



UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia
Series of podcasts “Generations talk gender”
Episode 1: Women’s plea for a world free of violence

SOFIA SCARLAT: People have still yet to acknowledge that women and girls’ rights and issues are a crisis that has engulfed our entire world.

Music jingle

KATY LEE: Hello, and welcome to episode 1 of Generations Talk Gender, a podcast from UN Women’s Europe and Central Asia office. I’m Katy Lee. I’m a journalist based in Paris, and I’m the co-host of The Europeans, a podcast about politics and culture around the continent. I’m also a firm believer in the power of women to make this world a better place.

You’re listening to this podcast at quite a big moment. UN Women has just launched a new global campaign. It’s called Generation Equality, and it marks 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the most visionary agenda for the rights of women and girls, everywhere.

Generation Equality is a campaign calling for concrete action to actually move gender equality forward. And -- you might have guessed this from the name -- it’s intergenerational. It’s about women and girls of all ages.

... Which is where this podcast comes in. This is part one of a series that will bring together feminists young and old. We’re going to be speaking to women from all across Europe and Central Asia in the run-up to the Generation Equality Forum, which is due to take place next year in France and Mexico.

We’re also kicking it off during 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. And that’s what we’re going to be talking about today.

Before we meet today’s guests, I just want to run you through a couple of stark statistics.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, around the world 1 in 3 women experienced physical or sexual violence. In most cases, by an intimate partner.

And that is a situation that has only got worse since the pandemic began. What we know from emerging data and reports from those on the front lines, is that all types of violence against women and girls, has intensified. Domestic violence in particular.

It is a Shadow Pandemic that is growing in parallel to the COVID-19 crisis, and we need a global collective effort to stop it.

I'd like to introduce you to today's guests.

Sofia Scarlat is a 17-year-old activist from Romania with a particular focus on youth engagement and the prevention of gender-based violence. She is the founder and director of Girl Up Romania, her country's first ever gender equality organization for teenagers.

At Girl Up Sofia coordinates a team of more than 100 young volunteers who advocate for girl's rights up and down the country. She's also a member of the UN Women Generation Equality Youth Task Force, a Women Deliver Young Leader, and a 2018 International Children's Peace Prize nominee. And if that wasn't enough, she's also a student at Stanford University. Sofia, thank you so much for joining us.

SOFIA SCARLAT: Thank you so much for having me. It's an honour to be here.

We are also joined today by **Lepa Mladjenović**, a feminist activist living in Serbia. Lepa is a long-time member of the lesbian and anti-war movements. She has a huge amount of experience -- she was in fact there at the Beijing conference in 1995 which led to the Beijing Declaration. In 1990, she co-founded the SOS Helpline for women survivors of violence in Belgrade and networks against violence against women, particularly sexual violence in Europe. She now works as a counselor with women who are experiencing trauma of sexual violence and lesbophobia. Lepa, thank you so much for being here with us.

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: It's great. It's fantastic.

KATY LEE: So. Activists all around the world have been calling for an end to violence against women for many years. Lots of campaigning, advocacy and protesting have gone into calling for action to find a solution to this issue. Even though there have been advances -- especially when it comes to new laws and regulations -- it's very clear that violence against women and girls is a problem that persists all around the world.

Lepa, you were in Beijing along with thousands of feminists 25 years ago. And you've been calling for an end to violence against women, advocating for reforms, for many years. Why do you think the world is struggling with eliminating violence against women? Why is this still an issue?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: We feminists usually say that violence against women is a structural issue and that means that in patriarchal society men as a class as a gender, they have more power over women and therefore they misuse this power to be violent and this violence gives them emotionally the sense of victors, like they're winning something or they are controlling women and women's bodies and this gives them emotionally some satisfaction So it's really a huge issue to deal with because as you said we worked so much in all these years in every country of the world women have organized the work against male violence against women and we still have it and I would say we even have it more than before now with this internet society because that has really enlarged different forms of male violence.

KATY LEE: Sofia, when it comes to your generation, how do young women today experience violence. What forms does it take?

SOFIA SCARLAT: I think we imagine that a lot more has changed than is actually the case. I think especially in my country a lot of things are the same as they were decades ago. We're dealing with domestic violence in similar extends, we're dealing with sexual violence in similar extends. But we're also dealing with some new phenomenon which have not been studied as much. For example, campus

sexual assault which is now a huge problem at Universities across the world. We're dealing with online harassment, sexual harassment. We're dealing with revenge pornography. We're dealing with this new push for anti-abortion legislation which we're seeing right now across eastern Europe now with what's happening in Poland in particular. We're dealing with women not being taken seriously, not just by law enforcement but by their own communities So as to create an environment where girls grow up already knowing that they should not be talking about the violence that they face, it becomes very normalized to the point where you go on your daily commute to school, and you're in middle school, right? Let's say you're in like sixth grade, and you're already used to street harassment and being whistled at, or touched on the subway or on the bus. It's that type of environment that people grow up in, and that they keep living with throughout their entire lives, and they'll become so normal. People have have still yet to acknowledge that women and girls rights and issues are a crisis that is has engulfed our entire world. And that is very deeply rooted in our culture and our traditions, and the way that we even interact with people on a day to day basis. And so that's, that's the issue that that girls are dealing with today's is life and its society. And it's the way that we, we interact with the people around us.

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: And I'll just add to this really great everything that she said and especially that women are not taken seriously. And their experience is not believed. That's especially sexual violence. Whatever woman says about her that she's been raped or that she's been harassed. It's always the first thing is maybe maybe not, maybe she's inventing it. Maybe she's lying. Maybe she wanted and so we are... We who work on sexual violence always have to say again and again that we believe women's experience unconditionally.

KATY LEE: Let's turn now, to the health crisis that has turned all of our lives upside down this year, some more than others. Violence against women and girls was an issue before the pandemic but it is clear that COVID-19 has made the problem worse. Particularly when it comes to domestic violence because of course so many women have found themselves confined to homes with their abusers during lockdowns.

Sofia, I was really interested to hear that when it comes to young women during the pandemic, a lot of the abuse is happening online.

SOFIA SCARLAT: During the pandemic back in March, in my country, we went into a full lock down so everybody moved their lives online. You were working online, you were going to school online. All of the violence that was in women's lives, every single day, in the real world, face-to-face had to sort of move on to our computer, on our phones as well. So we experienced different kinds of gender-based violence in online mediums as well. The only issue is that with online mediums, nobody was prepared to really handle them so that's what we're kind of dealing with right now is the fall out of a world, an online world in which we have all these forms of violence and no legislation and no experience in tackling them.

KATY LEE: Can you give me a couple of examples of the online abuse that we've seen?

SOFIA SCARLAT: Yes, especially I think with with the work that I do, with my organization, something we saw a lot of was revenge pornography. This was an issue even before the pandemic but it grew to insane heights back in March. We started receiving a lot of messages from girls who were saying that they were in a situation where they were being black-mailed with nude photographs or where Instagram accounts have been posting their nude photographs, things that they've shared with ex-boyfriends years ago or different things like that. We realized that there were at least a few dozen accounts of this kind across

the country. There was one for each major city. Umm and there were dozens upon dozens of girls involved. All of them were underaged. Some as young as 12. We were able to track down these accounts to a group chat on Telegram which had over 30 thousand members and were sharing this content, hundreds of photos, every single day. So that's kind of the issues that we are talking about. Especially with revenge pornography, there is no legislation in Romania to kind of support victims so even when they come forward to us, what can we do? We can contact Instagram and we can ask for help which was the first step but even in that case, we were told that because of the pandemic they had limited their staff and they weren't able to moderate content as well as they were doing before. So, a lot of these accounts are still up today, months later. We know that police are part of this system that oppresses women and when you come forward with this new issue that they're not trained to handle and they have no legislation around the more nice response they're gonna get is a no but more likely, you're gonna get laughed at. As young people, kind of going forward with these issues, we have to not just protect ourselves on online medias but we also have to educate adults on these new issues because they don't really understand the context of them and they also don't understand kind of how they arise. There's a lot of victim blaming involved with revenge pornography which also needs to be addressed.

KATY LEE: And in terms of offline abuse, Lepa, I'm guessing that also includes a rise in domestic violence?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: Yeah Yeah the offline is this one that that then during the day, because, you know, because of increased nervousness and anxiety because people are closed down, they can't go on with their life, then when men have this power they have this patriarchal green light to, to behave in this way. And therefore that's why the, the number of the women who, who who called the women's centers for any kind of violence, so that means partner's violence and physical violence has also increased.

And also in, in the in, in Balkan countries. Sometimes in the beginning it wasn't even increased and we also have thought about it because women were so shocked by what you know, the guy the whole changes and with the change of the style of life so they were not even calling the SOS hotlines because there were a lot done with men and they didn't have their free space you know how and from where to call them on how to how to contact women's organizations. In fact, in the beginning this number of calls even did not rise.

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KATY LEE: This is such a heavy and important conversation. But since we have two brilliant feminist minds with us today, I thought I might as well take an opportunity to pick your brains and ask you both for some recommendations.

Lepa, what is your all-time favorite feminist movie and book?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: I found the recently my old time as you say old time favorite movie. It was last year, it's a French movie, the portrait of a lady in fire. It's about love story between two women and the idea is that what is erotic is that women are equals. So equality between women is erotic. And equality between women is exciting. And it is shown in the film that because we are equal, we exchange our roles. And we there is neutrality, and therefore, there is no space for abusing of power. And, and therefore, this really means that, at the end of the line, there is no violence and there is no wars if we create a relationship around equality and neutrality and exchange of the roles. So I just love that film and because the main idea I can say "Equality is sexy" (laughs).

KATY LEE: It's a beautiful film. I have to agree with you.

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: So now you go Sofia.

SOFIA SCARLAT: I don't think these are necessarily my favorites. But they're just two things that have really touched me. The first one is *4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days*, it's a Romanian movie about two women who are organizing an illegal abortion during the 80s, Romania had some of the most devastating abortion policies during the communist era under Ceausescu. And so this is a really important movie that I think everybody should watch, especially when talking about reproductive health and rights within the Eastern European region, and also say, *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. Because I read that book when I was very young. And I think it's my most annotated book ever, because there are just so many things in there that stood out to me, and I thought it was amazing. Probably everybody who's around my age should definitely pick that book up, in any other age, but especially if you're a teenager, it's amazing.

KATY LEE: I don't think we heard a book from you, Lepa, what book would you recommend for us?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: Yeah, well, there are so many I couldn't even think but I can go on with *The Room of One's Own* because I really also thought that it should. I read it a couple of times. And I can also say that another one which I, which is my favorite is a black lesbian feminist writer, Audrey Lorde. And we have also translated in our language "Sister Outsider" and read it many times and it was really crucial for us to understand what is what does it mean to be a feminist and lesbian and black and a mother and poet. What does it mean having different identities and and at the same time, fighting for the new world. It's really fantastic. I just adore her.

KATY LEE: Thank you both so much. Something that we've seen recently is a rise in active opposition to gender equality and women's rights. It's something that's happening around the world, and in Europe and Central Asia in particular. And it poses a serious threat to progress when it comes to human rights and gender equality.

Sofia, I'm wondering how this opposition to women's right manifests itself, particularly when it comes to violence against women's rights activists. Are young feminists in your network facing threats or violence? Have you faced any threats yourself, I wonder... or have there been times when you've felt unsafe because of the work that you do?

SOFIA SCARLAT: When I started, I didn't know much about the work that I was doing. But the one thing that I did know was that people were going to hate me and everybody who is associated with the project. And so one of the the main ground rules that we had going into the organization was that none of the members were going to be posted without their consent were that their names were not going to be included. And that generally, we were going to try and maintain a very low profile, because everybody who's involved is under aged. But I'm the face of the organization, you search Girl Up Romania, you find my name, you find my school, you find my classmates, you find my family, social media is very, very easy to use, as a means of connecting with people and of mobilizing, but it's also very dangerous. Because, especially for young advocates, it can be a very easy way for people to target you and to threaten you, and to try and intimidate you. And so I've gotten throughout the years, messages and comments and people kind of reaching out with threats and hate regarding the work that I do. I've never been in a position where I felt unsafe in person, which I've been very thankful to, to not be able to

have that experience. However, it's still a very dangerous kind of situation to be in, especially as, as young advocates, because we know that there is no protection and our organization, we're entirely a group of teenagers, we don't have funding, we don't have lawyers to call. So when we go out and we organize a protest, we understand the risks of that movement. And [delete extra 'we want'] to we want to take those risks on you want to expose yourself to that danger. But how do you do that when you're 15. And you also have no protection, and maybe your parents aren't really supportive of the work that you do. And you have nobody to call if you were to be arrested. And I've had a few of my members who've received letters from the police or who sort of been intimidated in some ways to not go to protests in the future. But it's only really come to that at this point. And I hope it doesn't go any further. However, the fact that our country and I guess our society is willing to demonize and kind of attack even young people, people as young as like 14 or 15 involved in something as simple as a fight for equality. Right, then I think that's a larger conversation to be had, that we're willing to let people go to those lengths and to kind of dehumanize somebody because they want to fight, not just for their rights, but for the rights of people in general.

KATY LEE: Lepa, violence against women's rights activists is probably not a new phenomenon. Have you experienced violence and intimidation yourself in your activism?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: Wow (smiles) many times, physically many times. Lets' say I would choose two times. Once was in 1995. There were a few of us lesbians who were making lesbian graffiti in one of the streets near me in my neighborhood and there were all three men who came very aggressively to stop us. Well they were really, they broke glasses on me and another one and they start hitting the other one, and they took for my my jacket and they said I can ... you stop talking because I was asking him you know, who are you what are you doing here and then you know, like, you know, who am I because he obviously knew who am I and then he said, you stop dirtying my streets with your words and I can kill you now and and put you these door behind this door of the nearby house and nobody would know.

Which really afterwards made me write an essay, dirty streets. And one other one was in 2001 when we organized what was supposed to be a first pride in Belgrade but umm 400 violent men came before us about half an hour. And they were about 50 of us activists by that gathered, they're just very small number and they were so aggressive, you won't believe it. I mean, it was a huge. So at one point in the beginning, I found myself and another women friend near me, the guys were hitting us with eggs at the beginning. And I remember, we were really surprised, and the other one was a joker. So she said, Oh, eggs are on my face. You know, my mother used to make egg masks. Maybe it's a time for me to start making egg masks. She was trying to make it you know so that we can survive this moment.

KATY LEE: We wanted to take some time today to look in detail at some strategies that might help when it comes to ending violence against women and girls -- some innovative and effective solutions that have actually shown themselves to work, on the ground.

Sofia, how are young people tackling the issue of violence against women? Can you tell us about some of the strategies you've used in your own work, and ideas that seem to really be effective?

SOFIA SCARLAT: Our main goal going into the organization was education, it's very, very difficult to talk to our parents generation, to our teachers, to people within our communities, who might not really understand the issues that we're dealing with. But with young people, they're a little bit more open, they haven't fully formed all of their kind of ideas about the way that our society works, and in gender roles, and gender norms, and all of those things. And so it's easier to have a conversation. And we initially thought that we could just start there with talking to before our own age, about violence, sharing our experiences, kind of making it known that these are very common things despite how stigmatized they are in our country, and how little people actually talk about them. But moving on from that we really tried to engage young people as much as possible, because we understand that we're kind of on our own. And so with limited resources, you know, we've been able to raise donations for shelters. For women who have been victims of domestic violence or human trafficking, we've been able to sit down with politicians, we've been able to organize protests to kind of draw attention to these issues that we're dealing with, to just mobilize people to work within their schools and their communities to talk about these things in the first place. Something that I think people don't really understand as much as, as I hope they would is that you don't nobody is born an advocate and kind of being an activist, it's not something that you study towards or you need a lot of experience going into it to be an advocate for something is to simply believe in it, and then to talk to other people and to mobilize them to to learn more with you and to kind of have that impact within their community. Anybody can do that I'm not a special person. And nobody is a special person who's like born with these abilities of like, mobilizing and motivating people to do things. It's just about caring, and not enough people care. But I do and I wish more people did. And so I think that's really important is that my generation, I think cares a little bit more than the past ones that we've had, at least in my country. So that's the power that we have going into this movement.

KATY LEE: Lepa, with your many years of experience, what do you think is the ultimately best solution to address violence against women?

LEPA MLADJENOVIC: Teach our daughters disobedience to patriarchal roles. So it's very important that girls are disobedient, that we give our girls from the very early age to self defense to any kind of sport so that the body, girls are wired from the very beginning and our brains to protect and defend ourselves because there is no other way. And also raise consciousness as Sophia said I really believe in women organizing and women's solidarity. In the feminist movement, the women's solidarity has really saved my life, all throughout these years and that's the most precious dimension of my activism is women's solidarity and organizing in all different and any kind of activities against male violence and patriarchy.

KATY LEE: Thank you so much to Lepa and Sofia for joining us today, it is such an important conversation And I'm so glad we were able to come together to discuss such a range of experiences that you both have.

And thank **you** for listening to the first episode of Generations Talk Gender.

What's happening in the next episodes, I hear you ask?

Well, that's the big question. And it's kind of up to you.

We would love to hear your feedback, and your suggestions for what and who you want to hear on this podcast. You can send us a direct message on Twitter @unwomeneca, or you can send a message to the UN Women Europe and Central Asia account on Facebook.

Listeners can also find more information about signs of relationship abuse and how to find help on the UN Women website, unwomen.org.

Ultimately, all of us can play a role in helping to end violence against women.

Whether it means identifying violence when it happens, and not turning a blind eye, or calling the police and necessary hotlines to support victims of abuse.

It means listening to younger generations of women and girls who are suffering from new forms of violence whether online or at schools, on their campuses, at work.

And most importantly, we need to address the root causes of this violence, which is gender inequality.

It is rampant in the way most of us are brought up, the way we're taught to think. In the way we bring up our kids, the way we talk.

What can you do? You can support the feminists and activists who are pushing forward this agenda, and you can become part of the conversation.

Thanks for listening.