Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in conservation with Diana Mulinari



Diana Mulinari

2/25/17

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LEC: Today we are in Lund, Sweden. We're with Diana Mulinari and we are attending—Chandra and I—attending the *Future Nordic Feminism Conference: From National to Transnational Feminist Movements*. And we're really happy to be here. We're grateful for the invitation and we're so glad to be able to have this discussion with you. And so what we have been doing feminist, Diana, is we have been asking people to tell us a little bit what brought you to feminist work and feminist activist work in particular and how you came to do what you're doing now that we're at Lund—this University.

CTM: Take as much time as you want, and whatever genealogies surface for you, you know.

DM: One. Thanks a lot for this conversation, and particularly thanks a lot to travel for so little time. It's a pleasure to have you here. I learn a lot from the kind of work you're doing. I'm extremely hopeful after listening to Chandra's lectures. Thanks for a lot of things. For being so intellectually brilliant blah-blah, but also thank you for the hope which I think is – and the friendship. So—my biography. Let me see. And feminist. I have – I was born and raised in Buenos Aires, which is a big city. As many other people from Argentina, my grandparents were migrants, and socialist and anarchist, as many white European migrants that came to Buenos Aires. And my first political confusion was when other parts from our family that had much more of kind of mestizo background were Peronista, which is a different political identity and forms of belonging. In a way I think that as many other people—as all of us in the global South, I learned to think and reflect about difference in my family, in my

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kinship, because people have different positions both politically and religious, and you have to learn to live with those difference and to accept and confront some, live with others. That is the background I had. Maybe I can tell you, this is terrible I always feel so ashamed about that but it's important that the English I speak, which is bad, but is better than many of the Latin Americans that don't speak English, is because my parents thought they loved me a lot and they sent me to this—

CTM: English school.

DM: Yes. Colonial, terrible English school that are out there in Lain America. Really colonial. You put the dresses—

CTM: Ah. Uniform and everything.

DM: Uniforms. We had a little – where you were not allowed to speak Spanish. Really really terrible. Terribly colonial. I did understand that was the decision of my father. My mother wanted me to go to public school. They changed me from this terribly colonial school to public school. It was highly politicized. I came into as a teenager, very very young, 13 years old, I became organized on the left. We had a military dictatorship. I think the issues were much – there was a time of political hope with Cuba, and the idea that transformation was not only necessary but possible.

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DM: And that's how—the left was my central identity. I have a very good feminist friend in Buenos Aires. When we go out for drink and we laugh and remember how we were when we are teenagers is that we have this fantasy that we don't have any problems and it's other people discussing what they are going to do with their life because we are going to be socialist and revolutionaries for our whole lives. [Laughter] So that was how we though of ourselves and actually I believed that despite the roughness of the confrontation, the political confrontation, we never thought that what happen in Argentina '76, that was, we were speaking of the state terrorists that killed or disappeared so many people, target women or children in a particular way. We didn't have the understanding of the brutality of the state. In a sense because as other activists have pointed out, we were highly privileged despite being political – so the fantasy that people like us were gonna be put in jail, killed, disappeared as it happened was I think outside of our world view. Not that people aren't gonna be put in prison or that kind of thing but actually a genocide in the terms of Argentinian state terrorists, that we were not prepared for. And I was 32 years old when all these things happened and before that I was organized in a political military organization, and I say that not because I think that was very courageous because everybody did that, but I say that because that was one of the tensions when I got

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political – became a political refugee in Sweden because I had been raised on the left with very courageous, very strong women in leadership and political military organizations so the idea that we were not feminist in Latin America was very exotic for me. Coming from that tradition, coming from the tradition of women in prison, it's not that what you could call socialist struggle and colonial struggle in Latin America wasn't very transgressing regarding gender. And then when I came to Sweden as a political refugee everybody talked to me as "Ooh Latin America! Ooh Argentia! So terrible, so patriarchal, so catholic!" and I said, "Well, yes, well..." So on the one side it was the issue of what feminist was but on the other side it was the other issue which was that I was, as many other women, despite the way they identified with their ideas with the socialist struggle, even the armed struggle, we were very critical about the male leadership. That really forced us to a confrontation many of us thought that should be rethought in different ways. This masculinistic, very militaristic, "Yes we are going to die for the –"

CTM: Fatherland/motherland?

DM: Motherland, et cetera. I mean, in a context in which it was always argued that women and men were equal with a gun in the hand.

LEC: Cuba as well.

DM: Actually that was not the case because we were not equal. We had to take care of the children, we were forced to give birth in prison. The organization didn't provide any protection for the children or the women that were pregnant. So it was very different gender – I mean we were not –

CTM: Equals.

DM: It was a very beautiful slogan but it was not lived in practice, and the more the military project expanded, the more these organization turned more militaristic, more authoritarian and

CTM: More masculinist. Yeah.

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DM: So you know that right?

LEC & CTM: Yes. Right.

DM: It's fun to talk to you because you say, "Yes I know that." [*Laughs*] That was in a way – and it was very difficult for us as members of these organizations to put the issue in the context of the tragedy of state terrorists, so many people killed, et cetera.

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In the first years it was nearly impossible to say there actually was something wrong about this. For me, that was the other way I came to feminism, because I really began to think that -not that we could have win but I think this terrible defeat in those terms that was posed was in a way related to the lack of feminist agenda within our organizations.

CTM: Makes a lot of sense huh?

LEC: T left without taking care of the issues of women.

DM: At the same time they say that we are equal, and particularly this idea which I feel is so dangerous about being strong and being courageous, which of course created a specific subjectivity among us, but on the other side when the catastrophe came – put the issue of gender and gender roles, I mean women couldn't take children out of the country because we had a law in Argentina which you could get the children out of the country without the permission of the father. So we're speaking about simple levels. How can—so that's in a way who I was and in a way who I continue to be because more and more I think we understand that what happened in Argentina will be part and that experience and implies some kind of cultural trauma. we are working with the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and organizations of human rights that has been one of my hopes. But back to feminism—do you want me to continue?

CTM: Yeah, and then you come here.

LEC: Here in Sweden, tell us a bit about *that* work, as a feminist in Sweden.

DM: When I came here it was on the one side, solidarity with Latin America etcetera and on the other side, all these very strong discourse about migrant women and being patriarchal from religious context, et cetera. So particularly I was a mother and in the Argentinian case one of the most traumatic things that happened was that military appropriated the children of the women in prison because they thought that these women were communists that shouldn't have children. They couldn't be able to, not themselves, not their families. So we have the issue of, I think 500 children had been kidnapped by the military. For me the issue of mother work – plus we had the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo so for me the issue of mothering was an important issue, and of course when I came to Sweden my first confrontation was this very Swedish feminism that was very inspired, despite its socialist rhetoric in a very individualistic understanding of the self—self, autonomy, womens' rights, *my* body, *my* rights, *my* et cetera. That made identifications with communities nearly defined as primitive, or something.

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DM: You have to be independent. You have to be autonomous. Coming from a context in which communities and mothers were doing very wonderful work it was difficult to accept the idea that –

CTM: Completely individualist.

DM: Yes, despite the socialist rhetoric. I felt strongly that that was really an epistemological issue how we think about inter-dependency and what do we value? In Swedish there was a strong discourse that migrant women were dependent, that they were dependent on their families but also that migrant women were bad mothers because they made their children dependent on them. The problem of the migrant family was that the children were not autonomous enough. So, there was a very strong—that was an argument developed by feminists—the notion that being alone, being autonomous, which actually you are not autonomous, you are dependent on the state—that was the argument that you have today. Of course they are not autonomous, you have a state you can depend on. That made me—that was my first confrontation with Swedish feminists and my first search for women of color literature. I remember like one of my...really love...when I got this little book of Gloria Anzaldua, and it was vellow and I could've held it near my body, as usual, because I believe that particularly in Sweden, these discrepancies between, on the one side we have solidarity with Latin America, on the other side, we think you're primitive and it was a risk of being very schizophrenic. It was a very schizophrenic situation because the issue of racism was never named. So I began to – actually I have to say this because this is true. So, Chandra, you have to take it. When I got this, Chandra's article on...

CTM: "Under Western Eyes".

DM: Yes. For me was fantastic. This is it! This is my reality. She's right. I took ten copies, I gave it to all friends. People have different stories about different texts but for me it was like this is happening, this is – it's not only me and she could really articulate all these emotions and feelings that I had so many problems in doing that. So for me that article was...it saved my life—and when I say that, that's the same for Gloria Anzaldua, and I'm not joking—as migrant, we were on the one side extremely vulnerable because of the experience of state terrorists in Latin America but also because of the experience of racism that many of us have not experienced in our own countries because we were very privileged and white in our countries.

CTM: We were the majority in our countries.

DM: I believe that is one of the wonderful things about migration and exile that is your process of rationalization and down-class mobility forces you to a different understanding of the world. But I think we were...and then your article came and it

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really saved my life and—I think me, and many others colleagues. I believe that we get sick when we don't have words, so that was very important, and then I went to Nicaragua and wrote my PhD on Nicaragua, and particularly mothers, following Chandra, arguing that of course these mothers starting the revolution were not only—were both mothers and revolutionaries and moved between very complex and ambivalent positions and they were particularly agents of their own political missions not women because otherwise in Sweden you have these survival strategies that people in the South do things because—survival strategy here they do them because political choice. I was very inspired. Chandra gave me theoretical frame to go and argue for these things that were so central for me.

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DM: So that – and then when I came from Nicaragua that was in the end of the '90s? Yes. No, well, in the middle of the 90s, the situation in Sweden had really been transformed from—most scholars argue that it's '81, no '91, when the shift comes from socio-democratic hegemony to a neoliberal hegemony. Of course Sweden did that from a very high level so it was not as in Latin American countries, the level of destruction that the neoliberalism created. But on the other side because of the centralization of the state it was done everywhere, with ______ in all institutions. It was a very strong discrimination, and at the same time, the emergence and very strong presence of neo-Nazis in the street. Really, a very strong neo-Nazi social movement.

CTM: This is the early '80s?

DM: '90s. In the '90s. The white power music was one of the most powerful in Europe.

LEC: Middle to late '90s.

DM: Yes. That was – and all the debates about…between those suffering racialization—we didn't use that word, we used migrants—and Swedish, regarding what should be done. And we, arguing, "You have to go out," and "This is the neo-Nazis—you have to stop them!" and then the first response that we had been writing on, was that "Actually, they are not so dangerous." In particular, "This is never going to happen in Sweden." They said—

CTM: Interesting. You remember people saying this about the US?

LEC: Yes.

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DM: "This is not going to happen in Sweden." I said actually but look—then I think we learned—I'm using we because we had in those years created really strong friendships and collaborations with other women of color so we began on the issue of gender and race. I think how the '90s was all this discussions – we said, "Actually this is racism, you have to react. And mainstream Swedish activists and colleagues said, "Actually, no this is not going to happen. Racism is something that happens in the UK and the US and South Africa. But here? No!" With the Nazis in the streets. So this is a very very—the denial of racism was a central issue and I think that the most important event for us women of color activists and scholars was, we had a conference in which some of us argued with the article of Chandra Mohanty with the issue of representation. Among us it was Woukko Knokke. She was—she *is* Finnish. She has a Finnish background and she has done a lot of work with migrant women working in the industries. We thought that we were going to do an anthology in which we acknowledge her work because she was on the margins of sociology and social science.

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DM: Woukko is the first antiracist intervention—gender and antiracist intervention. She pulls this issue of labour market exploitation and she shows that actually this discourse about migrant women as tradition in the context in which they had been working for years is immoral. She didn't write like that; she was very cautious. So we did this anthology.

CTM: Talk a little bit about some of the challenges you've encountered in this kind of decolonial, antiracist, feminist work.

LEC: In this environment.

CTM: In this environment, which we are coming to see more clearly in the last two days.

LEC: Understanding.

DM: First I want to say that I'm very happy, very, very thankful for the life I have. Being an antiracist feminist is a wonderful thing. You get a lot of friends, you get a community so for me and particularly with the background I had in which we thought we had a meaning with life, for me, being an antiracist feminist provided a new meaning to life, a creation of communities and friendships and even sisterhood, because of the tradition—because of my background. We lost our families, biological families—kin—so we were forced to create other families and for me feminist antiracist is one of the families I have and I'm very happy for that. Of course it's been

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a lot of efforts but I really want to underline that it's been fun and it has given meaning to life, and that most important people in my life I've met doing this kind of work. Despite everything, I think it's a wonderful privilege and a very pleasurable position. The challenges are – I believe that the first was – I was in a way this was the first history of antiracism in Sweden was the challenge of arguing that racism was actually central for the Swedish social formation, which was a challenge because this was not something that was discussed in the dancing room but with sociologists and feminists that actually acknowledg other forms of inequalities and structural forces. But when you take racism, there was silence, and that I thought was a challenge—to put the issue of racism.

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DM: And, when we put the issue of intersectionality – I wrote together with Adele and another colleague, called Paulina de los Reyes, we introduced the idea of intersectionality. The reaction was mostly that, we got two reactions. The first one was that, of course we were very angry, but particularly it was that you cannot do everything, and then that we were highly deterministic, which was a way of saying that we were on the left and Marxism, which was that terrible thing. In Sweden, you shouldn't be, if you're in the academy. You have to be more elegant postmodern, so it was the argument that "Oh, intersectionality is too deterministic. And they are too political," which in Sweden is also something that is not being considered as good if you're a researcher. It's a very, very strong way of –

LEC: Dismissing.

DM: Yes. But also delegitimizing. Yes. "They are too emotional, they write about their own communities, and you know what they are going to say because they are too political." So, the idea that there are positions of neutrality and objectivity is very strong here, particularly in the academy.

LEC: The old essentialist argument, for us.

CTM: Yeah.

DM: Hm?

LEC: The old essentialist argument, where they write you're being essentialist.

DM: So that, and—challenges, yeah. I think it is important to think about our own challenges on the one side because we have had a very complex relation to the work you have been doing in the US and the UK. On the one side it has inspired us, it has

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opened every analytical frame for us, and it has also protected us, because we can say-

CTM: Here's research being done in the US.

DM: We couldn't say that if Chandra would be in New Delhi.

CTM: Exactly.

DM: New Delhi couldn't have –

CTM: No, no, no. It wouldn't have worked.

DM: So it's US – actually, imperialist—the marginal knowledge produced in the center has protected us. On the other side, one of the challenge is to produce knowledge in a critical dialogue with the knowledge produced in the US and the UK, but that is very contextual. Specific of the Nordic context. And that is where—I think I was telling you yesterday, or some day I was thinking about that—when we put the issue of intersectionality, one of the reactions was that, "Oh, it's a very difficult word in Sweden." The same was, we had a struggle for racialization. "No, it sounds so terrible in Swedish." So the process of translation and the contextualization is a challenge. And also the – because also, if *you* come here and—

CTM: Say something.

DM: Say something, everybody's going to say, "Yes yes yes!" But because you cannot stay with us all the time...

CTM: Exactly. We're not in people's faces when you come from the outside.

DM: Then we have to do things ourselves, and then our status goes down. So I think it's a challenge in how to think about this. We couldn't have survived without your voices, cecause it came from the Center. On the other side, what kind of knowledge production that is inspired by that, but develops up? I think this is one of our challenges. The other, which is a very difficult, very painful political challenge—for me, it is—

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DM:—how the racist parties, xenophobic parties have appropriated issues regarding violence against women immigrant communities, honor killing, et cetera. That has made us, has put us in a very difficult position, in which on the one side more and more migrant women—you can have a good career if you speak against your own community—you know, you get a position.

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CTM: You get rewarded.

DM: Mm-hm. So we have more and more of that kind of thing. Particularly the strong argument among mainstream feminist is that young women should leave their communities and cultures, should be saved. And when we—I'm speaking about antiracist Swedish feminists—we challenge that and said that actually on the one side there is extremely criminalization of all communities: "All the Muslim are patriarchal and identify with honor killings." This is a very strong understanding, very racist representation, particularly of Muslim men. When we try to challenge that the response was, of course, "You don't have feeling, any solidarity with migrant women's suffering." So, to be able to discuss the violence and patriarchy within our own communities without criminalizing our men, that are in position of extremely vulnerable, is I think a political issue. A very difficult political issue. Particular today in racialized neighborhoods that are actually militarized. When I was listening to you, Chandra, I was thinking this is what is happening in Malmö. We have neighborhoods that are militarized. And young nonwhite men are killed. So in that context to put the issue of patriarchy within our communities without falling into the trap of right wing xenophobic parties that have these issues at the core of their agendas. As you were speaking we have the same issue in Sweden. One, the Sweden democrats are never interested in gender equality but they're highly interested in gender equality within...

CTM: Within marginalized communities.

DM: Exactly.

CTM: Absolutely. So talk a little bit now about how you see the way forward for feminists to work across borders and within a neoliberal and increasingly conservative right wing space, racist space right now.

LEC: Which is right here in Sweden as well.

CTM: Which is right here in Sweden.

LEC: It's been here all along. All the communities are here and being marginalized in Sweden and across, outside Sweden.

DM: I think that – I'm more and more thinking about scholarships of hope. That is because moving back and forth from Latin America to Sweden, from Argentina to Sweden, I felt that in Argentina despite things are very tough, feminists are very hopeful. Everybody's like, "Yes! Lets'—" And then I come back here and everybody's depressed here. It's kinds of a very, very depressed—"Oh, it's terrible! Everything's terrible!" et cetera. I really—

LEC: Privilege. They need to deconstruct the privilege.

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DM: Yeah and in a way thinking about what's happening here, *why* this kind of depression?

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DM: Because, I mean, in Latin America people are resisting with less resources. They are enjoying life, which is for me, enjoying the struggle, enjoying life. In Sweden it was kind of, "Ahh! eEverything is terrible. Oh! Nothing can be done." In a way, thinking about this kind of scholarship production, maybe it's very politically progressive but it's very focused in how terrible things are. You read and read and you say "capitalist" and "expulsion" and "exclusion". I feel that I belong to a community and we are going to fight. The idea of scholarships of hope for me is very important and that's why your work is so important for me, because I think there's some type of dystopic scholar projection now among everybody: "Oh, things are terrible." I mean, our communities have survived before.

CTM: I think also that what's interesting about this then is that oftentimes the dystopia comes from a sense of isolation and a space where actually you don't feel that you have communities that can give you the hope.

LEC: That's why you can see the dystopia even among white privilege.

CTM: That's right.

LEC: That's what I've been feelings since I got here. The dystopia is among them.

CTM: Exactly. The point is hope is only possible if you see yourself really connected to communities that are fighting and I think if you don't then it becomes – that's so key, no, to some of the distinctions that we see among us?

LEC: The dystopia comes from feeling threatened, when your privilege is threatened.

CTM: That's true. That's right.

DM: Yes. The world that they thought wasn't going to be stable. We come an experience where the worlds change all the time. So this is one more. And we come from an experience in which we have seen a lot of suffering and terrible things but also we've also seen that it's possible to sometimes win. I don't know if it's that or whatever it is but I thought it was not only an emotional regime but also an epistemological regime. A production of one, and a production in research of very nihilistic, very deconstructivist—you could never support anybody because it came out that everything was so complex, et cetera, so there was never hope. For me, the idea that getting in politics and doing theory is getting dirty and things are not going to be pure and happy, but well, I come from a tradition of getting dirty. That was I

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thought it was also beautiful in your presentation today because my experience with solidarity movements in the Nordic countries, particularly in Sweden, is that when they get disappointed – there was a lot of support for Palestina and people get tired and disappointed, and then they go for another movement. It was like the Zapatistas, everybody loved the Zapatistas and then when – so the idea of staying embodied and accepting that things are not going to – we're going to get dirty I think is very...comes from a different kind of epistemology than the one regulating mainstream feminism, white feminism. So, I think we have to produce scholarships of hope. Showing the structural forces, terrible dangers, but showing that we will struggle, maybe we will defeat it, but some of us, or our children will. We will survive.

LEC: And there's a way to move forward after that.

DM: Yes.

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LEC: There's a way to move forward. There's no construction of how do we move forward from here.

DM: No, no, no. We don't have—no. And I think this could be one – because that I think is a very powerful difference. That when you find both scholars and activists working in the margins, is that despite the terrible situation, everybody is hopeful. We don't have that privilege of not being hopeful.

LEC: That's what I was saying earlier, that's a privilege.

CTM: Yeah the dystopia, and stuff is...

DM: That I think for me is epistemologically, the central: defending scholarships of hopes, and understanding that this dystopic—they maybe our friends and maybe they are depressed and maybe we can invite them to tea, but there is an issue. The narrative that everything is going to go to hell is that the world as they knew it—

LEC: Is being disrupted.

CTM: Is being disrupted. Exactly.

LEC: That's the problem.

DM: Yes. On our side I think that we have survived before and we will strive to. So theoretically I believe strongly in what you're doing, and I thought when you said that about hope...I felt—because we have not been speaking to each other—I felt so connected because in Sweden the depression is so terrible. Everybody is depressed! "

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"Oh, it's terrible, everything is terrible." That could be a central part. Produce knowledge that opens for the possibility of hope.

CTM: Yeah. So, last question?

LEC: Yes, so given all that, and your hopefulness, what do you see as the future of feminism here? We know how you see it globally. How do you see it here?

DM: I am very proud of – we have new generations of migrant background, very different migrant background. One of the things I think was very – I hope that one of the things we did in Sweden that was good was never speaking about ethnic minorities or that kind of thing, when we spoke about migrants or processes of racialization. That made alliances much more easier for—and young people with migrant background define themselves as much more belonging to the local. People say "Well, I'm from Malmö," more than the nation. I think there is a lot of beautiful, courageous work doing by this young antiracist and I think that some of them think maybe they're right—that they're much more separatist than we have been, and they're arguing that we have been trying to speak, and they're much more interested in their own agendas. What I think is so beautiful now is we see so very different movements. We see a lot of people, young people organizing this refugee welcoming. It was impressive, in Malmö, the level of solidarity and people who went to the central station. It was beautiful to see that because on the one side young feminists or young doing forms of feminism and the other side, old ladies from the migrant communities wearing a dress and side by side, helping refugees. It was beautiful to see. Then the state came in and defined that these people were not skilled enough to receive the refugees, and the state took over. Many of them felt very disappointed about not being understand—their skills were challenged. We have a beautiful refugee movement and I'm also really, really proud about that. We have very important—you were saying that and I really was crying—of undocumented young children. We have all these issues of minors and a state that checks the level of their bones to define if their children are not. And they have organized themselves and I think they have really very strong voices. And actually they are children in a racist society where they're not conceptualized as children.

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LEC: It's so shocking that the Swedish state could be doing this. At this particular moment in history, measuring peoples' bones.

DM: The Swedish state and then the social workers. And also these ideas about asking these children, some of them from rural backgrounds, "How old are you"

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and—it has been terrible. Many, many pediatricians went public and said this is very unscientific, you cannot decide—

LEC: The age by the bones.

DM: —but only to imagine how these young boys - their experience of being checked and challenged in that sense. I think the issue of children is really - I mean it's coming, and particularly the idea that they are not real children.

LEC: Such a form of institutionalized abuse though, by the state.

DM: That could be a very—I'm going to pass the word. I think that's a very good term. And concluding, I'm thinking about what you said today about not only gender but the location of women within all these issues, because one of the most, I thought, one of the most impossible stories to tell - I thought it was some kind of Garcia Marquez fiction was that when all these young children, unaccompanied minors, came to Sweden - I mean really we're speaking about maybe one of the most vulnerable categories today, we had all this feminist mobilization demanding that why do – we want girls. Demanding there were too many boys and few girls. There was lots of debates and why we have to get so many boys and so few girls.

LEC: That's supposed to be seen as feminist but there is another agenda.

CTM: There's a whole other agenda. An underlying agenda.

LEC: Underlying agenda. It's a racist agenda.

CTM: But it's coded as feminist.

DM: It's feminist, and it puts the issue of girls. And you have somebody arguing for that.

[00:54:35]

Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.