

Transcript of 'Entrepreneurship as Survival and Empowerment'

Season 3, Episode 40, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

Jan: Today, we're discussing entrepreneurship born out of necessity, but also as a means for protecting your culture and identity.

[Theme music]

Paul: Did they kick you out of New Zealand, Jan, or did you leave of your own accord?

Jan: [mock indignant] I, I don't know if I want to answer that question. So...

Paul: ...kicked out then. That's the... [laugh]

Jan: [laughs] But I think they would have me back. Yeah, but I didn't. I wasn't forced to leave, but a lot, there was a big cultural expectation, uh, and it still exists in New Zealand, that in your twenties or so, you'll leave the country to have a look at the rest of the world.

And they, I think they rather hope you come back thinking it's the best place in the world, but it doesn't always work. You sometimes go other places and settle down there. But, yeah...

Paul: ...yeah, it really didn't work for you because [Jan laughs] you've then lived in the UK for the majority of your life.

Jan: Yes. Yeah, I remember the day I went over the 50 percent mark, it was quite, uh, it ,[Paul interjects a sound] it was quite a moment.

Although you never, like, I think it's pretty evident on this podcast, you never stop being from a place. It's your identity, your background, your birthright, all of those sorts of things.

But also you, kind of, I don't really think of myself as being very British, but you kind of, you adopt things of the place you're at as well.

Paul: Apart from the accent. [Jan laughs] I, I think unless you move somewhere when you're, I'd even say if you move as a teenager, you keep the accent. But if you move before that, I think you adopt the accent of where you've moved to.

Jan: But also, and I guess this is one of the things about university life, there's people from everywhere in our university. So I think if I've moved and I'm, you know, working in a cafe, um, and everyone had the same accent, I would've picked it up. I'm not a very good mimic, so I would, but I maybe would have picked it up.

But we've got people from everywhere, all sorts of places, all sorts of backgrounds, all sorts of life histories. So you don't hear a constant accent that makes you sound like from where you're based at the moment.

Paul: I was really worried you were about to insult me and my accent then. I think you stopped yourself...

Jan:no, no...

Paul: ...I think you, you were really going somewhere and then you stopped...

Jan: ...ah, I think there's some...

Paul: ...surrounded by people with your accent, Paul, that's what you were trying to say, isn't it? [Jan laughs]

But no, no, the point was you left New Zealand and came to another country by your choice because you wanted to, because there were opportunities for you.

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Paul: You didn't leave because there were circumstances in New Zealand, though I can't imagine what circumstances would arise in New Zealand that would mean lots of people...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...were forced out and made to flee.

There are certain countries, though, where there are situations politically, situations with war, with famine, that as we've discussed very recently with Nonhlanhla, cause people to have to leave their countries.

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Paul: And if they do leave their countries, it's where they end up, and what kind of circumstances they end up in, how they end up coping with those circumstances and what they could even end up doing workwise.

Jan: Yeah. And we're recording this during a World Cup, I hope I get brownie points for knowing there's a World Cup on, Paul.

Paul: Well, New Zealand are playing in it. Not very well, but they are actually playing there...

Jan: ...I think it's a miracle they're there, but don't tell them I said that. [laughs]

Paul: Well, there, there had to be one country from the Oceania Football Confederation, and New Zealand managed to pull their name out of the hat.

Jan: [laughs] No, but there's, um, uh, someone from the Australian football team, who spent quite some time in a refugee camp before coming to Australia, and clearly is hugely talented in football, and has had the chance to represent his, his new, you know, adopted country with great distinction, I believe.

Paul: Very good. It's not quite the same, but someone played for Barrow and then played for New Zealand at a World Cup. Which I think is even more astounding.

Jan: I think you're making a different point to what I was... [laughs]

Paul: ...[laughing] no, I'm making a very different point. But, no, you're making the point that there is the opportunity to get there...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...well, I'm saying there's an opportunity to play for Barrow and still to go to a World Cup, which I'd say is an amazing thing.

But, we'll talk less about Barrow football and New Zealand football, and more about refugees today. Because we're going to be following on from the

episode we had with Nonhlanhla about refugee camps, and more about the supply chains and the logistics of refugee camps last week.

To look at a different angle of that today, where we're going to be talking about refugees, and a little bit about the entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges they face. And how entrepreneurship can maybe be an avenue for them to become part of the communities that they've come to.

Jan: Excellent, who have we got to talk to about that?

Paul: Well, we're going to be talking to someone who's a Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship here at Lancaster University Management School. Also, the Director of the Academy for Gender Equality and Social Justice Research in Organisations.

[softens voice] I spoke to her about this when they changed the name of the Centre. It became very long and complicated. [Jan laughs] And having just had to say it out loud on a podcast it becomes even more complicated.

[normal voice] Her research explores how gender dynamics, collective organising and entrepreneurship catalyse economic survival and socio-political change in refugee and marginalised communities.

We're going to say hello to Dr Sophie Alkhaled. Hello, Sophie.

Sophie: Hi, thank you so much for inviting me today.

Paul: Sophie, it's great to have you here, and to follow on from the episode we did have with Nonhlanhla about refugee camps.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background, how you've come to be interested in issues around refugees, entrepreneurship and gender?

Sophie: Yes, uh, thank you. Uh, I think it all stemmed from a personal interest, and my heritage. And over time it developed into, um, an academic interest, and then I found out that actually there was a huge academic gap in knowledge in this area.

So, I was born in Syria to a Syrian father and a British mother. I was raised there 'til I was, uh, just under seven years old. And, I remember it being an incredible place. Rich with culture and history, incredible food, incredible terrain, four beautiful seasons a year.

But I also, also remember living in constant fear. Fear of the regime, the Assad regime. Uh, I remember my mum, who's a British woman, sitting with my sister and I before we went to school warning us not to make any comments about the President.

If anybody was talking about the President we should either walk away or definitely not get involved, because there was this constant threat that if anybody heard anybody say anything against the Assad regime, they will take your Dad away.

So, that was the norm, that's how we, that's how we were brought up. I have a 4-and-a-half-year-old son who's starting school in September. I can't even begin to imagine that conversation with him.

But that's what we had to do. And, um, when, it just so happened when I was just around seven years old my Dad got a job in Saudi Arabia, so we moved there. And then that's kind of when my interest around issues around gender was really born. Because, uh, very simple examples that you could notice even as a 6-year-old was that my Mum couldn't drive, suddenly.

So, she used to drive in Syria, drive in the UK, but she couldn't drive there. And when I asked why, it was, 'I'm not allowed because I'm a woman'. And it, I think that was the time where I started to understand that there was a difference between sex and gender. And how gender was something that was socially constructed in a society to empower some, disempower others.

Of course, I wasn't that eloquent at six, that these are, [laughs] this was terminology that I learned later on. But, uh, it was very interesting growing up in Saudi Arabia because, again, I had a fantastic education, and I did have a happy childhood, but there was a lot of frustration around inequality being not just being embedded legally, within the legal framework, but also within society as well.

Um, hearing things like our teachers saying to us, you know, 'study hard and work hard so you can find a good husband, cause at the end of the day 'Akhirtik bi bait jowsik', which means at the end of the day you're just going to end up in your husband's house. And said in quite a derogatory manner!

So, when I came to the UK I was finally, right, this is it, full of hopes and dreams, finally ready to be treated as an equal. Only to very quickly realise that

this was not the case, even in this wonderful Western country, and part of the world.

Paul: What age were you, Sophie, when you came to the UK then?

Sophie: So I came for university when I was 17. But what was also interesting was, it was in 2002, so it was after September 11th. So not only was there the shock, uh, of coming to university but there was also a lot of questions.

Some were ignorantly funny around, [puts on ignorant question voice] 'oh, did you go to school on a camel,' and, you know 'did you live in a tent', and questions like that around the region. But then also more offensive questions around what it meant to be a Muslim, questions around bombs, et cetera, uh, and that, I found that, you know, quite shocking and very difficult.

So, I guess, this was, I decided that my therapy would be to do a PhD [laughs] to kind of delve into understanding, really, how these constructs are coming together, how they work in, how they differ across the world.

Um, and while I was doing my PhD at Aberdeen University, I was looking at women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring began in 2011. And this was when it was quite unbelievable to watch the Syrian people going out in the streets, marching hand by hand, shoulder to shoulder, of every religion, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, whatever faith, calling for the Assad regime to be dropped.

The regime answered their demands with the most horrific violence we've seen in our time. And, it went on for many, many years, until the end of 2024. So, I became obsessed with the questions that were coming out of Syria around what does this mean politically and economically.

But obviously, I always carry this gender lens. And I started, through reading UN reports, UNHCR, UN Women reports, I started to see that there was a real shift in gender relations. Suddenly women, one in three households were headed by women, women were going into entrepreneurship that had never done business in the past, and that was something that fascinated me.

So, it kind of brought all my worlds together.

Jan: And how did those elements, then, come together? The gender, the entrepreneurship and then also the situation with refugees.

Sophie: So it was actually one of the reports that I read that was saying that, uh, by UN Women, that was saying that women were starting up home-based enterprises doing, engaging in usually feminised industries. So, engaging in craft work or cooking and, and selling, basically, to survive.

Because, uh, there was a point, I think around, in 2013, when one in two Syrian people were either dead, detained or displaced. And the vast majority of those were men. So there was a huge cultural shift in the way the household was ran.

Jan: And how did that evidence itself in, like, gender relations? And what's coming to my mind is that, as Paul knows, I was, I was raised on a farm, and the farming went through a really sort of tough time. And my Mum raised peacocks to sell the feathers to fishermen who, you know, wanted to tie things, or whatever.

And so she kept the groceries coming in. Which was quite a role reversal for my Mum and Dad, but her income was still called 'pin money' [Jan and Sophie laugh]. You know, which is, sort of, a phrase for the money that a woman earns on the side through some craft work, that is, you know, somehow frivolous. When in fact it's the bedrock...

Sophie: ...yeah, yeah...

Jan: ...so that must have been really interesting for family dynamics, as people are hoping with that expansion of whose able to bring money in and support the family.

Sophie: Absolutely. And, actually, one of the papers that I'm working on with, uh, colleagues at the moment, is really looking at the language around entrepreneurship. So, actually, uh, entrepreneurship does tend to resemble a male, uh, [Jan chuckles] usually of a particular class, and, uh, this individual heroic male.

And, so, this is something that we see in the media, not just in research, as well, and culturally. So what I found in my studies that was quite fascinating is that the women didn't really identify themselves as businesswomen or entrepreneurs.

They were saying 'this is a family business, we're doing it as a family.' My husband, uh, you know, for example, they're saying, 'I'm the one that cooks, my husband is the one that delivers, my children take pictures and put them

on Instagram.' So this a, a family run business, rather than just 'I'm an entrepreneur and I'm amazing and I'm the breadwinner.'

Jan: Yeah

Paul: So similar to the conversation we had a little while ago with someone you'll know really well, Ellie Hamilton...

Sophie: ...yeah...

Paul: ...about rethinking entrepreneurship, and how you have to reimagine it beyond that stereotype of the strong, white male who's going to advance everything and everything, and probably take over the world whether you want him to or not. [Sophie laughs]

Yeah, yeah, so different to that. And also so different to the image of refugees. You'd never necessarily link people in a refugee camp as having opportunities for entrepreneurship and starting off their business.

So how does that come about? How can entrepreneurship be a factor for people in refugee camps, as something that, maybe, can help them out of levels of poverty? So, not just refugee camps, other marginalised communities as well?

Sophie: Yeah, so I mean, the, interestingly, the vast majority of refugees are urban refugees. So they do actually, uh, get into countries and, but then obviously when borders close, et cetera, a lot of refugees, um, settle in camps.

And these are two different contexts. Uh, so for example, in the Zaatari camp, uh, one of the biggest refugee camps in the world, uh, on the borders between Jordan and Syria, uh, the refugees are given permits where they can actually go into Jordan for a certain number of hours and get products and take it back into the camp and, and sell it.

Um, but the, the urban refugees, generally engage in an incredible job [laughs] of building their networks. Whether it starts with their neighbours, um, and then, kind of, so a lot of the women, for example, in my study, uh, really relied on their neighbours to be able to, uh, support, uh, in promoting their businesses.

So, for example, they would cook at home, they would start selling to their neighbours, and through word of mouth they'd be able to sell to other, uh, households in the community. Same with the craft work. Uh, so, and there's

also more kind of bazaars or infrastructure that might be available in cities that, that support refugees.

But I think what's really important is to understand that refugees are not a homogenous group of people. And if we talk about context, the variation starts from the, your home country to your host country.

So if you're a particular person of a particular class and educational background and you enter a country that's, you know, for example, the refugees that came to Germany or the UK or the Netherlands, where they are provided with housing and education opportunities and medical care, obviously their journey and story and ability to become entrepreneurs is very different to, already, a poor person leaving Syria, going into a poor country like Jordan or Lebanon that are already overpopulated, that lack resources. It's completely different story.

Jan: And, um, you know, size isn't everything, but some of the things you've described so far feel quite like localised entrepreneurship. Do they scale into bigger, um, bigger undertakings in, in certain settings as well?

Sophie: Yeah, I mean, again, it, it depends. So there are refugees that have come to the UK, or gone to the US, that can give us incredible examples of businesses that started quite small and expanded, uh, with the infrastructure and support.

But, the groups that I work with, in particular, they're the ones that are really entrepreneuring for survival. It is day to day. Am I going to be able to put food on the table or not? Because of a variety of circumstances, the circumstances that they came from and the circumstances that they've ended up in.

Paul: So, tell us a little bit more, then, about your work with refugees. What has it involved and which groups have you been working with particularly?

Sophie: So it started in 2015. I went to Jordan and I just, uh, was able to use my local connections and networks in the region, uh, to put me in touch with a research assistant who he himself was a second-generation Syrian refugee, uh, living in Jordan. So his father was a refugee there in the eighties, and he was born there, and he will always hold refugee status.

So he was very connected to the local community. And he put me in touch with women who had, who had home based enterprises. And, I was going into these women's homes. I was sitting down with them, uh, engaging in the

activities that they were engaging in, and talking to them and interviewing them at the same time, watching their husbands come and go, watching their children come and go.

So it was a, a very humbling experience, and I was very fortunate that I had this insider outsider positionality as well. So they saw me as one of them, uh, because I could speak the language, I understood the local culture and idioms, et cetera.

Uh, but they were also, very [exhales] excited at the prospect of me going back out to the Western world, so to speak, and portraying the Syrians as hardworking, as resilient. Um, they want to be financially independent. They don't want to depend on aid. They, they didn't leave their homes because they wanted to, they were forced out.

So really, on the one hand, I went to research entrepreneurship, and to see how they were using it as an economic means of survival. But over time I just found out that these women were really on a completely different journey, beyond economic survival as well.

So any pieces of craft work that they're engaging in, and, you know, we've written and published about this, my colleague and I, um, you know, they were using craft work or cooking, making flags, uh, wearing sort of traditional Syrian clothing and, and designing Syrian scarves, et cetera, just to keep their culture alive, keep their identity alive, and build that, that bridge and sense of belonging.

Paul: So you left Syria when you were seven, but you do, as you say, you've got a Syrian father.

Sophie: Yeah.

Paul: Do these people in the refugee camps who've come from Syria still feel like your people, so to speak, to use a broad term?

Sophie: My people...

Paul: ...yeah, I, I...

Sophie: ...absolutely my people, definitely my people. They will always be my people. Definitely.

I mean, I, we used to visit very often. I have a huge family there. Um, I'm bilingual. I have a Syrian accent. Um, I'm incredibly fortunate and very proud to

be British. My mum was British, I was carried in a British body. [Jan and Paul laugh]

I'm very, very proud of that and all the opportunities that I have here. But I'm also very, very much Syrian.

Jan: Yeah. It's that, it's that bimodal existence, isn't it?

Sophie: Yeah.

Jan: And so in each place you're sort of, kind of, from the other, but it gives you that fantastic sort of opportunity to meld those two things together...

Sophie: ...yeah.

Jan: ...as well.

Paul: You see, I don't really have that...

Jan: ...yeah...

[Sophie laughs]

Paul: ...I've, I've got families who the broadest, um, we can talk about is the Isle of Man or Suffolk, [Jan and Sophie laugh] you know, but that that's branches of family. Whereas at home my partner, who was born in Belgium, she also sounds Scottish, least my children have got that Scottish, that Belgian heritage, which I, I think I probably try more than Sabine as their mother to instil that in them, to realise that you are not just English, you've got that in there...

Sophie: ...but you know what? When that identity you, you're, you're not living in danger of losing...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Sophie: ...the identity. And for me, in 2011, when I saw what was happening, I went, I was suddenly that 7-year-old girl that was being told, you have to stay quiet. You cannot say anything. Do not speak.

I still have that fear in me, even here today, even though I know the regime has gone and Syria is doing great things. That's something that never leaves you. So when I saw that happening, uh, my national identity just...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Sophie: ...had a massive resurgence because I was afraid of losing it.

Jan: Yeah. Turning back to the, the core topic, um, could you sort of sketch out for our listeners what it's, life is like for those people who have been forcefully, uh, displaced from their homes and are, are trying to survive by whatever means is available to them?

Sophie: It's an enormous amount of pressure. The pressure that I, I don't know how they are able to, um, survive under.

So there were differences amongst households. So the worst were where there were women living with children, and the father was sick and unable to work. Um, I say sick, actually, they were injured from the war.

And so they were the absolute poorest households. And the women were going out every day just trying to earn enough money to feed their kids in the evening. They were getting very little aid from the UNCHR, so don't have to be a mathematical genius to know that the, the rent is about two hundred, it was around 220 dinars, uh, Jordanian dinars, and they would get about 80 from the UNHCR and maybe get 20 per child. It just didn't add up.

So there was that daily pressure of going out. And one of the women said to me that her 5-year-old son, uh, when she used to come home every evening, he used to run and open her handbag and say, did you make any money today? Are we going to eat tonight?

And hearing stories like that is obviously heartbreaking, but they are important to, to relay, to show just how difficult the situations are.

Um, and one of the women that I interviewed in Jordan in 2018, she had three daughters and her husband was in a wheelchair, um, because he'd been injured, uh, during the, the war. And um, you know, she said, if I don't make the rent this month, I'm going to have to take my daughters and husband and go in the refugee camp. And, um, I've got three young girls and it's not policed. So gender-based violence was rife there.

And that those were, kind of, the pressures that they're under. Something that we really, as you said, can't even begin to imagine.

Paul: Yeah. It's so hard to, because especially when you see refugees who come to this country, the government does, its utmost. Oh, it's hard to say this, because obviously there's such, the political divide that's...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...happened there. But to provide help and support for these people who've been displaced by war and things. But not all countries are able to do that for everyone who comes there. And it's just, it's like, you might be going from one country that's got a war into another country that maybe doesn't have a war but has major problems of its own, you are not always going from a really bad situation to a really good one, are you?

Jan: No.

Sophie: Absolutely. So again, if we look at the example of Syria, of course there are many examples as well across Africa and other parts of the world. But if we just go back to that context, uh, there was a time where one in seven people in Jordan were Syrian, and there was a time where one in four people in Lebanon were Syrian.

So, and, and these are countries that are already, they are incredible, again, rich countries in terms of culture, in terms of, uh, opportunities, uh, for people who are able to grasp them.

Uh, but you know, Lebanon in particular has gone through various wars and, um, the gas explosion, et cetera. And within all of that, they've then harbouring a huge number of, of refugees. And, of course, this causes tensions and conflict.

If you think that, um, there are a million refugees, Syrian refugees, in Lebanon, or 750,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan. Ee brought 20,000 to the UK of a population of 66 million. You know, it's, it's completely, completely different.

Jan: I knew that about Jordan. I've got a good friend that lives in Jordan and, um, he sometimes follows the UK news and people getting excited about such small numbers with... [laughs]

Sophie: ...yeah...

Jan: ...with a level of disdain. [laughs]

Sophie: Yeah, and, and you know, the, the communities are incredible, the host communities. Because even if you look at Egypt, even Iraq was taking in refugees. So, and, and as welcoming as they want to be, they're also in a state of constant need for survival as well...

Jan: ...yeah, a lot of pressure as well.

Paul: Yeah. There's such struggles in so many countries in that part of the world that it's so easy to generalise when you're sat here in, essentially, the ivory tower of the UK...

Sophie: ...yeah...

Paul: ...but knowing what's going on there and how hard, but also how hard they're trying to help people.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: So, does, do you think that entrepreneurship then gives an identity, a sense of belonging to these people you've spoken to, in the new communities that they're maybe trying to become a part of, and becoming a part of?

Sophie: Um, it's interesting. I think entrepreneurship is a means of economic survival. And empowerment, and I use that very loosely. I don't think it's the holy grail and the answer to all problems for women. And there's a lot of critique around that, which we don't have time for today. [laughs]

But it, it did give them economic, uh, independence and empowerment as in able to pay the rent and get food on the table that night. But what was giving them a sense of belonging was what they were creating, and what they were selling.

So, creating incredible Syrian dishes. And hosting, uh, for, for people who wanted to host parties, they would create amazing food and, and send it, and sell it to, to, well first it started off as households, and actually a couple of the women were able to fund parties and events, et cetera.

Uh, whether it was in the craft work that they were making, the items that they were creating, anything basic, whether it was bracelets or items of clothing.

Uh, one of the women, uh, that I interviewed was creating, um, sort of the, the first kind of, sleeping bag for, for babies. And was kind of using Syrian, flag colours, et cetera, on them so that when these babies were born, they would know where they came from.

You know, so these were the things that they were, yes, creating to sell, but also there was this, uh, connection to their past. And also trying to make sense of their present, and also try and carve out a future that would include that identity.

Paul: Is it a way of spreading the culture? That, that spreading that the Syrian culture, they're no longer in Syria, but showing to the people who they may be coming who aren't Syrian...

Sophie: ...I, uh...

Paul: ...this, this is what we're about.

Sophie: Again, it depends on, yes, uh, but it depends on the context.

So, for example, Syrians going to Jordan or Lebanon, we are extremely similar. This is the region as the Levant. We are very similar in terms of, uh, culture and, and, uh, behaviours and, and, and religion and, and ideologies.

Uh, but maybe more so when I've worked with refugees in the UK, for example. Uh, so there would be community events where every refugee is cooking a dish from their country or, uh, creating, uh, a piece of art that resembles the, their, the country that they come from.

Uh, but the, the overarching message, particularly when they come to more uh, European countries, is they don't want to be a burden. They'd want to get rid of that narrative of being a burden. They want to work, they want to contribute, they want to be independent, and most of all, they really want to go home.

Jan: Yeah. And I suppose, uh, particularly the story you just told us there about the wee sleeping bags, I mean, that just sounds, like, cocooned with, with love... [laughs]

Sophie: ...yeah...

Jan: ...isn't it...?

Sophie: ...absolutely...

Jan: My heart lifted. [Sophie laughs]

Sorry, Paul. Over to you. [Everyone laughs, Paul laughs indignantly]

Paul: Yeah. It's almost like, yeah, that's really what it sounded like. I was told off for making a similar kind of comment about someone in a joking manner, but you sounded entirely serious when you said, yes, my heart lifted. Paul, you're dead inside, let's go back to you.

Thank you very much.

Jan: No, it just, it just touched my, touched my heart.

Paul: And there's so much interesting stuff there. I know I worked with you on a few different things over...

Sophie: ...yeah...

Paul: ...over the years, and the different ways that we've talked about this. And we've talked not just about people as refugees, but also the gendered aspect, and that's a key thing...

Jan: ...mm-hmm...

Sophie: ...yeah...

Paul: ...which I guess brings us nicely onto, and I've said, you've made this a very long title to, to say, the Academy for Gender Equality and Social Justice Research in Organisations.

So you do some work that ties in with gender and refugees. So, it must tie in, therefore, with the academy. So can you tell us what the academy is, what it does?

Sophie: Well, first of all, the name, the long name, you're giving me a hard time for the long name. [Jan laughs]

Paul: It's all your fault, Sophie.

Sophie: [laughs] I love the long name! And I'll tell you why. Because, we were kind of looking at different names. And, yes, we did want to make it something short and punchy, but the reality was social justice had to be in there. But I wasn't going to erase gender equality.

Because, um, I fear that, particularly what's going on in the US today, and the messages that we're getting around the world, is that that work is done. And that we want to erase that work, or we've, we've got gender equality, we've got, you know, EDI, or we only do things based on merit.

And I thought, no, this has to stay in there because there still isn't a single country in the world that has achieved gender equality. And women still bear the brunt of that everywhere.

So, um, that's why I had to have both gender equality and social justice research in there. But, yeah, so what we do is, our research is really focusing,

and we're motivated by the persistent global challenge, um, of gender inequality.

So it really, what we try to do at the Academy is we aim to connect scholars, uh, concerned with tackling gender inequality in work-based contexts. Um, it's an opportunity to develop networks at national and international level. We try to showcase and stimulate groundbreaking and impactful research. And, uh, promoting it among scholars, but also practitioners, through events and, and seminars and, and workshops.

Paul: I worked with your predecessor as well as you, albeit the Academy had a different name then, Valerie Stead, and you both have such a passion for this, this work.

You can really see it. And whenever you speak to you, you can see your drive there. And we've talked so many times in the past about gender equality on this, and saying exactly what you said, the work isn't done...

Sophie: ...no...

Paul: ...there's so many examples of where it needs, needs to be carried on. And it's good to have people like you continuing to push it.

Jan: And indeed, it would be really interesting to hear about your work, um, as it focuses on business and management schools and, and supporting those institutions to carry on this pathway of the unfinished work, um, with regard to gender equality plans.

What's involved in that area?

Sophie: So this was, uh, so I guess I've got two hats. So the first hat is very much focusing on looking at refugees. Gender is the overarching interest.

Uh, but the second is, through the Academy we were very fortunate, my colleagues and I to, uh, win a bid, a project, a Horizon 2020 European Commission project on developing gender equality plans, uh, in business and management schools. And we had colleagues, uh, and partners across Europe and, and Lebanon.

And, uh, what we were aiming to do was to try and develop bespoke gender equality plans that would suit the institution that we were in. You know, we couldn't develop a one size fits all that would fit the Lebanese context and the

Greek context and Swedish context, Belgian and the UK, which were all our partners.

And so, the aim was to kind of do research, understand where we were at, uh, at, uh, Lancaster University Management School. And then to kind of develop the plans. And then we went through a period of implementation. Then we went through, um, a period of monitoring, and then a period of, of evaluation.

And it was great because that, the project was kind of driving this, but we got to work with incredible people in the Management School and beyond. And, and within Lancaster University centrally on various, EDI, um, initiatives, particularly Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter, Disability Confident.

So the project was really embedded with a lot of incredible steps that the university's taking currently.

Paul: While you're talking about this, I realised how unusual the situation we have here with the three people who are sat representing the Management School. In as much as I know a major issue that's seen in, um, universities generally, and business schools is, people who are academics, there's a lot more male than there are female, especially in senior positions.

Jan, you're a professor. You're not distinguished, as I keep telling you...

Jan: [laughing] ...very true...

Paul: ...but you're a professor. You, Sophie, you're a senior lecturer, you've climbed that ladder a little bit. And then when it comes to professional services, the people who provide all the support in lots of ways, but also do lots of other work, mainly female. And yet, here I am as a male representative of that.

It's a very strange panel we've got. [Jan and Sophie laugh] It must completely throw all of your research out of the window, Sophie.

Jan: Well, ah...

Sophie: ...well, no it doesn't actually, it's showing that it's working, [Jan laughs] whatever we're doing is working...

Jan: ...we're on the path...

Sophie: ...and we're on our way...

Jan: ...we're on the way, yeah...

Sophie: ...yes.

Jan: And, and do you feel optimistic in that sense, for the future of business schools and gender equality?

Sophie: I, I draw upon, uh, the incredible feminist Gloria Steinem, and I say, I'm a hope-aholic.

Jan: Hope-aholic. I like that.

Sophie: And I, I'm very optimistic. I'm very optimistic. If you look back and you see how slow progress has been, it, it could get you down. But I'd rather move forward and, and look forward.

I think we are, particularly in our institution, we are engaging in loads of EDI initiatives. And I came here in 2016 and I would say that what we've done, uh, in the last, probably, three or four years has been astounding.

And, but it, it takes time, uh, inequality, particularly gender inequality, has been going on since time immemorial. So we're not going to solve it in a year, or two, or three.

There are things we can do to expedite it. Uh, and I feel very passionate about those. But we're on our way. The only thing we need to be aware of is regressing.

Jan: Yeah.

Sophie: And that's, again, a movement that we're seeing where, while trying to erase EDI, uh, bringing in concepts like 'merit' without really unpacking what merit really means, and how can we look at that through an equity lens.

Paul: I guess, we've talked about this, then, and we've talked about refugees. Do you see a way that there's connections between the work you're doing in business schools, and with gender equality there, and the work that you've been doing with refugees?

Sophie: Context wise, no. No, absolutely not. What they are dealing with and suffering with is... It, it, we can't even begin to compare it to what we have.

Having said that, that doesn't mean that the women in the UK, in any organisation, not just in universities, should tolerate being underpaid and undervalued.

So it's all relative, isn't it? So I can't directly compare it. But one thing that I can say, that's very evident in both contexts, is that women are women. And they are hardworking. They're resilient. They're ambitious. They love their children, they love their families, and they want to work with dignity and pride.

Jan: And I think dignity is a word that we've had come up several times in the, the various podcasts, and I think it's a really, you know, important concept because it captures so much more than just, you know, something's fair or not fair...

Paul: ...mm-hmm.

Jan: Dignity is a, is a, a big, a big plus.

Paul: It, it really is, yeah. So what's next then, Sophie, what comes next for you in this work? And what do you see happening next both in terms of gender equality in business schools? And maybe in terms of what might be done with refugees, people in these communities, and what happens to them?

Sophie: So in terms of business schools, I think we are, for example, we've got the Athena Swan Award that we keep aiming for. So we've got bronze, we're aiming for silver, we're aiming for gold, and then we need to maintain that.

Uh, but it also needs to be beyond the charter mark, right? We need to make sure that we're engaging in sustainable cultural change, that we keep feeding that pipeline, um, and that we take an intersectional perspective.

So looking beyond gender, but taking ethnicity into account, religion, migration status. Um, and so we've got some great steps we just need to keep following through with them.

In terms of looking at refugee communities, believe it or not, the only category that is worse than being a refugee is being stateless. And this is something that I really want to work on next.

Statelessness is the worst thing that can probably happen to someone, particularly a child who is born stateless. And the absolute vast majority of the time that children are born stateless is because of their being born from, and into, a patriarchal context where women, their mothers who beared them and carried them in their own bodies, are unable to pass on the nationality to their children.

And if the father is dead or quote unquote unknown, or if they don't have proof of what the father's nationality was, the child is rendered stateless. And when you're stateless, you have nowhere to go. And that is really devastating.

What frustrates me is that there are still 25 countries in the world where women cannot pass the nationality, their nationality onto their children. Fourteen of which are Middle Eastern countries.

And that is incredibly frustrating when we can see huge change in the Middle East. We can see incredible, uh, movement towards modernisation, so to speak. A lot of money invested in education, in infrastructure, in sports. And yet women are still unable to pass on the nationality to their children.

Jan: That was a new fact that I didn't want to know, but I feel empowered now I do know, yeah.

Sophie: Well, believe it or not, and this goes full circle back to the, the beginning of where we started today, in the UK up until, I believe, 1982, British women who were married to a non-Brit and had their child abroad were unable to pass on the nationality to their children.

Jan: [very quietly] Heavens.

Sophie: That means that I was born in Syria to a Syrian father and a British mum, and had that rule not changed just before I was born, I would've just had a Syrian passport and I would've had a completely different life.

Paul: Amazing to think that even here in the UK it's been so recently that...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...these rules have changed. A rule that just doesn't seem to make any sense.

Jan: Well, it's a sexist rule. [Jan and Sophie laugh]

Paul: It really is, yes, yes...

Sophie: ... I mean, it is, isn't it? It's just good old sexism, yeah.

Jan: [laughing] ...sorry, I said the word, I said the word. [Sophie laughs] I'll take it back.

Paul: Back to the kitchen with you, Jan. Yes. [Jan and Sophie laugh]

Jan: Yeah. Good luck, Paul. [Paul laughs]

Paul: So, yeah, yeah. Thank you, Sophie. It's been a really fascinating conversation. You've given us such a good insight into your personal experiences, how that ties into your research and the struggles that many people are facing in so many different aspects of life.

Sophie: Thank you. Thank you so much.

[Theme music]

Paul: Speaking to people like Sophie really makes you appreciate, Jan, how fortunate we are in so many circumstances in our life.

But, also how, if we were in less fortunate circumstances, maybe there is the power within us if we have that entrepreneurial sense to do something about it, and build a, an identity that's aside from being a displaced person or a refugee.

Jan: Absolutely. And, um, I think what was really powerful was also how people use their entrepreneurial skills, not only to feed themselves and their families, but also to reinforce their identity.

So where you come from really matters, it absolutely matters. And to be displaced from where you come from is just, you know, unthinkable for those of us who haven't been, been displaced.

But then knowing how you'd respond, and how you could respond, in that context. The stories we heard, whilst very sobering, I also found uplifting in a way. And that possibility for agency and for human courage and spirit and all of those sorts of things to be able to, you know, deal with the situation you're in.

Even at the same time as we should be working to make those situations less frequent, and less strained, and less horrible.

Paul: And, yeah, background is important as well, for the people who work in the area, like Sophie, has the Syrian father, grew up in Syria until she was seven, then went to Saudi Arabia. Has experience firsthand, and then has, but also as she says, the outsider insider perspective where she can have both areas, and apply that to her work, and being able to go into the Syrian refugee camps, and still be seen as one of them, someone who understands them having the language, the dialects, the knowledge of the culture, and being able to use that.

And that can be so important in work like this where you need to have people who talk to you, and being able to get them to talk to you.

Jan: And I hadn't realised that, um, that discussion about statelessness. I mean, uh, I mean, I know there are people who are stateless, but I hadn't really figured out how that happened.

So hearing that, that that could happen when you can't pass on your nationality as, as somebody's mum was really a bit shocking really, I have to say.

Paul: Yeah, knowing that there's still 25 countries in the world where mothers cannot pass on their nationality to children...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...is...

Jan: ...outrageous...

Paul: ...yeah, it really is. It's, it's ridiculous to know that that's the case. And there was some, was some other stats there that were equally scary, where Sophie said that 50% of the people in Syria in 2013 detained, dead or displaced. That's 13 years ago that was the case.

And Sophie has talked about the optimism that is now there because of the overthrow of the government a couple of years ago, and the new government being in place. But, to know that even until then it was such a scary place to be, and the tales from her childhood, it helps you understand why there are so many refugees from Syria who have then left and gone to Jordan, gone to Turkey, gone to Lebanon.

Jan: Yeah

Paul: And had felt the need to do that.

Jan: But also that, that it is possible to come back. So you have to, you know, live in hope that Syria will continue to advance and to be safe places for everyone to be...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...that would be...

Paul: ...and Sophie describing herself as a hope-aholic, which I think is, it's...

Jan: ...I like that phrase... [laughs]

Paul: ...anyone who works in sustainability or the environment, climate change, anything like that, probably needs to be one of them when you see things going on at certain times around the world.

Jan: Yeah, no, hope-aholic, that was something I wrote on my piece of paper to keep a hold of as well.

Paul: And it's something that we probably need to keep in mind for next week's episode...

Jan: ...ah...

Paul: ...when we'll be talking about the emotional connections and effects of climate change, how that all ties into people generally, but also people who have a direct connection to what's going on the area.

We're gonna be talking to Dr Nadine Andrews about that. Which will be good, another Pentland Centre member.

Jan: Brilliant.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]