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Audio quality: Great

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

Moderator: It's Monday the first of March, and I'm with Esua Goldsmith via Zoom. Esua is a feminist activist and writer, with a lifetime's experience in the women's sector locally, nationally and internationally. Esua was the first woman of colour to be elected chair of the Fawcett Society, and co-founder and chair of the Gender and Development Network. She was a commissioner for the Women's National Commission, and a member of the UK government delegation to the UN's fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995. She's currently director of the Healing Solidarity International Feminist Collective. Esua is sharing her experience of working in the women's voluntary and community sector, and campaigning for women's rights, for the Sisters Doing It For Themselves archive. Welcome Esua.

Esua: Thank you.

Moderator: If we can begin with what influenced your decision to work in the sector, and for women's rights?

Esua: Well I guess my decision to work in the sector was part of my passion, and my identity. It's inside my bones, you know, I've been a feminist since I was fifteen. And so it's kind of part of my DNA, and as soon as I saw the women's movement I thought 'that's my home'. By the time I was nineteen I was at university, and I joined the Women's Liberation group there, and did all the consciousness raising and 'our bodies our selves' sessions, and all of that. And I just felt this is me, this is who I am, this is my passion. And I guess my passions have been in the Women's Liberation Movement, but also as part of a framework of socialism, internationalism and race equality. So I'd say that I'm an intersectional feminist, in that I believe in a whole movement of women, and I think the women's sector in this country is a part of that global movement. So I'd see it from that perspective. And if I'm thinking about what influenced me specifically to get involved in that, why is it part of my DNA? Well I guess because my mother was a feminist, she was way ahead of her time. She had me as a single, white, disabled mother in the 1950s, she insisted on keeping me, even though there was a lot of pressure to have me adopted, and I eventually came home to live in my grandparents' house. But you can just imagine, I was this little brown kid, on a white working class estate, getting racism every day. And I just literally felt, from the age of four or five, that the world was unjust, you know? And I felt it was unjust because I was a girl, and because I was a particular colour of girl. And I guess that's taken me into the women's movement, but also into working for the women's sector. And I've done that literally all my working life.

Moderator: You mentioned that you'd been a feminist since you were fifteen, I wonder, was there an incident or an event that sparked your interest at that particular time?

Esua: Yes, actually, I can remember the exact moment that it happened actually. It's a bit of an epiphany moment. I was a really rebellious teenager, went off the rails a bit, so they sent me off into the countryside to live with my aunt there, and her family. And one of the things with being in a white working class family, which is an extended family, is that you don't get the same story. There are some parts of my family that were

very traditional, and believed girls should be virgins when they got married, and you know, you have to toe the line. And there was my grandfather's family, that I was brought up in, where my granddad was a communist, and he said 'the sooner everybody in the world is your colour, the better', and 'girls should stick up for themselves and be independent'. So I guess I had these two stories in my head, right? And I couldn't make any sense of them, and this was in my own family. And one night I managed to get hold of Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', and I read it all night, under the covers with a torch, as people did back in the day. And by the morning I had seen the light, I was in this remote seventeenth century cottage, in the middle of a snow drift, in Norfolk, totally white world, literally. And I just suddenly thought 'this is what's happening to me'. It suddenly all made sense, and I can honestly say that from that day I was a feminist, and I've never looked back since then. That was the moment.

Moderator: Did the first women's refuge in the 1970s have any significance on your feminist journey at all?

Esua: Yes, well of course I was growing up a small child in the 50s, and then in my teenage years in the 60s. So by the time we got to the first women's refuge, which I believe was set up in 1971, I can remember hearing it on the news on the radio, and thinking 'thank god, people are doing something about this'. I felt it was tremendously exciting, and it was part of the landscape, for me, of women actually taking things into their own hands. Like, at the same time there were pictures of bra burning on the news, and there were pictures of the women storming the Miss World contest, you know, and all of this. So there were some really spectacular and flamboyant sort of expressions of empowerment and fighting back by women. And I saw it very much in that context, and it was just before I went to university actually, and as soon as I got to university, as I say, I joined the Women's Liberation Movement. And the rest is history. By the time the refuge movement and Women's Aid went their separate ways, and we got the kind of split in the perspectives, and the movement was looking much more complicated, I was then just at the end of my university career. And I was about to be the first black woman VSO volunteer, or one of them anyway. And so I went to Africa for two years, and very shortly after the refuge movement became an official charity. And I think at that time, what impressed me was that there wasn't a single story, and a single narrative to feminism. It made me realise that actually we could all be part of one movement, but we didn't necessarily have to agree. And that really chimed in with my feeling of being, you know, it was a largely white movement at the time, and I was finding my way as a black, mixed race woman. So it sort of gave me this idea of multiple identities, and multiple stories. So I was always very transfixed by it, but also the fact that, of course, violence against women is one of the most emblematic struggles we have, and the one that is still with us to this very day, in many, many forms.

Moderator: Who, you've touched on this, who inspired you, and who inspires you now?

Esua: Wow, well I just think there's so many people that have inspired me. As I say, my mum particularly because she was just amazing that she insisted on keeping me. And in fact, I wanted to-, you know, I was thinking about all of my family really. Women in my family. You know, my stepmother, my daughter, my sister and other women. But I've also been particularly captivated by learning about West African women's traditional leadership. Because I think-, sorry?

Moderator: Can I-, we missed the beginning. I don't know whether-, I couldn't hear what you were saying-,

Esua: When?

Moderator: There seems to be a connection problem.

Esua: Yes, actually it just said my internet was unstable. So shall I start again? Do you want me to start that whole question again? Who inspired you and who inspires you now?

Moderator: Yes. If you could.

Esua: Okay. Yes. So I've been (TC 00:10:00) inspired by so many women, it's a bit difficult knowing where to begin, but I think I'd like to start with my family really, and wanting to pay tribute to the strong and wonderful women that I have in my family. In the UK and in Ghana. My stepmum, and my mother, and my daughter, and my sister, and other women members of the family. The strengths they have and the struggles they've battled with, through all the generations to achieve their goals, I think in life. And I've been particularly enthralled really, learning about (inaudible 10.43) throughout history. African women as queen mothers and warrior queens and community activists and I really wanted to pay tribute to the women in my village in Ghana and my ancestresses. And especially my great-great-grandmother, Esuantsiwa. The warrior queen who's name I inherited when I was instilled as Queen of Development for our village in 2009 and it was just amazing to feel part of this incredible rich history. And it's something that's been, kind of, sublimated and negated, the whole history, not just of African women but of Africa itself. So that journey of discovery has been amazing for me. And to feel part of it. So I definitely think that that has inspired me.

But also, I have to pay tribute to the women's' movements around the world and the women's organisations that I've lead and campaigned alongside for decades. You've already mentioned one or two of them, like The Fawcett Society, and the Women's National Commission and the Gender and Development Network. But I've, you know, also been very much involved with the Women's Resource Centre, and with FORWARD, and the Black Women's Network. And I've also been working a lot in Europe of the European Women's Lobby. And my mixed race networks, women in my mixed race networks and so on. So in a way, it's like all those strong women in the women's sector that I've met in different countries that I've worked in all around the world, I think are just a constant inspiration for me. I'm so lucky to have met those kind of women, because it, sort of, inspires you for life really. You've got to be part of it. And in my organisation, and in development, I've just worked with so many women like that, over a hundred women or more in those different countries. Five different continents.

I suppose the one thing, having just recently become a writer myself, I had my memoir published last year by Jacaranda. And Jacaranda is a publishing house, one of the only ones in the UK, with an all women of colour editorial team. And lead by Valerie Brandes, an amazingly inspirational woman. And they published twenty black writers in 2020 to show that we're out there. That was just incredible. And because of becoming a writer myself, I reread all the greats, you know, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and you know, all the great African-America writers. But also contemporaries, like Afua Hirsch, and Zadie Smith, Jackie Kay, Chimamanda, Bernadine Evaristo, just amazing women writers. I think at a time when particularly women's access, especially black women's access to many public spaces and spaces of leadership was curtailed, writing was one very powerful way in which it could shape the political agenda. So I think that inspiration is not just literary, it's also political.

And sort of following on from that, obviously I've got to mention the one woman who's been my role model and guiding light throughout my life since I was a student. And she's been that to many of women around the world. And that's Angela Davis as a writer, leader, philosopher, campaigner. What isn't she? And I think those

words that she wrote many years ago when I was a student have really stayed with me. She said, 'You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world, and you have to do it all the time.' And I think that's in a way what I've been trying to do in my life. Just have that message of hope and transformation.

Moderator: You've mentioned some other writers who have guided you along the way, and you've also talked about the women in your life, both from your African heritage but also your white heritage. Can you give me a couple of examples of the way that they have inspired you?

Esua: I think the way they've inspired me is the strength they've shown in the most amazing circumstance. And I think it's about resilience really. It's about the fact that we've got a patriarchal world in which there is not a place-, you know, women are considered to be the aberration, not the norm. You have to be ten times as good in order to be thought half as good. And I think the way women have actually gone into that space and managed to, not just be as good as, you know, men at-, I mean, when you think of all the women who are, for example, heads of state in COVID times. There have been a number of stand out countries that actually dealt with COVID better than any of the others and they have largely been lead by women. I'm thinking of Taiwan and New Zealand and Denmark, Finland, Germany certainly in the first round. All of them lead by women, so I think that has really inspired me to think women can be, not just good within the patriarchal structures that we have, but also exceptional by bringing forward a visionary women's leadership, which I think is really inspiring. And when I'm thinking about my family in Ghana, when I'm thinking about the women writers and so on, I think within all of those groups of people that I've particularly been impressed by, they've all displayed that resilience but also that sense of being visionary. That we're not just trying to do good in the space and opportunities that we've got. We're actually trying to be transformational and make the world a better place. So I think that's what inspires me most, the resilience and the impact.

Moderator: Which brings us nicely onto women's leadership. And do you think that women's leadership is different to men's leadership?

Esua: That's an interesting one really, because I think very often people conflate women's leadership with feminist leadership. And I think there's two things really I wanted to say. One is that women's leadership should be everywhere, and that basically, women are half the population so in order to be fair and just and equitable, you'd want to see them in, you know, half the places in public life and in leadership should be filled by women. Or over half actually because we're over half the population. So I'd say that women's leadership should be everywhere in every profession bar none.

And I would also say that women's and men's leadership may or may not be different. And that feminist leadership is what I'm really interested in. And feminist leadership to me is about this sense of strength and resilience, which I mentioned earlier, and also it's about the principles of empowerment, collective action, collaborative approaches(TC 00:20:00), inclusivity, diversity and that sort of sharing of power and shared resources. And support for other women leaders. I think it's transformational leadership which is about creating the other world where patriarchy growth, climate degradation, white supremacy, capitalism, all the things that we're battling with and are causing all the problems, are replaced with that kind of caring, sustainability, wellness at the centre. I think Jacinda Ardern said it's about kindness being a political principle. Which I think is absolutely brilliant. So to me, I'd say that feminist leadership is different from general leadership. And that feminist leaders can be among the best leader in the world, but that leadership is not just about being in positions of power. I think the relationship between power and leadership is also really interesting, and what I'd like to recognise is the informal leadership of women. You know, as I've been going around the world

meeting and working with women leaders, a lot of them don't actually have formal positions. They're leaders of communities, leaders of movements, without that kind of formal hierarchy. And they are doing the most amazing things, and they're recognised as leaders.

So leadership to me is not a steady state where you just go into a position and you're either leading or you're not. To me, leadership is much more fluid and feminist leadership is about knowing when to lead but also knowing when to be a follower. And good followership is as really important as good leadership. You know, movements are all about that. So of knowing when you've got to get on board with it and go with it. So I think the whole question of leadership is really interesting because in the seventies when I became a feminist activist, because of the complications of patriarchal leadership, the whole brand was toxic. Nobody wanted to be called a leader, you know. And if you called yourself a leader, immediately you'd be suspect in the women's movement. So I think we've come a long way since then, because we've realised there is a role for leadership but, you know, the feminist leadership is of a very different quality to a very different purpose than patriarchal leadership.

Moderator: How-, and you've touched on this a little bit earlier on. How do you think women approach leadership and what makes it successful?

Esua: Well as I say, I think women are very diverse and they approach leadership in all sorts of different ways. So I wouldn't want to, sort of-, and some women approach it in the way that men do, they want power and they like it, you know. Margaret Thatcher being an obvious example of that. But I think feminist leaders would approach leadership differently, through power sharing and inclusivity and all these things. You know, challenging patriarchy. All these things that I've talked about before. But one of the things I think is really important, which I haven't touched on yet, and that is building trust. I think you build trust by putting people first, putting people at the centre. And making sure that you've got that consultative, collective organisation and decision making. And I think a lot of that is to do with knowing that as women, collectively we are more powerful. It's power with, rather than power over, and I think that's how feminist leaders would approach leadership.

And there's been some fantastic examples of leadership during the COVID times, you know. The world is going through seismic changes and obviously women are bearing the brunt of a lot of what's happening during COVID. The job losses, all the different sector of employment that are traditionally employing women, they're the ones that are going down the tubes first, you know. You think of retail and the travel sector and the service sector and so on. And then at the same time, we are bearing the brunt on the caring responsibilities when in lockdown and the home schooling and all of that. So in some ways it feels as if we're rolling the thing backwards in many respects. That women are bearing the brunt of what's happening at the moment. But at the same time, we can see some fantastic examples of women's leadership. Among women's organisations, Women's Resource Centre, and Fawcett, and GAD Network and all the rest of the, kind of, constellation that I think is my home of organisations. All doing amazing work online. Incredibly powerful. That real sort of sense-, I think that's the one thing about feminist leadership which is so important. There's a way of being able to shift and pivot-, I think pivot is the latest word-, and think okay, this is the latest challenge we've got. You know, we've been through the economic crash in 2008, we've been through the Rise of the Alt-Right, we've been through Trump, we've been through COVID, you know. What is the next challenge and how can we meet it? And I think that's why the movement's so vibrant and why the movement is surviving. Because you've got organisations who really are prepared to be visionary. We've got the goal in mind, and that is post-

patriarchal feminist future. And whatever the world throw at us, we have to be ready for it and ready to pivot. But of course, you can get burn out like that, so we've got to be kind to each other as well.

Moderator: What motivates you as a leader?

Esua: Well, as I said before, it's part my passion. I feel this is what I was meant to do. And I'm doing what I believe in. And I think what motivates me more than anything is what motivated me when I was about five. And that is, I wanted to changed things. I wanted to do something about injustice. So I think that really really motivates me to be in a leadership role. I'd rather say that I have a leadership role rather than being a leader in a way because, you know, you shift. In some cases I'm a facilitator, in other parts of my life I'm a leader and so on. But I think, when I was thinking about this question, I thought actually what motivates me as well is also fear. Fear of just not being thought good enough. You know, always thinking I've got to do better. I've got to prove myself. I've got to show that I'm worth something. And I think, you know, that goes right back to my childhood Helen. Of being that little kid, you know, the brown kid on the block and thinking, 'I've got to show people that I can do things in the world.' And that I'm not an aberration or a mistake, as I was made out to be. And without any black women role models all those years ago, we've got so many more now. It's fantastic. But I do think fear of not being good enough, of being a black women in a largely white space and having to be ten times better in order to be thought half as good, isn't that what Obama said once? I think it's absolutely true. So I guess, you know, that motivation to keep going.

To do what you believe in and prove you can do it and I think, the third thing I would say, that in the 70s, feminists used to say we didn't believe in equality. Not in inequality, but in equality. We had something better in mind and I think in, sort of, 2021, we've got to reimagine a better future, created with the feminist values and I think the world is crying out for that right now, post-COVID. I don't think people want to go back to business as usual. So, the other thing that motivates me in leadership and especially right now, is that we've got some of the answers as feminists. We've been thinking about a better world for 40 years or, you know, since the Suffragette movement or, you know, way way back, you know. So that now, it seems to me the time is ours, that a lot of these things we've been thinking about around caring, wellbeing, quality of life and so on, these are all people are thinking 'This is actually what we want' and so, I think it's very exciting, because (TC 00:30:00) there's an appetite for it. There's also a backlash, but there is an appetite for something alternative and I think, you know, feminism is going to save the planet, never mind about women.

Moderator: You've also touched on this in the intersectionality, what issues are dear to your heart and how do you think you have influenced change?

Esua: Yes, well, wow, this is an interesting one. Well I mean, you know, you're right, the intersectional stuff that's my passion. So, that bit is easier to deal with and where gender intersects with poverty, race, class, anti-racism, mixed race identity. Obviously that's what my memoir is about, about my journey as a feminist mixed race woman. And international solidarity has got to be. That connection that we have all round the world. Coupled to that, I am really passionate about the undervalued role of diasporian women and I think the diaspora, which is all the women that have been displaced, either as migrants, immigrants, refugees, you know, because of colonialism, whatever, they've ended up on the other side of the world. We are connected, all the women's organisations, like FORWARD and the Women's Diaspora organisations. We're all connected to home, so we don't talk that language of colonial stuff, you know, around, sort of, white saviourism and go out and rescue brown people and aid and development and all that. We are talking the language of, you know, reparations and international solidarity and equality. It happens to spell 'rise', which I really like but, you know,

those are my passions, that's what really gets me going and of course, being a facilitator, I'd say, you know a professional facilitator, I've facilitate groups up to 500, you know, people, back in the day when we could get them all in one room, you know. So, I honestly see myself as an enabler. So, those are the issues that are dear to my heart and I think I see myself as an enabler of our women's sector. To come together, think these things through, take a strategic, holistic approach and can make connections with each other to strengthen our movement.

So, what do I think I've done to influence change? Well, yes, that's a tough one. I think I've helped to change the landscape, I hope and you know, in a lifelong career as a feminist, I've been involved right from the beginning in Woman's Right to Choose. I can remember us going on Reclaim the Night marches on the time of the Ripper and being the first woman in a lot of places, you know, which, you are. Whether you like it or not you're often the first if you've had such a long career and the stuff I did in Leicester University Student's Union, you know. Just setting up a nursery for students and all that, it's quite, kind of, revolutionary in its time. Then I'd say the other thing that I'm proudest of and maybe where I feel I helped to make change, was during the United Nations Decade for Women. So, it's all those international instruments from 1985 to 95 and I was at all the conferences, you know, in Mexico and Nairobi and Beijing. Then at Beijing, I led in the NGOs and the women's sector and I was on the government delegation, representing NGOs. So, I was there while we were wrestling with the language of the Platform for Action, you know, the Twelve Critical areas of Concern. One of things I am proudest about there is that the African delegations wanted to put in, as a Critical Area of Concern, the rights of girls and young women, which, you know, the Girl Child and that is something which, again, is revolutionary and thank goodness we got it in there. Because, you know, now it's more relevant than ever when you think of FGM and girls being kidnapped all over the world, or shot like Malala. So in a way, I think that that UN Decade for Women process, which went on right until, you know, Beijing Plus Five and then, Beijing Plus Ten. So, I guess it took up a good fifteen to twenty years of my life doing that, but I think what came out of it was these amazing instruments, you know and together with CEDAW, which is the Commission on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, as another one of the United Nations conventions. All of these, what I think we achieved is that it gave the world a common agenda. It wasn't just for so-called developing countries or so-called rich countries, it was the whole women's movement coming together. I remember that so clearly in Beijing, 50,000 women from all over the world came there, from all countries, talking to Chinese women as well, because it was happening in Beijing. That was something, you know and those instruments are still live and beautiful to this day and we're still working on them, so it gave us that common agenda. I think those are some of the things I feel that I've been able to achieve, plus, sort of, being the first of many things. But, also, I set up some organisations like the Gender and Development Network. So we were thinking, 'Where are the gaps in our infrastructure and our constellation', I prefer to call it, 'of the women's sector in this country and how can we start to invent things, invent spaces, create spaces for people to come together on these things?'. I'm very proud to say that a lot of the organisations that I've worked with and for and set up, like Womankind. I was the first member of staff of Womankind back in 1987 I think it was and they're still going to this day and I'm being invited to their 30th or 40th anniversaries now. So, I just feel that it's providing that kind of continuity, learning as I go along and contributing that to what young women are thinking. They're learning from young women because, obviously, you know, we did all this without the internet, you know. So, you know, I'm learning now, from young women, about what it's like to live life online so, it's a job not done but I do feel proud of some of the things that I've been able to and privileged to be a part of.

Moderator: Thank you. What do you think of the specific characteristics of being a leader in the women's sector?

Esua: When I think of the specific characteristics, it's got to be, I guess, the things that we've, you know, talked about really in terms of an ability to have that, sort of, compassionate, collective, consultative leadership style. But, I think there are a number of other things that I would say about the qualities of a good feminist leader. One is devotion to the feminist cause and that, sort of, being able to be a visionary and see that you're part of a bigger picture. That whatever you're doing in your organisation, you know, with your specialism, be it anti-poverty or violence or changing the law or whatever it is, that you see your organisation and what you're doing as part of a global women's movement. Our sector is part of a global women's movement and that, you know, that big visionary thing that you can keep in your head when you go into work on a Monday morning is a really good thing in a feminist leader, you know. Then I also think, obviously, the values-based approach, which is about all the things we've talked about, including kindness and that that has to be not something you just deal with outside, with other people and with your service delivery, but also you live your values. You actually apply them inside your organisation, taking care of each other, supporting each other, having structures which help you grow, rather than extractive ones that, you know, makes you give. So that would be a values-based approach as well and then the third thing I'd pick out is something I've talked about a lot and that's resilience, which is (TC 00:40:00), you know, it's a pity we have to say that, but I think it's essential.

That is the ability to thrive and inspire others and keep them going and keep up the morale in what is a chronically underfunded sector which has always had a lack of money, even in the good times and often has traumatised staff, dealing with traumatic issues from service users and getting that, kind of, what's it called, secondary trauma from just hearing what's happening to your service users every day. Especially in the time of COVID when, you know, we thought things were bad enough and they got worse. But at the same time, I think, with that resilience comes an expectation that women are resilient and they always will be and I worry that we do have a culture of overwork, which we're only just beginning to even recognise and address. People just say 'Oh I had burnout so I had five years off', you know and you just think, well, actually, we lost you for that time. Would it not be better if we actually could create the culture which stopped us getting burnout? I think we have to give ourselves permission to take care of ourselves, as well as rescue the rest of the world. I think that's a women's thing, you know, sort of, flog yourself to death, you know, rescuing everybody else and I think that's not a good culture and I think, seriously, it's almost like it was a badge of honour. If you weren't tired you weren't doing enough, you know and I think we're just beginning to realise that that is not a good way and it's not sustainable. The last thing I'd say around that, there's lots to say around it, the particular qualities, but I would like to flag up flexibility. I think the reason why the feminist movement has survived is our ability to shift. I believe the big word these days is pivot, you know, we go with the seismic changes, we think, okay, what's the matter now, let's, you know, let's deal with it and we've had tsunamis surge over us. The challenges, particularly inside our movement, you know, it's not just the chronic under-resourcing and underfunding, it's just the undervaluing of our sector. You know, it's a bedrock and we're the safety net, really. Whereas they've dismantled the Welfare State, women's sector has become the safety net and we've withstood all these different crises and you know, Trump and COVID and backlash and financial crises and so on and it just seems to me that we have the flexibility to survive it, where a lot of other isms and a lot of other, you know, movements have actually become less to the fore, because they don't know how to do that, that flexible stuff. It's having the vision and saying it may be difficult now, but this is where we're headed. Hold onto it, because it's good.

Moderator: How would you describe your leadership style and how have you developed it?

Esua: Well, I guess I've tried to model leadership values and you know, the collaborative and collective. But, I would also say that in the twos of leadership spaces that I move in, which is partly, sort of, leading organisations, like being the chair or being a director or, you know, sort of formal roles, I've tried to espouse those values. But in my role as a facilitator and an enabler, I've got the leadership roles of participation and this, kind of, facilitation for liberation, if you see what I mean. I think that has a particular skill set from which I derive my values. I can go into a big space with a lot of women, sometimes its mixed, sometimes its women only and you've got to, very very quickly, with people that you don't know, develop an atmosphere and a culture of respect, of safe space, a brave space, because not all of it is going to be easy. A creative space, it's got to be fun. I see fun as a value quite honestly, you know, if you're not having a good time some of the time, it's not good and that dynamism and inclusivity that I've talked about before. In my spaces, when I'm leading a process, sometimes over several days, sometimes I will be asked to do it over several months or years, you know. There's Chief Strategists with the European's Women's Lobby, for example, for the last five years. So, you know, you're in it for a long haul, you want to see that organisation grow, you want to see it evolve during that time, you want to look back and say 'How was my time with that organisation?'. 'Was I able to grow?', 'Was I able to contribute some lasting and sustainable changes within it that help the organisation to progress?'. So, I see myself as an enabler for the sector and obviously, the more I have worked in the sector, I'm now coming up to 25 years, which is a quarter of a century, running my, actually it's gone now, November 2020. I was 25 years old, my organisation Anona Development. But, at the same time, I'm celebrating 45 years in the women's sector. So, obviously, I've learnt stuff. As I work with every organisation I learn as much as I'm giving, you know, absolutely and I can distill that learning. I mean I'm not breaking any confidences here, you know, stuff that they're doing belongs to them, but the sort of principles behind it, the way organisations evolve, how they tackle certain issues. That I can take into other organisations. So, I see myself doing this, kind of, overview thing where I've worked for such a long time with so many organisations, that I'm able to see where they are in the journey, their own particular journey and help them with some of the tools that might've helped other people and sort of, hold the space while they can find themselves. So, I think that's my role as an enabler within the leadership skill set. But, I also think it's about enabling people to grow and lead themselves. It's this thing about helping other people to take that space and run with it. I think that's the most important part.

Moderator: How has your involvement in the sector impacted on you personally?

Esua: Well as I was saying, Helen, it's been my whole life and passion over the last 45 years and I've been living and working my values, as I was saying, in what I was saying just now, about my leadership style. I think one of the things is that I've done all the jobs, you know. I've been an activist, I've been a leader, but I've also been a follower. I think being a good follower, as I say, is really important. I've, you know, got on board with other people, I've been a volunteer, I've been a paid employee. So, I think the involvement in the sector and as I say, I've also being a consultant and my involvement in the sector has been, kind of, multifaceted and my voluntary work is often the same as my paid work. So, you couldn't really tell the difference as to what I, you know, what I was doing on any one day, what I was getting paid for and what I wasn't and sometimes I get paid for it, sometimes I don't. I do it for love and as part of my validation, my identity, my reason to get up in the mornings so, yes.

I've even got a teapot, you know, with 'Smash the patriarchy' on one side and 'end white supremacy' printed on the other side. I have my tea in it every morning and as my to-do list. The European Woman's Lobby gave me that teapot, I love it. But I mean that's, you know, that's how important it is to me in terms of my involvement. So it has impacted my life totally. It is my life. And I think you get tested everyday and that's

part of the worry about burn-out and so on. But I think it's balancing that growing and thriving with this culture of overwork, because I find myself doing it, you know. I'm a consultant most of the time and I go into organisations and I work with them. And you think that my time was my own but I get sucked into it about doing more and more and, you know, it's very easy to do if you love something. But we've got to realise that sometimes we treat each other the exact opposite of the values we're fighting for. And I think that's one of the things we have to watch for. And it does happen to me and I think that one of the things I have to do is to (TC: 00.50.00) really think 'look, you know, this is my own organisation and I have to, you know, I work with other people and I have other people as associates and I have my own staff here but I actually have to be careful that I don't fall into that trap.

So I guess we get tested on that everyday, don't we? And then I think the other thing I wanted to say was that it impacts on my family and my children as well. I think when you're a woman activist born into a family with a feminist in it then that is a real kind of, you know, it ends up being your job as well. I can see that with my children. When I had to travel for long periods of time I really miss my kids. Sometimes I'd have to go away for two or three weeks and they miss me. And I think I gave a lot of my energy to the movement and sometimes I think those around me probably thought they were missing out. And I needed a lot of back-up as well, from my partner, my family, friends, childminders, neighbours, everyone. Honestly I'm a good delegator, everybody was in on my job, you know. So it's not just one woman's commitment, it's often a whole family, a whole community. I couldn't have done it without them. And I think sometimes it didn't impact so well on my family, so I really am in a debt to them. But as I say, it is best. I think sisterhood is powerful, and just being part of it is empowering in itself for women who are marginalised, abused, disadvantaged you know, living in poverty.

All the people that we work with. If they are members of our organisations, as volunteers, staff, and so on, it's not just about winning or losing or how much impact did we really make, or did we change anything? To me, those are good questions but to me it's about the experience. And I wanted to give you one example here. I worked with a women's budget group on one of the best projects I've ever worked with, and that is, I think it was about women's voices. And I was part of a team training low income women in Birmingham, London and Cardiff the basics of economics, national economics. Right, so these were low income women. It was part of their women's group you know, they came together anyway and so we went to this women's group and signed up to this programme and we got them doing economics, right. You know we baked cakes and cut up the cake according to the national budget. A very tiny slice for women, a couple of crumbs! And a bit slice for defence and so on. And it was great fun! Anyway, we did all that and there was one group in Birmingham, we went in the first day and there's this group of about 25 women. And one of them called Debbie, she came up to me, she said 'I'm with my mum, I'm not really here, don't talk to me, I don't want to tell you my name, I don't want to speak in front of the group', and she was all 'no, no, no' I'm not a part of this. She was diabetic, very overweight, very lacking in confidence. Well, needless to say by the end of this project our Debbie was up there in the House of Commons. I'm going to cry now, this was years ago, it always makes me cry. Actually she was in the House of Lords talking to Tessa Jowell about what should change in the social security system in this country. Well, nothing changed but it changed Debbie. It changed Debbie. And Debbie's story is about being part of the women's sector and actually getting her own empowerment through that. You know, she said 'I can't stop for a drink after that, I've got a date! I've met someone on the train!'. So you know you think 'good old Debbie'. I don't know what she's doing now, but basically the transformation happens inside everyone of us. That's what I'm trying to say. And that to me is what's impacted on my life. That I still cry when I talk about these stories, the people I've seen and the women I've seen transformed by our movement, we should be proud of that, absolutely proud of it.

Moderator: Yeah, I agree. How do you think the women's sector as a whole has influenced and changed women's structural positions in the UK?

Esua: Well there again I'd say Debbie. You know she's the one. I mean we did that, we provided a space in which Debbie could find her own empowerment. And all the Debbie's in the country. So all the women who turn up to women's meetings and have fun and especially the community groups you know, they're cooking and there's social life and where women don't have a lot of spaces it's absolutely a life line. So I think that's one of the fundamental ways in which we've changed women's structural position, because it seems to me that empowered women go on to do magnificent things. They get the confidence in their jobs and so on, and in their families, and they become role models to other women. So it seems to me that when we're thinking about structural position, we should think about empowerment as a number one in the structural position of women, and that that is what the women's sector does. Just simply by being involved in it. So I think that's one of the things that's really important to say, but also I think that our movement has enabled connections to be made all over the world. Particularly now with the internet that we can understand other women's positions, and enable- there's a lot of cross learning between European women and Latin American women and African women and so on. Not just simply by that sort of inter-continental dialogue that's going on at the moment and the international mechanisms to make that happen but also the diaspora you know as I say. We are an incredibly diverse community in the UK now since when I was a little kid. I describe in my memoir 'The space between black and white' first meeting a black child on Clapham Common in 1958 I think it was, '57/58, and being utterly shocked. It was the first time I'd ever seen myself before. Because that girl was like looking into a mirror and so I think that structurally since then the diversity of women's organisations has actually changed the way we think and our priorities and what we need to be focusing on. So I think that has made a huge structural change just having that diversity.

I also think that the women's movement has been able to diversify in itself. That we had the national women's liberation conferences that went on in the 1970s and basically we had this kind of agenda, and I'm just trying to remember this agenda. That's right, demands of the women's liberation movement, 1970s. One, Equal pay for women for equal work, Two, equal education and job opportunities, Three free contraception, Four free 24 hour community controlled child care, Five, legal and financial independence for women, Six, an end to discrimination against lesbians. Seven, freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of male violence and what I think should be an Eight although is included in Seven, an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women. Well that was the days of having a huge joined up agenda, wow! But the fact is that that was you know, in the 1970s, and now we are 50 years on from that, yeah 50 years on, half a century on. All of those are relevant but I'll tell you what all of the structures that we have in the women's sectors on every single one of those there's a whole sector within the sector working on that stuff. We have learnt so much about all of those and that's why we've been able to, you know armed with that information we've been able to go out and fight and change the laws and change the structures of society, change the agenda of society. A lot of the things that we take for granted now, like 'we should have equal pay', we didn't even have a law on it when I started out as a feminist. The Equal Pay Act came in when, '76 or whatever. So it seems to me that we do have an incredible, (TC: 01:00:00) an exciting track record and we ought to say how far we've actually come. And I think it just seems to me that one of the big stories that we need to think about is the fact that we have transformed, I was going to say transformed the culture but that's not strictly true because we got a backlash and so on, but it seems to me that now, a lot of what we're talking about has entered the mainstream without us even noticing it. The language,

I mean nobody will turn around to you now, Helen, and say 'what does sexism mean'. I think, you know, everybody knows what that means now. Whereas I can remember my very first speech on feminism, 1973, the rugby club at our university had put on a grapple and strip show for rag week, they were still at it then you know, somethings never change. And the grapple and strip was a naked female mud-wrestling, which they were going to do for rag week in the student's union. And so the following day, I mean we had a protest which all went wrong, so the following day we marched into the student's union, I was a little first year, didn't know anything. I went up and I said 'right I want an emergency motion on this, we're going to make a law against this happening in the student's union'. And so they put on this emergency meeting, and 800 students turned up. So there was little old me doing this speech to 800 people, probably more, there were people in the foyer! There was no internet at the time so that's what they did for entertainment. And so I was thinking then that basically nobody knew what the word 'sexism' meant. And they saw the first three letters S-E-X and they thought 'this is going to be great', you know, this is a different agenda from what we normally have. So they turned up, and you just think well from that time of inventing new language, the women's sector and the women's movement have taken this and now we've got, you know you've got feminist economists, professors, leading university campuses in the economic thought. There's just things we take for granted now, that's what I'm trying to say. In the very early days, it would have been unthinkable. If I'd have looked at the landscape now I'd have thought 'well some stuff we did do, brilliant'. And the structural changes in the law, we've got a law against FGM, we've got a law against people not giving equal pay, even though we haven't got equal pay. We've got laws saying that women should be able to have contraceptives, not always free but at least back in the day only married women could have contraceptives. There has been a revolution, it's just that there's still so much to do. It's not just job done but I do think we should celebrate the structural changes that we have been able to make.

Moderator: What do you think still needs to be done?

Esua: Well I would say that if you look at- I was just looking back at the Platform for Action for example, of Beijing and thinking 'what isn't in there?'. You know there's education, there's health, there's the girl child, there's the media and all of that stuff. But what we haven't got is a lot on race, for example, which I now think has come to the top of the agenda and which was always on mine, which I think is really important. We have a lot more on intersectionality to do to really embed that and make it part of our movement. And of course there is the whole issue around trans rights and oppression based on sex, which is still a big debate. Still something we need to be working on. We need to you know, people who should be natural allies within our movement are really struggling. So that's another thing I think we need to do. And I think climate change. It was on their Platform for Action but now I think we've reached operation critical and the world is at such a turning point. And you see that as usual, from green common onwards, feminists have been really part of the future. Greta Thunberg you know, young women around the world are really fighting on that. And I think we need to be battling the sort of post-colonial attitudes which still underpin white supremacy and which women have a big role in fighting. And you know how in your life you have big stories, big dreams that really are a moment of change in your life. And one of them happened to me, it's something I write about in my book. When I was in Tanzania on VSO, and every Friday we had to go to the Chamba, which is the school farm, with the students and dig and plant for the school dinners. I think it's something that should happen in every school. Kids would learn such a lot growing and eating their own stuff. Anyway this is what we had to do every Friday and as usual I was lagging behind. The way from the school to the farm was a mile long through the forest with a heavy hoe on your back. And so I was walking along with my hoe, and all my students were streaking off up ahead and I was walking through the forest dawdling. And there was this woman in the forest in a clearing.

She had a baby on her back, she had two big bags of brushwood at her feet and she'd just cut down with her axe singlehanded, a tree. I call it a log but it was a tree, it was about a foot diameter, it was taller than me so it must have been 5'6 foot tall this thing, and she was trying to get it on her head to carry it home. And so I went across to her in my rusty Swahili I said 'how are you and do you want some help'. Anyway, we struggled to get this log on her head, and the pain on her face as she got this load on her head and she had a little cloth around her head as they do to cushion her skull from the weight of it. And she ran, set off down the path at a trot, baby on her back, two bags of brushwood in either hand and this big log on her head. And as she was crossing the path at the bottom of the forest this guy, Tanzanian guy, he's got a bike. He's ambling along on his bike and he says "Jambo Mama" and she says "Sijambo". And I was just thinking 'wow, that is inequality in a nutshell'. You know she's just had a baby and she is carrying these loads that no animal should be carrying never mind a human being and I just sat on a log and I cried and I thought you know, this is a way in which I as a foreigner was trying to help this woman and ended up adding to her load. And everybody just expects her to do this work. Nobody cares, everybody just thinks oh well they're used to it they're struggling along, not even counting it as work. So when I got back home I set up the Women's Return Volunteer Action Group, as we did big national conferences. I think we organised the first national conference on so-called women and development and all of that, you know. And I just think now this whole thing around aid and development and all of that you know, where all of the climate footprint, the biggest climate footprint is down to the fault of the west and the way we're living here.

And that some of the communities that I've worked with around the world have got a much better idea about sustainability and about recycling and all of that stuff. And we aren't listening to that. We aren't treating each other as equals, and that we've got stuff to learn. So of all the things that I think we need to do, it's actually treat each other with the respect necessary to know that, you know, we are all one world and, just even like the COVID vaccine rollouts. You know, me first and Western countries stockpiling vaccines when obviously nobody's free until everybody's vaccinated. And it's just these things where you feel feminists have got something to say about this. We believe in collective action. We believe in collective responsibility. We believe in collaborative leadership. And so that's the future. We have also, as women, born the brunt of the stress of COVID. But I think we've got the vision, and those (TC 01:10:00) are the things that need to be done I think. To change the world's mindset into not superiority of certain races and certain countries over other, but to actually start talking reparations and, you know, do that healing. And I'm a part of the Healing Solidarity Movement now, which is tackling these issues of the, sort of, global feminist equality that we need to tackle. And I think one of things that we do is put equal emphasis on the healing as the solidarity. So what the world needs to do is heal. I think the whole world is in trauma, the planet and the people on it. And the women on it are going to be a bit part of leading that healing, I think. And a big part of leading the solidarity, because we've been doing it. You know, we've been doing it for hundreds of years. Collective action among feminists at it's best.

Moderator: And finally, what are your thoughts on women's rights? You've kind of talked about your ambition and vision for the future. What do you think about women's rights in the future?

Esua: Can you just give me an example of the distinction that you're making there? Just clarify the question, the difference between that question and the one you asked me before.

Moderator: Okay. I suppose, you've spoken a lot about you ambition for the future in terms of collectivism and working together. You've also talked a lot about women's rights in terms of formal

rights and rights on paper. And you've also alluded to the fact, yes we do have equal pay but we're not equally paid. Yes, we do have an ambition that we should all have access to childcare and still be able to pursue a career. But, you know, what in terms of the reality of women's everyday lives I suppose. It's that distinction.

Esua: Oh right. Okay, yes. Because obviously I've been talking a lot about women's rights in the context of international instruments and also of the legal framework in the UK. But I think you're right that legal frameworks are all very well but in most cases you can say that actually they're not an actuality on the ground. And that's where I think the fight is. I think that's what I was reading lately, I can't remember where I came across it, but the fact that you'll find that in a lot of cases, in countries with horrendous rights abuse of women, that actually there is a legal framework, it's simply not applied or not applied to everybody. Not implemented, and there are no sanctions for people who flout it. And that, in all this time, we've been thinking that all these international instruments that, you know, nearly every country in the world is signing up to, like protocols on violence against women and so on. People sign it, and then they even ratify it, and then they still, you know, rock up to meetings and give a load of waffle. They haven't actually done anything. So I think that when I'm talking about the rights framework and the legislation, it only takes you so far. I think we had an FGM law in this country for about ten years before the first prosecution was actually brought forward. So you can see so many holes in the actual implementation of this.

And it seems to me, a lot of these laws would not have been brought into place if it hadn't been for the women's movement. I think that was a huge effort to get the legislation on paper in the first place by women campaigning for this. But I think now we have to campaign for its implementation, we also have to campaign for transparency because a lot of the time people don't even have to say what they're paying people. The latest case with the BBC is an obvious thing, you know. A public corporation like that and they didn't even have to have that transparency. And there needs to be sanctions as well, so that people who do flout the law are sanctioned for it. But I think it's a bit like the, sort of, sexual harassment and all of that that went on in the aid agencies and the sexual harassment that takes place in workplaces all around the world. It seems to be that there's something to do with the culture and that that has to be where we focus our attention. Because legislation and litigation is already too late. You know, people have already been abused or sacked or whatever it is. So the law is a bit of a blunt instrument. You need to actually get to change the culture within sectors, within organisations, within the country itself. That certain things are not tolerated and certain things, in terms of the rights of women, are expected and mandatory.

So I think that is about education of women's rights in schools and it's about getting people to implement all of that in the workplace. I think it's about some of the mass movements we've had lately. The Me Too movement, I think that really changed the atmosphere in terms of what goes on at work and what women are prepared to put up with. And, again, you can see the women's sector and women's movement had an enormous impact on what was happening and what people found acceptable and I think that shifts the whole culture on women's rights. And the same with the Black Lives Matter movement which was set up by three women, and which I think, this year, has really come back into its own, seven years after its inception. Huge numbers of organisations are putting up their black squares on the internet and on all their media sites and so on as an expression of solidarity. But it's taking that several giant leaps forwards from expressions of solidarity into real understanding. And I think that that has to happen on every level. You know, sometimes when I'm doing anti-racism teaching I do it on the four Is, which is individual, doing that individual work, doing the inter-personal work into how you treat others. And then doing the ideological work on what is the framework, how

do we need to think, and what is the world as we want it to be. And then at the institutional level making sure that our institutions are walking the talk.

So in terms of women's rights, I think that we tend to see it-, and I'm sorry if I gave that impression, as a legislative issue. Whereas to me, it has to happen on all of those four levels in order for it to be an absolute reality for women in the future. And that is a huge job of work, and it involves all sorts of people. It involves employers. It involves institutions. It involves teachers. It involves getting kids involved. I mean I think Rene was talking about how wonderful it is to hear fourteen year olds talking about this stuff. It's amazing. You know, I think the younger generation knows everything we know and more. You know, it's kind of osmosis I think. So I've got lots of hope for it but I also think that women's rights needs to be seen in a really holistically from implementation to institutional culture in order to be a reality. I don't know if that helps to answer your question?

Moderator: It does. Thank you very much Esua. That is all from me, I don't know if there's anything else that you would like to add?

Esua: I think just to say that one of the things that I did when I was a kid was to-, when (TC 01:20:00) I got all these racist comments at school, you know, and my family and my teachers said, 'Oh just ignore it, they don't know any better' and it really sapped at my whole sense of self and my self esteem. So when I was eight I wrote a play called 'Why I Am Brown'. And I performed it in front of my class in this church school. You know, one of my school mates played the role of my disappearing Ghanaian dad that I only met when I was 37. And it took place in an unmarried mother's home and all this. And so I wrote this play and it's interesting that people saw me differently after that, when I'd told my story. And I moved around and went to a lot of schools after that, so that was just one school where I had a chance to tell my story. And I felt very much that was a precursor to being able to write my memoir. Sort of like, how many years? Sixty years later. But I think what we're doing in telling the story of women of all ages through this project, is really, really important and that that's another way in which we can-, I'm a great believer in stories and telling your story, and hearing other people's stories and learning from them. So I just think, I'm thrilled to be part of this project because it's about telling the story of our sector, and telling the story of the women's movement. And there can't be any more important job than that right now, especially in an internet age where so much is ephemeral. We're losing a lot of data. I've got piles and piles of leaflets in my little shed out in the garden where I work, and I just don't want to lose them. And a lot of them aren't online. You know, well this is all of our history. It's so precious. So what you're doing I think is fantastic and I just wanted to say it's an honour to be part of it. I'm really thrilled.

Moderator: Thank you very much. And stories really are powerful. Stories bring the world to life really. So thank you for sharing your story and we need to capture the story of the women's movement. It is so important. And particularly the story of the women who aren't normally heard within the movement. So thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

Esua: Thank you for inviting me Helen. It's been a pleasure.