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**Citation:** Matos, C. (2017). Rosalind Gill: “We don’t just want more cake, we want the whole bakery!”. *MATRIZES : Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade de São Paulo*, 11(2), pp. 137-160. doi: 10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v11i2p137-160

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**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v11i2p137-160>

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# Rosalind Gill: “we don’t just want more cake, we want the whole bakery!”<sup>1</sup>

*Rosalind Gill: “não queremos só mais bolo, queremos a padaria inteira!”*

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ROSALIND GILL<sup>a</sup>

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BY CAROLINA MATOS<sup>b</sup>

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PROFESSOR ROSALIND GILL studied Sociology and Psychology at Exeter University and obtained her PhD in Social Psychology at the *Discourse and Rhetoric Group*, from Loughborough University, in 1991. Brought up in a left-wing household with parents who frequently talked about politics, Gill grew interested in questions about ideology, and particularly the role the media played in winning consent for unjust social relations. Supervised by Professor Michael Billig, who did ethnographic work inside the far-Right party, the National Front, Gill has developed research on gender and the media, creative work, and widely contributed to debates about the *sexualization of culture*. She has worked across a number of disciplines, including Sociology, Gender Studies and Media and Communications, and has held various posts, including at Goldsmiths College, King’s College London and at the Gender Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Her publications include *Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (2017, with A. Elias and C. Scharff); “*Gender and Creative Labour*” (2015, with B. Conor and S. Taylor); *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Creative Industries* (2013, with M. Banks and S. Taylor); *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011, with C. Scharff); *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (2010, with R. Ryan-Flood); *The gender-technology relation: contemporary theory and*

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research (1995, with K. Grint) and the single authored book, *Gender and the Media* (Gill, 2007), among other book chapters and articles, including “Beyond individualism: the psychosocial life of the neoliberal university” in Spooner et al’s *A Critical Guide to Higher Education and the Politics of Evidence* (2017) and “Postfeminist sexual culture” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender* (2014).

Professor Gill is working on a four-year AHRC award called *Creativeworks London*, with Any Pratt (City), Mark Banks (Open University) and Wendy Malem (London College of Fashion), which investigates innovation in London’s cultural and creative sector. She is also part of the core group of a multi-country EU COST Action entitled *The Dynamics of Virtual Work*, which is concerned with transformations in work brought by digital technologies<sup>2</sup>. She is currently working on a book called *Mediated Intimacy: sex advice in media culture* (with Meg Barker and Laura Harvey). Gill joined City, University of London, in August 2013 and works at the Creative and Cultural Industries research cluster at the Department of Sociology.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <<http://dynamicsofvirtualwork.com>>. Accessed on: July 22<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

**MATRIZES:** On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, women gathered together in countries across the world to protest, including in Britain, against gender inequalities, and in fear that the rights obtained in the past are now under challenge. In your opinion, how have British feminist media studies contributed to looking at the correlation between structural gender inequalities in our societies and the role of the media here?

**Rosalind Gill:** Feminist media studies emerged out of three different movements. It came from people working within media industries who were angry about the under-representation and poor representations of women – for example as newsreaders, as *experts* and in terms of restricted roles for actresses. It also developed from feminists within the academy, in fields like Sociology, English and Media and Communication studies, who were confronting the *male as norm* problem. And it also emerged out of the anger that many ordinary women felt about how they were represented in the media – which led to a huge surge of energy and activism. For example, in the 1980s, before I was an academic, I was involved in a feminist grouping called the *Women’s Media Action Group*, and we did our own research about the portrayal of women, and produced zines and campaigning material about this. The International Women’s Day marches continue to express that anger at gender inequality and injustice, and I think it is really striking to note how much feminist activism relates directly or indirectly to media – from *Slutwalk*, to the *Everyday*

*Sexism* movement, to campaigns about particular advertising promotions or about *lad culture*.

**MATRIZes:** You are a prominent feminist media scholar. How has your academic path developed and what were your main challenges? What attracted you to work on representations of gender and media culture?

**Gill:** I was a political activist before I was an academic and was lucky enough to be brought up in a left-wing household where politics and ideas were talked about all the time. I studied Psychology and Sociology at University, and then was privileged to get a place to do a Ph.D. with a generous and inspirational supervisor, Professor Michael Billig, who at the time was known for his extraordinary research on British racism and fascism (Billig, 1978). He was interested in how forms of racism were changing in the wake of anti-discrimination laws, and had also undertaken very brave ethnographic work inside the far-Right party, the National Front. It was amazing to have the chance to study with him.

The questions that preoccupied me were questions about ideology, and especially the role that the media played in winning consent for profoundly unjust social relations. I continue to believe that the media are a really important area of study for anyone interested in social justice. Professor Stuart Hall has been a really important influence on my thinking about these questions – he is greatly missed and I think his ideas remain touchstones for anyone trying to understand urgent questions, such as the rise of Right-wing populism, misogyny and racism in Europe and the US.

**MATRIZes:** In your classic book, *Gender and the Media* (2007), you examined the trajectory of feminist media studies, looking specifically at representations of women in news and romance, talk shows, lads' magazines and women's magazines. Tuchman et al's classic *Hearth and Home* (1978) study on the US media during the 1950s, for instance, underlined how women suffered a process of symbolic annihilation, that when they appeared in the media they were either trivialised or infantilised. In your view, how have the media changed since then, and what would you say is the main legacy of feminist media studies?

**Gill:** Gender and the media is now a really well established area of scholarship. In my teaching I still go back to those early texts – like Gaye Tuchman's work (1978) on symbolic annihilation, or Erving Goffman's work (1979) on gender in advertising. I find my students today are always really interested in thinking about both what has changed but also what has



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remained the same: for example, women are still outnumbered on TV and in film both on screen and in production roles, and there remain troubling exclusions related to race, class, age and disability. On the other hand, it is really striking to see how the media have responded to the growing activism and visibility of trans people in the last couple of years, and representations of queer genders, and sexualities are changing fast. So it seems a really complicated picture: almost any areas you look at there are signs of profound injustice, yet also signs of hope. Take social media, for example; it is the site of terrifyingly brutal misogyny, racism and homophobia, but also a space for creative activism and resistance.

We are living in dangerous and frightening times. The waves of misogyny, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and rampant nationalism, that are evident in the vote for Brexit and its aftermath, the election of Donald Trump as the US President, the rise and *respectabilization* of the Front National in France under Marine Le Pen, and the growing strength of Right-wing parties and movements across Europe mark a new moment in political life. Among the many urgent questions that have demanded answers in the last weeks and months – particularly in the wake of Trump’s victory -, there is concern with how it may be that at a time in which feminism has a new visibility and has seemingly become *mainstream*, we are witnessing, at the same time, such spectacular misogyny.

The current conjuncture is complicated. It is marked by both feminism and anti-feminism. Over the past few years, feminism has achieved a new luminosity in popular culture. Feminist books such as *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2015) and *Unfinished Business* (Slaughter, 2016) top the best-seller lists, glossy magazines launch *feminism issues*, musicians and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities, and stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment that would, a few years ago, have been dismissed as a *yawn* – too boring to be reported – have become the stuff of newspaper headlines and primetime news broadcasts. Feminism is becoming “popular” (Banet-Weiser, 2015), “cool” (Valenti, 2014) and achieving a “new visibility” (Keller; Ryan, 2014).

Yet at the same time – as Angela McRobbie (2016) has argued – “Trump’s unapologetic sexism seems to give carte blanche to an insurgent patriarchy which can now re-assert itself with confidence”. Moreover, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2016) contends, “popular misogyny seems to fold into state and national structures with terrible efficiency”. Feminism may be visible, but misogyny is structural – like racism. How – she asks – are young women, raised on stories of *girl power* and *choice* and *empowerment*, to make sense of the election of a President who is unashamedly racist, sexist and anti-choice?

To answer these questions, I believe we need another term – postfeminism – in our critical vocabulary. This term speaks both to the backlash against popular feminisms, but also, crucially, to the dominance of neoliberalism as a political ideology and *ethic* across social life. It captures both the nature of new forms of anti-feminism and the way that neoliberalism is – as Catherine Rottenberg (2014, 2017) has argued – remaking feminism.

**MATRIZES:** Feminist scholars have directed their attention to film, advertising, and to female magazines. Many magazines directed to women, for instance, were abundant during the Victorian era in Britain, and these portrayed the customs of the time as well as showing how women were confined to the home. Some argue that well into the 20th and 21st centuries, many of these magazines still articulate similar discourses and biases around femininity, masquerading as *girl power*. What has then been the influence of these magazines on the development of a sense of self, and what has their role been in constructing a particular view of femininity?

**Gill:** Well, as I have mentioned, one of the questions that has preoccupied me a great deal is what I have discussed as a shift from feminism to postfeminism in media culture. Many of us have been interested in similar questions – such as the scholars Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker. Initially, it seemed as if the media had responded to the waves of feminist activism in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s with a combination of backlash – something that was well documented by Susan Faludi (1991) and others – and attempts to *incorporate* and *recuperate* parts of feminist programs, but to offer them back to us in a way that was emptied of their political radicalism. So, for example, the feminist notion of sexual freedom and reproductive rights were selectively picked up and sold back to us through the figure of the *sassy, sexy, independent* woman who knowingly used and played with her sexual power. This figure became ubiquitous in the 1990s – portrayed with high heels, perfect make up and in a push-up bra. She became an icon of what Robert Goldman (1992) called “commodity feminism”, implying that ‘all the bottles had been won’ and that, crucially, there was no tension between feminism and consumer capitalism. Much of my work is being concerned with trying to understand this shift, looking at sexism as a dynamic and ever-changing force which takes on new forms in new times and new contexts. I believe that the forms that sexism takes in this period after several waves of feminism are very different from the forms it took back in the 1950s say. The term *postfeminism* is a critical term designed to say something about the way that sexism and misogyny operate now.



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**MATRIZES:** Do you think the situation is similar in other parts of the world? What is the main problem with misrepresentations in the media?

**Gill:** The world is both a big and a little place! On the one hand there is quite a lot in common in the way that women are represented across societies – a focus on appearance, a trivialization of women’s concerns, a suggestion that a woman’s sexual value is the most important thing about her – all these things are seen in many places. On the other hand, there are huge differences both within and between different countries and regions, which vary in terms of religion or population or history. It is hard to generalise. But one thing we can say is that nowhere is there a place where representations of women are not an issue. This is still an ongoing struggle across the world.

**MATRIZES:** In your analysis of feminist media research methods, you make a point and state that it is not simply about underlining negative representations and stereotypes in the media. Representations need to be embedded within particular power relations and correlated with economic and political contexts. Feminist scholars have arguably made use of a range of methodologies in their work, particularly making use of qualitative methods, ethnography and reception research, and discourse analysis. The ways in which women encounter pleasure from the media, and engage with various media texts, have been the subject, for instance, of attention of researchers in classic studies, such as Ang’s *Watching Dallas: soap opera and the melodramatic imagination* (1985) and Radway’s *Reading the romance: women, patriarchy and popular literature* (1991). In your view, what have been the main contributions of feminist research methods to the study of gender and the media?

**Gill:** I think we need to embrace all kinds of approaches and methodologies for studying and intervening in the media. The ethnographic studies you mentioned are incredibly important pieces of work, and offer us so much rich, vivid detail about the way that women use media in everyday life. On the other hand, quantitative studies, such as the *Global Media Monitoring* reports, are also incredibly valuable, and, being repeated on a fairly regular basis, they can also give us some benchmarks about how much – or how little – is changing. Similarly, interview-based studies, textual analysis, visual analysis, and even metadata analysis on sites like Twitter, all have their place. There is so much work to be done and we really need a range of different ways of working. One thing that saddens me is how incredibly difficult it remains for feminist media scholars to get funding for their research. A lot of the ground-breaking



ethnographic studies that were done in the 1980s simply wouldn't get funded today – and I think that has led to a kind of dominance of textual analysis because it is something that people can undertake relatively easily and cheaply. Interestingly, it is often during Ph.D. research that scholars have their only time and resources to carry out a major piece of work – such as interviewing or being a participant observer. Time and time again, I see colleagues and friends putting huge amounts of time and energy into trying to get a modest amount of funding for important research – such as the experience of harassment on Internet dating sites, or the changing conditions for freelance journalists – and being turned down.

**MATRIZes:** Feminists have not reached a consensus regarding the nature of women's oppression, with Marxist feminists placing more emphasis on class exploitation for instance, whilst radical feminists have emphasised both capitalist and patriarchal relations and post-colonial feminists, focus on imperialism and the diversity of women's experiences of oppression. Fraser (2013) has criticised what she calls "mainstream feminism", arguing that it has largely served educated middle class women to crack the glass ceiling and climb the corporate ladder, thus not being able to achieve justice for women. This means that gender equality has only been achieved for a small group of more privileged women, and that for most ordinary women, the reality may still be of struggle and discrimination in the workplace and society at large. You also critique the dominant version of feminism today, associated with corporate culture and neoliberalism.

**Gill:** This is a really interesting question. As you say, there have always been different versions of feminism circulating, which have very different perspectives on the kind of world we are struggling for. The whiteness and middle-classness of some expressions of feminism is really well documented – and I think this is particularly the case with liberal feminist positions. It is absolutely imperative to be aware of the exclusionary tendencies of political movements – we can see the urgency of this right now in the UK in the ugly attacks by some radical feminists on transgender activists. However, conversely, there is sometimes a troubling tendency to *whitewash* the history of feminism, and to treat it as more white and middle class than it actually is. This may paradoxically lead to the erasure of black and working-class women's voices – as if *intersectionality* had only been *invented* in the last twenty years. In the UK, certainly in the socialist feminist tradition, there have been many, many struggles over workers rights, housing, state/welfare resources (e.g. Grunwick, the 1984-5 miners' strike, E15 struggle to name but

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a few), where women of colour and/or working class women’s concerns have been central. Feminist organizations like Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism as well as many feminist anti-austerity campaigns are really crucial here in London.

But, having said that, I do think there is a version of very neoliberal, very corporate-friendly feminism that is, indeed, predominantly white and middle class. It is a kind of feminism that has a lot of power and visibility in the mainstream media and is associated with some celebrities as well as figures like Sheryl Sandberg. Like many other feminists, I am disturbed by the way this is becoming the mainstream voice of feminism and squeezing out other feminist voices and perspectives. I think this predominantly white, middle to upper class version of feminism is what is dominant in the mainstream media, centring a restricted range of questions that – largely due to economic inequality – have little relevance to many women. But there are other voices too – and right now, in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire in London earlier this week, there is huge anger and energy to challenge the gross inequalities that are scarring the UK. I’ll come back to this a bit later.

**MATRIZES:** You argue that postfeminism is a contested term, and may be seen as a backlash against feminism, or a time *after* feminism, suggesting an alignment with other post-movements (poststructuralism, post-modernism and postcolonialism). You indicate a complicated relationship between feminism and post-feminism, even mentioning the possibility of a *transnational* understanding of postfeminism. The *postfeminist sensibility* is characterised among others by an obsession with the body, the dominance of choice, a focus on self-surveillance and the shift from being submissive towards portraying oneself as an active sexual subject. Women are constantly required to work on the self, from their bodies to what kind of person they are. You also argue that individualism, choice and empowerment are central to the postfeminist sensibility, and the media, contrary to the period of the ‘60s to the ‘80s, has incorporated these feminist discourses.

**Gill:** Yes, this goes back to what I was talking about before regarding the way that media have selectively picked up on feminist ideas. Angela McRobbie (2016) has a really helpful way of thinking about this as an *entanglement* between feminism and anti-feminism: women are *allowed* certain freedoms on condition that they repudiate feminism as a political movement for transformation. The media have been deeply implicated in this shift, constructing new figures, such as the empowered, sexually desiring,

*postfeminist* woman – yet this figure has been depicted in ways that are not challenging to patriarchy or to heteronormativity or to capitalism. Paradoxically, the appearance of the female body has become *more* rather than less central, with a vicious and toxic policing of normative femininity, with women educated in new visual literacies in which ever more miniscule *imperfections* are seized upon. We see this clearly with the way that female celebrities' bodies are policed. A few years ago it seemed you couldn't open a newspaper or magazine without seeing pictures of women with tiny parts of their bodies highlighted and magnified in red circles – a wrinkle, an area of cellulite, an unshaved hair, etc. Even today our female politicians are subject to this – just a couple of weeks ago, when Prime Minister Theresa May met Nicola Sturgeon (the Scottish Parliament leader), newspaper headlines focussed on who had the best-looking legs with a notorious headline saying LEGS-IT (rather than Brexit). It seems extraordinary that in 2017 you could still get coverage like that, yet it's reflective of a wider tendency to trivialize and condemn women often using their appearance or sexuality as a basis for shaming them.

**MATRIZes:** Shows such as *Sex and the City*, and other “chick literature” such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, are perhaps the best well known examples of post-feminist texts. Can you name recent films and/or TV shows which you would identify as a typical “postfeminist text”? (I recently discussed with students the film *Joy*).

**Gill:** Yes, writing about postfeminism has tended to focus on a few much-discussed texts: *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example. Today, Lena Dunham's *Girls* is the focus of a lot of analysis for similar reasons – it is seen as a direct inheritor of those earlier texts, yet also kicking off against them – for example in its frank portrayals of sex, which are nothing like as *glossy* as *Sex and the City* or *Desperate Housewives*, and also for its portrayal of a female body that is plumper than the idealised bodies we usually see on TV, plus has tattoos and is not simply framed for a male gaze.

One interesting example of postfeminism is the British drama *Fleabag*, made for the BBC, written and acted by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. In this, the intensely vulnerable *Fleabag*, stricken with grief and loneliness after the death of her best friend, and alienated from her family, is depicted as pursuing soulless and unsatisfying sex with random strangers. Her persona perfectly embodies the ideal postfeminist sexual subject who must always be ready for sex, while her expressions and asides to camera clearly show how bored, miserable and



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angry she is. Yet she cannot quite drop the postfeminist masquerade – captured vividly *as a masquerade* in her whispered confession to camera at the opening of episode 1:

You know that feeling when a guy you like sends you a text at 2 o’clock in the morning asking if he can “come and find you”. And you’ve accidentally made it out like you’ve just got in yourself. So you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, dig out some agent provocateur undies... and wait by the door till the buzzer goes. And then you open the door to him like you’ve almost forgotten he is coming over (cut to mid-shot of *Fleabag* in the doorway, acting surprised). “oh... hi?”

This *dark comedy* brilliantly satirizes the labour of postfeminist subjecthood – a labour that involves not only depilation and acquisition of the *right* lingerie but also – crucially – feigning an ‘*I don’t care*’ attitude of casual carelessness (belied by the careful preparation).

**MATRIZES:** Another of your important contributions has been to the debate on the sexualisation of culture, which you define as the proliferation of the discourse about sex across all media platforms as well as the eroticisation of girls, women’s and men’s bodies. However, there is today some dispute over classifying an image as being *sexist*. This sexualisation has provided opportunities for female empowerment, as well as articulating *new forms of sexism*, as you say. Authors such as David Gauntlett (2008) and McNair (2002) have talked about how young girls take pleasure in these images, and that these female magazines offer a form of *democratization* of pleasure, and show how girls can do what they want and wear what they want. This may be seen as problematic, as it ignores the impact of such images on women’s self esteem, eating disorders and feelings of having to live up to impossible standards of beauty. You, on the other hand, have said that you lament the disappearance of the word “sexism” from our vocabulary, and that it is *time to get angry again*. Has it become a problem then today for feminists to challenge “sexist media images”?

**Gill:** Debates about the sexualisation of culture are another area which is very fraught and complicated – and it doesn’t seem possible to make one singular judgment either way. For me, there seems to be a huge amount to be welcomed in terms of greater openness to sex and to sexualities, including the *alphabet soup* of LGBTQIA. Compared to a time not long ago, in

which there was great repression, criminalization of non-normative sexualities, and even the outlawing through our notorious Section 28 – of the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality, then this opening up is really to be welcomed – as well as the general greater openness to talking about and showing sex as part of life. On the other hand, it is hard not to be troubled by the unevenness of this so-called ‘democratization’ and the ways that women’s bodies are increasingly presented in completely reductive and objectified ways – yet with the alibi of feminism. It’s incredibly hard for girls and women growing up in this culture to explore and develop their own desires, since there is still such an emphasis upon male sexual pleasure and on really narrow, monotonous images of heterosexual desirability. Overall in all my writing around this issue, I have tried to fashion a position that is *sex positive but anti-sexism*. This is a political position rather than a moral one. It means that when I am angry about *sexualized* representations of women, it is not from a morally censorious position but from one concerned with gender (in) justice.

**MATRIZES:** In many local contexts, like Brazil, the notion of a postfeminist sensibility is still not predominant in the media, and rather there is a clash between pre-feminist discourses (i.e. traditional, old fashioned views of femininity, of women being assigned to the private sphere and to the role of the housewife, which are taken for granted and seen as common sense) with other more emerging postfeminists or feminist discourses (i.e. *the new career woman*). Such a case, as my research has shown and others, points out that sexist or stereotypical media images need to be situated within particular socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, and that there is a correlation between how women are represented in overall in the media and their treatment as second class citizens in society. Sexist images, thus, can say something about the societies from which they come from.

**Gill:** Absolutely! For sure sexist images say something about the societies they come from. I remember reading a quote many years ago that said that if a person arrived from another planet and looked to the media to try to find out what kind of place they had come to, they would think that we all got married at least once a week – such is our culture’s obsession with marriages! And this is indicative of a wider issue. But it’s also important to note that our media do not simply reflect the world but actively construct it in particular ways – even in the UK the figure of the *housewife* – as a media image – persisted long after most women were working outside the home. There’s a time lag, but its more than that – there’s also an ideological investment in particular images.



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On the question of how relevant postfeminism is for understanding Brazilian society – that’s a great question and I would love to see research on this. There is a growing body of research on postfeminism in the Global South, which is formulating transnational understandings of postfeminism. One of my former Ph.D. students, Dr Simidele Dosekun, who is now based at Sussex University, has made a really important contribution to this literature. Through her research with affluent women in Lagos, Nigeria, she started to question the focus on postfeminism as a purely Western or Northern phenomenon. In dialogue with many postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars she has argued that we need to recognise that a distinctive postfeminist sensibility can also be found in countries that have not been through the *waves* of feminism that are familiar in the UK and the US. I would argue that if we stop thinking of the *post* in postfeminism in purely temporal terms we can recognise that this is a fundamentally neoliberal sensibility that has transnational flows – partly facilitated by media and fashion and celebrity culture. I am quite sure that interviews with women in Rio or Sao Paulo would identify many aspects of postfeminist ideas in the way they think about their lives.

**MATRIZes:** What is the *confidence cult*, and what is its relationship with contemporary feminism? You make use of Foucault here to talk about the *technology of self*, which “permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies...” (Martin; Gutman; Hutton, 1988: 18). As you say, this form of confidence, which is demanded that women should have or even *fake*, implies that the solution to inequality is to be found on an individual and psychological level. There should thus be a focus on developing self-esteem rather than engaging in changing structural inequalities which, we could argue, are what precisely leads to many women “losing confidence” in the first place, recognising their limited options and subordinated status in society.

**Gill:** I have coined the term *the confidence cult* with my friend and colleague Shani Orgad (Gill; Orgad, 2016). Basically, we have become fascinated with how, in recent years, the *problem* of gender inequality has come to be reformulated in terms of women’s confidence. Wherever you look – in advertising about body image, in guide books on how to be a good mother, in sex and relationship advice, and perhaps especially in relation to the workplace – there is a really dramatic emphasis upon female self-confidence. Whilst, at one level, there’s nothing wrong with this – and neither of us would ever argue against programs or activities that boost girls and

women's self-esteem – the problem with this relentless emphasis on confidence is that it displaces all questions about why this might be, and it implicitly both blames women for their own putative lack of confidence, and puts the responsibility back on women to work on themselves to become more confident subjects. Thus, for example, when you look at all the public sector and corporate campaigns to get more women in senior positions, they are very much focused on the idea that the lack of women at the top is somehow women's own responsibility and this can be solved by giving women confidence training. It's a new version of a very old dynamic in which gender equality is framed in terms of *blame the woman and fix the woman*. What it does, of course, is to make it harder to see the structural blocks and challenges that actually face women – not least the persistence of sexism and discrimination. This way of thinking is really prevalent in universities as well – there are countless 'women in leadership' schemes that all focus on women having to change whilst leaving sexist and problematic institutions completely intact.

**MATRIZes:** How is this new form of confidence being played out by the media?

**Gill:** You see this emphasis on girls and women's confidence right across the media. One area where it is really prevalent is in the growth of what has become called *Love your body* advertising. This form of advertising – by companies like Dove or L'Oreal – works in a different way from most advertising targeted at women. Rather than emphasising what is wrong with a woman or her life and how a product could fix it, it instead works by apparently celebrating women's bodies and women's lives and reminding women how incredible they are. Dove, for example, has a tagline "you are more beautiful than you think", whilst Weight Watchers tells us to "awaken your incredible" and special K – the diet cereal brand – wants us to "shut down fat talk". All of these advertising campaigns focus on celebrating women, and telling us to believe in ourselves. However, there are very good reasons for being cynical about this: they are rarely less diverse than any other advertising campaigns; they are repeatedly *caught out* for using the very techniques (e.g. photoshop) that they apparently repudiate; the very same companies that have historically been deeply implicated in telling women to hate their bodies are now the ones disingenuously telling us to love ourselves – and so on. I have written quite a lot about this and Shani and I co-writing a book for Duke University press around these themes. I would also recommend Sarah Banet-Weiser's work (2015) around this. For me, over and above all the



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other criticisms of this form of advertising (and believe me, there are many!), I think the most pernicious thing is the way that it inculcates a particular form of subjectivity, a kind of compulsory confidence, without in any way lessening all the pressures that women already experience around the size, weight, hairlessness, and appearance of their bodies anyway. It tells us that not only should we look good, but we also must feel happy and confident in ourselves all the time. I think that makes it even harder for women – because even your feelings about your body are now being policed and you are not allowed being insecure or vulnerable. As one *May Advert* puts it “confidence is the new sexy” – but what it doesn’t say is that the flipside of this is that insecurity becomes *the new ugly*.

**MATRIZES:** Another key topic of your analysis has been the relationship between feminism and celebrity culture. Today, various high profile women, from Meryl Streep to Emma Watson, have endorsed the campaign for gender equality and taken on the “feminist agenda”. What is your analysis of this?

**Gill:** I guess it is quite similar to some of the points I was making already. On the one hand, it is something to be welcomed, but on the other, it seems to lead to a relatively un-radical form of feminism circulating. I have been much struck by the way feminism has become fashionable with celebrities endorsing it, and with T-shirts and merchandise on sale promoting “We should all be feminists”. It’s such a dramatic shift from a few years ago, when everyone was trying to distance themselves from feminism and repudiate the identity – as Christina Scharff showed so vividly. Yet sometimes it is troubling that the new celebrity and popular feminism feels a bit contentless – as if the identity were more important than the politics. I wrote about this in an article in *Feminist Media Studies* (2016) last year.

**MATRIZES:** Brazilian scholar Escosteguy (2004) has argued the Latin American reception research about women has largely treated them as informants, and this category is only used as biological differentiation, not sufficiently problematizing gender relations and the female condition. Authors like her, Martinez, Lago and Lago (2015) and myself (Matos, 2016, 2017) are examining the studies on gender and the media in the last decades, which are still expanding and in need to growth. A lot of the focus has been on soap operas, women and journalism and other reception studies. In your view, what are the areas of research that could be explored or what would your advice be? Are you familiar with the academic work in the field?



**Gill:** I think Escosteguy's perspective is really interesting, and I often feel very conflicted about this issue for several different reasons. On the one hand, gender is clearly something much more – or on the other hand much less – than biology, and as work from ethnomethodology and from performativity studies has shown us, it is doing as much as being – the meaning of gender is brought into existence through repeated practice. On the other hand, for decades men's experience has been taken to be human experience, and there is a real need to learn about how women use and engage with the media and how it relates to struggles in their everyday lives. Furthermore, I have often felt really uncomfortable with those generalisations about men and women – first because gender is always already intersected by so many other crucial locations or identifications – class, race, age, disability and many more; and second, because I think that we need to understand the ethnographic space or interview space as a place where people perform their gender, and this is partly done through their discussions of media. So, if women repeatedly stress their love of soap opera, this has to be understood not simply as a transparent expression of how they actually feel but also as a performance of gender – and likewise when men profess not to watch these shows they are also performing a particular masculine identity. I think the issue is also really problematised by the growth of trans and non-binary activism and visibility, and by the opening up of gender queer scholarship that pushes us beyond a cisgender binary... So, overall I guess we need much more studies of diverse populations that actually start from the people themselves rather than from an imposed researcher category – even if the findings do end up telling us something about the significance of those categories (gender, sexuality, age, etc.).

**MATRIZes:** Have you ever watched a Brazilian soap opera? In what way do you think they are different to the British ones, such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*? What do you expect to find regarding the relation between the media and gender representations in the country?

**Gill:** I can't answer this, I'm sorry – I haven't watched a Brazilian soap opera, and I also don't watch the British ones and never have. Life is short!

**MATRIZes:** The last two years have seen a series of backlashes against the women's agenda in different parts of the world. In the US, Hillary Clinton suffered from what many claimed was a sexist and misogynist campaign. The situation was similar in Brazil, with Dilma Rousseff's election, the first female president in the country, and later impeachment in 2016. In



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both countries the media was accused of a biased campaign against them. However, this was not largely the case of Theresa May in the UK. In your view, do the media still have difficulties in covering women leaders and other powerful women?

**Gill:** Yes. The media are implicated in some deep and some subtle forms of sexism against female leaders. For a start, their appearances are commented upon repeatedly in a way that has no parallel for men – this is utterly corrosive and undermining. You say that Theresa May has not been subject to sexist criticism from the media, but I would disagree. I already mentioned the LEGS-IT example from a couple of weeks ago, but this is just the most obvious! Throughout Theresa May’s time as Home Secretary the media were completely obsessed with her footwear and her penchant for animal prints e.g. leopard-skin shoes with kitten heels. This has been so ubiquitous that it has generated a vast number of memes. In fact, the day before the General Election on June 8<sup>th</sup>, *The Sun* newspaper brought back a ‘special edition’ of its page 3 model in homage to Theresa May’s shoes<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <<http://bit.ly/2vPS5xu>>. Accessed on: July 22<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

But it doesn’t stop there. I think that female politicians still face a set of impossible challenges that no man has to face – a double standard and double bind that makes it impossible to get it right. For instance in the wake of the terrible Grenfell Tower fire, Theresa May became nicknamed “The Maybot” to highlight her lack of emotion and engagement when visiting the scene – in stark contrast to male leaders who were shown *visibly moved* or, in at least one case, in tears (David Lammy). Of course I shared the huge anger towards May and am no fan of hers, but what I couldn’t help noticing was that if she had shed tears she would almost certainly have been cast as an *emotional female* and hence unworthy of leadership – so, in that sense, she was in an unwinnable position – damned if she showed emotion, damned if she didn’t. Again, I repeat, I am not in any way interested in defending May or her politics, but I do think it is beholden on Left-wing feminist scholars also to *notice* the sexism directed towards her and to condemn that. Many women in the US have said the same thing about coverage of Hillary Clinton – one may not love her, but it is hard to avoid the vitriolic sexism against her – and that’s why mobilizations around Nasty Woman etc. were so powerful.

**MATRIZES:** You have also written about feminist activism and the little coverage it receives in the media, apart from social media and the case of the *Slutwalks*. I am not sure if you are aware, but the year 2015 in Brazil was of

intense online and offline mobilization by various feminist groups, in favouring of maintaining rights and pressuring for further gender equality, including criticisms against the criminalization of the abortion law in Congress. New technologies were widely used by feminist movements, and the year 2015 was known as the Brazilian *Arab Spring*. There were various other online campaigns and hashtags, such as *#Myfirstsexual harassment campaign* and *Enough of Whistling*, promoted by the NGO *Think Olga*. Various feminist scholars are enthusiastic about new technologies (i.e. Harcourt, 2013; Plant, 1995; Haraway, 2000). In your view, may new technologies contribute for wider social change?

**Gill:** These Brazilian movements of 2015 are really inspiring – sound similar to things like *Hollaback* and *Everyday Sexism* – and they are all marked by both online and offline activism. I agree with scholars who see social media as an extraordinary space for activism, resistance, campaigning and solidarity among feminists and others. But I also think we have to hold this together with the equal prominence of the most vicious and brutal attacks on women – whether on journalists, activists, celebrities or anyone who speaks out. The graphic nature of the kinds of threats and attacks women receive online is quite terrifying, documenting the torture and mutilation to be meted out by those who want to punish us for speaking out. There seem to be two rapidly growing literatures at the moment: one on inspiring and defiant feminist activism and another on hate speech and gender-trolling – though it is important to note that it is not only women but also people of colour, LGBQ and trans people who are also disproportionately attacked in this way.

**MATRIZES:** Do you see new technologies playing a wider role in bringing together transnational feminist movements and women from different parts of the world, seeking avenues of empathy and solidarity and exchanging wider experiences?

**Gill:** New technologies have a huge role to play in transnational feminist struggles. We can connect instantaneously and talk across vast distances in a way that was unimaginable to me as a young activist – when our tools were print and radio and where the cost of an international phone call was prohibitively expensive even for those of us in the Global North. So, of course the new technologies have amazing capacities for social transformation and solidarity. However, the social and political – and yes colonial – dynamics that underpin relations are still not fully displaced. We have seen black feminist activists rightly complaining that *solidarity is for white women*, and – transnationally



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– we have to contend with huge power asymmetries that too often see feminists in the Global North involved in feminist campaigns of imperial *rescue* – seeking to *save* their global sisters rather than listening to them and offering the kinds of support that they seek. The work of scholars on *homonationalism* (Jasbir Puar, 2013) and *femonationalism* (Sara Farris, 2012) has been really important in highlighting the colonial dynamics within feminism as well as in wider society.

**MATRIZes:** You had said in your past that your view of what’s happening today may be seen as bleak or pessimistic. But gender equality has returned as a priority in various parts of the world, from the debate on the gender pay gap in the UK, to the revival of feminist movements and demands across the world. Guy Berger (Montiel, 2014), also from UNESCO, has stated that the media should have a wider role in the future in advancing gender equality. What do you think of initiatives such as the *Global Media Monitoring Project* and the UN Women’s *Media Compact – Step it Up for Gender Equality*, which has included 35 media companies from around the world, including Reuters, signing up to commitments on gender equality in reporting, from the inclusion of women as news sources to experts, among others? Media companies like the BBC in the UK, for instance, have launched a campaign for getting more women as experts. Can thus the media have a wider role in the future in promoting more women’s rights?

**Gill:** I think the GMMP is really valuable and the UN initiatives also have a key role to play. Apart from anything else they do, UN and other transnational organizations have a really key role in offering a language and a legitimacy for action that people across the world can use to mobilize and make demands of their governments and corporations – the UN Development Goals, for example, have been a key platform for national reforms across many countries. I see this in the UK too – it helps to secure legitimacy for equality goals that the national government might not recognise or support. We feminists – like all activists – become good at using the tools we have and working from the places we are in. There is no single strategy, but these are important ways forward. It’s got to be good if organizations like the *BBC* have some equality goals – and then we have a language for holding them to account. Absolutely this is important – but it is not the only goal –; our aim – in my view – is not just to have (white middle class) women having more media time alongside their male counterparts – hopefully something more radical can also be demanded. We used to have a political slogan “we don’t just want more cake, we want the whole bakery” – and to change how it is run!

**MATRIZES:** In such a diverse, complex and unequal world, is it possible still to pursue solidarity between women? Are you still trying?

**Gill:** I believe passionately in solidarity and in empathy. Without it, we human beings are lost. I believe we have the capacity to see beyond our own experiences and to feel for and with others. Being in London this week (when the Grenfell Tower burned down with the death of so many people) it has been extraordinary to see the love and solidarity shown by so many Londoners to complete strangers affected by the tragedy. So much food and so many clothes and toys and nappies have been brought to the site of the fire that the authorities have now begged people to stop giving. It is, I think, a wonderful expression of a very spontaneous human need to reach out and care for others. This is just one small example – there are so many and throughout history. But power relations mark all our relations – especially at a transnational level – and it is really important to be attentive to these and to avoid some of the earlier dynamics of *rescue* that I talked about earlier. Above all, solidarity has to be grounded in careful and attentive and ongoing listening – i.e. not doing what we think is best for the Other, but listening to what they tell us. This is just as true globally as it is on a personal level. We all want to be heard.

**MATRIZES:** You have also written about the neoliberal academia, and what it means to be a feminist scholar in it. Skeggs (2017), for instance, has talked about how we are all worn out, and how academia is like a middle class form of slow death (i.e. “We have to have anger to stop the fatigue”).

**Gill:** Over the last 10 years I’ve been thinking and writing a lot about what it’s like to work in the neoliberal University. Initially, I wrote a piece which attempted to ‘break the silence’ about our working conditions. Everywhere I looked I saw people who were exhausted, stressed, under incredible pressure, working 70 or 80 hours each week and still feeling like they were failures, and with more and more of us on temporary, casual contracts with little or no job security. When I first started writing about this, it seemed like this was an open secret – it was something that I would talk about with my friends, and occasionally in spaces like the coffee breaks at a conference, yet it was like a guilty secret, it was never talked about in departmental meetings or even in union meetings. I started to notice how many of my colleagues used really individualised discourse for talking about this – they often talked about really mundane things like being completely unable to keep on top of their email inbox through a language of great failure and shame as if there was something wrong with them – rather



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than something wrong with a workplace that was clearly placing intolerable demands on all of us.

Before that, I’d been doing a lot of work around cultural and creative workers, many of whom are freelancers, and, likewise, working incredibly long hours, with little reward, and often great insecurity yet also with great love and passion for the work that they do. I repeatedly encountered this sense of absolute passion and drive, yet also a sense of being close to collapse, and I started to realise how similar it is to our own workplaces. One difficult thing is that, in many aspects, we are very privileged group of workers – most of us derive great satisfaction from our teaching and research, and we still have some autonomy impaired to many other workers. Yet at the same time, our working hours and our rates of ill-health and early death are increasing dramatically, and looking around the UK universities, it is hard to avoid the impression of desperate crisis. Over the last few years, there has been so much energy and activism around this – particularly on the issue of short-term contracts and precariousness – which is fantastic to see. But we still need to develop collective strategies of resistance and care, as it is not possible to simply refuse all the demands as an individual. We really need to mobilise collectively, and we need to address other issues as well as casualisation.

**MATRIZES:** What advice would you offer Ph.D. students or young researchers who are starting work on gender and the media today?

**Gill:** I would say “go for it”! There is so much to do and to learn and to explore. We really need more scholars who care about these issues. It will be hard – because of the lack of funding, the paucity of jobs, the competitiveness that is scarring academia – but it is a chance to do something really important and to make a contribution. I have been so lucky to have worked with many absolutely amazing students who have gone on doing extraordinary work – it is one of the parts of the job I love the most.

**MATRIZES:** It seems that you are currently working on a book, called *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture*, with Meg Barker and Laura Harvey, and also *Gender and Creative Labour*, with other authors. Can you talk more about this project?

**Gill:** Our book *Mediated Intimacy* is coming out later this year. Basically, we start from the premise that most people – of all ages (i.e. not just young people) – get most of their knowledge and information about sex and relationships not from schooling or even from friends but from the media. So we have set out to look critically at which sort of *messages* are out there

circulating in everything from self-help books to magazines to romantic comedies and pornography. The book is organised by themes – for example, we have a chapter on consent, a chapter on communication, a chapter on pleasure, and so on – and in each theme we look across, a range of different examples. It has been fantastic writing with Meg-John and Laura – we all have different experiences and expertise, and we have also really tried to foreground some of the ideas about self-care in academia in our own way of working. It has been a really enjoyable and supportive experience – and we have a lot to say about mediations of sex and relationships – probably more than you have space for.

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