite get what he was doing ... and I should have just stopped him. I just didn't realize that if you took that one clip of mine, it would seem like I was talking about sex and dates. I was appalled. I think if I had meant what people thought I meant, I'd be mad too."

She was stung by the backlash to her comments, for which she has apologized. "It was like a perfect storm because it was Twitter; it (the soundbite) was short, out of context; it was in the news anyway because of the presidential campaign. It was very instructive – I learned a lot. ... I've never experienced the huge capability of Twitter before."

Steinem believes Sanders' popularity with young women "makes perfect sense" as he represents idealism, whereas older voters see Clinton as a more realistic candidate.

On prison reforms and abolishing tuition fees, the way Sanders talks "makes it sound as if he could do more than he could," she said. "It's the difference between promising the moon and being able to deliver dawn."

Steinem has done much to bridge the generational gap in feminism, lecturing at campuses across the country and mentoring young women in her New York home.

"I do think there are things we have to be aware of – that older women, having been so isolated and punished for what they did and not being rewarded, sometimes expect gratitude from younger women. And that is just not fair."

But she does not think there is hostility between the generations.

"I don't want to speak for everybody, but I don't experience it that way. I experience, just in terms of numbers, so many more activist, feminist, amazing young women than there ever were. We were this small group of rebels, but this is a majority movement and I am so inspired by them. So what I should have said, and what I usually say when people ask me about young women, is: Ask young women; don't ask me. The whole idea is we're supporting them."

Another influential second-wave feminist, Germaine Greer, recently became the target of a petition against her delivering a lecture at Cardiff University on the grounds that she expressed transphobic views when she said: "I don't believe a woman is a man without a cock." Steinem believes Greer was right to give the lecture. She points to tactics she has witnessed at Stanford University against the Bush administration, and in India, against Mother Teresa, where audience members turned their backs to speakers. "They listened, but they just made it clear how they felt."

Do people who assert a right to not be offended risk stifling free speech?

"I am not sure we can generalize," Steinem said. "We probably have to listen carefully to each situation because there is hate speech, and hate speech can be quite dangerous. But in general, I would rather demand equal time and not silence anyone."

Steinem said that we have to support the right of everyone to define themselves and that anything that blows up the gender binary is a good thing.

"At Ms. magazine, we published (Welsh trans historian) Jan Morris 35 years ago, writing about having been a man in the British army. It was fascinating because she's a wonderful writer, and a wonderful human being, and she had a female sensibility in the army. That's great. I think it's hard for a lot of born women to look at Caitlyn Jenner because they feel that this is woman as performance, just raiding a closet of the clothes. It's hard, but we have to respect it. There's no other way. You can't judge what somebody else is feeling."

Audience Q&A: Gloria Steinem

Gloria Steinem visited Manchester Literature Festival, where she was in conversation with British journalist Rachel Cooke, followed by a Q&A with the audience. Here are some of the highlights.

Should I tell my 17-year-old daughter she can have it all?

"We made an error when we said they can have it all because it's a lie. When men look after children as much as women, they can. No one ever told a man they could have it all. ... Sometimes women say to me, with alarm: 'My daughter doesn't know who you are.' I say: 'But does she know who she is?' People do what they see more than what they're told."

You've spoken much about sexism, but have you encountered ageism?

"In this patriarchal culture, we're valued for our wombs rather than our brains, so men suffer, too, but women suffer more. It has changed a fair amount. ... The feminine role comes down on you at 9 or 10 years old, then that 10-year-old comes back at 50. ... It's a whole new country after 60 – there's a terrific freedom."

Is Hillary Clinton going to be the next president?

"She has to be."

What would it mean to you to see a woman in the White House?

"It's not about a job for one woman. It's jobs for many women. ... I would vote for her if she was called Harry. I wouldn't vote for Sarah Palin."

Do you feel you've made life sacrifices for your work?

"I don't really. I feel so lucky. I get over-rewarded because I'm accidentally recognizable. I get shit too, for the same reasons, but no, absolutely not."

What would you like your legacy to be?

"I haven't done it yet. I live in the future."

Second-wave feminism was often accused of being a white, middle-class affair, a charge Steinem said has been "very disheartening and a source of continued pain" for her. Race has always been central in her work, and her continued activism for Native Americans is well documented. But did the movement take sufficient account of the class differences that could divide women?

"It's just common sense," she said. "If you were a middle-class homemaker, dependent on your husband's salary, you were not experiencing discrimination in the work force in the way a working-class woman was. The women of the UAW (the United Auto Workers, the first trade union to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment in 1970) were pioneer feminists because they could see, hello, that they were not getting paid the same. There really were working-class women there, but the middle-class women were the writers, they're writing the books – that skews the media right away."

Today, she said, feminist literature should be available to everybody, not just women in the affluent world.

But although the Internet goes some way to giving women a positive voice, it's limited to those with electricity and money.

"We must remember that the huge majority of the world's illiterate are women, and there's a way in which technology can be divisive. My dream is to have a satellite with multilingual programming and, you know, those little radios that you can wind up. You don't even need electricity, so women could get information and a sense of community on the ground. I would love to see that."

Courtesy of INSP.ngo / Big Issue North