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Host: Mounira Chaieb

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Episode 2

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Transcript

00:00:07 Mounira Chaieb

She and her family lived on three continents as refugees, but she later worked with the same soldiers who had tortured her as a student in the 1970s, and she witnessed a drastic change in their behaviour.

00:00:22 Mounira Chaieb

In the second part of the leading feminist voices project.

00:00:26 Mounira Chaieb

Launched exclusively by the African Leadership Centre, we talked to Stella Sabiti, a Ugandan peace and security practitioner and policy maker.

00:00:33

I.

00:00:37 Mounira Chaieb

My first question to you, Stella, you mentioned that soldiers attacked your residence with other students at Macarena University in Uganda and.

00:00:46 Mounira Chaieb

76 But you immediately showed them compassion instead of hatred or anger, because you saw them as victims themselves. Can you tell us briefly what happened and how?

00:00:56 Mounira Chaieb

Reached that point.

00:00:57 Stella Sabiti

Actually, there is another emotion which should be added to the list like fear. Because when people attack you, the first thing you feel is fear. I didn't have that at the beginning, it was but later fear dissipated. It was in 1976. It was a challenging time for Uganda, but Africa was going through turmoil.

00:01:18 Stella Sabiti

Related and interconnected.

00:01:21 Stella Sabiti

Across continents or regions or separations?

00:01:23 Stella Sabiti

And so soldiers overran our university campus, and my husband had just dropped me that morning. And my roommates and friends told me that soldiers had been on the campus, but they had left. They're just beaten up the boys and they had left.

00:01:38 Stella Sabiti

So everything was so boring and and so quiet. And then out of the that silence came a polite knock at the door.

00:01:48 Stella Sabiti

But then the two were young. That was 1976. We just laughed and we thought it was our fellow colleagues making jokes on us, and we just make jokes. And then the knock progress to or degenerated into a banging. And before we knew it, we realised it was soldiers and they were shouting and they broke the door. They broke down the door.

00:02:08 Stella Sabiti

And I was pulled out with another friend. My roommates wasn't taken out, was myself and my friend. But I was taken out as a ringleader of an uprising.

00:02:18 Stella Sabiti

Of any up pricing or anything.

00:02:20 Stella Sabiti

That as I.

00:02:20 Stella Sabiti

You were so boring and.

00:02:23 Stella Sabiti

They were accusing me of so many things, but as we talked, I just thought they were just getting excused to be rough on us, even keen us because as human beings, really you don't do that to a fellow human being.

00:02:38 Stella Sabiti

You just don't don't, especially when you know very well they're innocent. So that's what happened.

00:02:47 Stella Sabiti

At some point, and as I said, I had No Fear.

00:02:49 Stella Sabiti

Yeah, my only regret was that I was going to die without anyone telling my mum because we didn't have like witnesses. And yet the whole of residence, Mary Stewart Hall, such a tall building with hundreds of women female students.

00:03:05 Stella Sabiti

We didn't have witnesses. We didn't have anyone saying no, they're innocent. Don't take them. No, everything was just quiet.

00:03:11 Stella Sabiti

So that's the only thing I was feeling that I'm going to die without my mom. Especially my dad was also there. But I was thinking of my mom and I thought it was unfair that she would hear later, but she didn't have details because they were going to kill us. They were taking us to.

00:03:27 Stella Sabiti

Place where they killed people.

00:03:29 Stella Sabiti

At that time. But then.

00:03:32 Stella Sabiti

Something told me don't die before you discover why.

00:03:37 Stella Sabiti

They were telling lies, the beatings, the cuttings and so on. It was real torture and I don't want to describe it right now. I think I shouldn't. So I wanted to find out why they were giving those reasons for going to kill me.

00:03:52 Stella Sabiti

And.

00:03:54 Stella Sabiti

Something, Tommy, maybe I don't have a voice because I hadn't cried. I hadn't felt pain. I was just like.

00:03:59 Stella Sabiti

Piece.

00:03:59 Stella Sabiti

Wood or something? And but I had that voice with me constantly that I felt I wasn't. I'm known as myself as hella. The was apart from my friend. There was another kind of prison.

00:04:11 Stella Sabiti

How to describe it? I can't explain.

00:04:13 Stella Sabiti

It's not the only time I've felt it many times because I work in all areas and it happens many times.

00:04:21 Stella Sabiti

And this voice or this wisdom or awareness?

00:04:26 Stella Sabiti

Help me see that I shouldn't use my voice, but I should expose my face and look them in the eye. And that's where I would find, you know the answer. And indeed, when I exposed my face 'cause then I wasn't afraid of eye. I was ready to die. I was really ready.

00:04:42 Stella Sabiti

And when I looked at the nearest soldier, I saw sadness in his face. I saw.

00:04:49 Stella Sabiti

Like tears are almost coming out of him. I just saw that and I wasn't deranged or whatever. I saw it, and I looked at the other soldiers the same. And so the sense that came to me with that accompanying awareness, I don't know what to call it.

00:05:09 Stella Sabiti

Was that just tell them it's OK. You understand? It's yeah. So I I I saw the tears and the misery in the nearest soldier, but when I looked around, it was so deep that I I was convinced he wasn't the only one.

00:05:26 Stella Sabiti

Feeling like that? So when I looked at the other soldiers.

00:05:30 Stella Sabiti

It was the same.

00:05:31 Stella Sabiti

And I was adding that it wasn't my friend and myself were being tortured. There was also boys who came from the next building, the accommodation for the male students, Mukuruma Hall, Wasik Lumumba Hall. OK.

00:05:47 Stella Sabiti

Sorry I don't remember the name very well. I confused them. That was 1976. So the boys, they were being tortured all along and we didn't know. So when they brought me and my friend out of Mary Stewart Hall and took us to.

00:06:03 Stella Sabiti

The boys residence, that's when we discovered that all along.

00:06:06 Stella Sabiti

Were also being tortured horribly.

00:06:09 Stella Sabiti

I'd never seen things like that, so when I realised that the soldiers were very sad, I got this sense I just thought I needed before I died. It was important.

00:06:26 Stella Sabiti

To communicate with the soldiers and tell them that it's OK, they don't have to feel so bad about what they're doing. It's a job or whatever.

00:06:34 Stella Sabiti

But then I wondered what words do I use and I do. I have a voice still, I wasn't sure and a brilliant idea came to me, he said. Just.

00:06:44 Stella Sabiti

So what you have in common with them and just talk about it, and because I just got married, I was expecting a baby and I thought these are not young boys. They are men. Maybe that's what we have in common. So I just focused on the nearest soldier.

00:07:01 Stella Sabiti

And I looked him right in the eye with the best smile I could get because I don't know. We're full of blood and mud and everything. Turn clothes and all that. But I smiled. I thought I smiled and I looked him nicely in the eye, and I asked him.

00:07:18 Stella Sabiti

What did your wife cook for you last night?

00:07:21 Stella Sabiti

The soldier went crazy. Crazy. What? And he hit me more and more and kicked me. You know, they had all these instruments and then the other soldiers asked, what did she do?

What did she say? He told them and they came and they rained blows on me and everything.

00:07:38 Stella Sabiti

And I was saying how dare you abuse our wives. But every time they stopped.

00:07:43 Stella Sabiti

Hitting me and all that I would ask the same question. Why did your wife cook for you last night? Again, the beatings, teakings and everything. It went to London until I realised that their strength or their appetite for.

00:07:59 Stella Sabiti

Harming me was going lower and lower, while my strength was rising and rising.

00:08:06 Stella Sabiti

And eventually, that soldier was next to me, answered. And we talked and we talked about his family. I asked about his children and the others joined in.

00:08:15 Stella Sabiti

Good laugh under that tree and that tree is still there at Mccarran. Sometimes when I have time when I come to Uganda, I go there and I I visit, I see it's like a shrine for me.

00:08:27 Stella Sabiti

And yeah, so that's what happened.

00:08:30 Mounira Chaieb

To to a voice or a wisdom that came from within you that told you to approach them differently. And you are such a young lady and you were married and expecting a baby on.

00:08:46 Mounira Chaieb

Where do you think this voice came from? Were there influences in your own family in your own life, in your own community, maybe of strong women who?

00:08:57 Mounira Chaieb

I have inspired you to think you know this way an approach. You know, soldiers who are ready for violence, extreme violence like this.

00:09:08 Stella Sabiti

Did ask that question I asked myself so much and I wonder one which scientists would use. I'm sure is that I was trying to protect the baby. Maybe if I was nice to the soldiers, maybe I would survive or the baby would survive.

00:09:23 Stella Sabiti

But for me it went beyond that. I it was like I understood them. And I, I mean, I work in war and and I that's what I dedicated my life to. I understand. And I know that is what they call the Stockholm.

00:09:38 Stella Sabiti

Syndrome that when you're kidnapped, abducted by people with bad intentions, eventually.

00:09:46 Stella Sabiti

You buy their story and you move to their side. You even become their spokesperson. It wasn't like that. I just understood. I saw those tears.

00:09:54 Stella Sabiti

The man.

00:09:55 Stella Sabiti

I saw and the proof was when I insisted on talking.

00:10:00 Stella Sabiti

About their families and food and children and school. Now I know what I was doing. I was mentally removing them from a very violent situation.

00:10:09 Stella Sabiti

Question because physically, when you're immediate or or intervening in a violent conflict and parties want to sit and talk about peace, you remove them from even indigenously, even traditionally, that's how it is.

00:10:24 Stella Sabiti

You don't solve the problem at the place where the violence is, you remove them, put them in a nice, secure environment.

00:10:32 Stella Sabiti

So that's what I was doing. I wasn't moving them physically. I was moving them just psychologically and mentally. And I always joke that if they'd beaten up their wives in the night or in the morning, then they would have killed me.

00:10:47 Stella Sabiti

But thank God, I think they had a good relationship with their families, with their wives and and so on. And I think I was studying social psychology, social psychology, mainly because I'm interested in the behaviour of human beings, and I was already a broadcaster. I started broadcasting.

00:11:03 Stella Sabiti

As a young schoolgirl I just love communication. I love people, I love to understand reasons behind everything we do.

00:11:11 Stella Sabiti

And I think what the surface doesn't tell even 50%, it tells very little. Most of the story is hidden behind and that's why we should open, have open communication and and learn. Be curious.

00:11:12

Mm.

00:11:26 Stella Sabiti

One another.

00:11:27 Mounira Chaieb

Absolutely. The soldiers were probably just exercising, you know, or applying instructions given to them. You know, they had no choice but.

00:11:37 Mounira Chaieb

Behave the way they did.

00:11:39 Mounira Chaieb

Would you say your exercise was referred to as soft power today and if you were to give it another name, what would that be?

00:11:47 Stella Sabiti

May I call it inner power? Because what power did I have? The soldiers you know, when I was trying to find out what I had in common with them was it was difficult. They were in uniform. I was in torn.

00:12:00 Stella Sabiti

They had guns and everything. They had all the power. I didn't. I was like the victim. If we use super language. But I realised that no, I was the one who had the power. And why? Because I discovered I have my power allowed.

00:12:16 Stella Sabiti

Also, the way my parents brought me up the schools I went to taught us about our own power, and I would call it inner power.

00:12:25 Stella Sabiti

Umm, you don't have to go and buy it. You don't have to borrow it. You don't have to travel far to get it.

00:12:31 Stella Sabiti

It's right there. You have it and it's accessible and it's limitless. So I call it inner power. But I would also, as an African Bantu, I would call it Ubuntu.

00:12:44 Stella Sabiti

For me it's the same thing. Seeing yourself in another human being, you identify yourself through others. I saw that since I was a child. I understood that.

00:12:53 Stella Sabiti

Very well.

00:12:54 Mounira Chaieb

And I guess we all have it, but we don't really practise it every day. How do you think that can be applied in conflicts today with all the military might and the technology that the aggressor has?

00:13:07 Stella Sabiti

Behind those guns and heavy weapons and missiles and so on, is human beings. Exactly those human beings to have a bit of me in them, and I have a bit of them in me.

00:13:18 Stella Sabiti

So I don't see them as strangers as horrible people. I know something is driving them to do bad things and that's why we do peace. That's why I promised myself when I saw the faces of those soldiers in 1976.

00:13:35 Stella Sabiti

That if I survived, if I didn't die, if I finished my studies, I would work with armed people. And those days there were men I would work with armed men. 'cause. I thought that many people do, especially you. You especially Uganda is very kind to refugees and so on.

00:13:52 Stella Sabiti

Very kind. So we have that reputation and I felt everybody works.

00:13:57 Stella Sabiti

Or helps those who are in need, but we forget to support those who do harm to others who cause others to suffer, that someone needs to cross the line and join them and work with them. And that's what I've been doing. And I've seen so many miracles.

00:14:12 Mounira Chaieb

And from the many conflicts in the world, you know, soldiers after the conflict is over, soldiers would return home and they are traumatised in most cases from the US soldiers who went to Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq.

00:14:28 Mounira Chaieb

Whatever to African soldiers, you know, being distributed everywhere, you know, executing the orders.

00:14:34 Mounira Chaieb

They go home, you know, seriously traumatised and no one really, you know, pays attention to this. No one is willing to to help them. Like you said, you know, they think of the victims, but they don't think of the aggressors that they themselves, you know, they have no choice but to do this. But then they come back with with a heavy load.

00:14:54 Stella Sabiti

Exactly. And when I worked in in Europe, I lived and worked in Europe many years and in my organisation we had so many European conscientious objectors.

00:15:04 Stella Sabiti

Because many young men, especially there were men at the time, we used to have space for conscientious objectors who refuse to be recruited in the readiness for war or for readiness to join their military, and the alternative would be work in social sector and so on. So my organisation used to welcome them, and I would here.

00:15:26 Stella Sabiti

Their arguments, they just didn't want. But some countries forced them, or something else attracts them.

00:15:33 Stella Sabiti

Umm, camaraderie, you know, they'll have friends there. They'll be like boys again, and it looks so attractive. It's like another family there, you know? Yeah. They are attracted to that. But inside, many of them really don't like. But they have no way out.

00:15:49 Mounira Chaieb

You speak about the power of the media, including conventional media like radio and TV and social media in peace building. Because you studied media or you study communication and you are you are always interested in the use of communication to reach.

00:16:05 Mounira Chaieb

Other people.

00:16:06 Mounira Chaieb

Did you use that in your own experience?

00:16:10 Stella Sabiti

Yeah, I started broadcasting in my.

00:16:15 Stella Sabiti

I think teens already in Uganda and when I was at the university that time we had a foreign service of Radio Uganda, which broadcasts all over the world, and I was working there as well, mainly doing continuity, announcing the time, the programmes and so on.

00:16:33 Stella Sabiti

But sometimes I would read the news and do other things while I was still a student, and eventually when I was in the Netherlands while I was doing my piece work, I was also.

00:16:42 Stella Sabiti

Working on the Dutch radio, the Netherlands radio broadcasting in English to Africa. So I used to work there because I was living there, but I would broadcast stories from my work, my peace work, and I was also convening meetings for African students.

00:16:58 Stella Sabiti

In The Hague or in Amsterdam or around, I was asked to do that by some universities. So I was doing that. But what attracted me really in media.

00:17:11 Stella Sabiti

And.

00:17:13 Stella Sabiti

Why I always talk about women? Because those days it wasn't so much like that.

00:17:20 Stella Sabiti

It's because you would see someone on TV or in the papers. There's a photograph. Clearly. It's a young man who has committed a crime. But if you showed that to the mother, the mother would say no. That's not my son.

00:17:34 Stella Sabiti

And I was wondering, why would the mother say that's not my son. And I was very curious because.

00:17:39 Stella Sabiti

A.

00:17:39 Stella Sabiti

Very naturally curious person and I realised that the mother sees that little.

00:17:45 Stella Sabiti

The little boy.

00:17:49 Stella Sabiti

And later, when the mother says that's not my child, the mother means that the world has done something to my child that I never put my child up to do things like that. So I saw the power of the media. You learn so much. And of course, coming from Uganda, there was genocide next door in Rwanda in 1994.

00:18:08 Stella Sabiti

Before the genocide, my district is close to one it's neighbouring.

00:18:12 Stella Sabiti

District I was always hearing the broadcasts in King Arunda. I understand the language. All the threats and then they would say, and you, Ugandans and through paganda, they would also threaten us. And of course, you know what happened in the end, Yugoslavia and so on.

00:18:28 Stella Sabiti

But you can use it for peace if someone can use it for negative intentions, why can't we use it for peace? So in my organisation here in Uganda before I left, OK, I've been living and coming, living and coming back.

00:18:43 Stella Sabiti

I started an organisation in 1995 in January here in Uganda Centre for conflict resolution or SICO.

00:18:52 Stella Sabiti

The Italians call it chekore. We don't mind the sicko. And we had a programme they still have on the media and peace building and we've trained hundreds of media people from around Africa.

00:19:08 Stella Sabiti

And across so whatever we do, even in my work as a policy maker at the UN or the African Union, I always make sure that media is mentioned and I've been pushing for the African Union to have a kind of its own media voice.

00:19:24 Stella Sabiti

But I get pushed back. I don't know. Yeah, but I will not give up.

00:19:28 Mounira Chaieb

The media is very powerful is the 4th power, you know, and it can play a major role in peace building in in anything positive that one is doing for society.

00:19:39 Mounira Chaieb

You worked.

00:19:40 Mounira Chaieb

Women from other countries, can you mention few examples and how did that enrich your own experience?

00:19:49 Stella Sabiti

As I said, it's many years and I've been mobile. I've worked with women all over Africa in any war zones I have been there and I've worked with.

00:19:59 Stella Sabiti

So I've worked in Liberia in the early 2000s and during the time of Charles Taylor, I mean, there is still controversy about all that. But the women were very, very strong.

00:20:10 Stella Sabiti

And we know that they got also the underwater for peace. So I was working there alongside those women women in Colombia. My goodness, I was in Colombia in 2004.

00:20:25 Stella Sabiti

I don't know how many African women had ever gone to Colombia during those turbulent years, but I was there and it was amazing working with them, the government and also the FAQ rebels trying to see what kind of peace we're back in 2004.

00:20:42 Stella Sabiti

And during one coffee break or lunch break, someone came to me and said, Stella, there is a group of women who would like to speak with you. And I said, but I don't know any women in Colombia, but I went anyway. And it was a collection of Afro Colombians.

00:20:57 Stella Sabiti

I didn't know at the time. Yeah, there were many and they told me they were Bantu. I said, excuse me.

00:21:04 Stella Sabiti

And they said they told me about their suffering and they told me all the strength they have and their programmes and they wanted to hear from me.

00:21:13 Stella Sabiti

In Ecuador also I was right there. The other side of Ecuador and the women were saying we here in the media about African women. They are so strong. Please help us. And we spent like a great one month there with those.

00:21:30 Stella Sabiti

In the Asia Pacific, gosh, I've worked with women from the tiniest islands. You can't even locate on the map. And those women are so strong. Always. It seems like the women work for peace because they are men, their husbands, their sons and so on.

00:21:47 Stella Sabiti

Are taken to do bad things and the women, instead of sitting and crying, they want to do the opposite. They want to reach out to change the whole political situation, which has forced their men for to be taken.

00:22:00 Stella Sabiti

Those batteries.

00:22:01 Stella Sabiti

Things. So I'm from Yugoslavia. Then I was living in the Netherlands. The women used to mobilise and I would be part of them. I've always liked this mobilising. Wherever whoever it is, I'm there and.

00:22:16 Stella Sabiti

I would learn so much, get enriched and I would feel when I'm actually working on the right path because what I'm doing, other women who don't share that much with me, not same culture, not same language, not same religion many times.

00:22:30 Stella Sabiti

But we are the same. We want the same things that we're doing it the same way.

00:22:34 Mounira Chaieb

And you do sound like a mobilizer and look back. What lessons emerged from your leadership journey, would you say?

00:22:42 Stella Sabiti

I think that one is born a leader whether they know it or not. Since I was a little girl in school, I was always forced to be the leader of the class and I was such a shy girl and they would push me. No, you have to. And if there was an issue, standard will speak on our behalf.

00:23:00 Stella Sabiti

So I got used.

00:23:00 Stella Sabiti

To that, they saw something in me, which I didn't I just liked.

00:23:05 Stella Sabiti

They to observe and be curious, and I never wanted to be at the forefront, but throughout my life I've been doing that. Even at the AU at Uni I've been a leader in the villages at whatever level, and I mean, look at the soldiers came to my door out of so many million. I mean hundreds of doors when they come to my room.

00:23:27 Stella Sabiti

Any prominent position I do on location, I just don't know those things happen but some people.

00:23:34 Stella Sabiti

Do realise that they are leaders, they have the leadership skills and they know how to use them. Others are reluctant leaders like me at the beginning and eventually it is like the only way and it's so enriching in that you're sharing whatever you have with others. It's about sharing.

00:23:52 Stella Sabiti

The skills you have, the vision you have and then in doing that you discover the others also have almost the same and then you work together, you work together.

00:24:03 Stella Sabiti

Leadership is collective leadership.

00:24:04 Stella Sabiti

Really.

00:24:05 Mounira Chaieb

And I think that experience with the soldiers, you know, really marked you because at such a young age, anyone who is confronted with a situation like that would go into the mode of fight or flight. You know, the fear and the survival instinct will take over. But for you, you just switched, you just, you know.

00:24:26 Mounira Chaieb

Over and you know you are.

00:24:29 Mounira Chaieb

Understood where they came from. And yeah, of course. The concern for your baby was your main motivation to do so. But then you were able to just see them as victims themselves. And you persisted in asking them the same question. What did your wife cook for you last night?

00:24:48 Mounira Chaieb

And you know, you managed to come this far. Thank you so much.

00:24:52 Mounira Chaieb

Stella Sabiti, a Ugandan peace and security practitioner and policy maker.