



Faith in development: Transcript

Season 2: Gender and protection

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Speakers

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Episode 5: International Women's Day

Sabine Nkusi 0:09

Hello, welcome back to season two of the *Faith in development* podcast brought to you by Tearfund. I am Sabine Nkusi, your host for this conversation. For today's episode, we'll be having a slight change in the schedule. You'll now be able to hear from my colleagues Francesca Quirk and Martha Marie, discussing social norms and gender transformation in episode six. But as much is the month in which we celebrate International Women's Day, I sat down with Veena Sullivan, Tearfund international director to mark your occasion. Veena has worked at Tearfund for over 18 years and has previously led our work on HIV, sexual gender based violence and peacebuilding. As you will hear, Veena is a pioneer in many ways. We talk about women and the kinds of leadership this world needs. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Sabine Nkusi 1:14

Morning, Veena, how are you doing?

Veena O'Sullivan 1:17

I'm doing really well, it's been lovely to see you.

Sabine Nkusi 1:20

Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me this morning. So we are in March, right. And I consider this month to be a month when we celebrate women, their achievements, and also really look at how we move forward conversation around gender equality, not just in Tearfund, but also in our own personal spheres. And I could not think of a better person to speak with the new given your vast array of professional experience, and also what you have accomplished and achieved as a leader. So thank you so much for being here. As a way of introducing yourself and introduction for our audience. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background? And perhaps how you came to work in the international development world?

Veena O'Sullivan 2:21

Okay, I'll try and keep that short. So, I come from the country that is shocking when it comes to issues of gender and status of women. But I grew up in contrary home. I'm from India, grew up in a home though where my father from when I was a little girl always said, 'you don't even need to worry about men, you can do it'. You know, so I've never ever thought I need to be worried about the opposite gender. I work with that sense of that innate sense of believing that I'm equal. I didn't realise until much later how different that was to almost pretty much every other girl friend around me. So I have to say, you know, massive thanks to my dad, and my mum who probably was just went along with him. So I suppose in that sense, I cannot take credit for a lot in terms of how I'm wired or how I think, because the foundations were laid. To have much to do with that, I just probably enjoyed that sense of security and knowing and believing. I grew up also in a home in those times, right? So I'm quite old. I'm old, compared to people like you, I'm very old! You know, when India was quite different to what India is now. So I grew up at a time really, when issues of gender were not even talked about, they were just taken for granted that okay, the man will do this, and the woman will do this. And, you know, no one ever spoke about stuff like that. So to think that at a time that I grew up with that sense of liberation, and it's even more extraordinary. And you know, having lived in the western part of the world, in Europe for the last what, 23 years now. I have been more shocked about how because I thought the West is the one that's really way ahead. I have been shocked about actually cheese, this Indian girl. This experience has been so way ahead compared to some of the other girls and women around me. I in terms of my sort of, I was actually my study and all of that was in interest. But I had a life-changing experience in all kinds of ways, from coming to the Christian faith from a Hindu faith coming, moving from design, which I was passionate about and loved and thoroughly enjoyed. And to become an activist, that happened really fully when it came to the Christian faith. I cannot again, I cannot take credit like for most things in my life, I cannot take credit for that, because it was just a phenomenal series of events that brought me to a place where I was asked to lead by I felt God say, 'Okay, I have a different world view'. And I found myself being asked to lead a whole design campaign for HIV. I was always an activist, though, I would be protesting, you'd find the other teenager protesting about all kinds of things, even being taken, you know, arrested, ish, not put in prison, but dragged to the jail, fine for protesting, as a young girl, as a teenager, always hanging out with children who lived on the street. So but I realised all of that much later, that I just felt so strongly about some things. And you know, the most incredible thing about God is I think he creates each one, knowing how He's created us. And somehow, you know, we find a home as part of His kingdom. Just being and just being in the way we've been created. And that's the only way I can say that I

got involved with issues of justice for people with HIV now going into the early 90s.

Sabine Nkusi 6:36

Wow. So I guess your life experience, how you grew up, and even those arrests that you were being arrested as a younger, all of these things really prepared you for the work around connotations issues here at Tearfund, I guess in times when he was not popular in the sector, especially in faith spaces. So can you tell us a little bit about that, you know, your work around HIV, how all of that started. And some of the I guess, challenges that you might have faced as you thought about this way.

Veena O'Sullivan 7:34

You know, call me crazy, or naive or even stupid, maybe. I just believe, right? One of the things about coming to meet with Jesus. My life at that time was crazy, not just me, me and my family, we were going through an extraordinarily crazy time on all fronts. And I think what God did with us, because me and my family, we all came to faith within three months, right? God had to do the miraculous because that was the only way. He knew that he'd get all of us. And so that, that drama has continued. For me. My relationship with God is like that. I just believe and I'm not even thinking about the consequences, though. How do I express this? Who do I go to? So it is just purely based on okay, I believe this is right. And I don't care if they fire me. I don't care. Because what I think God wants me to do. And I also know when I say that there is no arrogance, I'm not feeling arrogant, like I know what God wants me to do. But I think so God, God, God if I'm wrong, rescue me. But God if I'm right, enable me that I need to, so that's kind of how I think I live my life. In Tearfund and outside Tearfund. Tearfund was quite a strange place for me to come into as a new Christian. And also, you know, British Christian charity. I only worked in NGO activists, world back home, all kinds of things, culture shock, shock of how people worshipped or didn't worship or expressed or didn't express. And when I came to church, and I was the second non white person in the office, all kinds of shocks, right? But I was fixated about what I thought God wanted me to do. So I didn't see much beyond that. But when you look back, when you look back, you realize and I can only say it must have been God's protection. A lot of that because if I saw a lot of that and, you know, picked up on a lot of that where people were didn't want to do anything about HIV or thought, oh, this Indian girl who would who is always looking for a hot discussion, you know, all kinds of things. I think that would have scared me, or broken me even. But I didn't see all of that. But I saw it when I look back. Oh, gosh, people said this to me. And, you know, the way people treated me or the way? Yeah, but it was too far gone.

It took courage because, you know, I think courage is when you consciously make a decision to act against the norm. I, because I didn't see it like that, because I was so kind of caught up with my commitment to people, people who were my best friend's living with HIV at that time. It didn't feel like that. Other side like that? I didn't see it like that. Yeah. And I think the one of the best tricks. Now I'll say best tricks in my book is, is that I surrounded myself with people who are living with HIV logins who are pastors who are worship leaders, you know, they are the best ones to speak. So that's what Tearfund is committed to the church and people, you know, of church. So if they are saying this, how can we say something else?

Sabine Nkusi 11:37

Absolutely. I remember. I mean, I've been a Tearfund for quite some time as well. And I remember when you were heading the HIV unit, and I was not in that team at the time. I remember passing by and looking at this and thinking, wow, they do amazing work. You know, it's really heavy stuff. It's really contagious. But what an amazing work that you're doing. I've been looking at, as someone coming from, from India, when you look at the media and people in international development. So the people that the international development is meant to serve. So people in Africa, in Asia and the Americas, I think there's a certain narrative that comes through a narrative about women, especially women who look like you and I say, who are black and brown. We are often described as weak, hopeless, helpless, as the other. There's no sense of agency at all about us. And looking at my own life, and the women around me, and the community, this narrative is really alien to me, because, you know, of course, there is patriarchy at work. You know, there is violence against women and girls, but also stories of leadership and driving change in the community that I have seen. Yeah. And I want to, you know, what have been your experience working with women, especially women, as leaders, and changemakers.

Veena O'Sullivan 13:11

Yeah. And that's, you know, it's really important to understand the depth of that, Sabine, because I think, you know, a lot of a lot of the narratives of around leadership are completely male dominated. And, yeah, like, what 95% of the top five on Fortune CEOs are made men. So they had a successful man, and therefore, this is what effective leadership is like, it is a male leadership that they're talking about. You look at leaders of nations. And you know, I think even last year, that if you look at the heads of state and government across the world, only 22 countries had women. Yeah, a crazy country like my own, has had a woman, female prime minister longer got a country like Pakistan, Bangladesh. Now this is contrary right to what the world would imagine you think the, the US would have as as a you know, as a progressive, rich country. They haven't had a head of state who is a woman. So I think you and I are part of the world where effective leadership is defined. They won't say as male leadership, that's fine. But the other, that is so not true. If you look at power, men dominate. Normally, if you look at domination of women, it's an care. That's right. We are going through one of the bad for our generations, right? We are going through a phenomenally difficult time, almost in every country around the world. We need a domination of the caring kind of leadership. We have very little of that we have very little of that. Now, I think in, in in even in Tearfund the kind of leadership a woman brings, of course now you look at the executive team, it's predominantly women, right and at the end, so changes are happening. But I don't think we can talk about gender alone. Although gender is so important. We can't talk about gender alone, we have to talk about the diversity of what it means to be a woman of color, and a woman of all kinds of color. Because the way you would lead is rich and wonderful and different to the way I would lead. Both are good. Can we acknowledge that? You know, how do we do that? How do we do that when the storm is this way, when the force is defining effectiveness in a certain kind of way, critical for us and Tearfund to understand how the emergence of leadership is happening, and how do we want it to happen. As we ourselves transition from being a UK based organization to a global one. We're taking baby steps we want to hear, we want to hear, but it's gonna take a phenomenal sensitivity, honesty, drive, to move to being truly global. So that women and men can thrive in every place in this organisation.

Sabine Nkusi 16:57

Thank you. So as the pioneer of some of the most successful work with churches and faith communities, here Tearfund, you know, tackling sensitive issues. So we know that you've you sort of pioneered our HIV work, which then gave way to our sexual and gender based violence. What was the vision for this work? And then where did the desire for Tearfund to engage in these work come from? I don't know if you remember this, but a few years ago, you facilitated a session around vision during the growing leaders course, or TFS. I was part of that course. And you talked about things like I think there were three words to talked about insight, foresight, and maybe oversight. I can't remember the third word. But during that session, what really stayed with me was the importance of listening in leaning in into prompts around you. So the current situation, the environment that you're in, as well as what's coming. So you're now Tearfund international director. So looking back, how did you make, I suppose a personal conviction. So you were talking about it earlier, right? You've got a sense that you know, something's wrong. And you really, you know, that's what's driving you. So how did you make a personal conviction into an organisational vision?

Veena O'Sullivan 18:27

Yeah, I mean, I don't know if it's, you know, obviously, it's a very personal journey, right. So, so I don't want anyone to think this is the only way at all. But for me, I think because I, I, when I kind of fell into the development space, I knew I came without education. In this area. I came without any of the qualifications or experience even right. So I had, I totally only knew, Okay, God has something here for me. So I had really lean in, lean in and trust intuition became huge. My gut instinct, but holding that gut instinct precious and like precious because feeling is so much and I'm a feeler and light because I could be wrong. I could have a sense of grandiose maybe I didn't want to be I was so I don't want to be in the wrong place God and I it would always consume me. And when something consumed me then I would say Okay, I'm gonna give it my hours. Not knowing, you know, and story of my life. I don't plan anything, right? So not knowing where this could go. But if this is of God, I have no problem talking about it. With anyone, anyone finding allies. I've also never done things on my own. I've always had to find community to do things with because that's how I've learned them. I just That's how I've known the deepest as well. So, so in HIV and sexual violence, I just had to go to the people say, you know, the women that, you know, I moved to South Africa and Tearfund was I went to Matthew Frost CEO and said, I'm really feeling this. But I would understand that this is not for Tearfund, I feel like we have to do something about the rape of women and war and sexual violence and war. And but I want to go and really figure this out, because I have a lot to learn. And so he let me go. And I chose South Africa because it is a country with the highest incidence of rape, and also to the country when Tearfund wasn't really known. So I could quietly see if I could, if this is what I could rally women around this, if this is what they wanted, if the women I met then said, Oh, we're not we don't want to do anything, I would have given up because no point, they if they feel they wanted, then I'm an ally, I'm writing that, and I will do anything, you know, to make it happen for you. And also, I wanted to see if I could rally the church to come along, because to see if they could become the safe spaces that women wanted, you know, so I think intuition is a big one. And then take acting on the intuition and rallying people inspiring others to show solidarity and you know, more than solidarity, even when women believe they can trust you. And then they can lean on you. For me, I'm talking about women really in the context of the sexual violence work. Or people with HIV felt they could trust me, I was the only one backing our state's network of people with HIV. I

was the only person who did not have HIV was part of the network. Wow. Okay. Like a special place, they allowed me to be part of it and proudly walk around living with HIV living positive, yes, T shirts and stuff. So people thought I had HIV as well. But I think when people trust you, it's an incredible honour and an incredible responsibility. Nothing will stop you. After that. You will go you will find you know, with sexual violence, as you know, you've been with me my journey, knock on any door with the Foreign Office by the UN, you know, those open God makes it happen. But intuition and really holding it precious and light are big things and same thing even in this role. Right? It's having to hold what is precious, precious, and treat it that way. And hold what is like, likely?

Sabine Nkusi 22:40

Wow, that is amazing. I think I have really witnessed again, working closely with you, I have witnessed the power of bringing people on board and really centering people at the heart of the work and not seeing them as just numbers, but as real people, people who have names who have families, people who are your friends. And I think that has been part of really the successful story for TF and then I think it's not just in terms of the work. I mean, I have been in your team as well. And I think, you know, when you talk about intuition and trust, I think there's something about trusting someone that gives them wings, I think. So you trust someone and be able to do things and I think you have been used that is I guess a special gift that you have as a leader, but also as a yeah, as a wonderful woman.

Veena O'Sullivan 23:38

Sabine, look at the truth. Like God says, right, you will be able to do far more than you could ever ask or imagine that means you work as an administrator, you know, everyone is able, and how do we enable that force? To really for us, as an organisation, to release to equip to enable, to encourage trust? You know, of course, trust is earned. When it's given you hold precious and you receive and you respond fundamentally, each and every one is able.

Sabine Nkusi 24:17

Absolutely. So is to think about the journey then from working with women and girls and men and boys in the context of Section gender based violence, and also the leaders. Can you share some of the gains you think we have made or even challenges that we've had to really grapple with? Over the years around the work section, gender based violence?

Veena O'Sullivan 24:42

I think if you know, and I'm conscious that me saying it is, you know, you can blow your own trumpet. It's not my trumpet to blow, but I genuinely think this is one of the most successful things that we've done. And I don't mean success. So in terms of attracting big donors are things that successful because it's one of the hardest things to change, deep rooted belief that when, you know in so many of our places where, where

they believe scripture says that women are lesser than men see that change to see the flourishing of women? And so I've been you know, we've been in places as well but like Burundi, Basra last one, my goodness me, when just to see that force for change for good. Not leaving men are but men with women. Yeah, that that is God's kingdom. They work together like that, oh, my gosh, the things they can do together, the, you know, the power of the next generation that they are modelling for. That's, that's incredible. I think we've we've seen that we've seen, I think it's always challenging and an organisation like Tearfund, where a lot of the leaders, you know, like, but a lot of people sitting in the UK who don't experience what you and I have had the joy and privilege of experience and being with these kinds of journeys with people in the countries where we work. Translate doesn't compute, because experience Trumps anything that you would read, right. But let's see, let's look at the impact that that work has had. It's had phenomenal impact, because it brought us directly in relationship with the Foreign Office, the UK Foreign Office, going back, we got to influence what William Hague said. Right, the government that we wrote six lines, that's right off his speech, we got to bring our church leaders into dialogue and reach an agreement about how they in any country that the UK Government works, they will be involved. They, of course, they funded us in many places. And we record church leaders to inspire this church leaders. So I think if I look at my, you know, I lived in South Africa, I left South Africa in 2015. And this is a microcosm of the success of you know, success. Again, I don't want to talk about success in the way again, male dominated effectiveness. But when we look at the whatever we got, we got over 3000, maybe even 5000 are women as part of the survivor movement. And we'll send me photos on WhatsApp about what they've achieved. Women who were raped and sitting at home like no pillow who you know, yeah. Oh, my God, a force for change. Speaking of a girl Esperance, quiet. Now, PhD. She's like one of the most popular speakers and you know, key influencers. We don't even know where all she travels and goes, yes. How incredible is that? In Tearfund, we talk about Jesus calling us and to follow him into places of greatest poverty and the greatest need. When you saw the kind of broken women we saw, even in Mali, we followed we follow Jesus in the way we understood, right, you and me that time I remember that trip, and, and if they are flourishing, and if their faces are shining with joy, not with anger or not with unforgiveness, but they're exuding joy and peace and power. That's what we've gained. I wish we could look more, I wish all of Tearfund could look more and feel it, experience it and find ways to communicate it far more than what we've managed. Ah, there's phenomenal stuff. But how do we package it and how do we share it and how do we, you know, it's like fire. How do we light everyone on fire? That's the bit that we are I don't think we've figured out to its fullest. You and I had that fire though. So yeah.

Sabine Nkusi 26:25

Thank you. Thank you. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about some of the interfaith work that we have done?

Veena O'Sullivan 26:31

Yeah, absolutely. And I think you know, again, effectiveness of this kind of leadership means you have communities caring, expressing love, affection sharing dominates. It may, you know, it even dominates in the GDP the savings that those communities have. That's right. But I think we have to redefine that kind of effectiveness. Yeah, which we need to swallow desperately at this time.

Sabine Nkusi 26:25

Yeah, absolutely. So as we think about care, and you know, how we look after ourselves as women with many caring responsibilities that we often have, I mean, looking at COVID, when COVID hit us, we have seen how the burden of care still landed on women and girls around the world, even though we were all at home, men and women, but the care still landed on women. And some sectors would have collapsed actually without care work. So as we care for others, what does it mean to care for ourselves? And have you mastered the art of self care? I would love to hear some tips.

Veena O'Sullivan 31:10

Sabine, you know me so well, though. Absolute fail, I absolutely fail, but I have not been broken down. You know, I spend a lot of my time away from home. And it does come at a cost, but it's a cost that counts. I counted as privilege, even though it does come at a cost and you know, we make choices. Some of the others say you make sacrifices, I think I've made a choice. Definitely as my husband and my kids who probably years down the road later on, say 'that was your choice Mum', not ours, but they're totally, you know, in sync and where they live seems to go on. So in terms of care and self care. I do think one is one thing I've had to do is really know myself, what I need to know how far I can go know when I'm getting into a not good space. So real deep self awareness is something that I haven't mastered, I am constantly aware of. And my best check out my other fellow women, right? We talk that's the joy of being a community of women, we talk we can tell each other we are sensitive to one another you know Sabine as a mother of two boys as well. Means and as a person who loves cooking for her family. What it means to you know, every time I travelled, I used to cook and freeze food for the entire time. As always, remember, that was me too. Yeah, we just do it because that's what you do my husband becoming a better cook according to my boys, so I'm not doing that any more. That's how it is. So we have to really learn from one another. I think that we have to stop being you know, feeling I have to start let me stop saying we and say I, I have to stop feeling guilty. Because that's the comes with being away and oh gosh, I'm not being the Cara, my mother, my mother will make me feel you know, women as the worst with one another as well. As we are the best, she will make me feel guilty. Every time she'd say, 'Oh, you poor things are leaving them'. How can you know we are our worst sometimes, you know, how we raise our sons how we speak to other women, how we don't support that tear down? So I think so I choose my friends that he can. Yeah, well to understand and those who will support and challenge and not tear me down. But I think but I'm also blessed to be married to Gavin who is the primary care in our home and has always been when I you know when I had my first baby, I didn't take maternity leave. And I came straight back because I was quite stunned about how having a child in London felt and the environment that so he took six months off. So I guess, you know, I'm spoiled in that sense. But I think that was God's plan to because he loves that. I love this. So my children to think whenever I come back home, they say oh district one is back. It was changed. Oh, even that you know, and that my early understanding of fate was a huge challenge about the male female roles and But thank God, I realized that, you know, God had puts people together complementarily what would be deemed as a male role? Maybe be travelling and my husband's staying home? You know? Right. So yeah.

Sabine Nkusi 35:16

We all play to our own strength. And I think one thing that I've been saying to my husband and my two boys is that, you know, sometimes I'm not doing any unpaid care work, right? No unpaid care anyway for my mom right now. Because I'm aware that I'm raising boys, and I'm the only woman in this home. So, therefore, they need to be able to do everything for themselves. And as you said, you know, I used to also do the cooking on my travels. But then, you know, they've taken on board, so we kind of sharing the burden of that work. Yeah. Which I think is really important, because it says them for life as well. And for the, you know, the future partners too.

Veena O'Sullivan 36:00

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. No, no, I think it's really important, we model a different way. I think caring and therefore cooking, because coming out of care is one thing, but cooking and, you know, using the cooking example that you're cooking, just because we feel guilty, and we feel like we have to do it is not the right thing.

Sabine Nkusi 36:21

Absolutely. Wow. So to sort of end our conversation, sort of looking back at what you have accomplished throughout your life, is there anything that you have done differently? Anything at all?

Veena O'Sullivan 36:00

In terms of in leadership? You, me? Yes. I think just to trust that femininity, feminine styles, ways, feminine, you know, being wired differently. I've really believed in that that is good. And that is powerful. And that can be even more successful than everything I've had for me, more than because I told you about my dad, more than thinking about me as a girl or a woman, I've had to think more about me as a woman of this colour, this race, this ethnicity in this part of the world. I think a lot about that. And you know, and that I think is a challenge for us currently in Tearfund. How do we hold that? How do we enable encourage acknowledge that because I think like saying the exact team is predominantly women. So for us, we have another layer now. The diversity and the you know the wonderfulness if that is even a word of diversity to see that thrive. I think I've had to learn a lot about other traditions and cultures. And thank God, you know, the privilege of working for Tearfund has taken me to places where I've, you know, met other others and had to figure things out and understand and accept and listen well. Feel well, think well, about others. For me, that's the biggest thing that I continue to hold tight, I think.

Sabine Nkusi 38:33

Veena, thank you so much for this insightful and inspirational conversation. Thank you.

Veena O'Sullivan 38:42

And just to say, Sabine, what a joy, what a privilege, and what a vote of confidence to see you leading the gender work.

Sabine Nkusi 38:50

Thank you so much. I've learned from the best.

Sabine Nkusi 39:01

Thank you for listening. I hope you enjoyed this conversation with Tina. For our next episode, we will return to our normal schedule. So look out for Episode Six, where you can hear from my colleagues, Francesca Quirk and Martha Marais, exploring the role of norms in our gender work. Please join us again. And if you want to know more about our work or catch up on previous episodes of the faith in development podcast, please visit learn.tearfund.org See you next time.

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