

PENCIL SKETCH BY FRANKLIN McMAHON

# Ms Steinem

PINK talks to feminist icon Gloria Steinem about women, media and business during Women's History Month.

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Gloria Steinem at the 1972 Democratic national Convention with a delegate.



*McMahon  
1976  
gloria steinem*

from the desk of Gloria Steinem

Someone is about to get their just deserts, but it's not Gloria Steinem or Jane Fonda after Comedy Central TV host Stephen Colbert interrupts them midsentence as they talk up their newly launched radio network for women. It's the latest stop on a whirlwind media tour, their star power landing high-profile attention for their fledgling venture to bring women's voices and sensibility to the male-dominated shout-fest otherwise called "talk radio." Once vilified as activist icons, Steinem, 72, and Fonda, 69, have emerged as grande dames of American culture, pioneering the largely woman-invested GreenStone Media.

Now, the satiric host interjects, won't they please step into the kitchen?

A frilly graphic announces "Cooking with Feminists," and the plot calls for a pie-baking. Laughing, the women don aprons as the straight-faced funnyman ushers them to a counter heaped with raw ingredients, then orders

I proving we want strong men and do what they want if I squeeze the lemon?"

Eeek, she's going earnest, veering toward cringe – in television's best-known irony zone. But then she hits a master stroke. Why not, she suggests, squeeze it together? So it is the man who complies – as they each pinch a slice simultaneously over the apple-filled bowl. Known for bringing feminist ideas into the mainstream, Steinem has just shown how to do it – persuading even the "egomaniacal" host to share, rather than command, a sour task. Because, yes, it matters that men help squeeze the lemon, since unequal family responsibilities in a still largely inflexible workplace continue to slow women's career rise.

Then, for the coup de grâce, Fonda plants some sexy smooches on the host's kisser, and the usually unflappable comic unravels like a schoolboy, blushes and concludes: "I like feminists."

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–Gloria Steinem

them to mix and knead while he lobs mock hardballs like, "How do you know if a woman is a feminist or just angry?" The feminist is honest about her feelings instead of pretending, Steinem explains while Fonda grips a rolling pin.

It's brilliant schtick and the ultimate multi-tasking (still a woman thing) as Fonda and Steinem update the world on the status of feminism ("extremely healthy") and the need for their project (the female exodus from polarizing guy-grouse radio) while literally rolling out the dough. (They're not yet rolling in it, though venture fundraising is nearing midway toward a modest \$11- to \$12-million goal.) Then the "right wing" host orders Steinem to squeeze a lemon, adding, "I thought women responded to a strong man who knew what he wanted." But now she balks.

Even in fun, is the icon of the feminist movement really going to pinch the haughty man's fruit? The woman who founded *Ms.* in 1972, giving voice to women's struggle for equality, crisscrossing the country since, organizing for liberal causes from Feminism 101 to Iraq war opposition: "This is a moral dilemma," she ponders aloud. "Am

Brava! Glam publicity for women and the radio start-up. Plus delicious symbolism – a demonstration of the now quaint-sounding but still true feminist philosophy: "the personal is political," even on Comedy Central. "Men tend to have only one job, whereas women still have two," Steinem says later. (For the record, she doesn't cook as a rule but does slice up great salads.)

"Women have proved they can do what men can. But we haven't begun to prove the other half, which is that men can do what women can. Until men are raising children as much as women, it won't work." (That theme starred on *Ms.* magazine's 1972 debut cover showing a six-armed woman multi-tasking, with inside features like Vivian Gornick's "Why Women Fear Success" and Judy Syfer's "I Want a Wife.")

### In Person

Arriving for our interview, Steinem breezes into the Women's Media Center's ninth-floor offices in

In Steinem's career-defining 1963 assignment, "I was a Playboy Bunny," she went undercover to expose how Hugh Hefner's exclusive men's clubs exploited women workers, from docking their pay for minor infractions to requiring a gynecological exam before hiring.



the Empire State Building exuding a kind of loveliness. The organization, which she also helped found, launched in 2004 to advance female visibility, issues and leadership in a media still largely run by men, who make up 85 percent of management in TV, radio, newspapers and the Internet. Willowy as ever, she dresses simply in form-fitting black pants and black sweater, with a Western-style silver hip-belt. Her suede wrap hints at grandeur, but her realness radiates an it's-just-me warmth as we head into the conference room to chat – on topics ranging from women's huge workplace advances, like reaching critical mass in many previous all-male fields, to such ongoing barriers as balancing family, double standards about leadership ability, and internal barriers to asking for more at home and work.

So, how far have women come? So far, Steinem says, that it's hard to believe that back in the 1960s most Americans opposed the basic expectation of equal pay for equal work, a principle now codified in law, though not always in practice. (Women used to earn 59 cents for every dollar men were paid. Now it's 77 cents.) "If you consider where we were when the women's movement started, people were still saying women don't need the pay. They have husbands. It's just extra money," she says, laughing at the thought. "That's a huge change."

Though the media periodically declare feminism dead, the changes have transformed society, Steinem observes. For example, help wanted classifieds used to segregate by gender, barring women from many jobs, while today women have proven themselves in once all-male preserves, such as law enforcement. The next step will be rising beyond about 30 percent in professions like medicine and law. "We've passed the age of tokenism," she says. "We're now approaching the second stage of extreme resistance"

to higher-level integration. And then there is the personal side – always a part of the feminist story. Turning 50? Like falling off a cliff. And Steinem wrote about that, too, in her 1992 book *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (Little, Brown & Co.), which critics slammed as self-help babble, though women related to the tale of inner struggle – including today's *Bitch* magazine editors, who rate it a classic. Turning 60 was easier but ended with emotional extremes. "Fish weds bicycle" was how the *New York Times* headlined her 2000 wedding to handsome animal rights activist David Bale, alluding to the famous feminist slogan "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," a relic from days when matrimony stripped women of basic civil rights, like their name and credit. But laws and marriage changed – and Gloria found love in it. Three years later, Bale died from brain lymphoma. She was a widow. There was much sadness. (The visible fragility I saw at a public talk a few months after her loss is gone today, though.)

And the seventh decade? "A shock, I have to say," she says. "I woke up the morning after my birthday and thought, 'There's a 70-year-old woman in my bed. How did this happen?'"

It did. But now at age 72, she is helping to organize a move onto the airwaves. "Crazy isn't it?" she says, looking happy.

Truth to tell, she'd rather be home writing her overdue road-trip memoir about her years organizing, but the times spoke to her again in the 2004 presidential vote scandals. The electorate seemed misinformed on major issues like the Iraq war, which women oppose in far greater numbers than men. She points to chest-beating war coverage that not only displaced issues important to women, such as health and children, but also shoved many women newsmakers off the national stage, sparking



public debate over male dominance of influential print and TV media. Bylines in the *New York Times* Op-Ed pages, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and opinion TV talk shows, from *Face the Nation* to *Meet the Press*, were (and are) about 80 percent male – or more. “The presence of women in the media does encourage coverage of a wide range of issues that are often neglected,” Steinem says. “And there’s a different view of issues like war. We just don’t trust violence as a way of solving conflict to the degree that men do. It’s not about biology. It’s about consciousness.”

So Steinem called a powwow at her Upper East Side brownstone apartment, inviting high-powered activist and media friends like Gail Evans, a CNN founder (and PINK columnist), one-time PBS president Pat Mitchell, and pioneering TV anchorwoman veteran Carol Jenkins, now the Women’s Media Center director, to name a few.

A market study later pinpointed talk radio as a female wasteland with real opportunities: With Wall Street howling over falling terrestrial radio stocks, down by 30 to 60 percent thanks to Internet and satellite competition, advertisers were hoping to win back disaffected women, increasingly recognized for their consuming power. And, considering women’s limited presence in radio – 92 percent of station programmers are men – the group decided to launch its own network, signing on radio executive legend Edie Hilliard as Founding President and COO and former FCC commissioner Susan Ness as CEO, with investors ranging from Rosie O’Donnell to *Friends* executive producer Marta Kauffman. “It is predominantly women investing,” Ness says. “Women have often had access to money, but they didn’t feel it was theirs to invest.”

It’s Steinem’s first time investing cash in a venture rather than sweat equity alone. “I’m small potatoes here, so I put in \$10,000,” she says, calling the move a “mark of maturity,” just like starting her first retirement savings fund in her 50s. “Before I was always living on the edge, with enough to survive 30 days,” she says, counting her best money move to date as buying the second floor of her brownstone apartment in the 1960s and the first floor in the 1980s.

While hopes are big, so is the task. Even with high-watt publicity, only a handful of stations are running GreenStone’s 12-hours-a-day programming, soon to go 24/7. The goal is 100 markets by mid-2008. Feminist bloggers, whom GreenStone execs have smartly courted, enthuse

Steinem and other celebrities rally for abortion rights in Washington D.C.



Steinem married David Pale in 2000 but lost him to cancer three years later.

over Steinem and the network. But *New York Times* critic Ginia Bellafante’s review was biting, praising “feisty and refreshing” bits but dismissing the rest as a “humor of complacency [that] stands in for a language of subversion.”

Not political? Who said that? A look of anger flashes across Steinem’s face as she explains yet again: “It just depends what you mean by ‘political.’” The definition has been perverted to mean the hostile, Washington-insider arguments dominating today’s airwaves, she explains. “‘Political’ means any power relationship,” she says. It can also mean creating community and connection – the bedrock of action.

Such arguments, of course, reflect the old women’s movement debate about change through personal transformation versus electoral politics and activism, says Deborah Siegel, author of the upcoming book *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Girls Gone Wild* (Palgrave MacMillan, June 2007). “The fact that we’re still having this debate,” Siegel says, “means feminism lives. We’re still fighting over it.”

Steinem’s emphasis on personal psychology and community also fuels her great talent for connecting with women across America, points out Linda Basch, president of the National Council for Research on Women: “She’s always tried to demonstrate how people were trapped in inequalities, often without realizing it. But from early on she tried to work across generations, class and race, meeting people where they are.” Of course, communicating was the heart of Steinem’s original profession, journalism.

## Career and Stereotypes

It was as a freelance writer in the early 1960s that Steinem first hit the national scene as part of the “New Journalism” movement with its emphasis on the personal perspective. In her career-defining 1963 assignment, “I was a Playboy



There was the beauty stereotype — like when a *Life* editor withdrew a political assignment (her passion) after meeting her. “The editor looked up from his desk and said, ‘We don’t wanna pretty girl. We wanna writer. Go home.’”

Bunny,” she went undercover (for now-defunct *Show* magazine) to expose how Hugh Hefner’s exclusive men’s clubs exploited women workers, from docking pay for minor infractions to requiring a gynecological exam before hiring. Surely that was her most demeaning on-the-job moment? No, because all bunny workers suffered the same, she says.

The worst, instead, were sniggering dismissals directed at her personally, like when her *New York Times Magazine* editor propositioned her, then, when she refused, asked her offhandedly to mail his letters on her way out. “It was just expected,” she says of the days before the concept of “sexual harassment,” which would become a *Ms.* cover story some 15 years later. And there was the beauty stereotype — like when a *Life* editor withdrew a political assignment (her passion) after meeting her in person. “The editor looked up from his desk when I came in the room and said, ‘We don’t wanna pretty girl. We wanna writer. Go home.’”

Her face still clouds remembering such lost assignments and the leering after her now-iconic Playboy exposé. But talent prevailed. Steinem soon became a noted political columnist for just-launched *New York Magazine*, then helped found the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1971 with Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug and Rep. Shirley Chisholm, becoming a movement leader after covering it.

But even then her looks were an issue — detractors dismissing her as the “pinup of the intelligentsia.” “They assumed feminists must be ugly,” she says. “So if you were even halfway decent, suddenly you were fantastic-looking.”

The insinuation that looks smoothed her way into the media spotlight and feminist history still hurts. Even today. “Sometimes I feel no matter how old I get and how long I work and how hard I try, people will attribute what I do to my looks,” she says. “That’s very painful to have to say.” Still painful? Even at 72? Yes, but less so.

It is the ultimate in “personal is political” — the uneven focus on women’s looks and personality still playing in public, like the recent dig at Sen. Hillary Clinton as formerly “ugly,” or the reverse slam at ex-Hewlett-Packard head Carly Fiorina for being “glamorous.” Steinem is still beautiful. She is also still a true leader. So why — finally today — can’t a woman be both?

It gets back to those stereotypes, which a Catalyst report called a major obstacle to work advancement. Those stereotypes, Steinem says, still hinder from outside — and within. “Women have low standards,” she says. “They say, ‘How can I combine career and family?’, never expecting men to ask the same question.” So, she advises, women should ask for the raise, ask for better work-family policies and ask men to share, even if it’s awkward — like that national TV demo of how to squeeze a lemon. Together. ■

## gloria tidbits

**hobbies:** None, really. “I’m not sure that people who love their work have hobbies.”

**recent reading:** *The Rule of Mars: Readings on the Origins, History and Impact of Patriarchy* (Knowledge, Ideas and Trends, 2006)

**workout:** Twice a week with a home trainer. “I finally bit the bullet.”

**latest “aha” moment:** “What’s great about being older is that you’re not focused on the goal, so you can enjoy the present.”

**joys:** Working with old friends who’ve become like family.

**biggest accomplishment:** “I haven’t done it yet.”

A woman needs a man  
like a fish needs a bicycle.