



Reproductive Justice & Gender

## **Freedom and Feminism in Jennifer Fox's "Flying"**

By Britt Wahlen, Alternet. Posted 11 June, 2008.

Filmmaker Jennifer Fox turned her camera on women around the world and came back with a radicalized view of feminism and freedom.

All of her life, Jennifer Fox has held freedom above anything else. She has a successful career as a filmmaker and travels around the world. Without a spouse or children, she does as she pleases and sleeps with whom she wants. She has a great loft in New York City, which is frequently populated by her bohemian friends who are like family to her.

But in her early 40s, she begins to wonder where she fits. Though she eschews marriage, she has a relationship with a married man, and the way she feels when he's not there for her is anything but liberating. She thinks she may want children after all. All around her, female friends are experiencing parallel struggles figuring out how love, sex and partnership square with often competing desires for independence: professional, financial and otherwise.

To figure it all out, she turns the camera on herself and invites family, friends, and friends of friends to share their stories, too. "Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman" is the resulting tapestry of narratives, a six-hour meditation on the modern female experience. The women in "Flying" cover a gamut of topics ranging from marriage, motherhood, divorce and sexuality to abortion, infertility, virginity and violence.

The germs of "Flying" came to Fox in the mid-'90s, when it struck her that though she tended to be in relationships with men, her female friendships were holding her together. "I was initially interested in female language, how women communicate with each other," she said.

In South Africa, where she was working, her water-cooler conversations with the female members of a mostly male production team always hit on the same topics: love, sex, relationships. "Though we were from different backgrounds, we were experiencing the same things," Fox said. She hypothesized that the themes of modern women's lives cut across race, class and culture, but she wasn't sure how to incorporate her ideas into a compelling film.

A few years later, personal crises propelled her to begin filming what became "Flying."

But she had to figure out how to capture on film the unique way women come together to talk about their lives. It wouldn't work to have a cameraperson filming discussions with friends about their most intimate feelings and experiences -- they might not open up.

She came up with a technique that she calls "passing the camera," in which two or more people pass the camera back and forth and take turns asking questions. Fox believes this equalizes the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, and in the intimate setting of a living room or kitchen, passing the camera over a glass of wine or cup of tea, people are more willing to share. Fox used one camera to shoot 1,600 hours of footage for "Flying."

In the film, Fox passes her camera with women from 17 countries. Some women appear throughout the series, such as Pat, Fox's best friend who is diagnosed with a brain tumor; L'dawn, whose perfect marriage devolves into divorce and a years-long legal battle for child support; and Theresa, who discovers she is pregnant after breaking up with her boyfriend; later Theresa gets involved with a man who accepts her baby as his own. There's also Jihan, an Egyptian woman living in France with an international career. When she gets married, her husband agrees to be the primary caregiver of their children so that she does not have to give up her satisfying work that requires frequent travel.

Other women in the film appear in one episode only, such as Paromita, a civil rights lawyer in India who chooses to remain single. Fox also meets with sex workers in Cambodia and Somali refugees living in London who recount their personal stories of undergoing female circumcision.

In India, Fox initiates a discussion about masturbation with a group of widows. The women ask, "How would one do that?" and then break

into hysterics at the mere suggestion that they would touch their own bodies for sexual fulfillment in the absence of husbands.

But the main story in "Flying" is Fox's own, which plays out like a soap opera -- each episode ends with a cliffhanger. She takes a tell-all approach: about her sex life, her relationships, her abortions, her miscarriages, her sexual abuse, and her anger toward her parents and grandmother. She says her decision to share everything, both the good and the bad, was her political choice. As a filmmaker, she wanted the film to show that "this is not a perfect life, but it's a real life." As the film's subject, she believed she was on a journey to self-understanding that required complete honesty.

The journey led her to feminism. Before "Flying," Fox was not a feminist, but she became one over the course of making the film. Though the film itself does not preach, Fox "personally became radicalized" about a number of issues such as the need for child care and other supports for working women and families.

Fox has always been an independent filmmaker. Her first film, "Beirut: The Last Home Movie," garnered international praise and won Best Documentary Film at the 1988 Sundance Film Festival. She has made other marathon-length films, including the critically acclaimed "An American Love Story," a 10-hour PBS television series about an interracial couple and their family.

Regarding the length of "Flying," Fox said, "Ultimately, six hours was too short." There were many more stories she wanted to include, and "because there are so few films about women, people want 'Flying' to be everything."

One missing perspective is that of a lesbian or bisexual woman; the women in "Flying" only speak of sex and relationships with men. Fox said she did film lesbian women but that these stories did not work out: One woman decided she did not want to go public with her sexual orientation, and another story wasn't strong enough to make the cut. Initially Fox thought that she would explore her own bisexuality in the film, but the events of her life did not unfold that way; she stayed with her boyfriend Patrick.

But Fox is committed to using the film as a springboard for dialogue and the sharing of many more stories. In addition to television broadcasts and festival screenings, Fox has taken "Flying" on a college screening tour. She also repurposed the film's content to create two-

to 20-minute excerpts on specific topics for classroom and educational use; a 62-page discussion guide will soon be available on the film's website.

She is also encouraging women to pass the camera on their own. Every week the "Flying" website features a new video sent in by women who have put their own stories on film. Fox also launched a contest to find the seventh episode of "Flying." The winning entry may be featured on the Sundance Channel website and included on the deluxe DVD, and all entrants will receive the DVD for being "brave enough to share their story."

The women in "Flying" do their best to be free in a world that still wants to restrict women to narrow roles and inhibit female sexuality. In presenting the multitudinous ways Fox and her friends live their lives, the film offers reassurance that there is no one right way to be a free woman. "People have said to me, 'Thank you. I was always afraid to say things -- about my abortion, about choosing work over marriage,'" said Fox. "('Flying') helps people feel comfortable with the complexity of life: 'I won't be ashamed of my life.'"

"Flying" has been airing on the Sundance Channel (United States) in May and June and will be broadcast on the BBC (United Kingdom) and SBS (Australia) in upcoming months. The DVD is available for purchase at [www.flyingconfessions.com](http://www.flyingconfessions.com).