



Guest: Dr Bev Palesa Ditsie

Host: Mounira Chaieb

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Episode 3

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Transcript

00:00:07 Mounira Chaieb

They are a first of many things but best known for being the first lesbian to address the United Nations at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1994.

00:00:20 Mounira Chaieb

In the third part of the leading feminist Voices Project, launched exclusively by the Africa Leadership Centre, we hear from Doctor Bev Ditzzy, a radical gender-nonconforming activist and award-winning filmmaker from South Africa.

00:00:37 Mounira Chaieb

My first question to you is what situation in your journey would you say required you to show leadership?

00:00:44 Beverley Ditsie

There's been quite a few instances. I think there's been some private more key moments, but I do think that it was the first Pride March in Johannesburg.

00:00:56 Beverley Ditsie

Like when I realised that there wasn't going to be anyone, black or woman, that is going to be making that speech, it was a historic March. We knew that the eyes of the world were on.

00:01:13 Beverley Ditsie

Us we knew that, you know, there's going to be a lot of controversy, and I think really my biggest issue was that women were very prominent and in their prominence it almost became inevitable that.

00:01:28 Beverley Ditsie

People like me would be invisibilized and so as soon as I realised that there isn't anyone like me who represents me, who looks like me, even that is going to take the podium and speak.

00:01:43 Beverley Ditsie

I asked the questions I said is nobody like me speaking and the answer was well, do you want to do it? That was a turning point for me in my life. It was October of 1990, I think I was 18, turning 19.

00:01:59 Beverley Ditsie

But I already knew and understood quite a lot. I grew up in a very maternal home where I saw a lot of the difficulties. I saw how my family was treated, because there was no.

00:02:13 Beverley Ditsie

In inverted commas, men in the house. Therefore, there was no respect.

00:02:18 Beverley Ditsie

But I also understood quite a lot about what was going on politically in the country, and so I was already very immersed.

00:02:24 Beverley Ditsie

In attempting, I suppose to play my part in fighting for the freedom of the country across the board. So when you gain lesbian organisation was formed and I was there, it would become a home for me.

00:02:29

Mm.

00:02:41 Beverley Ditsie

And so when that much happened a year later, in 1990, it became very obvious for me that.

00:02:48 Beverley Ditsie

If we continue to be invisible.

00:02:53 Beverley Ditsie

Then the discrimination continues because we continue to be told that we should not exist because people like me do not exist because it's an African to be queer, to be lesbian. And I was not going to accept that.

00:03:08 Mounira Chaieb

He said that you grew up in a household full of women, therefore there was no respect. You mean no respect from the community, from the society, because you are all women.

00:03:20 Beverley Ditsie

That's exactly what I mean. It's a very interesting thing because my grandmother was a pillar of the community. If people needed anything, they would come to her and it didn't matter whether it was financial help or a shoulder to cry on. People came to my grandmother.

00:03:36 Beverley Ditsie

And yet, at the very same time.

00:03:39 Beverley Ditsie

Yeah, you knew that a man would walk through the yard and talk to her and talk to the rest of us. My mother, my sister, my aunts. Any way that they please.

00:03:49 Beverley Ditsie

And they would even say, where's a man? We don't talk to women. We have issues where business that we would like to discuss and whether it was about the electricity or about building something outside the yard, it didn't matter.

00:04:04 Beverley Ditsie

There was a genuine disrespect as soon as it was found out that there is not a head of the home, inverted commas and so I grew up understanding that you know the way that Patrick operates is that if there is no man in the home then.

00:04:21 Beverley Ditsie

It's almost as though everyone's opinion, or anyone's.

00:04:24 Beverley Ditsie

Point of view is not valid.

00:04:26 Mounira Chaieb

And who would you say inspired you the most? As far as leadership goes?

00:04:32 Beverley Ditsie

My grandmother, definitely.

00:04:34 Mounira Chaieb

In what way?

00:04:36 Beverley Ditsie

My grandmother did not shy away from doing what needed to be done, and half the time it meant that she put herself in a lot of danger or in the firing line. But when someone was screaming outside in the middle of the night when a woman was screaming, my grandmother would say give me that weapon and she had this iron, this piece, I don't even know how.

00:04:56 Beverley Ditsie

Private. But that was her weapon.

00:04:58 Beverley Ditsie

And every time, she said, give me that weapon. People was scared because I think they thought she had a gun. I think it didn't matter. It served its purpose because she would just step out and start screaming at the top of all's leave her alone and and she saved quite a few people in that way.

00:05:16 Beverley Ditsie

She was really known to be very strong.

00:05:19 Mounira Chaieb

Wow.

00:05:20 Beverley Ditsie

And so she would do things like that. But also, you know, household duties did not wait for, you know.

00:05:29 Beverley Ditsie

Figure we did everything. We fixed our own electricity. We chopped our own wood. Literally everything that was supposedly a man's job. She did, and I learned so much from her. I do my own backyard renovations. I use brick and mortar. I use wood.

00:05:50 Beverley Ditsie

Know how to use tools and that's all from my grandmother.

00:05:53 Mounira Chaieb

You say wearing a leadership is about interrogating taboo. Can you explain about that and how you want to?

00:06:03 Beverley Ditsie

I think the definition of queer itself just means out of the ordinary. It's normally meant negatively. You know, when people use the word queer, they have hand gestures, you know, like you're funny. You're not correct.

00:06:18 Beverley Ditsie

Somehow, when the word queer is used and I know that, you know, in mostly Western countries it's been used so directly that.

00:06:28 Beverley Ditsie

People don't like it necessarily. We adopted the word because it actually does.

00:06:34 Beverley Ditsie

It just really means just not.

00:06:37 Mounira Chaieb

No more.

00:06:38 Beverley Ditsie

Out of the well out of the ordinary, you know, because what is normal we, we normalise things that are not normal and whatever is normal sometimes isn't. And the word itself has issues. The word normal and so.

00:06:40 Mounira Chaieb

Yeah.

00:06:52 Beverley Ditsie

You know, queer is being extraordinary. And Mama Winnie Mandela was extraordinary.

00:07:00 Beverley Ditsie

She did things that.

00:07:03 Beverley Ditsie

Were not done by women, even women, in leadership.

00:07:07 Beverley Ditsie

Who? Shy or back off? When? When there's things that need to be done that require origin and.

00:07:15 Beverley Ditsie

And a kind of a bravery that is not associated generally with with women, particularly African women, which is quite odd because the African women I have ever known have always been very strong.

00:07:28

Mm.

00:07:29 Beverley Ditsie

And so you know.

00:07:33 Beverley Ditsie

Women being on the forefront.

00:07:35 Beverley Ditsie

Is itself queer because we are not meant to be taking that sort of leadership role.

00:07:40 Mounira Chaieb

Yeah.

00:07:41 Beverley Ditsie

Women back off. Women must kowtow. Must take a step back when a man becomes involved among women. He was supposed to do that, in fact, wasn't it? Reverend

Emeritus, Bishop Tutu, who said you're supposed to step back? Let him be a leader. Bring him his slippers. Make him his porridge.

00:08:02 Beverley Ditsie

And and I remember, all of us were aghast because what do you what do you mean? I'm a leader who has been on the forefront of so much for so many years, and now the man comes from prison. And now I must now step back.

00:08:06 Mounira Chaieb

Yeah.

00:08:17 Beverley Ditsie

And give him his slippers. There is an actual factor coat where he said that you're supposed to just get make him his food and give him his slippers. And now take care of him because he's the.

00:08:22

Mm.

00:08:29 Beverley Ditsie

What? What utter nonsense.

00:08:30 Mounira Chaieb

Yeah, yeah.

00:08:34 Mounira Chaieb

But, but it's usually women like in countries who are colonised or in freedom fights, who are actually fighting behind the scenes, you know, supporting the men like in.

00:08:50 Mounira Chaieb

The war for independence of Algeria, 132 years of, you know, French colonialism. It was. It was the women.

00:08:57 Beverley Ditsie

It was the woman who.

00:09:01 Beverley Ditsie

And and and also it's not just supporting the men, women in the forefront.

00:09:06 Beverley Ditsie

Are doing the work.

00:09:09 Beverley Ditsie

How we do the work is how we do the work and the fact that it is seen, as you know, oh, we are in the background, doing support isn't itself an offence.

00:09:20 Beverley Ditsie

It's offensive because women have been in the forefront in all sorts of different ways.

00:09:25 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely, absolutely. You also say understanding how the personal is political for women leaders. Can you explain what you mean by that?

00:09:36 Beverley Ditsie

Oh, I think it's just the personal is political on all fronts. It's a matter of life and death for us, isn't it?

00:09:45 Beverley Ditsie

It's a matter of life and death. Simply, if I do not stand up for myself, I will be killed.

00:09:52 Beverley Ditsie

And sometimes killed metaphorically by being erased, sometimes killed outright.

00:09:58 Beverley Ditsie

Literally.

00:10:00 Beverley Ditsie

You know, if you don't have a voice and and we keep silent when we are looking at atrocities around us, things that are affecting us either directly or indirectly, we find ourselves in positions where our silence becomes complicit.

00:10:16 Beverley Ditsie

In whatever it is that's happening in the atrocities around us. So no, we cannot remain silent. The personal is political because it is a matter of life and death for.

00:10:26 Mounira Chaieb

And in the South African context.

00:10:29 Mounira Chaieb

During apartheid and even post Apar.

00:10:32 Mounira Chaieb

Died. How challenging was it and is it still to be homosexual in that context?

00:10:39 Beverley Ditsie

Do you know why things change so much stays the same? I would like to believe that we have moved to such a progressive space that I am married to my wife currently Lee.

00:10:53 Beverley Ditsie

Legally, we are able to buy property together. We are able to do things together that other people do. That is amazing. I made a phone call. Lesbians free everyone in 2020. That title alone is controversial.

00:11:10 Beverley Ditsie

We liked it and chose it because it is controversial, but because it has layers and layers of meaning, and the fact that I could be on national television and national radio and in mainstream media.

00:11:22 Beverley Ditsie

Talking about the phone that's coming out, just like any film maker who talks about their work when it comes out, there are things that make me realise how far ahead we are because I could do that with No Fear.

00:11:37 Beverley Ditsie

And yet, at the same time, there's still a lot of discrimination. There's still a lot of hate speech. There's still a lot of homophobic attacks.

00:11:48 Beverley Ditsie

On both gay men and lesbians and trans women and trans men and all the gender nonconforming people, it is quite incredible that there is a balance and a mixture of both.

00:12:02 Beverley Ditsie

Where we are as progressive as we are, while at the same time there's so much discrimination.

00:12:09 Mounira Chaieb

And from the sound of it, it sounds like it's probably more difficult in other African countries than it is in South Africa. If you are able to set up a phone line, if you are able to marry Marianna, the woman, same sex partner, and apply for a mortgage and all of that, I guess.

00:12:22 Beverley Ditsie

So the sets partner.

00:12:25

Was.

00:12:28 Mounira Chaieb

A lot of other African countries.

00:12:30 Mounira Chaieb

Countries have not reached that stage yet.

00:12:33 Beverley Ditsie

Yes, but that would be completely and totally unheard of to even get to a stage where we're able to do that. And I know and understand the privilege of being in a country where I'm able to live fairly.

00:12:48 Beverley Ditsie

And I say fairly relatively.

00:12:52 Beverley Ditsie

Easier with my life partner is quite an honour and quite a privilege because I know that and it's not just African countries, there are also many European countries. I know that the USA, which has seen or supposed to be a beacon of freedom all over the world, we know now that it is actually.

00:13:11 Beverley Ditsie

Probably most oppressive.

00:13:13 Beverley Ditsie

Now you know that states where that is not possible.

00:13:18 Mounira Chaieb

Yeah, but can you name a few incidents in your journey that you lived through or you witnessed that made you say no? You know, I don't accept this. This is not OK.

00:13:32 Beverley Ditsie

I'm struggling to answer that question for several reasons. The discrimination that we have experienced that we continue to experience is not just confined to.

00:13:43 Beverley Ditsie

Our queerness, I think being.

00:13:47 Beverley Ditsie

A mass presenting lesbian. Since I was a child.

00:13:52 Beverley Ditsie

And knowing and being aware that there aren't many people like me meant that I was already aware of how I was being looked at, how I was being perceived, and how I was being treated, whether it was in school or.

00:14:07 Beverley Ditsie

You know, going to church with my grandmother or in my own home or wherever I was, I already understood that.

00:14:14 Beverley Ditsie

Something is different. I was being treated differently and.

00:14:18 Beverley Ditsie

While sometimes it was subtle, sometimes it was not very subtle, and so you know, one's entire life is the lens has always been that of being Abbott.

00:14:31 Beverley Ditsie

And so I can't pinpoint one particular incident because my whole life has been one particular incident.

00:14:39 Mounira Chaieb

People treat you that way because you look different because you behave different because you felt different. What was it that made them?

00:14:49 Beverley Ditsie

Well, absolutely. I mean, we are all.

00:14:52 Mounira Chaieb

Push.

00:14:54 Beverley Ditsie

To let me backtrack a little bit, when it comes to gender and how gender is defined and how gender is expressed.

00:15:05 Beverley Ditsie

When you're a girl child, do I expect it to play with dolls and to like pink and to be different and soft spoken? I grew up neither gender.

00:15:12 Mounira Chaieb

Spoken, yeah.

00:15:19 Beverley Ditsie

And it was very clear to me, even as a child, before I was 10 years old, it was very clear to me that I am neither one of these things. Just in terms of how society expected me to play these role. And so when I had a role on television.

00:15:36 Beverley Ditsie

And I was cast as a boy and a lot of the shows that I subsequently did, I was cast as a boy. I was very happy because I knew that I was not necessarily a girl, but that had to do with the fact that as a girl, there were expectations.

00:15:50 Beverley Ditsie

And those expectations were an anomaly to me. You know, we're fast.

00:15:55 Beverley Ditsie

In an expression, we are forced to role play.

00:16:00 Beverley Ditsie

His these roles, these genders that actually sometimes do.

00:16:05 Beverley Ditsie

Fit us.

00:16:06 Beverley Ditsie

And that's being, like I said.

00:16:10 Beverley Ditsie

Most of my life.

00:16:12 Beverley Ditsie

Where I found myself having to role play in order to be accepted, and I knew even then that something was wrong with that because I was very clearly a boy when I was.

00:16:28 Beverley Ditsie

When I get off set and when I'm now supposed to go to church, I'm being put in a dress and the way that people spoke to me behaved around me, treated me was completely different.

00:16:43 Beverley Ditsie

When I was presenting as either of these two robes.

00:16:48 Beverley Ditsie

It was all a role play for me, which then shows for me it's very clear this is all a construct and everyone gets forced into these roles and so if you don't fit the role you are then treated differently. You are then treated funny as soon as people realise. When I got into puberty that in actual fact.

00:17:08 Beverley Ditsie

This is somebody who was assigned female at birth. All of a sudden I am being treated with hostility because now, wait. If you are a girl, why have you been behaving like a boy? Well, in actual fact, I have never felt like I was either.

00:17:22 Mounira Chaieb

If you were.

00:17:23 Mounira Chaieb

You know, forced to have this multiple identities. You know, it's like that is the identity that you chose, which the society is not accepting and therefore the society is imposing on you.

00:17:39 Mounira Chaieb

Another identity that you fought with.

00:17:41 Beverley Ditsie

But I think that that is an imposition that is on all of us as human beings to the gender binaries. There's a construct and we are all forced into those roles. I I don't think it's just a sexual orientation thing.

00:17:46

Mm.

00:17:56 Beverley Ditsie

It is completely a gender identity thing, and those are two separate things where we have been forced into roles that we don't necessarily belong to, but you conform in order to be accepted to society and become a member of a community.

00:18:02

Mm hmm.

00:18:13 Beverley Ditsie

Because if you don't, then you're treated differently and then you are then discriminated against, right?

00:18:18 Mounira Chaieb

And then you are an outcast.

00:18:20 Beverley Ditsie

And then you are other and.

00:18:22 Beverley Ditsie

Are an outcast.

00:18:23 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely. And finally, doctor. Ditzzy what are the key leadership lessons that emerged from your experience, would you say?

00:18:24

OK.

00:18:31 Beverley Ditsie

Lessons evolve. Lessons change for me, most key has always been.

00:18:39 Beverley Ditsie

You know, self-care. A lot of us are selfless or attempt to be so selfless that we start to neglect our own needs in order to try and serve our communities. I have found that you know as much as you have so many people that say yes, but.

00:18:58

You.

00:18:58 Beverley Ditsie

Know I can't be free by myself.

00:19:01 Beverley Ditsie

Have to continue working for my community. A lot of the time we neglect our own well-being.

00:19:06 Beverley Ditsie

In order to serve our communities, that was, I think, one of the first things when I crashed, you know, when you burn out as an activist, you then start to realise that you need to be taken better care of ourselves and that, you know, in our communities, we are happy to be, you know, marching together.

00:19:26 Beverley Ditsie

And exposing ourselves to all kinds of danger.

00:19:30 Beverley Ditsie

And half the time, people are not there for you when you are on your knees.

00:19:35 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely. Uh.

00:19:38 Mounira Chaieb

That was Doctor Bev Ditty, a radical gender nonconforming activist and award-winning filmmaker from South Africa.