

## Part Two: Interview with Flying Filmmaker, Jennifer Fox

Rachel Kramer Bussel

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Part two of my interview with filmmaker Jennifer Fox, director of the recent *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*. [Read part 1 here.](#)

**You talk about investigating "this modern female life," so I'm curious how you felt about the contrast between your New York life and that of some of the women you visited, like the ones in India who had no conception of female masturbation. What do you see as the connecting link between the various women in the film, including yourself? Do you feel you were able to relate to some of the women who were in vastly different circumstances (and vice versa)?**

It may seem strange but there was very little that I couldn't relate to with the women I met around the world despite our different circumstances. It may be the fact that I am older — I was born in 1959 — and so I was raised in a more traditional manner. What I found, which I never realized before, was that the way I was taught to be a girl was so similar to how many women are conditioned everywhere.

In fact, one of the inspirations to make the film came about while I was working in South Africa in 2000. I was brought there as part of a consulting team for a large film project on HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa where I met Alosha, who was African, and Theresa, who was "colored," both in their early twenties, and the only women on the local staff. During a coffee break, we found each other and huddled together in a corner, talking about men. Both Theresa and Alosha were married, but felt their husbands were abusive in different ways, one physically and one verbally. I started telling them about some of my experiences with men and before I knew it both expressed the feeling that they didn't care if they ever had sex again because they felt no pleasure. I was shocked! How could these young, beautiful women be so ready to give up all hope of pleasure? What surprised me even more was how universal this issue was. At the time I didn't know their backgrounds or their "stories." But I knew that almost every woman I'd grown up with — including myself — had to fight hard to feel any pleasure at all in their bodies. To me it wasn't just our bad experiences with men, but how we'd been raised to behave from birth as girls.

I think the biggest factor I remember of my childhood was just this enormous force from everywhere to control my body. One of my earliest identifications was with a black and white Hollywood film I saw on TV as a child. It was set in a women's prison, where an evil female prison matron tried to destroy any spark of life left in the female inmates. As a child, I felt like that prison story was my life; I was in a fight to the death with the women in my family for the very survival of my soul. I remember feeling like I was being "stalked" — particularly by my grandmother. I wasn't allowed to close my bedroom door, go to the bathroom alone, or be out of her sight for even a moment during the day. The implication being that if left alone, I would do something "forbidden" — and that meant sexual. Except at that point, I didn't really know what sexuality was. I just felt that she was after my life force, my sparkle, my joy.

I grew up in a semi rural area and I remember that I used to go to play in the woods across the street from my house for hours when I was small. I got enormous pleasure from being in nature — it was as if I could feel the streaming life in the plants and trees. My grandmother, on the other hand, was never really comfortable out of doors. I have a memory of her waiting on the pavement at the wood's edge, angrily calling for me to come inside. At some point she "won the war," so to speak, and I was no longer allowed to wander in the woods by myself. I just remember the feeling of the "lights going

out in me" — like my soul had been squashed. My grandmother was afraid of my sexuality and she did everything she could to tame it.

Now when you begin to talk to women everywhere, you see this common thread that most girls have been forced to repress their sexuality. But sexuality is an adult word, so in fact what adults are often asking girl children to do is to control their vitality, their playfulness, their happiness. So when I went around the world, to countries such as India, for example, and I met those wonderful widows that I filmed who didn't know what masturbation was — it didn't surprise me at all! It was clear the message they had been raised with, because while more extreme, I recognized it as the same as the one I had received.

Like many young girls, I was taught quite heavily that whatever feels good you shouldn't do and especially "down there." "Down there" was a dark, unknown place. And it took years of work within myself to overcome those negative morals against pleasure. I'd like to think that it was the force of my character that succeeded in rebelling against the repression around me, but I learned through the making of *Flying* that in fact it was the times that I grew up in, which actually allowed me to succeed in my rebellion. At another period of history or in another culture, I would have been squashed like so many women are and were. I would have been forced to marry and then beaten mentally or physically to a pulp by my husband, put in a mental hospital, or I would have become a social outcast for demanding my right to sexual pleasure as a woman.

While making this film I came to understand that we are creatures of our culture and our place in history. So those Marathi women in India are really my sisters — not different at all — I was just born in America in the late 50's and lived through the sexual revolution in my country, whereas that revolution is just beginning to touch their world.

**The freedom you talk about largely focuses, in your case, on sexual freedom, both in terms of not having it as a 13-year-old being sexually abused, and then in your forties having the freedom to have a married lover and a boyfriend, but being uncertain about both those relationship paths. For many of the other women, sexuality is painted as both something that's used to control women and limit their freedom but also a way that women can explore freedom and pleasure. I often find that when talking about "sexual freedom," it's seen as an afterthought, or relegated to some lesser status amongst the issues women face, as if it's something frivolous, yet clearly, from female genital mutilation to honor killings to lack of sexual education, controlling women's sexuality and bodies is a way for men to claim power in various civilizations. Why do you think sexuality is so paramount when it comes to women's freedom and were you surprised by what you learned about sex from the women you interviewed?**

This question of the importance of sexual freedom on the path to female liberation is a huge topic of debate. I remember talking to a woman in Pakistan a few years ago who argued that the issue of sexual freedom is secondary to the issue of the freedom for women to work. She felt that these two essential rights could be neatly severed and she could avoid fighting for the right to sexual freedom for the time being in lieu of getting women into the work force. While I agree that economic freedom is absolutely essential — if a woman is reliant on a man for her finances, she will always be under his control — but I am not so sure that you can split off sexual rights from the right to work.

The whole issue of women in the workplace — working, literally out of the home — has historically been a sexual issue. You see it best in fundamentalist countries today where a working woman is seen as a "wanton woman," a promiscuous woman, and a whore. Because we are literally talking about the control of the physical body: what a woman does with her body in an external way, such as leave the house to work, and what she does with her body internally, such as her relationship to her own pleasure. Of course I understand that in fundamentalist countries today you can't bring up the topic of sexual freedom, but the topic of women's right to work brings it up automatically anyway. That's why in these countries women are forbidden to leave the house alone at all.

So what is this age-old focus on trying to control our bodies? I have thought about this from childhood. It seems to me that if you destroy a person's connection to her own body, you have destroyed her soul — and in doing so, you have broken her will, made her passive, and she can be dominated and controlled. You hear of this often when you talk with women who have gone through Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is the most overt way of controlling the female body and sexuality — by literally cutting out the clitoris, its pleasure source, and sewing it up so no man can penetrate till marriage. Women will often report that they were so free and joyous before the "practice" was done to them, and afterwards they stopped dancing, laughing, going outside — they felt ashamed of themselves and their bodies. Of course, some of this is because the practice can literally make movement painful. But it is also because the whole purpose of the practice is to inhibit a girl's sexuality so that she can be dominated and fit in a narrow social form awaiting marriage and the role of subservient wife.

There is a beautiful book written by Alice Walker called, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, about how a young girl loses her joy after she had undergone the FGM practice and afterwards, her lifelong struggle to regain it. What you see in the book is that the character can never get "her joy" completely back, but her effort to do so is fundamental to her reestablishing her identity that had been robbed from her. I remember reading this book and weeping. While by no means did I ever undergo such a brutal practice, I felt a psychological parallel in the repression and control my Gram attempted to submit me to as a girl. The more she succeeded in controlling my body and my movements, the more I felt the very joy go out of me. The less "joy" I felt, the more I became a proper girl, ready to be molded into a proper woman. The less joy I felt, the more disconnected I became from my self and all the more malleable to social standards.

It seems clear that a woman who knows her own body is a free woman, because she will demand what she needs for satisfaction. She will not place the needs of a man or society above her; nor will she be submissive to his control. This is why the repression of female sexuality has been an on-going component of human history enforced by most religion, governments, and family systems throughout time. A woman disconnected from her own body is easily enslaved. Why would anyone in power ever want women to be free?

Forgive me for saying the obvious, but we cannot get away from the fact that historically a woman's role has been that of a second-class citizen. Girls and women were seen as mentally inferior to men in all ways. We were obviously physically inferior and therefore could be easily physically dominated. Our role was seen as providing progeny for men to pass their property onto. Girls were seen as being owned by their family, to be sold to a man in the form of marriage, where they would be responsible for fulfilling men's sexual needs (as well as all general caretaking) to lead to the birthing of male children to whom property could be passed from generation to generation. There was no need to educate girls or women in an intellectual way. All we needed was to learn the basic skills required to care for men, children, animals and home.

Clearly women's desires should not be made important because then she would want her desires fed rather than focusing on her job tending to the needs of her husband and children. Meanwhile, it was extremely important to the social structure that men could rely on their women's sexual faithfulness, because otherwise how could they know that their prodigy was in fact their own — and therefore that their property was remaining in their lineage? The whole system required girls to be systematically repressed and controlled to fit into the narrow role they would have to perform when they grew to be women. Hence, for a patriarchal system to function, it is absolutely necessary to destroy each woman's connection with her own body, her own needs, and her own desires. Therefore, sexual freedom is paramount if women are to be free at all.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg in this discussion! We haven't even begun to discuss so many issues like: Why rape? Why sexual abuse? We could go on for days!

**You have [links on the Flying website](#) to various feminist and women's organizations and the film certainly touches on issues of prostitution, rape, sexual abuse and inequality while still being highly personal and intimate. Do you consider it an activist film? A feminist film?**

A girlfriend of mine, who is in the film industry, called this film, "a story about feminism backwards." I think what you see in the film is a female main character (me) who never considered herself a feminist, who in fact hated the word feminism. Yet, after talking to all these women around the world, I realized that feminism is not just a word, but something alive and real, the connective tissue of our gender. As the viewer watches me bumble through my life and learn about the links between pleasure, freedom, control, abuse and even prostitution, I think the viewer also begins to understand how these things relate, but in an organic, emotional way. The way I start out in the film is very similar to the way many women feel today: they don't want to talk about feminism, because they associate it with something bad and ugly. I am hoping that through taking this journey with me, the idea of feminism gets rejuvenated for them as it was for me.

When I thought about making this film, I had a very political idea: I wanted to begin a whole new dialogue across America about our "real lives" as women. I felt that most of our female stories were kept secret; most of us were "in the closet" out of self-preservation, because we knew our real lives would never be accepted by society, which still maintained some very rigid, old fashioned fairytales about the way women were "supposed" to be. I decided to expose my life as a metaphor for the kind of complex, real dramas modern women face. Certainly, I am not every woman, but my story, combined with the stories of the many women in the film, bring up some of the multifarious issues — both old and new — that women face today. The whole purpose of the film was to say these are real lives — wonderful, complicated, sometimes difficult — but most importantly, nothing to be ashamed of. The interesting thing is that the response women (and men) often have to the film is one of relief. I often hear people say, "It was so great to see my story finally told by someone else; I thought it was just me, now I don't have to hide anymore."

The other thing that was central for me with *Flying* was to explore, expose, and name this language I began to notice, which I called, "women-speak." In my thirties, I began to realize that the conversations I was having with women were totally different than those I was having with almost all the men in my life, including my boyfriends. Over time I began to categorize some of the special qualities of "women-speak": I noticed that the conversations were circular in nature; that they were not goal- or result- oriented, that they wandered from one topic to the next in a more associative or non-linear way, that they went on for hours, and subjects were often returned to day after day, month after month, and year after year, and that they were often accompanied by food or drink. Yet, no matter how little the dialogue focused on goals, the outcome was that both women often walked away feeling better and somewhat "healed," ready to return to our lives with fresh perspective. By recognizing and exploring women's unique way of speaking, *Flying* empowers women (and men) to acknowledge the different language tools we have. Moreover, *Flying* shows that despite class and culture, women everywhere are speaking this same special language.

Another important goal I wanted to achieve with *Flying* was to show that women are leading similar lives everywhere. Our society today is so geared towards dividing cultures — to the ideas of "us" and "them." We like to think we are so liberated in the West, and those foreign cultures are so backwards. But what I wanted people to see watching this film is that we are living across a spectrum of experience — more extreme and less extreme — but all facing varying degrees of the same battle as women. And the problems are often based in the same roots of physical domination and control. This is why I felt I had to expose the issues of control and abuse in my own family, as well as the sexual abuse I suffered by a teacher at 13-years-old, and other violence I endured as a woman. It was important to reveal that this white, western, middle class woman was not free, any more than my girlfriends in South Africa, Somalia, or Pakistan were free. I wanted women in the West to be able to see the link between women everywhere.

For all of these reasons, I always envisioned taking *Flying* on the road across America to do both a theatrical tour and a college and university tour for students. From the beginning of thinking of this

project, I thought it could get people talking! And seeing it with the audiences at the Film Forum theater in New York, I can see that all people want to do after watching this film is talk: to their husbands, their mothers, their children, and their friends! That's why I wanted Flying to be shown in classrooms across the country: to reinvigorate a dialogue about gender, roles and the language of men and women. In fact, we are booking a screening and speaking tour around the country right now for the fall. And I can't wait to hear the conversations that happen around the film then!

So do I have a political agenda? Absolutely! Is it a feminist agenda? Well, the funny thing is that my goals haven't changed since the beginning, when I never used the word feminism at all, but ironically now after going on the Flying journey, I realize that my goals are absolutely feminist. And then some!

For more information about Flying, visit [www.flyingconfessions.com](http://www.flyingconfessions.com). Flying will be shown July 29-31 at [Cinema Arts Centre](#) in Huntington, New York.