



## Episode 1,158: Women vs. Feminism: Why We All Need Liberating From the Gender Wars

Guest: Joanna Williams

**WOODS:** In reading your book, I was struck by the tone. I expected in a book like this to be hit over the head with a brutal polemic, and a polemic no doubt I would have cheered, but instead what I encountered is a fairly measured and reasonable tone. I don't suppose that your opponents or critics will perceive that quite the way I did, but it came through quite clearly to me, and it seems to me like a deliberate move on your part.

**WILLIAMS:** I think in part it was. One of the things I wanted to do very deliberately was to take some of the emotion or, dare I say it, even irrationality out of some of the debates that creeps into feminism. So I've noticed in particular with discussions around the gender pay gap, some of the arguments that I would get into with people about it and I would present them with various facts and statistics around the gender pay gap, and their final retort would be, "But I believe in the gender pay gap." And for me, that really summed up a particular direction in which feminism has gone, where women's oppression becomes much more an article of faith, a belief rather than anything that's actually substantiated with evidence nowadays. And I guess one of the things that I wanted to do with my book was just really say it's not good enough just to believe that you're oppressed or to hold onto this as an article of faith; actually, we do need to look at some of the facts and some of the statistics about what's going on in the world today.

**WOODS:** What's your background that led you not only to writing this book, but to the beliefs that you hold today?

**WILLIAMS:** So my background's in education and actually most recently in academia, so I guess that's another explanation for the perhaps less polemical tone of the book. So that's in a way given me some of the insight that I have about women's situation nowadays, because it always struck bizarre to read all these stories and hear all these accounts of women being this oppressed group in society and then to look around the university campus where I was up until fairly recently spending most of my time, and it's so dominated by women. So women students make up by far the biggest proportion of students at universities in the UK now, and I know that's the same in the U.S. and in many countries around the world today. But not just that. Women are so much more represented on faculty, in senior management positions. At every level of the university there are more women than men. And it kind of made me think, if women really are supposed to be so oppressed, how come they're doing so well in education? And also, what happens to women after they go to university? Does this success suddenly stop, or does it actually carry on with women out into their professional lives? And that was definitely the conclusion that I came to, that it does carry on, as well.

**WOODS:** Well, as long as we're on the subject of education, why don't we talk a bit about chapter one of your book, which deals precisely with this. And it is interesting to note just how much success girls in school have been having, and we see that in a variety of metrics, that then persist into the college years in terms of how many women as opposed to men are in college.

But what's more interesting to me even than that is the analysis that you have toward the end of that chapter about why this may be the case. Now, of course it could be that old barriers are being struck down and women now have more opportunities. Certainly there's something to that narrative. But also you're suggesting there's something about what has happened to the nature of education itself over the past several decades that could likewise help to account for this and maybe not in such a positive way.

**WILLIAMS:** Yeah, definitely. I mean, I describe it in the book I think almost as a therapeutic ethos that's crept into education, where emotions really are center stage in the classroom. And I think that comes into higher education as well, where people are asked to bring their emotional self into the classroom and to talk about how they feel and can be given academic credit for having that emotional response to a particular subject matter.

But I think this starts really in the very earliest days of schooling, where there are rewards, if you like, for not just being emotional — that would be the wrong way to look at it — but a certain emotional correctness, if you like. I think that's the best way. So we hear a lot about political correctness, but I think in education there's a certain emotional correctness, where people are rewarded not just for good behavior — and I think that's how it starts off — but also for having the correct emotional responses.

And I think for a whole variety of reasons, girls are far more tuned into this than boys. So in terms of behavior, it takes the form of sitting nicely, of having good handwriting, of being generally neat and obedient and biddable. And I think girls very, very quickly pick up on the fact that they get rewarded for this kind of good behavior, if you like, whereas I think boys, certainly when they start school at the age of 4, 5, or 6, are still a little bit boisterous. And personally I don't see anything wrong with that, still have a bit of energy that they want to run off in the playground, and I think they should be allowed to do that.

But I think it soon moves beyond just a kind of behavior correctness into this emotional correctness, when children have lessons about, say, anti-bullying initiatives, or fair trade is a big topic in the UK school system, or learning about — another topic that's quite popular in the UK is the idea of global citizenship, where the actual aim is to demonstrate empathy with other people. Say, for example, in a literature class, it's no longer the case in many literature lessons where children are asked to, say, analyze the text in a linguistic way, but they're more looking at the emotional responses of the characters to draw out lessons about racism or bullying or protecting the environment, for example. And I think girls are much quicker than boys to pick up on the correct emotions that they're expected to demonstrate.

And I think in the short term, this does girls a lot of good in the sense that they're rewarded, they get the stickers and the merit points, and they get the exam certificates. But I do think in the long run, it's perhaps a bit more problematic, because when you enter the world of work, if you're working in a business and particularly if you get quite high up in a business, then the qualities that are needed are not conformity, emotional correctness, but a much

more risk-taking, and I think that's where perhaps women are let down a little bit by the education system as it is at the moment.

**WOODS:** I think there's always been an element of promoting conformity in the schools, but it's interesting to note the different ways in which that has intensified, and that's happened alongside this interesting trend with regard to women and women's achievement, which is not – I have an audience that by and large would be appalled by these aspects. This is precisely what they dislike about the government's role in education, is precisely this cookie-cutter type of approach in which individuality is subordinated to expectations of conformity and obedience.

Now, I want to, just with your indulgence here, given that the gender pay gap comes up so much, I have covered that rather a lot on the program, so even though that is one of the main topics, because I have such a limited time with you, I want to talk instead about some topics we haven't hit so much here on the program. And I'm looking on page 102 of your book. You have a section called "Inflated Claims," and here you're arguing that so much of what we might call women's studies or feminist studies winds up being advocacy research, winds up being pursuing a conclusion that's known in advance.

And you give examples of this, and I'd like to talk in particular about – well, in fact, right here in your sentence, you say – you talk about "surveys purporting to show that women are victims of everything from rape culture to online harassment and sexualized bullying at school." Well, I may not be convinced about rape culture, but those other things don't sound immediately preposterous to me, so what is the truth of the matter?

**WILLIAMS:** In terms of sexualized bullying at school?

**WOODS:** Yes, and indeed, online harassment.

**WILLIAMS:** Ah, yes, yeah. Well, I think the problem is – well, I think there are a number of problems with the research that's conducted into these areas. So often you see what I'm terming as advocacy research is research that reaches out to a specific section of the population. So they take self-selecting samples, for example, who would like to complete this online survey. So it's hardly stopping random people in the street. They're loading the survey right from the start by seeking out people who've got an interest in such a topic.

And then often what they do is to lump together all kinds of behaviors. So I think if you look at online harassment, for example, personally I think there's a huge conflation nowadays between bullying, between criticism, and between abuse. And I think those three things are actually very, very separate things. To me, bullying is something for school. Any adult who says that they're being bullied personally I think should be embarrassed. I don't think bullying is a proper term to use for adult behavior.

I think criticism is something that takes place an awful lot in online forums, and you know, I think part of that, if you put yourself out there as I do on a regular basis, if you are going to express your views online, then criticism is a fair part of what you expect. And to me, that's life and that's part of being an adult, of having social media and being able to take part in debates, which is a real opportunity, I think, and far more positive. Lots that we can gain from being able to do that.

But I think there's a real conflation between criticism, bullying, and abuse. And we look at things like rape threats online, for example. They often turn out to be not credible. Some surveys of online abuse have actually shown that most of the abuse itself has actually come from women directed at other women, which is perhaps counter to what we might expect. So I think the real danger of advocacy research is that we conflate different types of behavior. We ask self-selecting groups, and sometimes we don't ask people if they have experienced particular things themselves, but we ask them to describe examples, and then the researchers will categorize and say, "Ah, so if you've experienced this, then that's abuse." And you might be like, "Well, hang on a second; I don't think that was abuse." "Oh, no, no," you will be told, or the researcher will make that decision on your behalf and put that under the heading of abuse.

And I think the real danger with this type of research is it does simply serve one purpose, which is to promote the cult of victimhood. It allows more and more people to come to define themselves as victims, and I think feminist advocacy research has the sole purpose of allowing often middle-class, privileged women who are doing really very well for themselves — it allows them an opportunity to apply the label "victim" to themselves. And I think that's really unhelpful. I actually think it's really unhelpful for women.

**WOODS:** That makes me curious about your views of the #MeToo movement. I've heard a number of people say this thing is turning into a witch hunt and it's gone too far, but at the same time, it does seem that it's uncovered a pattern of a lot of men and in many cases influential men who in their private lives are moral pigs.

**WILLIAMS:** [laughing] I think that's a very diplomatic way of putting it. I think certainly there are a few men who I think I probably wouldn't have wanted to have been around, but I think #MeToo I don't think has gone too far, I don't think is turning into a witch hunt. I think it's been problematic right from the get-go. I don't think there's anything positive about #MeToo whatsoever. I think it's been riddled with problems right from the very first time somebody put those two little words into Twitter. I think it is a really good example of a victim bandwagon that more and more people, more and more women are finding themselves able to jump aboard. And I think there are so many problems with it.

I think one problem is that it overturns the longstanding presumption of innocent until proven guilty, and what you have in effect nowadays is trial by social media where people are found guilty on the court of Twitter long before they get anywhere near a court of law. And you've got people with jobs and livelihoods and reputations being absolutely trashed on the basis of a few tweets. I think that's one problem with it.

I think another problem with the whole #MeToo movement is that it's conflated all kinds of different behaviors. So in the UK, we've had an example of a quite major senior politician who was — well, he's no longer a senior politician, let's say, but certainly one of the accusations leveled against him was that ten years ago, he touched a journalist's knee. Or somebody else went in for an attempted kiss, again, a decade ago. Now, these were with journalists. These were not timid little — certainly not children by any stretch of the imagination. And I think there's a real danger of conflating some of the very, very serious accusations leveled against Harvey Weinstein with some of the unwanted knee-touching allegations, hugs that have lingered a nanosecond too long, or the kind of bad-date scenario. I think that actually trivializes rape, and it trivializes some of the far more serious crimes. But again, the beauty of it is allowing everybody to perceive of themselves as a victim in some ways.

So I think yes, we can maybe say: isn't it good that somebody like Harvey Weinstein has got his comeuppance? Although now you know I hesitate because I do think that innocent until proven guilty is a very, very fundamental tenet of our law. But I think #MeToo has done far more harm to women than it has done any benefits at all.

**WOODS:** When you say that sometimes this kind of thing will trivialize rape or it'll conflate together behaviors that are really quite distinct from one another, at the same time, it seems to me that there has been an interest among feminists precisely in blurring what rape really is and making it apply in all kinds of situations in which most people would not think that rape has occurred. Because how else are they going to reach clearly and obviously preposterous figures like the ones we hear repeated on college campuses about the frequency of rape that we know from —

Like there were examples in the early '90s in the United States, and I'm sure there have been since but I was only studying them back then, where people would go on the news and say it's a horrible epidemic in America, but 12 million American children are starving. I remember that statistic in particular. 12 million are starving. I thought, how can that be? I live in America, and I've never seen a single starving child. How could this be? So the methodology, it turns out the method they used was they asked children, "Did you go to bed hungry at any time during the year 1991?" And if you said yes, then you were classified as "starving." Now, there's obviously advocacy behind that. There's obviously a bunch of policies; there's obviously an agenda behind that.

And it seems to me the same thing is going on with rape. They want to remake society, and in order to do that, they have to demonstrate that sexual assault by men against women is baked into the very warp and woof of society. Now, how are they doing that?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, I think you're absolutely right. And first of all, just a very, very quick comment on your starving child thesis, because we have absolutely this in the UK as well, where there's lots of panic about children being hungry and we have — I don't know if you've got the same thing in the U.S. — they're called food banks, where people who don't have any money can go and actually get some food, and this is held up as a shocking indictment on our society that we have children who are so undernourished that their parents are needing to resort to food banks.

And yet, without any irony whatsoever, on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, we can have a panic about starving children and food banks, and then on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, we have a panic about the obesity crisis and children being overweight. So you kind of think, well, hang on a minute; how can both of these things be true? Either these children are starving or they're obese. But actually, you can't have both, or to my mind, I don't see how you can have both.

So I think you're completely right. There are statistics and these statistics are used and skewed in a particular way, and it is absolutely the exact same thing that's going on to prove the existence of not just a rape culture on campus, but I think one of the main aims as I see it of the #MeToo movement has been a redefinition of rape, and I think this is why we see so much emphasis and discussion on the concept of consent at the moment. So we have this very, very bizarre situation in UK higher education at the moment, where there's a lot of emphasis on teaching students when they first arrive at university about consent. But consent

classes are actually compulsory, so you don't get to consent to whether or not you go to these classes. You're corralled into these classes.

And I think it does concern me — well, a number of things concern me about this redefinition of rape that's taking place. One thing is that it does become a self-fulfilling prophecy, I think, because if you teach young adults when they're leaving home and discovering sex and relationships for the first time that there is a right way to have sex with someone, to negotiate, if you like, getting someone into bed, that these formal scripts must be rehearsed and that if you haven't gone through this formal negotiation process, this conversation where you ask and answer what you're going to do when before you've done it, then you do encourage — the reality is that's not what young people do when they're alone together. But if you tell people repeatedly that if you have had sex with someone and that person did not stop and formally negotiate and go through this rehearsed script with you then you have been raped, then young women do come to see themselves as being victims of rape. Obviously it completely changes legal definitions of rape, but it does create this idea that rape is highly prevalent in society and that all young men are perpetrators and all young women are victims in waiting.

**WOODS:** More with Joanna Williams after this brief message.

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Where does the idea of rape culture come from? Because I don't see any part of American society that glorifies rape, so maybe it's a more subtle concept than I'm able to perceive.

**WILLIAMS:** Yeah, in the UK, it's being held up in song lyrics, for example. So there's a guy; he is from the U.S.; I'm sure your listeners will have heard of him. Robin Thicke, he did a song, this is a few years ago now, and the song was called "Blurred Lines," and it became a very popular song in the UK, and it was banned, actually banned from — well, more than 20 different universities banned this song because the lyrics were said to promote a rape culture. Posters, pictures that objectify women, all of these things are said to add to a culture that condones rape, that says that rape is acceptable.

We've also had three separate cases just in the past probably about two months of students from three separate universities in the UK, male students being expelled or essentially thrown off their university course for having made inappropriate jokes about rape. So these were on private online forums. They've made — I mean, not nice at all, not the types of jokes I would find funny, not the kind of jokes I would like to think that my son would make. But essentially, they've not raped anyone. They've not touched a woman inappropriately. It's an entirely linguistic crime, and it's a crime on a private social media forum of having told an inappropriate joke that included the word "rape." And again, this is the idea that this contributes to and adds to a rape culture.

But again, I think one of the biggest problems with this is that if you see rape everywhere, if rape is in song lyrics and scenes from films and in jokes and everywhere, then again it's very hard to say when and where a real crime is committed. Again, I think it dilutes the concept of rape. It trivializes it by saying it's actually something that's everywhere. And of course the reason why they do have to say — or the feminist campaigners behind these initiatives, the reason why they do have to say there's a rape culture and rapes everywhere is precisely because they can't point to an actual increase in the incidents of rape, the statistical increase

in rape. The reason why we have to have the kangaroo courts on campus is because most of the cases that come forward of rape on campus wouldn't stand up in a court of law off campus.

**WOODS:** Let me share with you my theory about where this idea came from, why they insist on the existence of rape culture, and you tell me if I'm completely off base. If there's a criticism that American society has one little problem with it but if only we could engage in a little bit of education we might be able to overcome that problem, you're not going to bring about the systematic, ideological transformation of a society. But if you say that an inclination toward violence against women of the most horrifying sort is deeply embedded in the culture, then that does seem to justify a root-and-branch remaking of that entire society from top to bottom ideologically, philosophically, socially, in every way imaginable. And therefore you have to make this stick, because then and only then will you potentially have the chance to engage in the total transformation of society that you seek. Now, is that just wildly off the mark?

**WILLIAMS:** The only slight disagreement that I have with you on that is just I'm not convinced it's that consciously thought through. I think there's a slight danger that we give these people too much credit, if you like, for having worked out something in advance and then putting it into operation. I do think some of the feminists who are most behind propagating a view of rape culture, I think sadly, perhaps unfortunately, I think they do genuinely believe it. I think they do come to see rape everywhere, and they do come to see every interaction between men and women as being somehow poisonous or a symptom of oppression and inequality.

So I mean, just to give you one example, I think one of the parties to this example is from the U.S. The other is a guy who is a professor at a university in London. Your listeners might be aware of this. It's been in the news quite a bit over here in the past few days. But it was an academic conference. I think it was in San Francisco. This was a week ago. Various conference attendees in the elevator, including a female professor of gender studies from a university in the U.S. And this male professor from the UK, the attendant in the elevator said, "Which floor, please?" And the male professor from the UK said, "The ladies' lingerie floor, please," which is a rather weak joke, but hey, it's just that. It's just a rather weak joke. The female professor of gender studies took huge offense by this. Obviously she was so outraged that she couldn't bring herself to speak and say anything in the moment. She had to wait until the event had passed and then go and complain to the conference organizers.

But this has now sparked this huge controversy where the man, thank goodness I think, is refusing to back down and apologize, but the woman is standing by this as a terrible symptom of oppression. She says it's "exhausting." this is the word I've noticed activists use more and more nowadays. It's exhausting having to deal with this routing oppression and we need to stamp these things out.

My fear is that they genuinely believe it. They're not going away thinking, well, if I chip away here and chip away there, I can bring about a full-scale change in society. I think they come to genuinely see themselves as being oppressed, and this is why I'm so concerned about the impact of things like #MeToo, particularly on young women nowadays, because you've got this complete contradiction I think between, as we were talking about in the beginning in relation to education, all the many, many opportunities and advantages that young women have today, and yet this narrative that constantly tells them that they're victims in every walk of life. And I think the real danger is that they do come to believe this and see themselves in

this way and kind of go through life — when you believe you're a victim, you do go through life responding to everything that happens to you as kind of confirmation of the way that you see yourself and see the world.

**WOODS:** And of course, in the old days when more men than women went to college and perhaps their educational outcomes might even have been better, that would have been a grounds for complaint. Now the exact opposite is true, and it's as if no change has been made. The shrillness is even greater than before, yet if the statistics were reversed, we'd be hearing complaints about that. So it's not quite clear what exact outcome it is that they want to see. What is the outcome they want to see? If society were to operate according to their rules, what do they expect it to look like?

**WILLIAMS:** I think that's a great question, and unfortunately, it's not one I've got a clear answer to. I mean, it seems to me at the moment that with every victory that feminism has comes a search for new sites of inequality. So you can say there are more women than men in higher education overall, but then they'll say, well, yes, but science is still dominated by men. And then you can say, well, there's more women in veterinary science, there's more women in medicine, in psychology, in biology, in biochemistry. They'll say, oh yes, but those science subjects, they don't count. What we really mean is engineering and physics. They kind of narrow and narrow down and are constantly seeking out new sites to prove this thesis that women are still oppressed nowadays.

And this is why things like the #MeToo movement have to look for I would say more and more trivial examples of male behavior. So in the UK — you might not believe this, but I promise it's true. In the UK, we've had a member of Parliament trying to make new legislation to outlaw street harassment of women, which you might think sounds sensible. No woman wants to walk down the street and be harassed. But this kind of includes whistling, being whistled at by a man as you walk down the street, as if this is supposed to be such a traumatic thing that a woman would just be so exhausted by having to deal with this constant barrage of whistles. No society that I've experienced is that actually the case. So you're constantly having to shift the goal post, it seems to me, to justify this oppression thesis.

**WOODS:** What's your website?

**WILLIAMS:** So that is [JoannaWilliams.org](http://JoannaWilliams.org). Nice and simple.

**WOODS:** Well, the book is *Women vs. Feminism: Why We All Need Liberating From the Gender Wars*. I'll be linking to it at [TomWoods.com/1158](http://TomWoods.com/1158) for Episode 1158. And Joanna, thanks so much for your time, and best of luck with the book.

**WILLIAMS:** Excellent. It's been such a pleasure speaking to you. Thank you.