

Reproductive Rights Oral History Project

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)
Geneva, Switzerland

Rosalind Petchesky

Interviewed by
Nicole Bourbonnais

October 18 and October 25, 2021
Online via Zencast

Background:

This project consists of oral histories with advocates prominent in the late 20th century transnational reproductive rights movement. It explores how their broader trajectory and experiences shaped their role in this movement, as well as their lives, careers and activism more broadly. The interviews thus provide material of broad relevance to those interested in histories of population control, reproductive rights, feminism, global health, development, and international activism.

Narrator:

Rosalind Petchesky is Distinguished Professor Emerita (retired) of Political Science at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is a widely published feminist scholar and recipient of a MacArthur (“genius”) Fellowship. Her first book, *Abortion and Woman’s Choice: The state, sexuality and reproductive freedom* (1990, revised) was cited by the United States Supreme Court in its landmark decision, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992) and received an award from the American Historical Association. Her many subsequent articles and books in the field of reproductive and sexual rights and justice (notably, *Global Prescriptions: Gendering health and human rights*, Zed 2003 and Bloomsbury, digital version, 2021) have been translated, distributed and read in countries across the globe. Since 2013 Professor Petchesky has been an active member of Jewish Voice for Peace and part of the New York City chapter’s leadership team, with whom she co-edited/authored *A Land With A People: Palestinians and Jews confront Zionism* (Monthly Review, 2021). She lives in New York City with her two cats and is the proud grandmother of Anna and Jack Macias Petchesky.

Interviewer:

Nicole Bourbonnais is an Associate Professor of International History and Politics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Her research explores the history of sex, reproduction, motherhood and the family in transnational historical perspective. She is author of *Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Format

2 .mp3 audio files: (1) October 18, 2021, 1:05:45; (2) October 25, 2021, 1:25:30.

Transcript:

Initial transcription produced by Otter.ai; edited and reviewed at IHEID. Transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by Rosalind Petchesky. Text in square brackets or footnotes was added after the fact for clarity.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms***Audio recording***

Bibliography: Petchesky, Rosalind. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Audio recording, October 18 and October 25, 2021. Reproductive Rights Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Rosalind Petchesky, interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, audio recording, October 18 and October 25, 2021, Reproductive Rights Oral History Project, IHEID, interview 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Petchesky, Rosalind. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Transcript, October 18 and October 25, 2021. Reproductive Rights Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Rosalind Petchesky, interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, transcript, October 18 and October 25, 2021, Reproductive Rights Oral History Project, IHEID, p10.

Rosalind Petchesky Interview 1/2, October 18, 2021

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:00

Today is the first interview with Rosalind Petchesky on October 18 2021. I wanted to start by asking you, if you could tell me a bit about your early life, where you were born, about your family, your parents.

Rosalind Petchesky 00:15

I was actually born in Bay City, Texas, because my father was stationed there during World War Two. But I grew up in a town called Tulsa, Oklahoma, which everybody thinks is very crazy and improbable, but I did grow up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And I was born into a middle class, white Jewish family. My father was a physician, radiologist, my mother was a homemaker, a fabulous musician who ended up to be a housewife back in those 1950s days. I was born in 1942, so I grew up during the 1950s and 60s. It was a weird time, it was a very conservative time, but also very stable time for growing up in a place where children went outside by themselves and played and roamed and adventured. I consider it now a great privilege. It was also very segregated. I didn't fully realise until the Civil Rights movement, when I was in high school, how segregated [it was]. We didn't know anything about the history of our city and the race massacre of 1921. It's now been famously uncovered with debates about reparations. It's very painful for all of us who grew up there, that we weren't told anything. My mother was two years old when this happened. Over 300 black people in the town were killed, and a whole incredibly prosperous, thriving community of black people, of lawyers and doctors and bankers and stores and amazing churches and cultural activities, was bombed. So that's the legacy of my city, that we're all still reckoning with.¹

I was also involved in Jewish youth activities. I would say that my family were Zionist, and I grew up in that Zionist climate. My uncle was a famous Jewish philosopher named Maurice Friedman. He was the biographer of Martin Buber. And I sort of always tried to encompass all of that, I wanted to be an intellectual and I wanted to be an activist, and I wanted to be social. I wanted all of it and I was a girl, so there were challenges. When I got to college - I went to Smith College, which is a women's college in the northeast in Massachusetts, and a kind of women's Ivy League college. I had a great education there. I loved it. I went to a women's college because I had gone to a huge public high school where everything was parties and boys and cheerleaders and football games, and I wanted to get away from that and just to study. Smith was really great for that. I had my own little place in the library, I just studied all the time. My mentor at Smith College was one of the greatest Palestinian intellectuals, Ibrahim [Abu-Lughod]. Professor [Abu-Lughod] was fantastic. I worshipped [and learned so much from] him but I didn't really understand, at that

¹ The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre took place in Greenwood, an entirely Black section of Tulsa, often called the "Black Wall Street." Over a period of less than 24 hours from May 21 to June 1, the neighborhood was attacked, bombed, and terrorized by white residents of Tulsa. Over one thousand homes and businesses were destroyed, and hundreds died. The story of the Tulsa Massacre was buried and remained undiscussed in history classes for many decades. An investigation by a state commission in 1997 and the centennial in 2021 sparked renewed attention and media coverage. (See: Ellsworth, Scott (2009). "[Tulsa Race Riot](#)". *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Accessed 18 May 2022; "[What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed](#)," *New York Times*, 24 May 2021, Accessed 18 May 2022.

time, very much about Palestinian Liberation. But it planted a seed for me because I admired him so much.

I also was furious at my father because he wouldn't let me have the car to do civil rights work, and [my parents] wouldn't let me go to Mississippi during the Freedom Rides. I had this anger about a certain kind of liberal head-in-the-sand positioning particularly of my father. I became more interested in militant [left-wing] politics. I became very involved in the Civil Rights Movement as a young person, I think I was 14 or 15, and the civil rights legislation was already beginning, and I was involved. We didn't have a SNCC chapter, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, but we had a CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] chapter in my city. I joined them, and we went around trying to work on [integrating] public accommodations. My first big conflicts, big big conflicts - I mean, I had conflicts with my parents. I was one of five children. I have four younger brothers. My parents were liberal politically but not activists. My younger brothers, my next younger brother and I participated in these things together. I remember trying to borrow the family car, to go around the city [with a group of] black kids. We were going to try to integrate public swimming pools. And we went there, we went to the pool. They [the pool managers] were very upset, and they wouldn't let us in, and then the next time we went, there was a sign that said it was closed. So I started to learn some things about power and racism in that context. I felt very identified with the civil rights movement, but I don't think I've made any great contributions. I was just a foot soldier.

When I was 19, I went to the Hague Academy of International Law, and my passion was public international law and human rights. I found in the Smith College library something that I could do in the summer, I could go to the Hague Academy of International Law. And I went there in the summer when I was 19. They had a whole three-week course. But in the meantime, I travelled all over Europe by myself, because I was supposed to go with a girlfriend and she backed out, so I said: "I'm gonna go." I did all kinds of - I was so foolish. I mean, can you imagine what could have happened to me? I had no idea. I was such an idiot. I could have been raped, I could have gotten pregnant, I could have gotten a venereal disease, anything. Nothing. Nothing happened to me. It was just sheer luck. Anyway, I met this boy at The Hague Academy of International Law, who was French and he was Jewish, and I was madly in love with him, totally, madly in love with him. And this fellow, who I used to see intermittently for years and years, he still lives in Paris. He's a lawyer in Paris. He said to me "what's your birth control?" I just was like "duh, I don't know". Immediately, he said: "You're coming with me." We went to a pharmacy. He went in, and he said "she needs a diaphragm," all in French. And I got fitted for diaphragm. So I got my first diaphragm because of this boy, who was way smarter than I was about such things.

The first thing I did related to reproductive rights was - well, I was also a girl of the 60s who was very adventurous sexually. And I've recently learned - this sounds really funny to say - but I'm part of a group of women that travelled together, and we all grew up together in Tulsa. We were in second grade together, in high school together, and they're all white, they're all kind of diehard Democratic Party liberals. We take trips every year, these old ladies tromping around various

cities going to museums, and it's so funny. And it's fun, too, it's really nice, and I like these women very much. But I only discovered this past week, when we were in Washington, DC, I asked them: "so did you guys - none of you had sex with anybody till you got married?" They said: "that's right. That's how we were brought up." And I thought: we're the same age, but I lived in a different universe. And why is that? Because for me, it was a time to just blossom out and do what I wanted and travel and go by myself to Europe and meet men and do whatever I wanted. I was a totally cis-identified sexual person, I have to confess, and still am. But I was very adventurous, and also very lucky.

Well, I went back to New York - I went to college, that is, to Northampton. And I got involved with some guy in New York City when I was on break. Very bad guy - I mean, not a bad guy, but much older. He was trying to rescue Iranians from the Shah. And I visited the Margaret Sanger Centre, all on my own. I went there and I got a whole bunch of literature, and I brought it back to my college. I handed it out to all the girls in my dorm and all my friends. That was my first activism in reproductive rights. It was funny. It wasn't organized. It was just spontaneous. When I got to graduate school, I became a feminist. I don't know if you want to ask me any questions, but I was very involved in the anti-war, the anti-Vietnam War movement at Columbia University, where I was a graduate student in political science. I also became a feminist, but I was a Marxist feminist, and I was suspicious of the radical feminist groups. We had these categories: Radical Feminism, Marxist feminism, liberal feminism. Anyway, we were very judgmental. I think we were almost doctrinaire.

Nicole Bourbonnais 11:35

Yeah, I mean, it's interesting to me that you start with thinking about civil rights and racism. Would you say that you were more conscious of those kinds of inequalities in your youth than of gender?

Rosalind Petchesky 11:51

Yeah, I mean, yes, definitely. However - maybe this is thinking from hindsight - but in some of my writing about Palestine, I wrote a story about my first visit, when I was 16. When I was 16 years old I joined a trip to Israel [organized by B'nai Brith Youth Organization]. And it was incredible. It was a very eye-opening experience, I was still a Zionist. I was thinking "oh, I want to live here". I want to work with children. I don't know what I wanted to do. But I witnessed things that were so shocking to me, because I was already active in the civil rights movement. And I witnessed out and out racism, of Jews against Jews, for example, on a kibbutz where we were staying. We were hanging around a swimming pool. There was a dark-skinned man, and I was just talking to him, he was a nice guy, and this woman, white woman comes up to me with a very distinct Brooklyn accent. And she said "don't talk to him". I said why? She said: "he's African." And I just went "what? What is she talking about?" And then I could see with my eyes the racial segregation. It was already the beginning of Israeli apartheid. Of course, it started from the Nakba, started from before there was the state of Israel. I was aware a little - I wasn't aware about Palestinians, as such, but I could see this.

When I got home, I was giving talks around Tulsa to synagogues and things. I gave a talk one time to – there was this Orthodox rabbi in our town, and some elderly people from the congregation, just sitting around the table. It must have been in the library or something. My grandparents were there, and these other elderly women, and I was just saying what I'd seen. And I got in the mail a copy of a letter that the rabbi had sent to the women. Apparently, the women were very upset with what I was saying, and they asked the rabbi "what is she talking about?" And he wrote to these women, and he said "she does not know what she's talking about. She's just a young girl. I was just there, nothing of what she says is true." And I felt like this was the first time I was being completely dismissed. Not just because of my heretical views, but because I was a girl. Nothing I could say would have legitimacy. I didn't identify - I didn't know about feminism till a few years later, but it sowed the seeds of feeling like: "this isn't right. Girls aren't treated the same."

So when I got to graduate school, it was then the beginning of the second wave women's movement, and I did become involved in it for sure. But the first real involvement around reproductive rights came later after I was already teaching. We were fighting the Hyde Amendment, which was denying Medicaid funding for abortions. So it was total discrimination against poor women and mainly women of colour in terms of medical funding for abortion. This was after Roe v. Wade, of course, because it was 1977. Abortion was legal in the United States and had already been declared a constitutional right. So we founded this organisation called CARASA, Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse. And I think there is a kind of simultaneity between CARASA and some of the organisations that were forming in Latin America and Europe, for example the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights in Europe, and the Latin American Network on Reproductive Rights and Health.

Nicole Bourbonnais 16:32

When you say "we": who else was involved in the organisation?

Rosalind Petchesky 16:37

These were other feminists in New York City, people I have known for a long time. They were friends and then other people who came along. How these networks form is really intangible. You know somebody and they know somebody and you say, "we're going to do this". There was one woman in particular, I have to give her credit, very formative, named Meredith Tax. Meredith and I and my friend Ellen Ross, and dearly beloved Rhonda Copelon, we organised a meeting that was going to be at the Village Vanguard. It was a nightclub in Greenwich Village, and we got everybody to come to this meeting. The place was packed. We started strategizing what we were gonna do, and we came up with this idea. CARASA meant the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, and its basic idea was that we were supporting women's right to decide about their pregnancies, their bodies, their sexuality, to have or to not have children, that we wanted to just as much confront the ways in which particularly women of colour, poor women, were being subjected to things like sterilisation abuse, loss of children to foster care, and denial of proper prenatal care and things like that. So we tried to be expansive, and we all considered

ourselves socialists and Marxists. We wanted a broad platform that would be inclusive, not just focused on the issue of abortion, but putting abortion in the context of the social conditions of women's lives, on housing, employment, food security, health care, all of it, childcare.

Nicole Bourbonnais 18:46

Where do you think that socialist Marxist perspective was coming from? Was that rooted in your education at Smith or Columbia or external to that?

Rosalind Petchesky 18:58

Well, only to the extent that a lot of it - I mean, it wasn't our education, wasn't our professors. It was ourselves. It was the students that formed student groups. I was part of these Marxist groups at Columbia. That was really the anti-war movement: the anti-Vietnam War movement was mainly moving to the left. So I was exposed to the left and to Marxist study groups mainly in graduate school at Columbia. I met people who were - I just thought: these are the most brilliant people I've ever met in my life, but they were all my peers. I wanted to always be where I felt like history was moving. And it sounded right to me. I studied Marxism, I took a course. It wasn't the professor, it was the other students, they said "come and be in our study group". You won't believe this. Nicole, this is true though. I guess I was in my first year at Columbia or second year, and these people in my Marxism class came up to me and said "we have this study group on Marx, and we'd love you to come and it meets such a such a night. And I said "I'd love to come, but I have to go home and make dinner for my husband." You believe that? It's true. I couldn't believe it myself when I remembered that I had said that. Oh my God. Because I still, you know, the tail end of kind of bridging these worldviews about women and what they were supposed to do. That marriage ended, by the way.

Nicole Bourbonnais 20:47

Was that in graduate school that you'd gotten married?

Rosalind Petchesky 20:49

Yeah, I did get married. I got married in 1967. I was between getting my Master's and then I was working for the city of New York for a year or two. That's when I got married. Then I went back to graduate school. That husband is my dear friend. He's like a family member, brother. He's my lawyer, and my son's father. He's Harry Petchesky. I keep the name Petchesky. My son said to me, when he was three and a half, he said, "Mommy, I want you to have my same name." I said "oh, of course."

Nicole Bourbonnais 21:33

You don't say no to a three-year-old.

Rosalind Petchesky 21:34

No, especially when you broke up with his father. Anyway, so you say here "involvement with the population movement"?

Nicole Bourbonnais 21:48

Yes. But maybe we should slow down a little bit and talk a bit more about your university experiences. For example, why did you choose political science? Or I think your Master was in international affairs, and then your PhD in Political Science?

Rosalind Petchesky 22:08

You studied my CV?

Nicole Bourbonnais 22:10

A little bit.

Rosalind Petchesky 22:12

Yeah, I did political science, because I thought that was about real world affairs, and what I was interested in was all the world and what was happening. I mean, I regret now a little bit that I didn't major in history or something. We didn't have such a robust geography field the I would have chosen that today. And also, at Smith, when I was an undergraduate, that department was called Public Law and Government, and I loved that part: public law. That's where the most interesting professors worked. That's where my mentor Ibrahim Abu-Lughod was, and other professors who were also very, very interesting. When I was at Smith and undergraduate, I had a professor named Guenter Lewy. He was a German refugee, and I think he taught constitutional law. I thought he was just brilliant. We had this incident where the college invited George Wallace, the racist, right wing governor of Alabama, to come speak at Smith College. It was a huge controversy on campus, a big division between people who were against it, and people who I would call John Stuart Mill libertarians, who said "No, we need to hear the other side, we need to hear what these people say, so we know how to respond to that". I was torn because I was a political theory major, and I studied Mill and I wasn't sure what I thought. So the guy came to speak in our big chapel. I went inside, and he started, like one minute into his speech, I would have said today so much more rude words, but I said: "this is really bad". There were people picketing outside and I just got up, walked out and joined the picket line. And my professor Lewy was the one who was organising the picket line. So I got in the picket line with my professor and the other people and marched around and ever since then, I became an ardent anti-libertarian. In other words, I do think there's such a thing as hate speech. I didn't support, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union when they let the Nazis march through Skokie, Illinois. I think it's complicated, but I think that we have to address those complexities and not take this fundamentalist view of speech. So now today, we adamantly fight for academic freedom and free expression for Palestinians because they are the most repressed and the most discriminated against on college campuses. I'm very involved in that movement. But it's not simply based on free speech. It's based on the ways in which Palestinians are treated like underclass and delegitimated in American political society, civil society included, not just the state. So I don't know, I'm just going on here. This isn't quite relevant.

Nicole Bourbonnais 26:17

It's relevant. It's interesting. Yeah, I think it goes towards understanding the broader worldview and how you understand this broader perspective. I'm kind of curious on the subject of the civil rights and on the Palestinian cause. What do you think made you so invested in this at such a young age? Was this kind of part of teenage rebellion?

Rosalind Petchesky 26:52

Civil rights or Palestinian justice?

Nicole Bourbonnais 26:55

The Palestinian [part] comes a bit later, right?

Rosalind Petchesky 26:57

Yeah.

Nicole Bourbonnais 26:57

So the civil rights is earlier. You talked about how in Tulsa, you're not really learning this history. Do you remember how you first became engaged? I know, it's a long time ago, to think of, but what might have been some of the push or pull factors of that early awareness?

Rosalind Petchesky 27:17

I don't know. My brother, Nathan, and I were involved in this together. Nathan was my buddy. He is just a year and a half younger than me. The civil rights movement was happening. We had this CORE chapter in our city and we were aware of it. Also, there were black people in my high school, and I was very active with the student council, I think I was the secretary of the Student Council and this guy David Campbell was President of Student Council. He and I, one time, had a date. This was an organised activity. He and I, and our friend Peaches Littlejohn, and one of her friends, and they were black, from the black community in Greenwood. We double dated to a high school basketball game, deliberately. Four of us walked into the high school gym, which was bleachers full of people. You could hear a pin drop, it was just silent. We just walked in and took our seats. We were nervous. Because you know black and white kids didn't hang out together. And there we were, and we did it. It wasn't a big deal, right? I mean, it sounds like nothing to you, I'm sure. But in those days, it really was and realising how much it was a big deal was part of that. And it was the influence of this guy, who was my friend on the student council, and knowing Peaches Littlejohn. She wasn't a close friend, but I mean, why was her life so separated from mine? It was reading about civil rights and hearing about it in the news. And then, you know, just wanting to be part of that, that movement, that struggle. It's more peer influence and then, just, I was always a kind of addict for the news, just reading, reading and listening. I thought that's what Jewish ethics was about: equality. And we call it brotherhood [laughs]. And when I saw it contradicted in my own community, and by Jewish Israelis, it just freaked me out. I mean, I just thought these people are hypocrites. This is not acceptable. And I think the experience in Palestine - and I say Palestine

because I think all of the land really is Palestine and stolen - reinforced my commitment to civil rights because I could see it where I least expected it, the racism and exclusion.

Nicole Bourbonnais 30:47

And had you grown up fairly religious?

Rosalind Petchesky 30:51

It was secular, I mean, religious in the sense that we belonged to a reform synagogue, and it meant we observed all the holidays, we went to the Shabbat services on Friday nights. I went to Sunday school, I never got bat-mitsvahed. Back then we thought it was something boys did and I didn't really want to go anyway. I didn't want to go to Hebrew school. I'm sort of sorry now, it would have been another language I could have learned, it would have helped me with Arabic. And certainly my grandparents, my grandmother, my mother's mother. My father was kind of an orphan. My mother's parents lived in Tulsa. We were close to them, and we went to their house all the time. My grandmother was very much a Zionist. She kind of worshipped her son, Maurice Friedman, the great Buber scholar. She read all the time. She was very brilliant. She had been a girl in Russia during the pogroms. But her father and all the male members of her family were Hasidim. I mean, she told us stories about how the men went to synagogue every single day and the women ran the inn, ran the house, made all the meals, did everything to maintain life. And the men would come back for lunch, and then they'd go back to the prayers. They'd come back for dinner and go back to their prayers. Her father, this Hasidic rabbi, whatever he was, burned all of her books. So that story really planted a feminist seed in me, of course. Such a heartbreaking, terrible thing, an irony. I'll just tell you a funny thing. When she came to America, she came by herself on a boat. She was 13. Her mother and her sister had gone to Toledo, Ohio, so she went to meet them. She was a young new immigrant girl in town in Bucyrus, Ohio, a suburb of Toledo. She was sponsored by a local woman, an upper-class Jewish woman who took her under her wing. And she happened to be the grandmother of Gloria Steinem.

Nicole Bourbonnais 33:26

Wow.

Rosalind Petchesky 33:27

Isn't that funny? Anyway, my grandmother and my father would have been very upset - I say this, this is putting it mildly - by my anti Zionism of today, I mean, very upset. They went to Israel. They loved the State of Israel. My father spoke fluent Hebrew. He taught about the Bible in the congregation. So that was a serious break from my family. My mother wasn't particularly religious or Zionist. She just sang very, very beautifully and led the choir and I sang in the choir. And it turns out now today, you know, I'm very active in Jewish Voice for Peace [JVP]. I love Jewish philosophy and I love our new New York City Chapter. And one of the things that's been incredible to me is to see this whole young generation of JVP activists, most of them queer, like in their 20s, who are way more religious than the old generation. The older generation JVP are all secular socialists, Marxists, hate religion. These kids just do it: they love the Shabbat, they love all the

ceremonies, they speak Hebrew, they got Bar Mitzvahed, you know, the whole thing. It's really interesting. And they're very radical, very militant about queer politics, feminist politics, but also very supportive of all the issues around environmental justice and racial justice, for sure, and immigration, and Palestine, above all. So it's just a new thing, and those of us in the old generation, some of them are just: "I'm not having anything to do with it, I'm not going to the synagogue." But some of us like me have said "Oh, that's so interesting". So going back to the synagogue, and with these young people. Watching the high holiday services online, what I loved was the music. I'm a musician, I play piano, and I used to sing a lot. I love the music and the songs, the tunes. That's what I love. Not the belief, not God. The music.

Nicole Bourbonnais 36:18

That's so funny. My family is Catholic and my grandma - we always thought she was just this very, very Catholic very serious about Catholicism, and many years later, she said much the same thing: that it was the music. The music and the community.

Rosalind Petchesky 36:36

Yeah. Yeah, for sure.

Nicole Bourbonnais 36:39

Yeah. So after you came back from Israel, and had this experience and shared it in the context of the synagogues, was your family also already aware of this? Had this become a point of friction?

Rosalind Petchesky 36:55

Um, I don't remember having fights with them about it. I mean, there might have been some tension with my father. But I wasn't then saying "I hate Zionism. I'm not a Zionist."

Nicole Bourbonnais 37:12

Right.

Rosalind Petchesky 37:13

That came later. And then I got so involved in both feminism and my research, and my writing. I became, you know, a kind of committed scholar. And my father was so proud. Smith College published my undergraduate thesis, you know, and gave me this big prize, I was the top person in my class, or something like that.

Nicole Bourbonnais 37:44

Do you remember what the subject was of your undergraduate thesis?

Rosalind Petchesky 37:49

Oh, yeah. It was the individual as a subject of international law and human rights law. I was arguing that even though supposedly states are the subjects, that there was a whole, all kinds of space for individuals to be subjects of law, in international law and human rights. I think it was

good, it was sophisticated. I'm a good writer. So yeah, I already was interested in human rights. And I had gone to the Hague Academy and started studying human rights. And then when I graduated from Smith, I got a Fulbright scholarship to go to France. I spent one year at the University of Strasbourg at an institute studying all kinds of things: comparative law and international law. Strasbourg was a center for studying international law and that's what I was studying there when I also fell in love and got a diaphragm [laughter]. Yeah.

Nicole Bourbonnais 39:02

Two equally big life moments [laughter]. Okay, and so then maybe to come back to graduate school. So in graduate school, if you can maybe kind of paint a picture for me, so you're involved in these anti-Vietnam War movements, Marxist socialist reading groups? Were there any other key activities or things that you remember?

Rosalind Petchesky 39:27

A big activity when I was already married and we had the anti-war movement on campus, we had a big student strike. When I say we, I mean, just the other students that I was part of. It was a very social thing. It was a way of having a community, a base. I always was kind of drawn to spaces where I could be part of something. I was never alone or I didn't like - I mean, even writing my dissertation was so painful. You had to sit in there and study. I have produced a whole lot of books, some books, but oh my god sitting at your computer by yourself all the time. You know what that's like, Nicole [laughter].

Nicole Bourbonnais 40:14

I do.

Rosalind Petchesky 40:14

Anyway, I like to be with people. So what we started to do was, we, a bunch of women who were identifying as feminists, but within this anti-war movement, and we were graduate students, so we weren't part of the SDS group. We had a graduate student kind of counterpart to SDS, Students for Democratic Society. We decided that we're going to occupy buildings and stuff, we've got to have a space for children on campus and we've got to have a daycare center. So what we did was, we made a daycare centre. We occupied a building, it was called Fayerweather Hall. That's where all the political science offices were. We took over one whole room, and we got people from the community and then we said: "we're going to have a daycare centre here, and come and join us." I mean, we went door to door and we had flyers. And we got kids, and we got people and teachers and stuff like that. But the thing didn't last forever. We couldn't keep the building. We got kicked out, and then we had to figure out where we're going to go with this project. And I was not part of the group that kind of rifled the university files. But they did. They went in and they went to files and people's offices, and they discovered that the university owned this huge house on Riverside Drive, this brownstone. It was more than a brownstone. It was a big house, a mansion. And so that mansion just had one kid living in it as a maintenance person, and it was empty and

then we said: "this is going to be our daycare centre". We went and we negotiated, and guess who was the lawyer for this project? Harry J Petchesky, my husband!

Nicole Bourbonnais 42:08

Ah, I see! [Laughter].

Rosalind Petchesky 42:13

We had demonstrations, and we went up on the big steps of the library, and Harry had a bullhorn. And so he guided us, kind of, he was very helpful actually and we got the Children's Mansion. It's a Children's Mansion, and then we were all meeting in the Children's Mansion to say, "Okay, now we have this space, what are we going to do?" And we decided: we're socialists, so we have to have no hierarchy. So everyone from the top teacher or the principal or whatever, down to the cook, get the same salary. We would be organisers and we'll pull back, let there be a parent's committee that runs it, and so on. Well, that thing lasted for 10 years.

Nicole Bourbonnais 43:04

Really?

Rosalind Petchesky 43:05

Really, 10 years, the Children's Mansion. It was the best, maybe the most successful political thing I ever did. But the parents didn't like our idea, and the teachers didn't like it. They said "no, we're not gonna have the same salary for everybody. There has to be, differentiation." So they did it their way but it was very successful, and very, very diverse, you know, Latinos, black people from the community who went there and who worked there. So that was an experience of socialist activism and feminist activism. It was socialist feminist activism. And then I got my PhD in 19.. I don't remember. Let's see.

Nicole Bourbonnais 43:59

72 maybe? Or 71. I have that you were at Ramapo College 1972 to 87.

Rosalind Petchesky 44:06

No Right, I was working on my PhD. Yes. Okay, around 1972, I guess, 73. I was part of feminist groups. In 1977 was when the mobilisation started around Medicaid funding for abortion. And I was part of the group that founded this organisation called CARASA , the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse. I started to talk about that before. And that was a robust organisation. It was terrific. It was mainly white women. There were tensions between lesbians and straight women. There were tensions around women who had children and needed childcare and couldn't go to meetings all the time at night, and women who worked during the day and couldn't go to meetings. I mean, all those things came up. But I think that it was a very, a very strong organisation. It was certainly very formative for me. It had terrific ideas, principles, which I write about in some of my books. We had a pamphlet called "Women under Attack." I wrote the pamphlet. It's kind of a broadside about: women need to decide what they do with their bodies, you

know, their sexuality, their pregnancies. And that started me - because basically I always wanted to be an activist, but I wasn't a very good organiser. I mean, I don't think very strategically. And really, I was an intellectual. And so I thought "well, what's the role for me?" And I thought "well, I can theorise about these ideas in this movement. I can write about it, the whole thing." So that's what started my writing about abortion and eventually became the book *Abortion and Woman's Choice*.

Nicole Bourbonnais 46:29

Right. And when you were doing your PhD, were you already writing about subjects like abortion and reproduction?

Rosalind Petchesky 46:38

Not really, but I remember going to a national meeting of the American Political Science Association and giving a talk about feminism. It was really a kind of critique of Shulamith Firestone, if you remember who she was. Shulamith Firestone was an early, you know, second wave feminist. And she wrote this book, *The Dialectic of Sex*. It was so famous, so important at that time. I remember going to this meeting, I didn't identify as a political scientist very much; I identified as a Marxist feminist and a scholar activist. But I got on this panel, somebody invited me to be on this panel. And I go: "wow me? on a panel of the American Political Science Association in Chicago?" I'd never been to one of those conferences so I went. I remember most vividly walking into this, you know, they have them in these big hotels, and walking into this big thing, and it was a sea of men in suits. That's what I saw, a sea of men in suits. "Where am I?" I mean, who are these people? And we went into my session. Mine had some provocative title, like, "women and their bodies" or something. I don't know what it was. And we walked in, and it was way overcrowded, and they had to move us to a much bigger room. And I gave this talk, and I honestly, Nicole, I can't remember what I said. It was my first talk about feminism. The woman who organised it and who I was critiquing on the panel was very upset. I remember people being upset, and criticising me from the audience, but I don't remember what it was about. Anyway.

Nicole Bourbonnais 48:49

I can imagine at that time, really many subjects in feminism would have been controversial.

Rosalind Petchesky 48:55

Definitely. Yeah, absolutely.

Nicole Bourbonnais 48:58

And especially in political science. I mean, they're probably as you say, there weren't many women.

Rosalind Petchesky 49:04

Oh, and it was so - political science was just so reactionary. It was terrible. I mean, it was the field of the Cold War. It was the field of regional studies, about counter insurgency. It was just terrible. Actually, I didn't even fully realise how terrible it was. I was interested in political theory. I loved

studying Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau, and all those guys, all those old white guys, I really did. And then I tried to fashion my courses in a more feminist and diverse way. I taught Fanon and taught Mary Wollstonecraft and all that, and helped to build a field. So when I went to Ramapo college, I went to Ramapo because when I was graduating from Colombia. My advisor said "Well, where do you think you want to apply for jobs?" And I said "I will only work in a" -- at first there was debate about are you going to work in a factory or in a university? And I realised I was not very well cut out to work in a factory, so scratch that. But I said, my compromise was to say "I will only work in a working class, or community college, or state College. That's it. No elite colleges." And my advisor said, "Oh, good. Okay. Bye, bye. Good luck. Good luck with that." And basically they were saying you're on your own. So I just found job openings and there was one at Ramapo college where it happened that my very best friends were already teaching. My, my dearest, dearest [friends], and they said "Oh, come on. We have a job here. You've got to come." Well, this college, Ramapo college, it was only two or three years old, and it was very experimental. So it didn't have traditional departments. It had the School of Environmental Studies, the School of Labour Studies, I mean, it was like that, the School of International Studies. So we became the Department of Social Relations. You can imagine it was all leftists in this department, and a few feminists. It was very interesting. I really enjoyed it. It was great, until I kind of outgrew it. I mean, it was too small and the student body changed. We had the most terrific students and a lot of black students from Newark. We had, for example, the black students who were mainly housed in the dorms. The dorms were mainly the students of colour and the white students all lived in the suburbs around there with their families. They were much more conservative. The black students had a big strike one year. They were striking over a lot of issues: about the curriculum, how white it is, about the faculty, lack of diversity among the faculty, but one of their big issues, which was an eye opener for me, was the dogs in the dorms. And they said, We don't like these dogs in the dorms. They felt the white students treated the dogs better than them.

Nicole Bourbonnais 52:41

Oh, wow.

Rosalind Petchesky 52:42

And to them, it was a sign of racism. They remember the dogs in the civil rights movement who attacked people. The police dogs, they associated them with repression. And I just went "Oh, wow, I didn't know anything about that." There were lots of things about Ramapo that were new. I had very interesting women students and we started a women's studies programme at Ramapo and it was one of the first in the country, in 1972. We started a women's studies programme, and we were very focused on women's labour and women in work cause that's what we were interested in. We had a close connection to local labour unions. We were part of our labour union. It was a union for the whole state college system of New Jersey. There was a Ford Motor plant down the road from our college, and they went on strike and we supported them, and then we had an all-system strike of our college system, twice, two different years, and the Ford workers came and supported our strike. We went on the picket line every single day. We occupied the president's office, the pathetic president of Ramapo College, I feel sorry for him now poor thing. We were very radical.

And then, at some point, the nature of the student body changed. They were much more conservative. I remember having a student in my class, a woman, who was like a Trump Republican. She was horrible, and she was very smart and she was very outspoken and rude in class, and she was always criticising me and always trying to be defiant. It was really unpleasant. It was terrible. And I realised I didn't really have good tools for countering that kind of thing. She was very sure of herself and I was not. Interesting. And also the students became more and more conservative, and more and more white, and suburban. And I took a leave of absence and went to Bryn Mawr College, I was something or other visiting professor at Bryn Mawr, because my friend taught there and she arranged that this would happen. That was interesting, too, because, of course - it was like Smith, I had gone to Smith College. So this was my visiting year and it felt really alien. And I felt like, oh, that's why I did not want to teach in this kind of place. This is not where I belong. It's not where my head is. That's why I came to Ramapo and then there was an opportunity, there was an opening for the head of Women's Studies at Hunter College in CUNY in New York, and I lived in New York this whole time, so I wouldn't have to commute. I applied for it and I got it. And I went to Hunter and that completely changed my life. And that was in the 1980s already.

Nicole Bourbonnais 56:22

Right. And so this whole time now you also have a son. So you're talking about starting Women's Studies, women's labour, is this impacting how you're viewing these subjects, inevitably?

Rosalind Petchesky 56:37

Yeah, I have one son, I wanted another child. It didn't happen. My son Jonah is now 50 years old and has two children. I have two fabulous grandchildren. They live in Texas, Jonah is the best. He didn't turn out the way I planned for him to turn out. He went his own way. He's in business. But you know, he's successful but not rich, I mean rich by some people's standards, but not a billionaire or anything like that. They have a wonderful life in Texas. But my son from the day he was born was just a revelation. First of all, I went to the hospital, I hadn't had a sonogram or anything like that, so I didn't even know what gender he was going to be. And I was by then in this radical feminist consciousness raising group, can you imagine? And these women were all supposedly my support group. I go to the hospital, I give birth. I have Jonah. And I get these flowers and a card from this women's group saying "it's okay, we'll still love you" or something like that because I had a boy. I said "what the fuck? Are you kidding me? Get out of here." I wouldn't even deal with them after that. I thought that was terrible.

Jonah was raised - his father and I, we always were on very good terms. He's a very dear man, I love Harry. But from the very beginning we made a list. Okay, this is your bath night, this is your bath night. This is your feeding night, this is your feeding night, divide everything down the middle, the minute he was born. And Harry was a great dad. So that was working very well. But more and more, I was becoming more, I don't know, engaged in feminist and radical socialist politics. I remember once we went to a big demonstration about Attica, when the Attica massacre

happened, and Harry was really uncomfortable. More and more I am realising the differences. He was your Democratic Party liberal, good liberal, you know, the differences became too glaring. And the main thing was that I felt as a feminist, I just felt more and more, this is not the life. He's paying all the bills, he's doing everything. I'm just, you know, I need to be on my own. I'd never been on my own. This is... I just have to and so I decided to separate from the marriage and Harry was very unhappy, but he was very sweet. I mean, he and Jonah took me around to help me look for an apartment. Um, I think he must have thought I was going to come back. But that wasn't to be. Jonah was three and a half and then we decided on joint custody. Harry finally agreed to it. And I mean, we're written up in a book that a friend of mine, a friend from graduate school did a whole book on it - I don't know, anyway, this kind of arrangement, they kept asking us to be interviewed on TV about joint custody and we wouldn't do that. Jonah had two households that were four blocks apart, so he got two of everything. He managed it well. He said, at the very beginning - we were just going to divide the weekend, split it the way we'd done everything. He said, "no, I don't want to divide the weekend. I want to be with one of you the whole weekend." So we had to rearrange our schedule. He was three or four. I mean, he was, like, he knew what he wanted. It worked out okay.

Jonah, you know, is the dearest thing in my life, and his children Anna and Jack. Anna is going to be, unbelievable, 13 in December, and Jack is going to be 11 on Thanksgiving, so in two weeks, and they are fabulous, just fabulous. They have a really good life, a really comfortable life. I would say feminism and anti-racism are very embedded in the house, in the family, partly because their mother has come a long way. She's half Mexican and she grew up poor, and she had this kind of defiant attitude about "I worked my way and I went to college and none of my stupid cousins did and people have to just work their way." And she gradually learned that that was not a good, you know, reflection of reality for most people, most disadvantaged and poor people and people of colour. And she's now very, almost radical, and getting a master's in social work, in child development. She was very influenced by my partner who's an African American, loves him very much. He grew up in Harlem. All came around very well, as far as the family is concerned.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:02:25

Right. But I mean, it must have been somewhat challenging working as an academic and kind of being an activist at the same time. I can imagine.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:02:33

It was really hard. When I was first contemplating getting pregnant. I had a mentor advisor in graduate school who was a woman and she said "go see this woman professor, who would be good to talk to." I went to see her. I saw her once and I don't remember her name. I don't remember anything about her, what she thought. She said to me "You can have a child and do your dissertation; or you can work and have a child." She said "you cannot do all three." And of course I said I'm gonna do all three. Of course. I had to, I mean, I was gonna do my dissertation and have a child and teach, and I did all. I was lucky because Jonah slept through the night from three weeks old.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:02:34

Oh one of those miracle babies.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:03:23

Yeah, he loved to sleep. He loved to eat. So he was just the easiest baby in the world. He didn't have tantrums. He had one episode of colic. But he was an incredibly easy child to raise. That's number one giving him credit. I was able to hire babysitters, and childcare when I needed it. We had joint custody, so Harry had him half the week. So honestly, I mean, there were challenges for sure. There were a lot of times that were sad because I felt Harry had all the advantages. He had more money, he had a car, he had ability to go places in the summer, do fun things with Jonah that I couldn't do because I didn't have the income. But you know, that's kind of minor. I would say today watching how Jonah and Danielle have raised Anna and Jack, I would do it differently. I mean, I think Jonah kind of raised himself. They spend so much time, they invest so much energy in every aspect of their kids and have done. Everything, from school, Jack's learning disability, their activities, what they wear, what they eat, I mean everything. Jonah grew up - I don't know how he grew up. He did. I mean he resents that. He had very bad problems with his teeth. We didn't research, we didn't investigate the best ways of handling that, and he suffered some of the consequences. And he's got his son, boy, on the most painful denture things, these things they put in his mouth that are very painful so he won't have the problems Jonah had with his jaw and his teeth. So I feel like I was not the most, the best mother. I certainly have a lot of regrets. But I guess it turned out all right. I mean, we have a great relationship.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:05:41

Okay, great. All right. Thanks so much.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:05:43

Excellent. Okay.

Rosalind Petchesky Interview 2/2, October 25, 2021.

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:00

Okay, so today is Monday, October 25 and this is the second interview with Rosalind Petchesky. So last time, we talked a lot about your early activism in different movements, different organisations, some of your experiences growing up. We talked about CARASA, as well as your early career as an academic working at Ramapo college and your experience with childbirth and motherhood. We just finished as you transitioned to Hunter College. So I wanted to start by just asking if there was anything else you wanted to add, anything else important that you see in your life leading up to the transition to Hunter College?

Rosalind Petchesky 00:40

Um, no, I mean, I think all the major activism around reproductive justice and reproductive health came after that. Did I talk about being the head of Women's Studies?

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:57

I think you had just started to discuss that. So you had just moved to Hunter College where you started to focus more on women's studies.

Rosalind Petchesky 01:07

Well, my job there, I was hired to be the head of Women's Studies. So that was my job. And I had already done Women's Studies at Ramapo College. But when I got to Hunter, I felt that Hunter was such a very cosmopolitan and international place with students from all over the world and speaking many languages. You'd have as many as 18 languages among your students in a single class, I mean, languages of origin that they spoke in their homes, etc. I felt that the Women's Studies programme needed to have that kind of focus, so I tried immediately to broaden our policy committee and make it much more international in our curriculum and our programmes.² But as I became more and more interested in issues of reproductive health and questions - early on, with my involvement in CARASA, which was started in the 1970s, I had been very, very concerned about access to reproductive health, and particularly, with the Hyde Amendment, it had to do with [banning] Medicaid funding for abortions. We had produced, I don't know, if I talked about - I'd like to backtrack and talk a little bit more about CARASA, because we produced this book. This is a collector's item. It's called Women Under Attack: Abortion, Sterilization Abuse, and Reproduction Freedom, and I wrote this with a collective of people. The publication date on it is 1979. A lot of people were involved in the collective that formulated it and got it published and distributed.

² The Women's Studies programme at Hunter College was later renamed the Women and Gender Studies program in the late 1990s and became a full department in 2015.

But I just wanted to, if you don't mind, read you a little bit from it, because this captures our perspective, which I think has become very much now embodied in the reproductive justice movement and its attempt to embed abortion in a much broader array of social conditions. So we say: "our members are of different ages, races and religions. We are health workers, housewives, teachers, students, secretaries, lawyers, waitresses and city workers, mothers and grandmothers, gay and straight, political activists, and just concerned people. We want reproductive freedom for all women." We were very focused on women. What is very interesting looking back at this old publication is that we had no concept whatsoever of queer politics, of transgender, of trans women, none, in the late 1970s. It was all binary women and men. "No category of women, poor, young, handicapped, should be excluded from reproductive freedom. To really have that freedom we require abortion services for all women, regardless of income, safe, well-designed birth control, sex education in the schools, good and accessible pre- and postnatal and maternal health care, and the right to conduct our sex lives as we wish and with dignity. Reproductive freedom depends on equal wages for women, enough to support a family alone or with others, welfare benefits for an adequate standard of living, decent housing to provide a comfortable, secure place to live and rest, reliable skilled childcare and schools to enable our children to become healthy adults and an end to unsafe and toxic working conditions, which cause sterility and birth defects. Reproductive freedom demands a radical transformation" - these are all in caps - "REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM DEMANDS A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION of society and the quality of life." And then we have a whole paragraph on ending sterilisation abuse.

So that kind of broad perspective is what I brought to the movement, never singularly focusing on just one issue or even just reproductive health, but reproductive and sexual health and all: what Sonia Corrêa and I called the "enabling conditions" for it to even be possible. So I just wanted to highlight that, and that was a perspective that we did not find present very much in the mainstream population organisations, like, even Planned Parenthood, NARAL, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League or whatever they were called back then. We considered ourselves to be on a different - I mean, we were a little bit adversarial with them, and very critical, very critical of them in CARASA. Going into the 1990s that certainly was my perspective that I tried to bring to the group that formulated the Declaration [Women's Declaration on Population Policies] in 1993 when we first met. Was it 92 or 93?

Nicole Bourbonnais 07:06

I think there was a first meeting in 92 in London.

Rosalind Petchesky 07:09

Yeah the London meeting, right? And then Rio.

Nicole Bourbonnais 07:13

Another much bigger one in Rio [held in January 1994, titled the "Reproductive Health and Justice: International Women's Health Conference for Cairo, '94", which produced the "Rio Statement"].

Rosalind Petchesky 07:16

Right. So when I was first at Hunter in 1992, there was a big international women's studies conference in Dublin. I can't remember what it was, but it was an organisation of academic women around the world, but mainly really based a lot in Europe. And the President of Hunter College, who was Donna Shalala (who later becomes the Secretary of Health in the United States) - she was a big deal in Democratic Party politics, and she was the president of the University of Wisconsin, and then the University of Miami in Florida, blah, blah, blah. She was the president of Hunter at the time. She hired me and she told me she wanted me to go to this meeting, and so I went to the meeting. I found it very boring, but I went. When I came back, she said, "Well, we are going to host the next one, whenever it is." She wanted me to be all involved in it, and I said "I'll do this, only on condition that I can organise my own track within it, and I want there to be a track of transnational feminists engaged in reproductive and sexual health." Then I went to Joan Dunlop, and Adrienne Germain for help. I said "I'm organising this. We're gonna host this at Hunter College. It's a big deal. I want you to help me reach out to the best activists in lots of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa that I don't have contact with. So they did that. They really started me on all the work that I did subsequently. I consider Joan and Adrienne to be my godmothers in all the work I did through the 90s: I mean, my writing, my organising. They were so generous, sharing all of their contexts that were just wonderful. We had this meeting at Hunter College, and there were people from a lot of countries, so that's where I made my first contacts with women from the Philippines, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Nigeria, Egypt, all those countries. And they all came to our meeting and we wrote a report. And I had a coauthor [Jennifer Weiner]. She was my kind of research assistant, I met her when I gave a talk at Princeton. She's now the most successful, what do you call those novels about young women? Those young women novels that are in the airports.

Nicole Bourbonnais 10:43

Like young adult fiction or?

Rosalind Petchesky 10:45

Not young adult, it's for adults. ["Chick lit"]. Anyway, she's a zillionaire from her writing. Her professor at Princeton was Joyce Carol Oates. Anyway, never mind about that. But we wrote about the meeting, we documented it in a report. And then from there, I conceptualised something, you know - are you a runner?

Nicole Bourbonnais 10:54

A little bit.

Rosalind Petchesky 11:00

Well, I don't know, I used to run back then, but I don't anymore. I was out on a run. And I just got this idea of starting this thing, which we called the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group, IRRRAG. And I drew on all those wonderful women from that conference at Hunter

to start it up, and then got some more. I got, really, by today's standards, tremendous funding from the MacArthur Foundation and the Ford Foundation to do this project. And it lasted seven years, the IRRRAG project, and we wrote a book called Negotiating Reproductive Rights that had chapters based on every country [where we did the research]. We had research action teams for seven countries, Nigeria, Egypt, Philippines, Malaysia, US, Mexico, and Brazil. We would have meetings periodically. We had funding for all this stuff. It was incredible, lots of grants. We met at Bellagio, we met in Mexico, we met in Brazil, and brainstormed and worked out the protocols of the research, but also the ideas - who would be writing, who would be researching, and everything was supposed to have both academic researchers and activists on the ground. That was sort of the premise on which we operated. We did this project for seven years. And we participated in the meetings in Cairo and Beijing as a group. We had a whole plan, we presented, we prepared panels for the Women's Caucus, the NGO forum. We worked very, very hard on those UN conferences. Joan and Adrienne asked me to be part of this group that was going to meet in London, I went there. I mean, I felt a little bit, I don't know, I felt a little different from the others, because I identified as a Marxist, and had this broad perspective and wanted there to be. I fought for that. But I think a lot of others came along, too. And I think when we got to Cairo, and to Beijing, we were very committed to this kind of broad perspective, that would link not just abortion, but all aspects of reproductive health care, to the enabling conditions of livelihoods and housing, and social justice. So I remember being in London, I don't remember very many specifics about what happened there.

Nicole Bourbonnais 14:33

But even just that general sense of feeling like you didn't quite fit in - is that because you felt the other participants were more moderate or more policy focused?

Rosalind Petchesky 14:42

I did think they were somewhat moderate and a little cautious about antagonising the US government, for example, the State Department. But also there was another aspect...As much as I was so grateful to Joan and Adrienne and just love them to pieces, I also didn't appreciate a kind of in-groupiness that they functioned with...they wanted to have a small group that they could trust. I've come across this again, in my work on Palestine with certain groups, they just didn't want to be open in a way that I would have been. Now, there's things to say on both sides of that, and I've made mistakes about being open, ended up being a little bit crazy. But I felt they could have been a little more democratic. And I missed that. And always in these things, there's a kind of exclusionary aspect.

There was also a lot of hostility between this group, and then a whole other formation which revolved around Betsy Hartmann and Farida Akhtar. Betsy Hartmann from Hampshire College, the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights based in Europe. Farida was from Bangladesh, and some people just thought she was the second coming. And that group went to Cairo with a very strong agenda. We in CARASA were always, as I said, very suspicious of the population organisations. So we understood that position. Akhtar, Farida Akhtar, I'm just looking

at this title of an article that she wrote in 1994, the agitation piece for the Cairo conference: "Resist reduction of "population" issues into women's issues." So what she's saying there is: you're using the kind of front of women's rights and human rights and all that to insert a population control agenda. That was their fear and suspicion. So they were very suspicious of us as kind of doing the work of the population control establishment. There was a lot of tension between these two groups in Cairo and Beijing. I wrote about that, in my book, I have this book called Global Prescriptions. I went back and looked at it, and you can just check it out on pages 47-48, I wrote about that tension. I went back and looked at it and I thought, "huh, that's interesting." I was trying to be fair, sympathetic with both positions, and ended up being quite critical of the outcomes. Not so much the document itself, but the lack of enforcement, and then to some extent the document in Cairo. We succeeded very much in putting a language, a feminist language on the agenda and making it visible, and making the argument. By the way, the argument that women's rights are human rights was not Hillary Clinton's invention at all. It came out of the women's movements in all these countries. The argument for making reproductive health accessible, understanding quality care in a really broad way, for example, it would include clinicians that were not racist, that were sympathetic to whoever walked in the door, that followed up and tried to make sure that [their patients were] going back to decent housing and sanitation.

Nicole Bourbonnais 20:46

Can I ask maybe to backtrack a little bit? How did you meet Adrienne and Joan in the first place?

Rosalind Petchesky 20:54

Good question. If I remember. Wow. Who was it? Somebody referred me to Joan. And it could have been Carmen Barroso, I'm just guessing here. But I knew Carmen. We had met at some national women's studies conference or something. And I think she was still in Brazil then, I don't think she was working at MacArthur yet. But it might have been Carmen, who remains my friend to this day. Carmen Barroso might have been the person who referred me to Joan.

Nicole Bourbonnais 20:56

If you remember. Did you say, the funding you mentioned, the funding for the research group IRRRAG...

Rosalind Petchesky 21:43

It mainly came from Ford and MacArthur. Yeah. And that's because Ford and MacArthur had people working there who were part of our movement. You know, it was a different time in the 1990s. Feminists with a strong interest in reproductive and sexual health were working in these foundations. I got a MacArthur Genius Grant. I mean, how could that happen? Only because people working there, and that included Carmen, by this time, were part of the same movement. I mean, that's how power works. I mean, I would never be getting something like that, somebody like me, today. No way. So we did get very significant funding, we felt very supported by those foundations. They became, you know, as I worked in later years with Sexuality Policy Watch, based in Rio with Richard Parker and Sonia Corrêa, we just found the Ford Foundation becoming

much more tight, restrictive. Much more surveillance of their grantees. And I remember when I was writing this book, the Global Prescriptions book, and later there was a big critique in the women's movement here and in Europe and Australia, of what people called NGO-isation. You are probably familiar with that. I felt very vigilant about that, because I thought: there is definitely something true in that, but I felt like, I'm one of the people being criticised. We couldn't have done our work without that support from those foundations. There's just no way we could have done what we did. We couldn't have brought all those people to those big UN conferences, and had an impact.

And people were really good. Well, they were not just our group, I mean, Bella Abzug, I was part of WEDO, Women's Environment and Development Organisation, in those years, I forgot to say. And Bella was kind of an influence on me, she was something else. She was a phenomenal organiser, and she organised this women's caucus that became the linkage caucus. And people knew how to lobby, they knew how to go to their delegations. They had people on their delegations. So [my friend Marilen Danguilan] for example, was on her Philippine delegation. That was true about a few others. Or, how to talk to those people (country delegates). Some of the rest of us didn't know how to do that as well, but we'd sort of sneak into the meetings and try to take notes and I don't know, make trouble. I think that work was good work. And I do think it had an impact on thinking. It had an impact on agencies in the UN. I don't think UNFPA would be the same today if it hadn't gone through that challenge of having to deal with all these crazy feminists and listen to their arguments. But at the same time, if you look at the whole arc, the UN and its agencies are just people today, you know. They don't have any influence or impact. We thought that everything happening in the UN was big. We thought we were there where real change was happening, and actually, it wasn't. I mean, what was changing was language and norms, for sure. By participating in that kind of collective activity, you are also forming a movement, you're forming relationships, and in the end, the thing that matters most in any political action, is relationships. That's the thing that matters. So I come away with that, I mean, I still have strong relationships with some of those people. Some of them are not living anymore. I mean, it was an important time, and I do think it had an impact.

Over the long run, the centres of power have shifted dramatically. The US was always the centre of power. US power is pernicious. That was another thing that made me feel a little bit more, a little bit alienated, you know, but just somewhat different from the other people in that London group, in the Rio group, because I was a strong anti-imperialist. I was very critical of US policy, and very distrustful. Adrienne is somebody who - she would know someone in the State Department, and so she thought she could talk to them. And I did not, I could not. And I really, you know, I've been through the whole anti-war, Vietnam War movement, and, you know, US intervention in El Salvador, I mean, so many things. So, in some ways, I was more sympathetic with, you know, Betsy Hartman and Farida Akhtar's group, in a way.

Nicole Bourbonnais 27:23

And did you know those actors? I mean, are these very direct encounters or is this debate happening more through articles that are being written, competing statements?

Rosalind Petchesky 27:35

Well, it was both. I mean it was more through competing statements, and, you know, manifestos and things that people would say, but I knew them. I didn't like Farida, I thought she was very dogmatic. I always liked Betsy Hartman, she's a very nice person. And we would have little conversations, but there was not a lot of direct contact. I once went to the Hague, I was in the Netherlands, and I stayed with this - I'm forgetting her name, I'm really sorry - a Dutch woman who was very active with that group. And she was just so lovely. And I enjoyed being with her. I'm sure we talked about some of these issues and where the convergence is, and where were the differences. But there was not an effort as I recall, I could be wrong, but I don't remember an effort to bring people together and say, "Let's just talk this out. Let's see where we might be able to work together." I don't think that happened.

Nicole Bourbonnais 28:50

Even at Rio? I mean, because Rio was quite a big conference, a couple hundred.

Rosalind Petchesky 28:56

Yeah, no, no, no.

Nicole Bourbonnais 28:58

Do you remember some of the tensions or discussions there?

Rosalind Petchesky 29:03

Oh that Rio conference. Oh my God, in the gorgeous Gloria hotel. Aye-yai-yai. I'm sure that some of them were there. And I'm sure these tensions were present. You know, I told you, I sent my papers to the Sophia Smith collection, and I can't even look at my files and see if I have notes about that conference. I must have because I take notes on everything. But I don't honestly remember very much about it. I now wonder if other people that you've interviewed have talked about it in more detail. I'm sure they must have.

Nicole Bourbonnais 29:38

Yeah, people remember different things. It's kind of interesting to me what you remember, you know what even left an impression that you kind of continue to remember it. So you know, it's not a problem if you don't remember it, but it's interesting what stays in your mind and what doesn't.

Rosalind Petchesky 29:54

I had a very, very, very dear and close friend I worked with through all of this and in the UN conferences, and she was a feminist human rights lawyer named Rhonda Copelon. Rhonda was not at the London meeting, but I believe she was in Rio. And I think that it ended up that Rhonda and I worked very closely together on drafting language, we were always drafting language at the UN

conference at Cairo, and then again in Beijing. What we were trying to codify and get into those documents was the idea of bodily integrity. We thought that was a concept - the idea of owning one's body, and bodily integrity and owning one's own body. And we tried to get it into all of these provisions. We drafted it, and we pushed it to the people who were working with the delegates. So we were working on that level of language. And we had some success, we had a dispute with Adrienne. Adrienne said "no, bodily integrity is no good, because the right wing and the Vatican think that bodily integrity applies to the fetus. And so that's gonna backfire." [Adrienne thought] we should say something much blander [“security of the person”]. We thought it was not as powerful.

Nicole Bourbonnais 31:32

And so did you feel satisfied with - I mean, you've already said you had kind of some critiques of it, but did you feel that the core issues, the kind of broader social economic perspective that you were pushing for, was integrated into the Cairo platform, into the concept of sexual and reproductive rights? Or not really, to a limited extent? Basically, how did you feel about that?

Rosalind Petchesky 32:06

We felt that the acknowledgement of social and enabling conditions was there, but what would have to happen to make that real, was not there. In other words, there was not an effort to address inequality and inequities in finance, in trade, access to markets. There was not an effort to address levels of military spending which affect other aspects of budgets. There was nothing about taxes. These things which had to do with infrastructure and making the society more just in order to make it possible to have more just healthcare systems, they were not there, and they were not addressed. In that way, I mean, I did this thing in the report card, remember that report card in this book?³ So I'm saying: what are the achievements of ICPD, this is just an example. "Gender equality, equity and empowerment of women as a separate chapter, recognition of the empowerment and autonomy of women, and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status, as highly important in and of itself was a paragraph in the Cairo programme of action, but no resource allocations or specified amounts for any aspect of sustainable development, primary health care, women's empowerment and improved status, poverty alleviation, or environment." So you have this language that all sounds very nice, but you don't have the shifts in power and resources and money that could make it real. That's sort of the pattern.

Nicole Bourbonnais 33:59

And in fact, I mean, there's a decline in funding for international reproductive health work in the late 90s, kind of early 2000s.

Rosalind Petchesky 34:12

That's right.

³ "A feminist report card on the Cairo Programme of Action," Box 2.2 in Rosalind Petchesky, *Global Prescriptions: Gendering Health and Human Rights* (Zed Books, 2003), p. 44.

Nicole Bourbonnais 34:12

Do you think that's because it moved away from this very instrumentalist population rhetoric to the more women's reproductive health [approach]?

Rosalind Petchesky 34:23

Well, it might be, but that doesn't mean that we should have stayed with the instrumentalist's population strategies, you know.

Nicole Bourbonnais 34:32

Right. But it's interesting what you say about who's working in the foundations.

Rosalind Petchesky 34:36

And that works with it too.

Nicole Bourbonnais 34:38

How much does that impact where the funding goes and whether women's reproductive health is a priority or not?

Rosalind Petchesky 34:46

Women's reproductive health always remains kind of a priority in the more liberal foundations like MacArthur and Ford. It did. But you know, it'll shift as their focus becomes - and I think importantly - on other things, like racism, police brutality, schools. I mean, there are a lot, a lot of things. So if I were, you know, someone working at the Ford Foundation, I would think maybe we put too much emphasis over here. But the problem with that, and that kind of budgetary thinking is that it's very fragmented, and it doesn't see things holistically, and it doesn't see things intersectionally. So it doesn't understand that there's completely a connection between the treatment of women and how you do policing, or how you do education, or healthcare benefits. All of it, it's a whole. So how do you develop a philanthropic programme that reflects that holism, that holistic view? It may not be possible, because philanthropies are very complicit in the state, and they are dependent on their donors, and they're dependent on the approval of the government. They can't get in trouble, and they are bureaucracies. So, until there's a whole new way of thinking, I mean, revolutionary transformation of how you do public policy and how you do government that is much more democratic and connected to people on the ground, and maybe localised, maybe decentralised, much more decentralised, I don't think these things are going to change.

And I do think at the heart of all of it, is profound militarism. I think the ways in which military contractors control the flow of funds, and goods and services, throughout the world is something that's so dominant that nothing else can really advance until we tackle that, until we get rid of the cultures of war, and militarism, and punishment. So I don't know, I just think that the reproductive and sexual health field needs to have a much more revolutionary, transformative and abolitionist perspective. And abolitionism as the kind of feminism now, which wants to not just

abolish prisons, but to transform the thinking about social change that looks to punishment as an answer: any kind of, you know, how do you have transformative justice? That's what people are working on now, and especially antiracist feminists who are identified as abolitionists, and how could that perspective be brought into the reproductive and sexual health field. I don't know if you have any more questions?

Nicole Bourbonnais 35:21

One thing I was thinking about also when you were talking about CARASA but kind of connects us to what you were just talking about now. Some of the points that you're making to me seem similar to conversations that were going on in the black women's health movement. And then in later years and early 2000s organisations like Sister Song and Loretta Ross and this kind of thing. So was CARASA connected to that, or was CARASA a kind of a smaller organisation amongst..

Rosalind Petchesky 39:53

CARASA was earlier than Loretta came along and Sister Song were later. The whole development of the reproductive justice movement was its own thing, but I felt that, Loretta knew about CARASA, and she knew, but I don't think they gave quite enough credit to what we had done. But it doesn't matter really, because they've been very important, very powerful. And now, I think that Sister Song, which I continue to try to support, there's an emphasis that that movement has on self-care and wellness, which is very positive, but it also can be in a way individualist, just focused on individuals and individual relationships and personal life. And spiritual life, I mean, it becomes very spiritual, which can feel good and be good, but get away from larger structural issues. And I do come from the more old-fashioned left, that was...

Nicole Bourbonnais 41:38

I was gonna say, is that the Marxist coming out?

Rosalind Petchesky 41:43

Yeah I guess so. I think that they've been fantastic, those [Black] women [reproductive justice advocates], and they've influenced me for sure, and I'm grateful for their genius, their brilliance. But I still think that the question of how you transform whole systems has got to be on the table. And I don't think it will happen just through local conversations in communities, it has to be there, but it has to be on some other level too, and maybe the tools of transformative justice, and conversations at a local and community level need to be infiltrated into places like foundations, and government agencies. And that would happen through people, individual people working there, and bringing that perspective there. That's the only way that it will happen.

Nicole Bourbonnais 43:08

Yeah, when I talked to Sundari, she described it as "feminists in the system."

Rosalind Petchesky 43:14

Well, they're always, this is an old, old discussion about inside versus outside - the best is to be inside and outside, and the connections between the inside and the outside. So, we really thought the revolution was going to come in our lifetime, when I was much younger, we absolutely thought that we would have socialist revolution. And now, I mean, if we can just hold back fascism that will be a lot because it's really, really, really, really bad. So, I don't know what else do you have on the list?

Nicole Bourbonnais 44:02

Well, we've talked a lot about your work in the activist and reproductive rights community. But what about your position as a political scientist? I mean, do you feel connected to a political science community, or were you always more connected to the women's movement, and how was your work?

Rosalind Petchesky 44:25

Definitely, I was always, always on the fringes [of political science as a discipline]. I mean, my abortion book, which was published a zillion years ago, right. People didn't know: "what is she?" They thought I was a historian. The abortion book won a prize from the American Historical Association. So I was always like: neither here nor there. I never identified strongly with political science. And the jobs that I got, my first teaching job at Ramapo I was in this thing called the School of Social Relations. It wasn't even a political science department. And when I went to Hunter I was in the political science department, but I had to be in a department as that was the way Hunter was structured. I had to have an appointment in a department because Women's Studies was not a department, could not appoint me or give me tenure or anything. So I got everything through the president of the college and I said, "Look, I have tenure already. I'm not coming here if you don't give me tenure." And she did. So I was there willy nilly. And I made friends there. There were some people I really loved, other people not so much. I liked teaching there very much. And I think I was a pretty good citizen in the political science department, but my work was not traditional political science work. I just continued to do what I did. I was very privileged, because I had this funding. I could pay my way. I had two offices, one for the IRRRAG project, and one for me as a teacher, as a professor.

Last year, I won this award from this group called The Caucus for a New Political Science, which is a left caucus within the American Political Science Association. And because it was COVID, they couldn't give the award at the APSA conference, they didn't have the APSA conference. So I just got this award. And now I have this plaque thing, which is very beautiful. It was a lifetime achievement award for combining scholarship and activism in political science. I wasn't even a member of the organisation. I thought, "okay, but thank you very much. This is ridiculous, but okay." And this year, as the previous winner, I had to be the chair of the committee to choose the new winner of this award. So I did my job. And I had people on this committee who were appointed by somebody else, and I worked with the committee. And I said, "well, look, there's just one thing for sure, this award has never in its 25 years, or whatever, gone to a person of colour, excuse me, but that's gonna stop right here. So let's work hard to find [an outstanding person]." They have to

be kind of senior for lifetime achievement. So we did, we worked very collegially, it was very pleasant and then we agreed and declared the award to Cornel West. We did, and that was fun. But I realised there's something very weird about me being so on the fringes of this field and being the person bestowing the award.

Nicole Bourbonnais 45:53

But maybe that's why, right? Because if you're not as embedded, you can think about things in different ways that have an impact.

Rosalind Petchesky 48:33

Yeah, I didn't really like academia that much. I just didn't like the closed, self-satisfied, smug [attitude]. Something about academia just turned me off. But I loved the students and I loved Hunter College, because it was open to the community. We could have programmes, lectures, forums, opened up to the whole community and have very radical speakers. And that's what I always did. It's really fun and it was a very privileged, very gratifying career. In the whole university, CUNY, I went to the Graduate Centre at a certain point. I was still at Hunter, but I also was teaching in the Graduate Centre, so I had graduate students and supervised dissertations and I liked that very much and I became the deputy, Deputy Director, something, of the Political Science programme at the Graduate Centre, and I really loved that because I was working a lot with the students and setting up their development programmes. I was also the chair of the committee that did admissions to the Graduate School for political science, so that was really interesting, and got some really great people admitted to the Ph. D. programme. So I liked that, I felt very part of that, in my institution, it was just the larger field of political science that I really wasn't much a part of.

Nicole Bourbonnais 50:23

So maybe this is a bit abstract, but what spaces did you feel most at home? Was it working with Sonia or the research group?

Rosalind Petchesky 50:34

Oh, yes. The research group, that was fantastic. I love those people, those women, I guess they love me. It was just an extraordinary time to be able to meet together and talk together and be friends and think of these ideas together, and fight, you know, about certain things. Oh, there was a friend, Mercy Fabros from Manila, the Philippines. She was tough. She always said we had to have an action component in every single team. They had to not just do the research and write their results, but they had to have an action component, and they have to bring it back to the community. You just can't go in there and do research and pull out of people's lives and not give something back. She insisted on that, and so every team had to, and some did more successfully than others. In Nigeria, they had a kind of programme to give small grants to local village women and stuff like that. That was extraordinary and I learned so much from the women I worked with. I just felt like "wow, you guys are way ahead of me. What am I doing even directing this?" And so what I did was I brought on a team of researchers, anthropologists, who were all friends of mine,

all strong feminists, very sympathetic with what we were doing. And oh, Sylvia Marcos from Mexico, Rayna Rapp from the US, Beth Richie, also from the US, African American. Anyway, they would come and they would work with the different teams, because I didn't feel I had that kind of research background. I'm a political theorist. So that was a great dynamic. And then later I became very close with Sonia Corrêa and Sonia is still one of my dearest friends in the world. Sonia and Richard Parker and Gloria Careaga from Mexico, we formed this thing called Sexuality Policy Watch. It was after the IRRRAG project was over and after the UN conferences. It must have been around the early 2000s I would say, maybe early to mid-2000. I've got all this somewhere, in piles, I'm sorry.

Nicole Bourbonnais 53:20

I will double check all these facts.

Rosalind Petchesky 53:23

Sexuality Policy Watch published many papers. They published some by me, some by Françoise - Françoise Girard became head of IWHC - and other people. We had meetings. We had the most fabulous meetings in Rio, in Buenos Aires. We went to Hanoi, to the Big World AIDS conference in Hanoi. We had panels there. I worked hard with Sexuality Policy Watch,⁴ doing writing and editing and organising these panels at the AIDS conferences. I can't remember where else, but we were in Hanoi for sure, Rio, in Peru, Lima. There's an international sexuality organisation, IASSCS, International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society, something like that. So that's what we went to in Hanoi and that's what we went to in Lima. And we spoke and had come, you know, the way you do at conferences, and I certainly felt at home in that group. I mean, that was just a fabulous group. And every time we met, we, Sonia and Richard were geniuses at finding these young people. Alok Vaid-Menon, is a world famous trans performance artist and writer. Alok is from an Indian family, grew up in Texas, unbelievable human being. When Alok first came to our meetings, Alok was so "chip on their shoulder" and belligerent about academics and, you know, "academics are just bourgeois" and I thought Alok was just insufferable, but adorable, at the same time. And it turns out Alok's - both parents are professors in Texas. And of course, then, later in life, and more recently, Alok decided to go get a PhD, so wanted my help navigating admissions and all that stuff. But you know, what I learned from people like Alok - oh my god! How do I come into contact with such amazing [people]? And Mauro Cabral, an astonishingly brilliant, intersex champion and philosopher. Mauro is a philosopher by training and a brilliant writer, thinker, unbelievable, and has been in the forefront of the movement around intersex rights for years, and pretty recently got married to their longtime partner, I don't know.

I think of the people, it goes back to what I said before about relationships: that's what matters. That's what stays with you. And so this formation of Sexuality Policy Watch has produced very, very, cutting-edge papers, and I encourage you to go to the website and see all this material on sexuality in many countries. But the relationships, in those days when we could have meetings in

⁴ Sexuality Policy Watch website: Sxpolitics.org

person, pre-COVID, when there was some funding for this stuff. But the funding all dried up, I mean, if you think it's bad for reproductive health, for sexuality: forget it. Sexuality Policy Watch still exists, but it's just Sonia and Gloria holding it together. I guess Richard, to some extent, Richard was a professor at Columbia, School of Public Health and amazing guy, love him to pieces. Richard Parker is an anthropologist and public health person who's written a ton of stuff about sexuality and AIDS in Brazil and has lived in Brazil more than he's lived in the US with his partner Wagner. They're a gay couple. And he did incredible work at Columbia, when he was the head of the Department of Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health. And that's sort of where Sexuality Policy Watch started, at Columbia, but then it became much more international, and then it moved later, as Richard was sort of separating himself from Columbia and deciding more and more to live in Brazil. He finally resigned from Columbia, but SPW moved then to Rio as its base. And, actually, Sexuality Policy Watch became my main base in those years like from around 2000 to say 2008 when our book, *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights* (the book that Sonia, Richard and I wrote together) came out, so long ago, 2008. But I think it's still used and stuff. Do you have it? Okay, I actually have a printed copy on my desk, I could send it to you.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:00:15

We have that in the library.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:00:17

So that was a lot of work that book, and we did it by dividing it up, and each of us writing different chapters. So, working together with Richard and Sonia was just wonderful. They're both so brilliant. I just learned so much from both of them, that we really made a good team. So that whole period, I felt most identified and connected with Sexuality Policy Watch, until 2013, 2014 and Sexuality Policy Watch was really becoming just one person and having little meetings, but I was less and less involved. And that's when I became so involved in Palestine Solidarity work, and completely captured by that. In 2014, of course, was the enormous massacre Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and that was a major turning point for many, many people. Jewish Voice for Peace expanded, became twice as big, I mean, so many new members.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:01:41

Had you been involved on a less intense basis before or just really started with that?

Rosalind Petchesky 1:01:44

Well, I was always very much, my heart was very much in sympathy with Palestine, I think I told you that. I had a Palestinian as my mentor, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, my students at Hunter, Rabab Abdulhadi, Suheir Hammad, Riham Barghouti.⁵ I mean, these people were just amazing. And I always felt sympathetic with the Palestinian Liberation cause for as long as I can remember, and

⁵ Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi is a leading Palestinian academic and activist, currently a professor at San Francisco State University and director of the AMED (Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies program) there. Suheir Hammad is a well-known Palestinian poet. Riham Barghouti is a Palestinian feminist and activist who continues to collaborate with Rosalind Petchesky and her co-editors of *A Land With A People* today.

I've written about that history. But every time I tried to go find an organisation - like, I went to some meetings of New Jewish Agenda, for example. I mean, there were these groups. And I could never, I mean, Rhonda and I went together, Rhonda Copelon and I, to the New Jewish Agenda, and thought "Oh, no, it's not for us." They were too religious. They were too much more Jewish-identified than I was at that time. So, I never found any kind of organisational base for that work, until Jewish Voice for Peace.

In 2013 somebody came to me and said, you know, some people are trying to - it was the beginning of the BDS movement, Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions - and they wanted to get TIAA-CREF, our pension for academics in the United States. It's our pension fund and is a huge, huge organisation. It's an institution really, and that was where my pension was. So, they were keen to lobby the president of TIAA-CREF to stop investing in these very Zionist organisations that were very pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian as part of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement. So I said, "Okay, I'll be part of this." And the people who were spearheading it, I met them. I didn't know that one of them was one of my colleagues. Tom Weiss was one of my colleagues at the Graduate Centre. He and his wife, I went with them to a very small meeting at the Harvard Club of this guy from TIAA-CREF, he was president of it. He was just like an Obama. He was African American. He had worked with McKinsey, the McKinsey Corporation, and he was very smart, very sleek. And he was giving a talk, and I tried to challenge him. It was really terrible. I kept raising my hand, I was like, one of two women in the whole room. This guy who was his right hand, who was shepherding the questions, he just didn't call on me. I'd raised my hand. He just ignored me, looked right past me. So afterwards, I went up to the guy (the president), and I tried to get him to listen to me about how important this was. And he said, "Well, you know, we are responsible to our donors, and, you know, we can't go against our donors. I'm sorry, but no, this isn't happening." He just blew me off. I was angry.

And then 2014, the whole thing happened in Gaza, the war, the bombing, the killing. And I went to a meeting of Jewish Voice for Peace in New York that happened to be at the home of one of my good friends. And I said, "This is it." The first general national meeting of Jewish Voice for Peace I went to, I'll never forget, I think it was in Baltimore. And they had a lot of speakers. And it was so phenomenal. I thought: "This is my home, this is my home." It's anti-racist, it's feminist. The head of it, all of them are women. It's very radical socialist. It tries to work with all these black anti-racist organisations and civil rights organisations. I said, "Well, here I am, you know, I'm, what, 70 years old, and I'm landing in my political home, finally." And it just felt phenomenal, which is great. But I will say that there isn't a lot of what you would probably recognise as feminist politics. They all consider themselves feminists, they'll sign on to something opposing the Texas abortion law or something like that, but they won't do anything actively. Um, they're very - my JVP chapter in New York is very queer identified, most of them, the people in our leaders' group are queer, they are transgender, gay, lesbian, non-binary, young. I think there's almost an attitude that - well, you know, first of all, we don't want to be too closely associated with mainstream white women organisations. That's very toxic, so that I get, but also, I think there's a bit of complacency like: that happened, that's done. Let's move in these more exciting new directions.

But it didn't get done, because as we see, with the recent politics of abortion in the US, the rug is going to be pulled right out from under us. And people are going to be having to think much more about alternatives, because I think that the Supreme Court will probably overturn *Roe versus Wade*. So now it's about how do you raise money for women to travel to other states? How do you support access to medical abortion, and self-managed care? And get providers who will support that even taking risks in states where it's illegal? This whole movement is afoot. It's very important. I did write an article about it very recently, if you want me to send it to you. And I felt like "well, I haven't really, really been thinking about this for a long time." I wrote one that was in this handbook on *Transnational Feminisms* for Oxford. Did you see that? It's called, "On Owning the Body." Well, that was a reprise of sort of all the work that I had done all through the years, and looking back and thinking, what does it mean and what are the ideas that really remain here? So that was kind of an important article for me because I feel like this is it. This is kind of the final word that I'm going to say on this subject. But then all this stuff started this shift, it started hitting the fan about abortion politics, in the Supreme Court and in Texas, and that will spread to other states, of course. Now the Mississippi case is coming before the Supreme Court November 1, very soon.⁶ Well, no, that's not the Mississippi case. They're going to hear they're going to do a hearing on that Texas abortion law that you're familiar with it, the new Texas abortion law?

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:10:24

Yeah.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:10:25

You've read about it. Okay. It's pretty draconian. I mean, it's really unprecedented to make everyday people deputies. It's vigilantism, is what it is. That the US Supreme Court could sanction that is just so appalling, no matter how conservative they are. Not only to throw out their own precedent, but to allow this kind of, I mean, it's so unconstitutional, anti-constitutional, that there just aren't words. We'll see what happens. But I do think it's a new moment for reproductive politics in the United States. And elsewhere. Brazil, for sure. I mean, all the struggle around Cytotec and women trying to get Cytotec, which is misoprostol. So it feels like: "tout ça change." Everything comes back.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:11:30

Does it feel like it's still the same overall issues that you were talking about in CARASA 40 years ago, or does this feel like a unique moment?

Rosalind Petchesky 1:11:45

⁶ At the time this transcript was finalized, the Mississippi case was still pending, although a draft opinion in which the majority of the court voted to overturn *Roe* was leaked to the press on May 2, 2022. See: "[Draft Supreme Court Opinion Would Overturn Abortion Decision](#)," *New York Times*, 2 May 2022, Accessed 18 May 2022.

Well, it is and it isn't. It's a new time. I mean, we're post-Trump. It's a new time in the sense that everything is connected to, for example, Black Lives Matter. I mean, Black Lives Matter is now, it's just become almost a cliché, but you can't talk about any political issue without relating it to racism and anti-racism in the US anymore. I mean, you just can't, and then you have to rethink: what do you even mean by that, is it just black lives? What about Asians, since all the anti-Asian attacks after COVID? You know, people blaming Asians for COVID. It's awful. And then we come back to population. And it feels weird, but it's a real thing, as demographics become more and more salient in a world where, you know: what proportion of people are immigrants, and dislocated internal immigrants and international immigrants? What proportion of people are moving all the time and forced out of their homes? And what proportion of people in different countries including Europe and the US? Maybe Switzerland is different? I don't know. But to think that you are homogenous, mono-ethnic society is just, you are living way in the past. So I think it's pretty interesting and exciting to think about demographics, and to think about population movement as a very important part of reproductive politics. And to think about it in ways that welcome the change, and welcome diversity and start reversing some of the old evils of population control. How do we have population advance, you know, population enrichment, population empowerment, and make populations not just about race and ethnicity, but about all the divisions and all the differences, the mosaics. I don't know, I think there's a lot of interesting stuff to think about there as feminists.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:14:50

Yeah. When you first started talking about contemporary population politics, I thought you were going to talk about the resurgence of the population control narrative, with climate change and the environment. I wonder if you see that as well, and how you would respond to that?

Rosalind Petchesky 1:15:09

Well, I think for sure that that's been there for decades. I mean, the idea that too many people are the cause of environmental degradation. That's always been there. Now climate change is - it's a really, really messy conversation. Because when you hear young women say, "I'm not sure I want to bring a child into this world. Why? Why would I? I mean, it's just terrible, resource scarcity, and there's going to be less habitable land and less potable water." How do you deal with less, do you deal with less by having fewer people? Or do you think of ways of sharing the less, so it becomes more? I do think that that old population control narrative is very much out there and very much a threat, and that we have to challenge it entirely. But I think we have to challenge it in a way that acknowledges the real ways that people are moving around the planet. I think that we have to think about how to have conversations with people who are scared of the influx of new populations into their communities. How do you talk to them? The same way that we in JVP talk about: how do we talk to people about Islamophobia, or Palestine or to, you know, Zionist Jews who were scared that their homeland is going to be taken away? I think that it's through the Palestine work that I've really come to this understanding. You can't just lecture people. And you can't just say, this is the right way to think, you have to talk to people and learn, what are their fears? What are their imaginings about what might happen? How can they imagine things differently? And I think

that goes also to people's fears about immigration. They feel pinched in their own lives, they see new groups coming, and they think: "they're gonna take what I have."

And that is propagated over social media. We haven't even talked about social media. And we haven't even talked about, you know, Fox News and all the purveyors of really hideous mythology that people take seriously and think of as facts. So how do you have conversations with people when everything they're hearing is lies? So we have to have strategies that work on social media, and I'm not very good on social media. But at least a lot of the people that I work with are and that's where they want to be present. And so, things like: how do we get our messaging out and where do we get it out? And how do we stop censorship by corporate media like Facebook and Zoom. You know, YouTube, big corporations, they decide on their own what they think is good and bad speech. So, you know, it's a tremendous struggle. But I think that the immigration movement in this country, in the US is very, very smart and very powerful. Not that they've won the battle, but they've certainly increased their adherents. A lot of young people who are tremendously mobile, mobilised around opening borders and stopping deportations, and abolishing ICE. You know, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency?

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:20:14

It's complicated.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:20:16

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, there's a risk in feeling so overwhelmed by so much to address, and so much that's wrong, that you just are paralyzed. And all you want to do is go watch TV.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:20:36

It's been an hour and a half now. So I don't want to keep you too much longer. But maybe as a last question, just because you kind of finishing talking about social media. And I wonder, as much as it has that potential, and it is the main medium right now, so much of what was made possible in the 90s, because of these conferences, was through these personal meetings, these relationships? Could you reach the same levels of conversation and consensus? To the extent that there was consensus? I realise there were still major divisions. But I don't know, it just seems when I talk to people about the 90s it just seems like this other experience.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:21:24

It wasn't utopian. Let's not exaggerate it. But I do, I love that you raised that, because I think it's really, it's really important. And I don't know that you can have revolution via Zoom. I don't think [so]. I think that that is a loss, it's a tremendous loss. Those in person meetings, those little, you know, where you could go on the side and talk to each other face to face. Maybe that's what you heard in my voice. And that's what the nostalgia is for. I think we have to work hard to figure out how to resurrect that in a world where social media are dominant, and that with all the good things of social media, they can mobilize lots, lots, lots more people. But then you see the transitoriness of that. You have Tahrir Square, but it's smashed in Egypt. The people who were

most active are in prison. They just let out Alaa Abd el-Fattah but the organizations are decimated.⁷ And we thought that was such a moment of heightened revolution. And it happened because social media brought people together. So, you know, there has to be a more hybrid way of organising, that uses social media but also retrieves the advantages of person-to-person meeting. That has to be on a community level; it has to be within mosques and synagogues and churches and schools [and universities], in neighbourhoods, that's where you're going to bring people together. Or if you do something internationally, that you actually do bring people together in some kind of forum. And I think that donors have to be aware of how important that is, and not just think that they can do everything online. So maybe it's not as often and not as extravagantly. But yeah, I think that we have to have a hybrid organising strategy that combines in person and social media. I think a lot of people are actually doing that. A lot of organisations are meeting and then they're using social media. And I know, that's what we're doing in Jewish Voice for Peace. We're doing both. So, thanks for thinking of that. I want to ask you, what are you going to be doing in the next five years?

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:21:58

Right. Good question.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:22:44

You're going to be teaching?

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:24:08

Yeah, teaching. One of the advantages of being in Geneva is there is a lot of activism. It's pretty UN focused, but it does mean that you get to meet some really interesting people. There's organisations like the Sexual Rights Initiative, Center for Reproductive Rights, they all have offices in Geneva. So you get to kind of see a little bit of how they're dealing with these kinds of questions too, which is interesting. But yeah, I also really love the interview, the oral history element. And so I'd like to think about how that can be something that then spreads these experiences more broadly, outside of, of course, I'll write some academic article about this, but I think people enjoy reading and learning history more through this kind of engagement than through reading an academic article. You know, this is part of the goal.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:25:08

Sure, but they're both important. So write your article.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:25:11

Of course. Yeah. Yeah.

⁷ Abd el-Fattah was returned to solitary confinement in April 2022 and was on hunger strike at the time of the interview. When this transcript was finalized (May 18, 2022), his condition was unknown, although his book circulates widely: Alaa Abd el-Fattah, *You have Not Been Defeated: Selected Works 2011-2021*, Seven Stories Press, 2022.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:25:13

Good luck with it. Thank you so much for taking on this huge, ambitious and very important project. I think it's going to be really major.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:25:22

Thank you to you. This was so interesting, to hear your experiences.

Rosalind Petchesky 1:25:28

Good luck and thank you.