

File name: UKLSE_CT1_SD01_001_001_0011_0001.wav

Audio quality: Great

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (ia + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** = (ph + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode).

Moderator: It's Monday 9 December and I'm with Naana Otoo-Oyortey, the Executive Director of FORWARD, the Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development. FORWARD is the leading African women's rights organisation in the UK, working to end violence against women and girls. Naana is sharing her experience working in the women's voluntary and community sector and campaigning for women's rights for the Sisters Doing it for Themselves archive. Naana, if you could begin by sharing with us what influenced you to work for women's rights and in the women's sector?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think what influenced me was when I did my studies in the university and I went to school in Ghana, and I've always been a fighter for rights, primarily because of my home situation and I think having gone to university and met a group of friends, we started talking about women's issues at a time when gender issues were not even sexy, that was early 1977. That's when I realised that it was a passion of mine to continue to work on women's issues, and that's how I got into the sector, through my studies and immediately after my studies I actually got a call from a lady who was looking for a counterpart to work on women's issues in Northern Ghana. That's how I started working with women in agriculture then I went on to work with women in entrepreneurship, particularly looking at women who were in rural areas and who didn't have access to any form of resources, particularly access to banks and micro-credit. So that's how I really started and a lot of the work involved not just looking at micro-credit but also looking at women's personal lives and the need to build women's confidence and I always remember one story of a woman who, when she was asked what had been the greatest benefit of the project and for her it was the fact that she could walk into a bank and when she saw the police officer in front of the bank, she could walk past him confidently and it just struck me. I mean, some of these basic things that you take for granted, and this is something that was a huge barrier for a lot of rural women in accessing basic banking facilities. So, it really made me think much more about women's rights and women's voices and the need to build women's capacity but when I did my masters in Sussex University, I then went into the whole area of sexual reproductive health and I realised that that was an issue that had been around me for a long time but I had not necessarily looked into it.

So, my long essay at the time was really around sexual reproductive health and rights and that opened up whole conversations around sexual reproductive health, violence against women and girls and the need to really work towards this and I think there was a conference in Brighton in 1996 or 1997 on violence against women and girls and it was a huge conference, I do remember that the whole place was buzzing. And I heard about female genital mutilation

and I heard the woman talking about her story, experience and she was, at the time, a volunteer with Forward and that really struck a huge chord to me and so it's like, 'I come from Ghana, I've never experienced FGM.' I'd worked in Northern Ghana and I hadn't come across anybody who had had FGM but clearly I was working in an area where it was happening. And considering that I wasn't from that ethnic community, it meant that I was safe from FGM and I always told myself that it could have been me, I could have been born in Northern Ghana, I could have gone through FGM and I really would have wanted somebody to speak on my behalf or to support or to advocate for this to end. I think that really made me put myself in the shoes of those who've gone through FGM and it really made me think about not really being a bystander but to be actively involved. So, in my organisation at the time I started working with international Planned Parenthood Federation and I really started to talk about this issue, find out how we could really work towards addressing this issue in a much more strategic way. So, that really pushed me into this work on women's rights within the UK and it wasn't just women in the UK but it was, for me, women on the global south and the global north as well because I was working at an international organisation. So, it gave me exposure to a number of countries, a number of issues and that really pushed me into this arena of women's rights.

Moderator: When you were working in northern Ghana with micro-credits, were you working for NGOs?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: Yes, I think I've only worked once for a government organisation and I think-, and even that I was directly working with women. With the NGO it was a women's credit organisation, it had just been established at the time and that's when I got the opportunity to work as a training coordinator. So, I also love training so it's really part of my work around training people to get confidence but also training people to understand the issues and to be able to work much more effectively. So, that's been how I was ushered into the work.

Moderator: You've talked about what influenced your decision. Did the Women's First Refuge in the UK have any impact on your decision making?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I mean, the reality is I came to the UK long after the Women's Refuge was first set up and I do recognise the added value of a women's refuge and the whole structure of support and provisioning of care for women. Primarily because when I worked in sexual reproductive health, and this was in, I started in 1996, there was very little discussion on gender-based violence. And I recall the work started in the western hemisphere, actually Venezuela, the Family Planning Association of Venezuela started to really ask questions within the consultation and they realised that women were desperate to talk about the experiences of intimate partner abuse. The doctors and the providers were not ready and so the consultant who was sitting in the consulting room observing basically came to the conclusion that there was a huge problem and everybody was ignoring the problem, primarily because they didn't have the skills and so these women would have nowhere to go. When they came to the clinics nobody was also listening to them and that really started the work on tackling gender based violence and really working with professionals, the clinicians, but also working with the receptionists and everybody. So it was a whole system's approach. And the other part of it was identifying refuges within the country where women could be referred to.

So, for me, that is where access to a refuge should be part of the package of care and support. Because it's not everybody who can safely go home and there are a lot of women who go home and end up dead. So, I think the refuge really provides that added haven for women to be able to access some kind of support and start to rebuild their lives. So yes, this is how it resonates with me, by UK starting to put up the first refuge, it really meant that women could now start to have that needed support.

Moderator: Thank you. Who inspired you and who inspires you now?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: That's a big, big question. I always say that the person who inspired me has always been my mother. This was also because my mother wasn't that educated but she was very clear about what she didn't want in her married life. And I recall that, in conversations with her, by the time I realised that my Mum had had three marriages and she says she walked out of her first marriage, which was an arranged marriage. The second one too was really arranged because her brother introduced her to my father and the third was a love (TC 10.00) marriage. And so, right from the beginning it was like, I was very clear that if you go into a relationship and it doesn't work you can walk out. And that confidence that my Mum had in her life and to be independent and to really also reach out to people, and I never saw my Mum and my step-father having a bad word with each other, and I thought that was such a good role model. And although I'd never stayed with my mother, I stayed mostly with my father and step-mothers, I noticed that my father was violent to some of my step-mothers and I think that made me see the difference in a woman who is confident and a woman who is determined to make a difference in the lives of others. So, I think that really was why my Mum has always been my role model. I also have other role models and I think in terms of other women who have been role models for me, I always think about Winnie Mandela and I just think that clearly she was so much involved in the apartheid movement and that, if Winnie hadn't been there, South Africa could never have gained that independence and it's always interesting how such strong women are almost vilified at the end. I think that, for me, was also the challenge but I think it's important for women to have that kind of leadership and really fight for women's rights and I think that's something that I see also in my Mum, she died fifteen years ago, and also in Winnie Mandela. Bless her, she's also died.

Moderator: How would you describe leadership?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think, for me, leadership is-, and I always tell-, because we do leadership training for young women, and I always say that we can all be leaders, nobody is born a leader. When you're asked that question, 'Who is your role model?' or, 'Who do you see as your role model?' people also talk about their mothers and they always say their mothers were all so shy or that kind of thing but they definitely saw their mothers as role models. So, for me, it's about, leadership involves working towards a particular goal with people and enabling people to make decisions or take them to a particular journey. And that's how I see a leader in terms of-, and a leader can be in any walk of life. A small task would need leadership role, a huge task would need a leadership role. So, yes, for me, a leader is about having the capacity and the ability to engage people to meet a particular goal that's been set.

Moderator: Can you give an example of your leadership in action?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: That's interesting. I think my leadership has always been having come to FORWARD as the Executive Director. I actually was also on the board for about eight years before I became the Executive Director, so I was very much aware of my role in helping to set the direction and helping to set goals, helping to steer the organisational development and my role at FORWARD, I've always seen it as a collaborative role in helping others, because I wasn't the only one who made decisions but working together with the team to be able to develop our programme areas in supporting women and girls who had been affected by female genital mutilation but also, working with building capacity of others who have come along. I think what I've been really excited about has been the work to build capacity of young people who have come through our organisations. And I've seen them come in as interns or volunteers who either want to do work in the area or want to get into the sector and I've seen quite a lot of them come through and really gone up to a number of organisations and gone to places. And, for me, that is the role of leader, to be able to help people to flourish and help people to sort of gain their voice and regain their vision in life and to sort of move and thrive.

Moderator: Does any particular intern come to mind? Could you describe one in particular and their journey?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think, for me, the most interesting, I've got a few but I will talk about two of them. Angela is one who came in as an intern. Primarily she contacted us because she was doing her first degree and had come across FGM and was interested in doing work in her university to raise awareness. So, we had a young people speak out programme where we recruited young people to take part in a youth advocates programme and she applied for it, and when she applied she was given a small sub-grant as part of the training, it was residential training, and then she was given a small grant to undertake an intervention-, she was in Essex University at the time and when she did her intervention it actually gained so much interest in the university that she requested to repeat to the year after. And when she finished her degree, she contacted us to see whether she could work there as an intern. So, Angela came in as an intern, but she came in just at the time that we had started the young women's leadership programme, which is called TuWezeshe. So, Angela came in as an intern and within two years she'd gone from intern to a programme assistant to a programme officer who is leading the leadership programme. And today she's gone off to work with the UN and she's working with the UN volunteers in Nigeria. And it's so exciting to see and I remember when she was leaving, she was crying and she was so upset but she said, you know, again I mean, it was something that we had given her the confidence and Angela was leading the leadership training programme, she'd been so instrumental in helping to set up a young women's hub and that, for me, was like seeing her Mum.

Her Mum sent us a letter to say thank you, she gave us presents when Angela left and that was like, oh I was so excited that I'd helped her through her journey and she continues to be in touch almost every other week, she's on WhatsApp with us, you know, 'Naana, this is what's happening. I've met another woman who reminds me so much of you and she gives me so many opportunities.' And it was the opportunities that we gave Angela, and we pushed her and pushed her, but we gave her the support to grow and to thrive and I think that was a good

example. The other one was also another young woman we worked with, Saria. And Saria also came in as an intern with the young women's programme. And after six months, normally the internship was six months, and she said no she wanted to stay on for another six months. So, we agreed for her to stay on another six months. And then within that period the youth programme officer left because she'd got an opportunity to go to Brazil to do an internship programme, so we asked Saria to come on board as a programme assistant. And, from then on, she went on to lead the youth programme, and became the youth programme coordinator for about five years, until she decided she wanted to go and do her masters, and that's when she left the organisation, but I think there were issues with her going to her masters and she then asked to do-, and then I recommended her actually to do some work with Rosa. And that's when she was taken on to work with Rosa as part of the tackling FGM initiative. Today, she's working as a programme manager in Oldham, working on violence against women and girls. And at each stage, we have to be writing references for these girls and it's really exciting. So, that's my journey and an example of two young women that we have brought up, and we still continue to stay in touch.

Moderator: How or do you think women's leadership is different from men's?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I mean, I think women's experiences are different in terms of, I would say the intersectional challenges that women face. One, because women's leadership is (TC 20.00) within a wider patriarchal system where women's voices and women's leadership is not as recognised because of the fact that the patriarchal system really entrenches men's power as the most important and women are not necessarily seen in the same status as men and so there is discrimination in terms of access to leadership roles, there's more competition within-, and I think because of women's general experience of discrimination, gender inequality, it often means that I'd see that particularly in the women's sector, there is more of a focus on women's specific needs, and I always think about, is the Caroline Moser issue about strategic gender needs as well as the practical, so there are the practical issues and then there is the strategic in order to address women's particular needs. And for me it's also about seeing the arenas where women are more likely to want to work in. So, with the women's sector we have seen that the focus is primarily on discrimination, abuse of women's rights and to get women's voices and address violation of women's rights and issues around discrimination, tackling violence against women in particular, but also looking at women's sisterhood and that then means for women we have particular issues and interests that are very different for men. And these issues are often not recognised by men.

And so, the need for women's-, and I would say that very often women's leadership is very much linked to a, kind of, feminist approach which is really about addressing discrimination, equality of opportunity, equality of access and those kind of related things that really enable women to have the agency to make decisions in their lives and to be able to thrive in their lives and in their relationships. So, it's quite different from men's, where it's actually more around competition and very much around getting one person's voice heard over another. And so, I tend to see those as different but again you find a lot of women who would have those kinds of entrenched patriarchal attributes as well, in terms of the leadership role. I do recall in one of our leadership trainings where we did a case study on an organisation in particular, and it was supposed to be a women's feminist organisation but the attributes were so similar to male dominated patriarchal systems and a lot of the young women said, 'Oh I

can see my organisation in that.' So, I do know that it's not every women's organisation that's a feminist organisation. So, we need to also differentiate that.

Moderator: You talked earlier about practical and strategic issues. Can you expand on that? What you meant by it.

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I mean, for me, the practical is issues, or what are the practical things that need to be done to enable women to thrive. So, access to childcare is one basic thing. You know, if in an organisation women don't have access to adequate childcare, you definitely cannot contribute as effectively, so flexible working hours, all those practical things that you really need to, sort of, ensure that you put in place for women to be able to work, and to get women able to give off their time and to take holidays when it's school holidays and those kinds of things. So, in an organisation you have to make that work for women. At the same time, you need to sort of think about the strategic which is about enabling women to have the voice, to have opportunity to build their agency, to build a movement, to link up with other women and to create that space for women to develop. So, I think for me those are the kinds of differences I'm seeing in terms of the practical things that would support women to work better vis a vis the strategic ones that enable women to link up with other women's organisations, partnership working and all those kinds of things that would enable women's organisations to be much stronger, because you do need these kinds of building solidarity. And one of the things that we have increasingly been seeing in our organisation that's also very, very important in terms of the practical needs are the issue of self-care. And I think, increasingly, we're seeing that in the sector. And it's something that we've constantly had to bring into our work and to ensure that women's needs are addressed in that issues of burn out and all those kinds of things and giving them opportunities to get that rejuvenation of their energy.

Moderator: You've touched on this, what motivates you as a leader and how have you developed your leadership style?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I mean, what really motivates me is that I can be part of change and to see some of the examples or the people we've worked with or the organisations we have worked with, thriving and really going on to make a change in other people's lives and, I always tell myself, you can't be everywhere but you can influence and shape other people then I think the ability to give off support and enable and create opportunities for others to make a difference is really, really amazing and the thing that really gets me really excited. You go somewhere and you see maybe the young people that you've worked with who've gone off to do other things and they're so excited to see you and to tell you their successes and to tell you how that has changed their lives, and also you see the organisations we've worked with. And I always mention an organisation in particular, in Bristol, Refugee Women of Bristol, and when we started working with them, about ten years ago, it was very much like they were very much not interested in these women's issues, they were just doing practical things for women. Refugee women you need to have to know how to fill in your forms, how to access benefits etc, but when it came to really tackling issues around their lives and making decisions around violence and FGM and related things, they were really not touching on those kinds of things. And we started with a conversation around whether FGM

was an issue in Bristol, and they said, 'No, it's not an issue.' So, I said, 'Let's do research,' and so we actually gave them skills to do participatory research.

We trained and recruited the community women, trained them as researchers and worked with them over three months to conduct the participatory research, and then afterwards, as that part of that research we create a platform to engage community stakeholders but also policy makers around the issues and that was a turning point for all of them and they all said, 'Look, we didn't realise this was an issue. We never knew, because we're not talking about these issues.' And they all came from communities where, yes, they'd been affected by FGM but it's like, 'it's happened. So what? It's part of my life.' But now, they had seen that they needed to take action. So, this was something that in the last ten years has transformed the organisation and Refugee Women have now become a very, very critical organisation in Bristol working with refugees, taking on more strategic issues against violence against women and girls, looking at broader issues that affect women. But also engaging with policy makers, so they are now part of the delivery group on FGM, they have opportunities to speak and their income has grown, I mean this is also because of the partnership we've had with them over the last ten years. So, these are the things that really motivate you when you see you are actually influencing and shaping the lives of women. Early October, as part of the programme we do a lot of partnership work with them and we went to a programme in Madrid and six of the women decided to get a, sort of, a flat and spend a holiday in Madrid. They took a few days after their training. I was so excited but later on I said, 'Hang on, I hope you people are not going to make your husbands feel that we have actually started you on this journey and we're going to be in trouble and can't go to Bristol.' They said, 'No, we are okay now.'

(TC 30.00) To think that these Muslim women, who were really really excited about taking initiatives and doing things by themselves. I was really impressed. So, those are some of the things that really motivate me. Really seeing that the little seeds that you're sowing is really making a change and it makes you feel excited. At FORWARD, we do celebrate a lot in my organisation. We celebrate the little games, birthdays and we bring cakes and eat. If somebody is leaving we bring cakes and eat. Somebody brings flowers and things so, it really is to keep us all happy. This is because the issues we deal with are huge and sometimes they can be really really depressing. If you don't really hook onto something to keep you motivated, you really are always going to go home very saddened. I think that's why we keep ourselves motivated in this way.

Moderator: How have you developed your leadership style over the years that you've worked?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I like to learn a lot and I remember when I came to Forward, I didn't really know much about finance and I had to learn how to. I was saying that if you need to be a leader, you should understand the things that you're going to work with and one is finance. The other is, management styles and management skills and to know how to work with people to support people. To really understand organisational systems, organisational processes so, those basic organisational processes I had to sort of learn. In terms of my personal skills, I've actually built a lot in terms of public speaking, understanding how to

present your case, advocacy and learning how build stronger partnerships and what it really means to develop partnerships. It's about really getting evidence-base around some of these things. One of the things I've been really interested in too, has been participatory research. That in itself is about creating the evidence with the people that you're working with, to be able to understand. So, I've come from that angle of participation and getting people to participate and I do it in different ways in the organisation. That's how I've learnt to build my leadership skills.

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

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I always say that initially our work had been at FORWARD on tackling female genital mutilation because, that was an issue that nobody was really looking at. So, it was very much how do we open the conversations, how do we engage women and how do we engage young people, but increasingly we have found there were links between UK and countries of origin. There were also links in Europe and so the need for us was to build partnerships with others because we couldn't do it alone. We were also increasingly seeing that other organisations were starting on the issue so it was about us sharing our lessons with them and some of them too, it was about us initiating. I do remember when we had to lobby for funding, for tackling violence, more funding for FGM work, particularly community based work because there wasn't that kind of strategic focus. The government was really interested in provision of services, safeguarding but not necessarily community engagement. We were clear that tackling these issues were social norms, you had to work with communities. So, I think that's where we came from working with others in the sector and contributing our knowledge to the wider violence against women and girls sector. What also transpired quite easily or at a very early stage was the fact that we're seeing that people were working in siloes so if there was work on domestic violence, it didn't really overlap with work on forced marriage, it didn't overlap with work on FGM.

For us we came from the angle that we're seeing overlaps because a women who goes through FGM would almost always sometimes marry early, she would also be affected by domestic violence. We're seeing a number of community girls talking about rape and nobody was really looking at that. We have in the last five years really had to look at the notable links and us, as an organisation, we have very early on in our development or in our work started to also do international development work. So, whilst we engage in the sector in the UK, we also engage in partners and that gave us a rich understanding of some of the issues. Particularly, the work in European level. We were co-founders of the End FGM European Network and we were quite clear about the fact that our communities were quite similar in other parts of Europe and it really made more sense to collaborate and get to do the things that others were doing, learning from them but also sharing our learning with them. So, that's how we work with the sector and right from the beginning, FORWARD, as a lead organisation, also contributed a part to existing women's sector. We were part of the Women's Health and Equality Consortium, which was also lead by consultant with us, seven organisations at that time, which came together to inform and shape decisions about women's rights for the Department of Health.

We have been part other spaces, including, the Ascent project, where we've come from a sector that's really dealing with not only women affected by FGM but also with refugee,

migrant women etc, perspective. So, that meant we really started to engage with the sector, we've been part of the MOPAC initiative also on tackling violence against women and girls and bringing the element of training and really engaging. So, I think that's how we've really linked up with the sector and it has then meant that the sector is becoming much more robust and trying to sort of bring in other voices and other issues because violence against women is a huge challenge.

Moderator: Has there been any impact on you personally, on a personal level?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: Impact in what way?

Moderator: Has it affected your life in anyway, your life outside your work environment?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: To be honest, my kids always told me that I never relax and it's because for me, I enjoy my work and so I will work throughout and come home and still continue to work. Luckily, I have got a good husband who knows how to cook well so I really don't have to cook much at home. He has been unwell for the last two years so really being at home now he enjoys cooking and it means that I can still travel and do a lot of my gallivanting and doing work, without having to cook and the kids are grown now. So, I think you do need to have a very supportive environment, supportive system to be able to work in this sector, particularly in a leadership role. If you have kids and things and I think I also had a family that were also very supportive. In fact my kids have all been very very supportive of the work and have helped along the way so that's been the issue. Some people have had backlash in terms of their work and I haven't had that backlash. Primarily because I tend to work a lot with everybody and I always feel that everybody has something to offer. So, I think that's what has really made me quite a crucial connector in the system and I haven't really seen that kind of backlash, in terms of my personal life. I definitely would love to do other things that I love doing. I love dressmaking and I've never had time to do it, unless I've had to stitch a few things here and there but those type of things I love.

I've got grandkids now so I do have to spend some time with them so sometimes I'll close work and go and spend the night and stay over with my daughter and then go back to work in the morning. So, I do a lot of things and I try to do different things in between but I think increasingly, I'm seeing that it's a huge challenge trying to do succession planning and I think that's where I'm becoming really concerned because we've seen the young people come in but they don't really stay long. They come in and go. So, you really don't build them to really say, hey it's time to hand over and I think that's where the challenge is going to be within the women's sector, in terms of handing over and succession planning.

Moderator: (TC 40.00) I know you have touched on this, what are the issues that are dear to your heart? You've spoken about FGM and how do you think you've influenced them?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: Also, child marriage. Child marriage has been an issue that has been very very dear to my heart. Primarily because when I started working with family planning, I saw it coming. This is a huge issue. I mean I did a few publications around child marriage and was really pushing for my organisation to take on. We became part of a network called

'The Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls', I think in the late 90s. That was what actually helped initiate work on forced marriage within the UK. I think I was really excited. Particularly, the forced marriage unit came out of those conversations and discussions where they did some research. It was sad that we were not able to take this to a global level. Primarily because the organisations that had all come together to discuss the work on child marriage at the time, we all were passionate within our own individual organisations and we didn't have the organisational back up, in terms of really wanting to take it forward. So, as people left organisations, there wasn't much interest. Until, I think maybe ten, eight years ago, when the Girls Not Brides came to really now take it up as a key area of concern and it came to a global level. In terms of our work with the The Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, I'm really clear that, that was also one of the earlier work that really sparked on the interest. We even had UNICEF take up one of our research and really take on and do a much more in depth study on child marriage.

We were very instrumental even in naming it a child marriage. Initially, it was early marriage and then we took on the term child marriage because nobody should be married before they are eighteen. So, yes, that was one of my biggest passion. I mean, child marriage, because as I just said, there's no way we should continue letting girls marry. For me, that's also a big cause of all the challenges around lack of agencies, lack of opportunities for girls but also domestic violence and things. We're seeing it in a lot of the communities that we're working in, particularly in Africa. You go through FGM and by twelve years you're already married, by twenty years you've had about five children, you're already divorced or moved to about three or four men. That was a challenge for me and repeatedly, we are seeing the impact on girls. So, child marriage leads to early childbearing so that's something that really really bothers me.

Moderator: How have you influenced change in the area of child marriage?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think the influence in change has been about the studies we've done. We've done quite a few consultations which really started the conversations around child marriage. I can talk about what we did in the UK, where we worked with the Home Office at the time when they started the research based on the work we done on child marriage at the time but also the work we've done in Tanzania has been instrumental. We started a Tanzania project on child marriage and today child marriage has become a key discussion issue in Tanzania. The legal issue has still been challenging but in the last two years, they've challenged the government on it. There's been a network that has been really working in Tanzania. There's been organisations that are doing work on child marriage and that is really for me, a huge progress in that area and that really makes me quite excited about the future and tackling some of these issues.

Moderator: How has FORWARD and the women's sector as a whole influenced and changed women's structural positions in the UK?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: One of the things that I really get excited about FORWARD's work has been our nurturing role. Our nurturing role in enabling campaigners to really come up, and I do remember having the conversation with Leyla Hussein when Cosmopolitan contacted me about getting somebody to talk about FGM and I contacted Leyla and I said,

'Leyla, this is an opportunity for you if you're interested,' and that, you know, interview she did really pushed her in the media and really pushed her to become one of the first campaigners to really start publicly talking about themselves and their experiences, and it was the same for, you know, the establishment of the specialist services on FGM in the UK. Forward was instrumental in pushing for the establishment of these services because these services, at the time, the existing hospitals were not providing the care that women needed, and so, by pushing and working with Harry Gordon at the time to establish the service, it then became the blueprint for other specialist services to be established. We were instrumental in the policy and development of the first legislation on FGM, and subsequently the legislation in 2003, even the launch of the legislation was actually done in our office, so in terms of some of these structural things around getting policies in place we were very much at the forefront. We also supported, significantly, the 2004 Girls Summit, which was led by David Cameron at the time, and we then introduced, 2014 I think, sorry, 2014, a number of policies which changed the landscape of work on FGM. Unfortunately, I mean, we see too that there's been a backlash as a result of, you know, too much policies, which has then meant that, you know, communities have been, sort of, marginalised and discriminated against.

But I think some of the things that we have been really critical in shaping in terms of strategy has also been around recognising the role of community engagement. That is something that's taking much longer, but in places like Bristol it's been very clear, the role of community engagement in reaching communities who are affected. And we're getting more and more voices speaking out. Some of the structural things that I think we've also been effective in doing has been more at the European level, in terms of working with the End FGM European network, I was, like, the first president of the network for about four years, so we did a lot of lobbying with the European Parliament, with the Council of Europe in developing policies around FGM, but also on forced marriage and child marriage, so that, for me, was instrumental, we were involved in the conversations around the Istanbul Convention as a network, and that for me was also quite instrumental in the sense that it resulted in funding of organisations, increased funding in work at the European level towards work on FGM, towards working with migrant women affected by FGM, and that really was an opportunity to really see that, without funding, you know, organisations could not be supported, that that for me were some of the, you know, structural things that had been. What has started also, but I would have wanted it to, sort of, strengthen, was the whole element of engaging statutory professionals. So in the issue of training we were quite instrumental in training, particularly social workers, working with midwives and the nurses, and working with police and training the police on issues around FGM. In the last four (TC 50.00) years I think there's been a shift, where the police themselves have now been doing the training themselves, and there's been a stronger push on, I would say, a stronger element of prosecution and safeguarding, which has really meant that there's been very limited focus on community engagement.

Moderator: What do you think are the greatest achievements of Women's Collective Action, and what still needs to be done?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think the greatest achievement has been the push towards tackling discrimination against women at different fronts, discrimination in terms of equal pay related matters, maternity rights, getting women to, you know, issues around domestic violence, and I think one of the things I was really excited about, especially in tackling domestic violence,

was when they started asking questions in maternity hospitals around women affected by domestic violence, I thought that was a real big shift. I'm not really sure the impact of it today but at least these processes have started and it opens up conversations around women and identifying women. I think that growth in women's refuges has been really, really huge. My challenge has also been the fact that there's still a lot of discrimination around, particularly, women with no recourse to public funds and those are the ones that are continuously being a huge barrier, but the push for comprehensive sexuality education, tackling relationship issues in schools, is a big plus for some of us. We've got, like, the End Violence Against Women Coalition that has been really, really instrumental in some of these issues of pushing for attention on some of these things, including the, I'm not sure where we're going with that, the Domestic Violence Bill, and I thought that was something that was going to be passed but it seems that it's now falling through the cracks and we hope that somebody picks it up in the next parliament. The other big issue for me is about women's rights being also instrumental in the UK, primarily because, you know the whole Beijing Platform for Action and the fact that governments had to, sort of, report to CSW and they had to also report in terms of the monitoring standards around CEDAW, has also meant that there's been push by the government too.

And this is all part of the work of the Women's Collective voices, and I know WRC was really, really at the forefront of pushing on some of these reporting, the Shadow Report and things, which really provide, I would say, kind of, accountability tools for the government to, sort of, really push on these things about women's rights and women's voices. So yes, access to health services, you know, I think even abortion rights and things have been something that women's voices have made possible. But without collective voices and women, sort of, collaborating and working together, I think this would have been really, really challenging and linking with policy makers. For me at the international level there's also the push for the Sustainable Development Goals, which have become part of the push for, you know, getting wider access to women's issues, and I think Goal 5 is really, really strategic, which is, you know, the Goal 5 on gender equality and empowerment of all women, and the fact that it applies to all countries then means that we really also have a strong push to push for women, women's representation in parliament, although I think that that issue is really going to be rolled back with so many, about 120, women parliamentarians have really, really resigned and, you know, decided not to go into parliament. Women's Voices in Parliament has been so, so instrumental, and pushing for Women's Voices in Parliament has also been quite a strategic entry point for pushing women's agenda but I'm not sure where we're going now. We are in challenging times now, yes.

Moderator: And, finally, what are your thoughts on the future for women's rights?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: My challenge in terms of the future for women's rights is there is this issue, particularly with the young women, who have taken everything for granted and not really seen that so many things that they're taking for granted now, people had to fight for, and really not wanting to be part of that, I think, movement is frightening. The whole challenges for me around women's participation in decision making processes, particularly in policy making, is something that I'm quite concerned about, we're having a backlash, gender equality gains are being ruled back in a number of countries, and that is really frightening. I'm even shocked about this whole push for, you know, unisex toilets and that kind of thing

and I went to this programme and it was, like, unisex toilets and I just said, 'That is really challenging'. There is, you know, the whole conversations around, I would say, women's rights, trans and all those kind of things, is also really areas that really need to, sort of, really, really engage in and discuss and that seems not to be the situation and I just worry about the fact that the women's sector has really taken on change without having an equal men's sector talking about these issues around empowerment and equality. And I'm seeing it more and more in the sense that domestic violence is not reducing, sexual violence isn't reducing, and I just, over and over, wonder how we can really make men more engaged in leading change, rather than having women to always take the responsibility of leading change because we can only do so much and what needs to be done is to really address the social norms, and these social norms would need to be addressed equally by men. And I think for me that agenda of who's doing that, and yes, we cannot carry everything, but at the same time we need to recognise that we can only do so much in terms of, you know, tackling the issues, we have to, sort of, get men's voices on board. And that's something that the women's sector has to, I mean it's not for us to really take up everything but, you know, it's not enough just picking people up, going to refuges, we have to, sort of, look at how do we prevent, how does prevention become -, or what are effective ways of looking at prevention. So those are my key issues.

Moderator: Is there anything else that you would like to say that you haven't?

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: I think, in terms of what's still there that needs to be done, I think for us in the UK and being a woman from, you know, a BME community, I think we still have a lot to do around bringing in BME women's voices, strengthening leadership within BME organisations, but also tackling the realities that are facing BME young people growing here in terms of race, identity, gender and all these kind of things, and that for me I'm increasingly seeing a lot of issues around mental health which are coming out of all these challenges, and failure to, you know, have resilience among (TC 01.00.00) young people and that really is something that is becoming, increasingly, a challenging problem that has to be addressed. And I don't know whether it's been addressed, it's not been addressed enough, clearly, and there is an issue of, you know, mental health is coming up on the agenda, there's conversations around, but the intersecting root causes are still not being addressed. And it's just, like, 'Yes, we are picking up', it's not just picking up the pieces, we do need to, sort of, look at what is it that is making young women feel so uncomfortable about their bodies, feel so much vulnerable within their communities, and feel unable to, sort of, exercise agency and access and thrive. You know, yes, there are some who are thriving but there are also a lot that are really, really left behind and I think we do need to, sort of, take this up as a huge, huge issue, otherwise we are going to go back to this, you know, somehow, us, when we're coming I always feel, I don't know whether there's an inbuilt thing but we have quite a bit of resilience, but these young people don't, and that is really, really challenging. So that's something that I really feel that it's some of the things that still really, really need to, sort of, be addressed, so issues around mental health of women, young women's leadership, discussing the whole intersectionalities around, you know, feminism, what it really means to be a black woman and the issues around parallel agendas but to, sort of, really make sure that our agendas really work together, I think that is something that has to be, sort of addressed.

Moderator: Thank you, thank you very much.

Naana Otoo-Oyortey: You're welcome.