

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S AND GENDER ACTIVISM  
AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: NEW ZEALAND**

**Transcript of Rebecca Stringer  
Interviewer: Nicky Newton**

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**Dr. Rebecca Stringer** studied Art History and Criticism and interned at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection before completing a Ph.D. in Political Science at Australian National University. Her research examines theories, meanings and politics of victimhood in modern and neoliberal times, and her book *Knowing victims: Feminism, agency and victim politics in neoliberal times* (2014) examines the neoliberal transformation in how we talk about and conceptualize victimization. Rebecca's other publications trace the dynamics of victim politics in contexts including Indigenous policy in Australia, the government of drug use, rape law, and the rise of precarious academic work, and her current projects examine the origins of victimology and the visual culture of victimhood. Rebecca teaches and supervises in the areas of feminist theory and critical victimology at the University of Otago. She has been a visiting fellow at the University of Alberta, the University of Sydney, and Flinders University, and has presented her research at conferences and events in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, North America, the UK, and Europe. Rebecca was co-editor, with Hilary Radner, of *Feminism at the movies: Understanding gender in contemporary popular cinema* (2011), and with Damien Riggs she co-edits the book series *Critical perspectives on the psychology of sexuality, gender, and queer studies*, which publishes scholarship challenging the way psychology has traditionally thought about bodies, identities, and experience, with a focus on sex, gender, and sexuality.

**Nicola Newton** is an Associate Professor of Psychology, who was born and raised in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Nicky trained and performed as a classical flute player in New Zealand, Australia, and Austria. She played with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in the 1990s, before a hand injury curtailed her career. After moving to the United States, Nicky gained a PhD in psychology from the University of Michigan (2011). She has held research and teaching positions at Youngstown State University, Northwestern University, University of Michigan, and Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada). Most recently, she moved back to Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and is currently a Research Fellow with the Health, Work, and Retirement Study based at Massey University. Nicky uses quantitative and qualitative approaches to research relationships between personality, social roles, gender, life transitions, and well-being across the latter half of adulthood. Recent projects include a multi-faceted study of older Canadian women's lives, an examination of stressful events and well-being among mid-to-later life women in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and a case study of the life of an Ann Arbor-based community activist. She recently co-edited, with Jamila Bookwala, *Reflections from Pioneering Women in Psychology* (2022), a volume of 26 essays from trailblazing women in the field.

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**Nicky Newton: Okay. Thanks, Rebecca for joining me this morning. Before we start the full interview, can you just confirm, give me a verbal yes, that you are okay with conducting this interview today, that you agree to being interviewed?**

Rebecca Stringer: Yes, I certainly agree to be interviewed. Thank you.

**NN: Thank you. My first question to you is, we are going to talk about the background about your life. As you think about where you are today, how would you depict the journey that's brought you to this point? You might want to focus on what your career arc looks like, what the central commitments are, and what you consider your most significant achievements to this point so far.**

RS: A bit of a bio sketch. I'm from Western Sydney. At undergraduate level, I did Art History and Criticism. That's really where I first encountered feminist perspectives. I was very taken with feminist philosophy and feminist perspectives in Art History and Criticism. That politicized me. I ended up doing a PhD in Political Science and reading into feminist political theory. I decided to go into academia. I felt that that was really my calling. My focus has really been— I've spent more than 20 years reading feminist theory and contributing to those debates. I'm trying to think, how would I—

Being from Australia, I've migrated from Australia to New Zealand. I have quite a strong knowledge of Australasian<sup>1</sup> feminist perspectives. We often find that kind of perspectives from North America tend to dominate the debates, but Australasian feminist perspectives are delightfully different to North American perspectives in a whole variety of ways. I guess my place in things and the place I've sought to make for myself is a feminist thinker from the [Global] South and of the [Global] South. Really, feminist theory and being active in the academy as a feminist is really where I would locate my calling and really what it is that I'm focused on.

I'm not sure whether that's a full bio sketch. I'm sure there's many things I could speak to outside of that, but that's where I would want to start.

**NN: It's interesting that you say that the viewpoints from a feminist of the South and perhaps the North American perspectives, they're different. Could you speak to that a little bit? Because I think that would be very interesting for everybody back home in Michigan, but also for others using these materials.**

RS: I think feminists from the South often see things differently and have a different encounter with northern-generated cultural content and political— the way things are going politically. Feminists of the South also is something of a minority voice in the broader context of feminist debates. I like the idea of— In my own work, this showed up— In the 1990s, really, is when my feminist perspectives— I was growing a feminist perspective, if

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<sup>1</sup> Native of Australasia, geographic region that consists of Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, and other neighboring islands around the Pacific Ocean. ("Australasia." *New World Encyclopedia*. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Australasia>)

you like. One of the things that was happening in the '90s was that the feminist popular press had really turned. If you look back at the '70s and even the late '60s, you see that the kind of feminist blockbuster texts that were designed for women at large to read and become empowered— that's a real signature feature of the second wave of feminism, coming from the northern hemisphere. Then in the '90s, their messages started to change. Those texts of the '90s, like Naomi Wolf's<sup>2</sup> *Fire With Fire*<sup>3</sup> and Katie Roiphe's<sup>4</sup> *The Morning After*,<sup>5</sup> those kinds of books were about what's wrong with feminism and what's wrong with the way that women are thinking about themselves. They were particularly arguing that feminism has encouraged women to identify as victims, and feminism has therefore sponsored this kind of disempowerment of women, and women are overcome with this victim mentality.

I believe that it's my positioning in the South where I like to identify as a bit of an angry penguin, so I don't receive the cultural messages of the North— I don't just accept them. I see the scope for a Southerner to see those differently. I wasn't having it. This idea that feminism had descended into a victim mentality really didn't read right to me. I devoted myself to actually speaking back to those texts. I notice now that the feminist popular press is much less of that type of argument, but I thought the critiques of victim feminism that dominated the popular press in the '90s— I saw those as profoundly destructive.

That's an example of— I'm sure that people in the North were seeing them that way as well, but I think it was more possible to get around that discourse and to critique it from a Southern perspective. I was literally working in a bookshop, and one of my first jobs was to unpack all of the books, all the copies of Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After* that had just come in from the States, in these fresh boxes. I had to unpack them and put them on the shelves. I actually had an experience where a customer had purchased Katie Roiphe's book, and then soon after, days later, she came back, and she wanted her money back.

**NN: [laughs]**

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi Wolf is a prominent American author and journalist, usually associated with the third wave of the feminist movement in the early 90s. Wolf has become increasingly known for her conspiracy theories and controversial views on a variety of topics, including COVID-19 vaccines, ISIS beheading videos, and the Ebola epidemic. (Fisher, Max. "The insane conspiracy theories of Naomi Wolf." Vox. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/5/6909837/naomi-wolf-isis-ebola-scotland-conspiracy-theories>)

<sup>3</sup> Published in 1993, the book *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* by Naomi Wolf suggests a need to shift the focus from traditional feminist values that paint women as pure and fragile to a new approach centered on celebrating women's power and success instead. ("*Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*." Publishers Weekly. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780679427186>)

<sup>4</sup> Katie Roiphe is an American author and journalist, best known for tackling the issues of gender, sex, feminism, and the media in her books. ("Katie Roiphe." Wikipedia. Accessed 9 August 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katie\\_Roiphe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katie_Roiphe))

<sup>5</sup> Katie Roiphe's 1994 *The Morning After: Fear, Sex and Feminism* was a controversial bestseller that challenged the views of many feminists on the issue of sex, fear, and date rape. The book has been highly criticized for its insensitivity to the experiences of rape victims and its misleading use of data and statistics. ("*The Morning After* (book)." Wikipedia. Accessed 9 August 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Morning\\_After\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Morning_After_(book))) (Pollitt, Katha. "Not Just Bad Sex." *The New Yorker*. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1993/10/04/not-just-bad-sex>)

RS: She said, "I thought this was a feminist book, but really, what this book is telling me is that feminism is wrong. I'm not interested in that message." I had to wrangle the manager and make sure this woman actually got her refund. I often return to that moment, and it's an example for me of a moment where I thought how important it is to speak back to these very strong cultural messages and to critique them.

**NN: Thanks. That's excellent. Second group of questions is really about what— and you've covered this a little bit— what drew you to the work that you've done and how you first became involved in the area, and that little vignette that you've just told really speaks to that. Perhaps in this block of questions, you'd want to focus on, this is the really interesting bit for me at least, how has your life shaped your work, and vice versa— how has your work shaped your life, to this point?**

RS: That's a profound question. I have a working-class background, and so I have always been interested in this world that we have, this binary gender order, that is, proliferates with dividing practices. These kinds of bodies, we've decided that they're male and they're going to be doing these things. These bodies over here, we've decided they're female and they're going to be doing different things. Bearing witness to— I've always been— ranged from bemused to horrified by the dividing practices that we see in society.

It's sort of when I cultivated the ability to step apart; somehow I had this— I think my working-class background, particularly looking at dividing practices in the area of labor, the idea that there's that classic gender division of labor that people may or may not be living these days, where it's thought that the home is the primary domain for the work that women should be doing, and men have access to the public sphere of public life and employment and so forth. The idea that different kinds of labor are suited to different kinds of bodies. I think my kind of working-class background, again, was a way to see through that.

I am part of a family where there's history of voting Labour.<sup>6</sup> There were always political discussions happening in the context of the family and my identification with labor movements. I feel like my leftist<sup>7</sup> perspective, my left feminism, was really forged in that context, and gave me this ability to see that those dividing practices around labor, which is so significant for how people live their lives and people's life chances, it enabled me to see that that isn't just the way of things, that in fact, that's the outcome of certain kinds of struggles that went one way and not another, and to maintain those struggles, because those dividing practices are productive and destructive.

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<sup>6</sup> Established in 1916 as a fusion of multiple socialist parties and trade unions, the New Zealand Labour Party is the country's oldest political party still in existence and the largest party currently in the Parliament, with 64 seats. Its policies focus on social justice, economic equality, and environmental protection, as well as supporting a strong welfare state, public education, and universal healthcare. ("New Zealand Labour Party." Wikipedia. Accessed 11 August 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Zealand\\_Labour\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_Labour_Party))

<sup>7</sup> Refers to left-wing politics, usually related to the support of more liberal and progressive ideals, and the promotion of social equality and anti-capitalism. ("Left-wing politics." Wikipedia. Accessed 11 August 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing\\_politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing_politics))

They produce our lives, and they produce our sense of ourselves, but they also destroy possibilities for people. I think that in terms of the biography and the work, the dialogue has really been in that place of left feminism, and thinking critically about those dividing practices, especially as they bear on labor.

**NN: Right. You bring up a couple of really good points there. That is this intersection of class and gender. I guess positioning yourself as working class and voting labor, do you think it's easier to disrupt the dichotomy between male, female, do this, do that, if you are left-leaning? Or what's it like in New Zealand? What have you observed in New Zealand as might be different, perhaps, in say, the northern hemisphere?**

RS: In terms of that question about the left, and if you're left-leaning, can you perceive the problems with the system? because I do think that's the case. I do think there's such a rich world of socialist feminist thinking that helps with that. In terms of New Zealand, it's interesting, I think the history here is one of— there's that proud achievement of women's suffrage, the first country to grant women's suffrage. But then of course, there's been the long struggle beyond that, to actually have women in Parliament, as elected representatives in Parliament.<sup>8</sup> In the Jacinda Ardern<sup>9</sup> years, we actually got to a point where there was this achievement around the number of women in parliament.

As a left feminist, I support that. I do think there's been a lot of focus on that in New Zealand, but I'm always interested also in the radical outside, where we're not necessarily seeing the Westminster system<sup>10</sup> as the great passage to human freedom, and we want to keep our political imaginations alert and supple, and able to imagine modes of organizing that foster human freedom to a much greater extent than what we currently have. I think that if we wanted to promote equality of gender, and move beyond this binary gender regime, we need something stronger than the Westminster system. When I say stronger, I mean more amenable to human freedom.

Yes, perhaps my political imaginary doesn't quite fit with what we currently have. I'm interested in what we could evolve yet, in terms of a system that would enable human freedom rather than disabling it, which I think is what we have right now.

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<sup>8</sup> The Parliament of New Zealand is the supreme legislative body of New Zealand. The unicameral parliament is led by the prime minister and is responsible for making laws, holding the government to account, approving the government's budget, and representing the people of New Zealand. ("New Zealand Parliament." Wikipedia. Accessed 9 August 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Zealand\\_Parliament](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_Parliament))

<sup>9</sup> Jacinda Ardern was the 40<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of New Zealand and leader of the Labour Party from 2017 to 2023. She became the country's youngest person to become Prime Minister since 1856, at age 37, and the first woman to be elected in her own right. Ardern resigned in January 2023, succeeded by Chris Hipkins. ("Jacinda Ardern." Britannica. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacinda-Ardern>)

<sup>10</sup> The Westminster system is a type of parliamentary government that incorporates a series of democratic features and relies on three separate branches of power: the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. It was first developed in England and is now used in many countries around the world, including Canada, Australia, India, and New Zealand. ("The Westminster System." Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/visit-and-learn/resources/factsheets/the-westminster-system>)

**NN: Interesting. You touched on the other point that I wanted to just sit with for a little bit. It is a difficult question, do you think it's— and I'm pre-empting a further question later. Do you think this binary of boys do this, girls do that, men do that, women do that, male, female, has that moved in New Zealand? Are we still fighting that battle, like disrupting that in any way?**

RS: Yes, there are terrific efforts. I think it has moved. There have been all kinds of shifts. There have also been, I think, unintended outcomes, which is often the case. The gender pay gap<sup>11</sup> is one way to think about the movement. We still— with all of the changes that have taken place, women are part of the workforce, to a greater extent than they have been at any time. Working-class women have always worked, of course, but there is a shift with women's greater visibility in the workforce, doing a greater variety of things, but there are still a dearth of women in senior positions within corporations, within public bureaucracy, and so forth, outside bureaucracy, and in universities.

I think there have been profound shifts, but the old patterns are still there. Just sort of an example; I've been reading into— there's a— what some people are calling a re-masculinization of academia going on. What they mean by that is that women have entered academic life in many greater numbers than we've seen in the past, but the question really is, what roles are they going into? We have more women in the academy, but we have women overrepresented in precarious work, in part-time positions. Our gender pay gap in the academy currently is, a woman academic can expect to earn on average \$400,000 less over the course of her career than her male counterpart. That's half a house, right?

**NN: Yes.**

RS: That's a lot of money. In a cost of living crisis, that kind of pay gap really shows up in terms of determining people's comfort and life chances, and their reward for all return on investment in their education, and then their career. Yes, I think there have been really significant changes, but I think things like the gender pay gap, however it's measured, there are all different ways of measuring it— that is the lasting trace. That's always what I want to see, is how is this translating into money earned and status gained? The other, of course, is that women gain seniority at a much lower pace.

**NN: It's not just public validation, but it's also that women live longer than men, and more likely as not in poverty. There's a lot going on there. I would totally agree. All right. Let's move on to the third block of questions. This is reflection on your work.**

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<sup>11</sup> The gender pay gap in New Zealand denotes the difference between the average earnings of men and women for doing the same work under the same conditions. In 1960, the Government Service Equal Pay Act introduced equal pay legislation into the public service, which was also extended to the private sector in 1972. In 2022, women earned on average 9.2% less than men, and this number continues to fluctuate. ("What is the government doing?" Manatū Wāhine Ministry for Women. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://women.govt.nz/tools/whats-my-gender-pay-gap/what-government-doing>)

**How do you understand the term feminism? Let's just stick with that question for a bit. What's your take on that feminist term?**

RS: Yes, it's funny. I've run hot and cold over the years on the term feminism, but I like it now. I'm quite happy to run with it now. I think, increasingly, we need to be making a distinction between feminists and womanists. It seems to me that public figures like J.K. Rowling<sup>12</sup> who are speaking out against trans rights and derealizing trans identity,<sup>13</sup> I think they're more womanist than feminist. I associate feminism with a far more radical perspective than that, and almost a mode of constant learning about what can be done around gender and certainly not a fixed idea that yes, you're right— this is a male and this is a female and that is how it is.

At the moment, I'm reluctant sometimes to identify as a feminist because I'm not happy to be supporting in any way, a transphobic position. I think the term has had such a life. It's had so many different meanings attached to it, but it is still the key term I use to describe what it is that I'm doing, and it's about not just promoting equality between the sexes for me, it's more than that. It's also about thinking and rethinking gender in relation to the human, and realizing that whatever we think we're stuck with and that can't be moved, in fact, we can creatively remake ourselves.

We're not stuck with a gender order in which inevitably, these kinds of bodies must do that and those kinds of bodies this. We're far more able to evolve new ways of being. I'm all about feminism being the thing that alerts us to that, and not at all the things that says, oh, no: this is a woman and a woman must only be this. I associate that term with freedom, but I'm not sure it's always used that way.

**NN: Yes. No, good answer. Thank you for that. It's a simple question, but it has a really deep history and meaning. What has being a feminist then, or your understanding of being a feminist, what does that mean for your work?**

RS: It's interesting, because I've crossed through— I read into lots of different disciplines, and in all of those disciplines, I'm finding the feminist voices. I'm sort of an interdisciplinary scholar, but really, I feel like I'm coming in on the same kind of conversation in each context. In the arts, in politics, and more recently, in areas like criminology<sup>14</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup> J.K. Rowling is a British author, best known for writing the *Harry Potter* fantasy book series, which has sold over 600 million copies worldwide. ("J. K. Rowling." Wikipedia. Accessed 11 August 2023.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J.\\_K.\\_Rowling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._K._Rowling))

<sup>13</sup> Since posting a string of tweets criticizing an op-ed that used the term "people who menstruate," J.K. Rowling has received backlash for her views on transgender issues and has been involved in multiple related controversies since. (Gardner, Abby. "A Complete Breakdown of the J.K. Rowling Transgender-Comments Controversy." Glamour. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.glamour.com/story/a-complete-breakdown-of-the-jk-rowling-transgender-comments-controversy>)

<sup>14</sup> Criminology is a multidisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand the causes of crime, the behavior of people who commit crimes, and the best methods for preventing and controlling crime. It draws on insights from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, statistics, and economics. ("What is criminology? The study of crime and the criminal mind." Maryville University. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://online.maryville.edu/online-bachelors-degrees/criminal-justice/resources/what-is-criminology/>)



victimology,<sup>15</sup> I've been seeking out the feminist perspectives and learning my way into them, and then finding my voice within those debates. I've moved around a fair bit. That, for me, is— that's been quite an important journey.

**NN: Yes, I can totally relate to that. The next question is, can you tell us something about your relationship with other members in your own organization? I guess you've touched on it with the interdisciplinary. You're at University of Otago<sup>16</sup> in Dunedin.<sup>17</sup> What's the collaboration like, there? Is there a lot of interdisciplinary collaboration across departments, across schools?**

RS: There's all sorts of collaborations always going on. I'm actually at the moment collaborating with people elsewhere, though. I'm part of a collaborative team that is starting to look at the decriminalization of abortion in Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. I tend to find that one of the things about being located in Dunedin is I do want my links with people elsewhere. We want to have that sense of being located in the world. Probably because we're so South. It's a really creative environment at Otago. There are fabulous scholars all around, so I learn a lot from the people around me.

**NN: Great. Gosh. The decriminalization of abortion— it's a fairly hot topic. Let's hope your research reaches other areas of the globe as well. Thank you. Okay, what are some of your expectations of your organization's future? You said it's a really creative environment there. Do you think that's going to stay, given: the news media in New Zealand, at least, of layoffs in tertiary institutions, which seem to be across the board everywhere? What do you think is going to happen with the University of Otago?**

RS: Well, when I speak to the creativity that is going on always, I really am talking about my colleagues and what they're doing, particularly my colleagues in the humanities, but also other parts of the university, but in terms of the university as an institution, we are suffering the effects, really, of the neoliberal capture of the university. Those significant policy changes that were about turning universities into businesses, and addressing them as corporations, or at least wanting them to model their operation after that corporate structure, which I'm against; I think that doesn't work. I also think that amidst all of that, it's important to bear in mind that actually the university is still a public institution. We're a public university. The government may be underfunding us, which is certainly what's happening right now, but we are still a public institution. There are many effects of the kind

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<sup>15</sup> Victimology is a field of study that focuses on crime victims, victimization, the relationship between the justice system and those victims. It is often considered a subfield of criminology. (Daigle, Leah. *Victimology*. 2017. SAGE Publishing. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/victimology/book244031>)

<sup>16</sup> The interviewee works as a Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies in the department of Sociology, Gender Studies, and Criminology at the University of Otago, a public research university based in Dunedin, New Zealand. ("Dr Rebecca Stringer." Sociology, Gender Studies, and Criminology, University of Otago. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.otago.ac.nz/sgc/staff/otago052071.html>)

<sup>17</sup> Dunedin is a city in the South Island of New Zealand, known as the country's Wildlife Capital. ("Dunedin." 100% Pure New Zealand. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.newzealand.com/us/dunedin-coastal-otago/>)

of neo-liberation<sup>18</sup> of the university, or the remaking of the university after the sort of patterns of a neoliberal economy. It's meant more of our staff are precarious, and as I noted earlier, many more women than men are procuring that precarious position. It's meant that our departments and our entities within our— at least, theoretically, we're meant to— we're kind of set in competition with one another and what I love about academics is the way that we kind of ignore that often.

The story from within the university, really, for me, anyhow, my perspective is that I just love the way that academics have kind of— It's like, nevertheless, she persisted.<sup>19</sup> There's a sense in which we just persist with our work. I think we probably needed to put up a greater opposition to the neoliberal capture of the university, because it makes us so vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of budget, but I don't know, I still feel like we're more than doing our job in terms of for students. I'm very involved in the teaching interface, it's still a very rich and wonderful space.

One has this sense— in my immediate environs, I have a sense of a really rich intellectual life being led by all, but of course, there is this wider scenario where we're vulnerable in ways that we shouldn't be. I don't know what the future holds, and in a sense— one thing I would do is that I do think academics need to be more actively participating in opposing these things, and I think that what's going on just at present, many people are starting to think that way, and thinking, actually, we should be doing more to oppose rather than just kind of taking another blow. It's definitely a hard time, but I just try and stay with the richness of what we're doing every day.

Also, the talent of students. We have amazing students at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. When you're marking an essay and you just find, oh my god, when the talent's jumping off page, you can't but feel good about what you're doing.

**NN: I wonder too. You are a, correct me if I'm wrong, senior lecturer of gender studies. Correct?**

RS: Gender studies, yes.

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<sup>18</sup> Alluding to the idea of neoliberalism, a political-economic philosophy that emphasizes the importance of free markets and limited government intervention in the economy, as well as free trade and privatization. In the university context, neoliberalism usually refers to decreased emphasis on the “public good” of higher education and an increasingly corporate model of education (Manning, Liz. “Neoliberalism: What It Is, With Examples and Pros and Cons.” *Investopedia*. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/neoliberalism.asp>)

<sup>19</sup> The quote “Nevertheless, she persisted” is drawn from a statement made by Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in response to a vote to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren during former President Trump’s nomination of Senator Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General in 2017. It has since been used to honor women who have faced discrimination and barriers but have continued to fight for what they believe in. (Reilly, Katie. “Why ‘Nevertheless, She Persisted’ Is the Theme for This Year’s Women’s History Month.” *TIME*. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://time.com/5175901/elizabeth-warren-nevertheless-she-persisted-meaning/>.)

**NN: This might be a good place to ask you about— It's been observed that women's studies, the programs are few. I haven't actually stumbled across any women's studies programs in New Zealand. I was trying to get at— with my last question, I think academics need to be fairly flexible with the folding in of departments to schools and different umbrella schools. Your school is the department, the school of gender and.... Can you tell me what it is and what your school is?**

RS: Yes, we're a little monster. We are three things. We are sociology, gender studies, criminology.

**NN: Do you have any opinions or take or knowledge of the history of: when did women's studies, schools, departments, areas, when did they start to disappear in New Zealand?**

RS: I guess the 2010s. I remember we were always getting these doom's news that another program was under threat. Then there'd be the campaign to save it. Then, almost inevitably, one thing that's so dispiriting about these situations are the mighty campaigns that get put up, and then management decide to go ahead nonetheless. The term "consulting" and "consultation," those terms seem to be meaningless these days. It's difficult for me to speak to this because I wasn't part of those programs but what I can say is that— I think two things have happened. Firstly, of course, gender studies isn't the only place where things like feminist knowledge are on the curriculum.

Right across the humanities, you might have one week and a paper, or you might have a paper where a whole half of it is bringing in those feminist perspectives and intersectional feminist perspectives and things like that. I think there has been a kind of— that generalization of gender studies or women's studies across the curriculum. That's one thing, but I still argue that even when you have that happening, you need a gender studies program. That's a place where we are doing duty to a discipline that exists. We're reading the history of that discipline, we're understanding the key figures within it, and that is concentratedly what we are doing.

Even though gender studies is represented outside of our program, when somebody in another area pops up with a paper where they're saying, "Hey, gender studies, we're going to be putting this paper in and we're going to have feminist perspectives in here." We say, "That is mighty. Thank you. We'd like our students to be able to do that paper. Can we include you in our major?" We've been really collaborative when it comes to the popping up of gender studies across the place, and that's just yet another paper that our majors can take. Instead of that working against us, it's really worked for us and it's made sure that our students have sufficient offerings to get through their majors.

They do core papers with us. We run a full first-year program. I teach a second-year paper looking at feminist theory. That's a core paper in the major. Then beyond that, they have a whole variety of other things that they can do in our program and elsewhere to make up their majors. Our numbers are very strong. They have always been strong. I can't actually speak to what it is that is working for us. I think there are probably many things but that's

how things have gone for us at Otago, in a very positive direction. We're a really strong program.

We altered our name to no longer be saying women's studies, to be saying gender studies, not in order to— it didn't come from a negative critique of women's studies. It was more reflecting, it did reflect a broader perspective that we were wanting to have our curriculum embody. Our curriculum looks at the making of gendered subjects in the way in which the making of gender is also the making of sexuality. The gender norms and norms around sexuality are actually co-articulated. Maybe it's that— I don't know, I think that a curriculum that speaks to those broad processes has been attractive to students.

One thing I find year in, year out, we have plenty of students coming along and wanting to hear all about feminism and all about perspectives and history of sexuality. It's gone well for us, which makes me feel like I can't— I don't exactly understand, but I do think that there is an unfair prejudice against women's studies that goes on. Women's studies is one of the only disciplines that students created. When you look at how our disciplines evolve, it was mighty, radical, stropo students in the 1970s who said, "We go to history class, we go to law, there's no women on the curriculum." Women write books. Where are their books? Where are the women scholars?" That's one thing that's really important to me.

I was part of an audit many moons ago of the number of women authors in political science on the curriculum across Australia. It was an abysmally small number of women. We have this experience where women are actually a majority of the undergraduate students at Otago, and I think generally, but all women tend to go to university. Then they go in and they're confronted with these curricula where there are no women's voices. That's not a good situation.

My thing is, let's make sure that the women's scholars who are out there, the ones who have actually managed to live lives in which books are written and significant scholarship is achieved, let's make sure they're on our curriculum and we actually read and engage with what they're doing. That's one of the things that I feel like my role really is to ensure those connections. That women aren't just writing books, that those books are being read.

**NN: Excellent. You made an excellent point about women's studies as being a bottom-up development. I've not thought of it that way before, but now you are carrying the torch as a top-down.<sup>20</sup> No. Excellent. Thank you. That speaks well to that question. Here's the gnarly question that we were talking about before we started the interview. How do you perceive the relationship between scholarship and activism in general and in your own work? Let's sit with that for a bit.**

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<sup>20</sup> "Top-down" and "bottom-up" are two contrasting approaches to hierarchy and development. Top-down usually starts with the government and then trickles down to the people, while bottom-up starts with the local level and then builds up to the national level. (Eby, Kate. "Which Management Style Is Right for You: Top-Down or Bottom-Up Approach?" *Smartsheet*. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.smartsheet.com/top-down-bottom-up-approach>)

RS: Scholarship and activism. I'm wanting here to refer to Sara Ahmed:<sup>21</sup> her work around the feminist killjoy<sup>22</sup> and her concept of feminist theory, which is one of the most wonderful ways I've ever heard feminist theory talked about: feminist theory is home work. The work of making this world one's home. So feminist ideas— she talks about keeping company with feminist texts. That as a feminist theorist, you are always in good company. You have these wonderful books.

One of the things I really appreciate about what she's articulated there is that there is a kind of activism always already going on when one engages with feminist theory. It doesn't look like activism might traditionally look, but there's certainly an activism involved in engaging with and participating in feminist theory. It's about making a world that women can call home too. I really appreciate that concept. I don't necessarily go in for a really strong distinction, the idea that, oh, you're doing scholarship, and therefore it doesn't have a relationship to activism. I think our received concept of the activist, it's the person on the street with the placard, and I love that person. I love that position, but I also think that we need to broaden it.

A few years ago, I examined a PhD, a brilliant PhD, about the women's movement in Iran. This person went for three years doing this PhD, and the response when he would say what his topic was, "There is no women's movement in Iran." He did this painstaking research to find that there is indeed this continuous women's movement in Iran, but all of our concepts of what a social movement is, didn't fit what he had found. So I think when we think about the activist, the hero on the street with the placard, I think we affirm that figure, but we also need to see activism— If we are thinking of activism as acting differently to how you might be expected to act according to your gender role, for example— maybe in that shaking things up a little bit and creating a space for difference, I actually think that's happening in manifold ways, often. I celebrate the small moments of activism as well as the grand moments. I like the figure of the activist, too, because I think we've gone almost too far about the idea that parliament's going to solve these problems. I think we need our voices outside of parliament, our radical voices.

**NN: At all levels, the subtle and the not so subtle. Excellent. Thank you. I know you were a little worried about that particular question, but that's a great answer. The question that I will— I'll say this question, but you've answered it. Perhaps, you could speak further to it. Do you identify as a feminist?**

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed is a British-Australian feminism writer, scholar, researcher, and former professor whose work focuses on queer theory, race studies, and feminist issues. ("Bio." Sara Ahmed. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv>)

<sup>22</sup> The term "feminist killjoy" was coined by Sara Ahmed in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, in 2010. Ahmed uses the term to refer to feminists who challenge the status quo and who make people uncomfortable by pointing out injustice, speaking up in the face of injustice, and working towards a more equitable society. (Dobbin, Natalie. "What does it mean to be a feminist killjoy?" CBC Canada, Nova Scotia. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/feminist-killjoy-book-erin-wunker-1.3864727>)

RS: Yes, definitely. I love to grab hold of the term and then have a big conversation about what it might mean. I love the way that it's always accruing new meanings. I love the way that in some contexts, it's not— for example, recently I've been reaching for the term womanist. I've sort of been thinking, I know people who have far more, if you like, credentials in feminism than say, an author like J.K. Rowling. Unhesitatingly, people are saying, feminist thinker J.K. Rowling, has said this. I want people to pull back from that. I want there to be moments where we are using a term like womanist, for example.

This gets into a matter concerning the backlash against feminism, and the way I think feminists are always doing the work of having to explain what it is that they are and so forth, and almost defend that, because there's always going to be something negative out there to say that that's something that you shouldn't be doing. I think we're often on the defensive, and I just as if were lean into that. I'm very happy to fight for the term and to be clear about what it does and doesn't mean to me.

**NN: No, really good point, and that came to the fore with the visit of, oh, Posie Parker, I keep getting it around the wrong way, recently in New Zealand. Good. Having a more nuanced discussion about what that's all about, I think is very important, rather than a reactionary bifurcation of what it is or what it isn't, basically. Good answer. Thank you.**

**Now we're going to move on to the sections that talk about where you see your work as fitting into feminist scholarship, I guess, within New Zealand. We've spoken a little bit about this internationally. You collaborate with others, you're doing this collaboration with New Zealand, Australia, was it, and Ireland— decriminalization of abortion. What other things do you do nationally and internationally? What other colleagues do you have in the globe?**

RS: Actually, I mainly do sole-authored work.

**NN: All right.**

RS: Yes. I'm mainly a sole author kind of person. My key work from some years ago though, it came out of my PhD, and it was a critique of the notion of victim feminism.<sup>23</sup> What I was arguing there: I was speaking back to this idea that being a feminist means seeing yourself as a victim, and just being endlessly sad about that. I argued that actually, victim identity is the result of a kind of feminist consciousness where you've realized that victimization that is being papered over and not responded to, really is happening. So I affirmed the importance of naming victimization, and arguing that this was a significant thing to do politically.

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<sup>23</sup> The interviewee refers to her book *Knowing victims: Feminism, agency and victim politics in neoliberal times*, first published in 2014, which tackles the issue of victimhood in contemporary feminism. She discusses the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility and the derogatory concept of “victim” as passive recipients of violence rather than active agents in the fight against it. (Stringer, Rebecca. *Knowing Victims: Feminism, agency and victim politics in neoliberal times*. Routledge. 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880129>)

More recently, I'm doing some work at the moment on the origins of victimology. What I've found is, one of the fathers of victimology was actually a criminal defense attorney who specialized in rape law.<sup>24</sup> He was defending people on charges of rape. He created victimology as a way to depict all of those who might present to police, saying that they've suffered a sexual assault, as inevitably lying. So he is a key— I'm arguing in the work I'm doing about him, that he's a key figure in the 20th century perpetuation of rape myths and in rape law. One of the raging injustices here is about the legal response to sexual assault. Also, of course, the institutional response to sexual assault. There is a very long history there.

At the beginnings, the first legal codifications of rape, many, many moons ago, the woman was the co-defendant, and the victim was the man who owned her. It took the French Revolution<sup>25</sup> to create different codes that codified rape as happening to the person who was raped. That's still quite recent history— when you look at the broad sweep of human history, it's yesterday that we decided that oh yes, rather than the man who owns her, her husband or father, that this is the person who was victimized. In that same moment, the Revolution, defendant rights come to the fore, and of course defense attorneys— their position is to stand between the citizen and the state and defend the citizen in that moment.

We, on the one hand, got the ability to see the victim of rape as the victim, and on the other hand, defense attorneys arise to find new ways of defending the person who stands accused of this. In this recent work, what I'm tracing is the way victimology as a branch of criminology, has really been operating very— The founder of victimology who I'm talking about really joined hands with Sigmund Freud.<sup>26</sup> He corresponded with Sigmund Freud. He's one of the first lawyers to bring Freud into the legal setting. He was really all about making sure women were still seen as liars.

**NN: Right. Or hysterical.**

RS: As fundamentally dishonest.

**NN: Man, that's pretty amazing. We've talked a little bit about your own scholarship and some collaborations, and also then, where your scholarship might fit globally.**

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<sup>24</sup> In reference to Romanian defense attorney and criminologist Benjamin Mendelsohn, whose work is considered to be some of the earliest studies of victimology, seeking to understand the relationship between victim and offender. ("Victimology." Britannica. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/victimology#ref908318>)

<sup>25</sup> The French Revolution was a period of radical social and political upheaval in France that lasted from 1789 until the late 1790s, marked by the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte. ("French Revolution." History.com. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/french-revolution>)

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud was a highly influential Austrian neurologist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, usually referred to as the father of psychoanalysis, a clinical method for treating psychopathology and explaining human behavior. ("Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)" Internet Encyclopedia of Psychology. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://iep.utm.edu/freud/>)

**We've talked about the North and the South, but do you have any other observations about where your scholarship fits in the overall scheme of things?**

RS: I would hope that I'm— where my scholarship fits in the broad scheme of things: I feel like with the project I'm doing around Mendelsohn,<sup>24</sup> because I'm doing that in the Me Too era,<sup>27</sup> I feel like I'm part of a really long struggle that's coming to a head around the injustice of the justice system's response to people who have suffered sexual assault. And there I include men, of course, as well as women. Women, girls, boys, and men. One of the problems with the victimological view is that it puts boys and men even further away from victim identity: that's one of the issues there.

I feel like I'm joining a very long struggle, a kind of 50-year-long struggle, and I feel like it's late in the day of that struggle. I'm still feeling somewhat hopeful that we might push through, because one of the things I like to point out is that conviction rates for sexual assault across the world are very low. I'm not a fan of prisons. I'm not all about wanting the justice system to be putting people away, but I do think it's important that we understand that none of us have experienced a society in which rape is criminalized.

**NN: Yes.**

RS: When you've got a 1% conviction rate, it's decriminalized. I think it's really important to— for me, that's a pretty radical fact. In 21st century, rape is effectively decriminalized. I don't want to leap to the thought that that means there is a huge population of people who must be in prison, because I affirm abolitionist feminism.<sup>28</sup> I don't think prisons are the answer, but I do like people to be aware that we don't understand what the criminalization of rape would even do, because we've never had it.

**NN: Right. It depends on how you define sexual assault. There's some fairly high-profile cases in New Zealand right now, of name suppression or identity suppression in public figures that I've been following in the news. That the same old trope exists: oh, it would deplete the alleged perpetrator's future job prospects, for example, those sorts of things. Those arguments haven't gone away: it's still protecting the perpetrator.**

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<sup>27</sup> In reference to the viral #MeToo movement, an ongoing social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment, especially in the workplace. The #MeToo hashtag has been around on social media since the early 2000s, shared on MySpace by sexual assault survivor and activist Tarana Burke, but gained more traction in October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged people to use the hashtag #MeToo on social media to share their stories of sexual harassment and assault. (Sancton, Julian. "#MeToo Five Years Later: A Timeline of Allegations, Accountability and Activism" *The Hollywood Reporter*. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/metoo-five-years-timeline-allegations-accountability-activism-1235228661/>)

<sup>28</sup> Abolitionist feminism (or abolition feminism) is a radical feminist movement that seeks to abolish the systems of oppression that make up patriarchy, including prisons and the carceral system, which is believed to uphold a racist, patriarchal, and capitalist order of social control that relies on violence. (Ananda, Kitana. "What Is Abolition Feminism and Why Do We Need It Now?" *Non Profit Quarterly*. Accessed 11 August 2023. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/what-is-abolition-feminism-and-why-do-we-need-it-now/>)



RS: Defense attorneys have remained unchanged. And if you tuned into what they were saying during the Me Too era, they were all saying, "Victim blaming's my job." That's what the court demands that I do, but actually it isn't. It's a peculiar defense strategy that was invented early in the 20th century and that they're just continuing on with. I think it's important to register here, of course, that where rape is criminalized is: if the perpetrator is a person of color; and so you end up with the situation where all of the victim-blaming that goes on, it suddenly disappears if the perpetrator is a person of color.

You can see then that there is something, not only is that a very specific and victimizing use of the law, but it also goes to show that all of those arguments about the reputation of this person must be upheld, and the whole tenor of the rhetoric, they'll only be doing that if the perpetrator and the victim have a particular profile racially.

**NN: Yes.**

RS: Excuse me, and if that profile is different, so we can drop all of that. Convict.

**NN: Right.**

RS: Obviously, I'm overgeneralizing here, but that's broadly the situation. So rape law has been used historically as a tool of racial domination. That's where the criminalization of rape has been skewed toward this sort of— yes, basically to racism. There's an intense set of problems set around this, when we're not responding properly to sexual assault or all its many forms. I think it's really important to remember that we are able to— there's nothing biologically dictating that sexual assault must occur. We're able to get beyond this problem. We're able to eliminate this problem. Just have to really realize our capacity to do that. I guess the work I'm doing, I'm all about trying to move us in that direction. I'm conscious that my contribution is small, but nonetheless, it's a meaningful contribution that will hopefully—

**NN: No, congratulations. It sounds like really, really interesting work. You certainly are interdisciplinary. That's history, law, gender, women's studies, all of it.**

RS: All of my kids!

**NN: Yes. The humanities. I have no further questions. Do you have anything further that you'd like to contribute or any other comments that you'd like to make?**

RS: Let me think. No, I think I'm good. There were probably things here and there that have popped up that I thought of possibly saying, but no, I reckon that that's okay, yes. I hope it works.

**NN: If you really do think of anything, let me know.**