



Episode 11: Yumi Lee

Transcript

00:00:02,180 --> 00:00:21,919 [Yumi Lee]

We'll have reached the tipping point where the culture of abuse is just not tolerated, it's collectively rejected, and where our human rights are not aspirational, but it's automatic.

00:00:21,980 --> 00:00:54,540 [Female Voiceover]

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00:00:54,540 --> 00:01:09,720 [Micaela Cronin]

Today, I'm really delighted to welcome a guest whose decades of tireless advocacy is helping to shape the path towards the future that we are talking about in this podcast. Yumi Lee, thanks so much for joining me today for this conversation about the future.

00:01:09,720 --> 00:01:16,600 [Yumi Lee]

I am absolutely honoured to be part of your podcast and delighted to be here, Micaela.

00:01:16,600 --> 00:02:59,660 [Micaela Cronin]

Thank you, Yumi. First of all, I want to start by acknowledging that today I'm on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, where I'm very privileged to live, and to pay my deep respects to their elders past and present, for the care of these lands and for their incredible ongoing generosity and wisdom. My commitment is to work and live as an ally in this role and always. Now, Yumi, I just wanna take a moment to introduce you and all of the incredible work that you have been doing for many decades. Yumi Lee is currently the CEO of the Older Women's Network, New South Wales, where she advocates for the rights and well-being of older women, amplifying voices that are too often overlooked. And Yumi is often the sole voice in the room, in many rooms that I have been in, speaking up and reminding us that we need to be considering older women and their rights. Yumi is a long-standing peace and women's rights activist, and she brings a lifetime of experience in confronting gender-based violence and working towards social justice. Her work has taken her across continents and causes, from advocating for disarmament, community organizing, working in fundraising and communications, to being an entrepreneur. Yumi has always had a focus on supporting those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged, and has brought to that a belief that our society will be richer when they are engaged in our work. Whether it's pushing for structural change in Australia or raising awareness for issues that concern older women, such as gender-based violence, Yumi is driven by a deep commitment to building a more just and safe society for all. Yumi, thank you so much for joining us today.

00:02:59,660 --> 00:03:01,280 [Yumi Lee]

A pleasure, Micaela.

00:03:01,280 --> 00:03:10,220 [Micaela Cronin]

So, my first question to you is to tell us a bit about what motivates you to strive for a different and better future, Yumi?

00:03:10,220 --> 00:03:17,000 [Yumi Lee]

Well, I think we'll have to go back to World War II [laughs], my mother. You know, we always have to blame our mother.



00:03:17,000 --> 00:03:17,480 [Micaela Cronin]

Yes. [laughs]

00:03:17,480 --> 00:03:44,560 [Yumi Lee]

She was- she was a child during World War II in rural Japan, growing up in a dirt-poor farming family because my grandparents were labourers in rural Japan. She told me that her family was required to hand over their pots and pans, et cetera, anything metal, to the Imperial Army. They had come round to the villages to collect as much metal as they could-

00:03:44,560 --> 00:03:44,800 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:03:44,800 --> 00:03:55,140 [Yumi Lee]

... melt them down for the war effort. And she'd just lie awake at night wondering if the planes flying overhead were made of her saucepans.

00:03:55,140 --> 00:03:56,180 [Micaela Cronin]

Oh, wow.

00:03:56,180 --> 00:04:11,180 [Yumi Lee]

Yeah. So that image has never left me, and- and neither did the contradiction I- I grew up with because I spent my childhood in Malaysia, where the memory of the Japanese occupation was very much alive.

00:04:11,180 --> 00:04:11,780 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:04:11,780 --> 00:04:35,690 [Yumi Lee]

And my mother's home country, Japan, was viewed as really, very cruel and violent, but, you know, that's not who I saw at home. This was a woman who's shaped by hardship growing up really very poor, couldn't even go to university, and she couldn't even kill a chicken, you know, let alone machine gun an entire village down.

00:04:35,690 --> 00:04:35,770 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:04:35,770 --> 00:04:56,060 [Yumi Lee]

So, there's that dissonance between that narrative of national violence and the- the- the quiet truth of individuals suffering, and that shapes the way that I see the world. It's- it's made me question every sort of easy story about us versus them-

00:04:56,120 --> 00:04:56,520 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:04:56,520 --> 00:05:48,440 [Yumi Lee]

... so, it's made me really sceptical of a system that blame people in- instead of, uh, being more compassionate and driving for justice. And, you know, I grew up in Malaysia where I was very much a second-class citizen because of the way the narrative of the nation is structured, and as a girl in a deeply patriarchal society. So, I didn't realise h- how much of that really impacted me until I was much older. I left Malaysia when I was 15, and I now, you know, am very privileged to call Australia home. But between the time I left Malaysia to the time to today, I've been able to live in Vietnam and Nepal, where I witnessed human trafficking-

00:05:48,440 --> 00:05:48,920 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm



00:05:48,920 --> 00:07:12,028 [Yumi Lee]

... because I worked in a charity in Vietnam especially, which rescued women and children from trafficking. And I- I spent time with survivors of sexual exploitation, and that's when I realized that the trauma doesn't end when the abuse does. You know, that work of rehabilitation, reintegration and reclaiming your, your own sense of being after, you know, years of abuse is really slow, painful work. And that journey is really painful. So that's what motivates me. It's thinking about all of these women who are trying to... And children, who are trying to make their way through the very dark passage maze of life. And the knowledge that we really don't get the same start in life. And I, I don't think you can see, you know, incredible levels of suffering experienced by some people and look away. So I am fortunate. I have this really idealistic view that the world can be safer and better. And now I've had many opportunities to try to contribute to a world that isn't as cruel as it can be. So that's what motivates me, Micaela.

00:07:12,028 --> 00:07:44,508 [Micaela Cronin]

Yumi, what an incredible image and journey from that story about growing up and handing over all your saucepans to working across multiple countries. And it's so powerful the way you describe that has shaped your approach to social justice in the work that you do that... Uh, and I think I have very much seen that in your advocacy that deep kind of compassion for people at, at an individual level, but awareness of the systemic nature of discrimination that many people face.

00:07:44,508 --> 00:07:57,408 [Yumi Lee]

Yeah, Micaela, I mean, I, I have been fortunate to have experienced a lot of things with many different groups of women, and I have seen the depths of what poverty actually means.

00:07:57,408 --> 00:07:57,418 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:07:57,418 --> 00:08:18,928 [Yumi Lee]

You know, I've been to the slums in the park where the living conditions are just so horrific, and knowing full well that it, it doesn't need to be this way. So it is that sense of, uh, you know, it doesn't need to be this way that drives people like you, you know, our listeners, to keep going really.

00:08:18,928 --> 00:08:58,288 [Micaela Cronin]

Absolutely. Absolutely, it doesn't need to be this way, Yumi. So that's what... That's what this conversation is about, is thinking about what does the future look like. So you know we have Australia, uh, and we are very lucky to have a national commitment to ending gender-based violence in a generation. So what I'm trying to have conversations with people about is, let's imagine that that commitment has been successful, that we have seen the fruits of that commitment and that we do create a safe future for all, particularly women and children. What's your vision for 2050? What does it look like if we've been successful?

00:08:58,288 --> 00:09:02,548 [Yumi Lee]

Well, Micaela, [laughs] by 2050, I'll be 85.

00:09:02,548 --> 00:09:02,577 [Micaela Cronin]

Ah-ha.

00:09:02,577 --> 00:09:04,068 [Yumi Lee]

Hopefully healthy.

00:09:04,068 --> 00:09:04,348 [Micaela Cronin]

Yeah.

00:09:04,348 --> 00:09:06,457 [Yumi Lee]

Hopefully still agitating for justice-



00:09:06,457 --> 00:09:07,748 [Micaela Cronin]

I'm sure you will be

00:09:07,748 --> 00:09:09,908 [Yumi Lee]

... in some small way, Micaela.

00:09:09,908 --> 00:09:09,928 [Micaela Cronin]

Yeah.

00:09:09,928 --> 00:09:26,168 [Yumi Lee]

But more than anything, I hope that we're all living in a country that has finally learned how to care. Now, selfishly, I hope age care by that stage is no longer the place where abuse hides in plain sight.

00:09:26,168 --> 00:09:26,318 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

00:09:26,318 --> 00:09:32,028 [Yumi Lee]

Because right now, we know that at least 50 sexual assaults happen in aged care every week.

00:09:32,028 --> 00:09:32,608 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:09:32,608 --> 00:09:43,948 [Yumi Lee]

So in 25 years time, I want to see that number driven down so low that it shocks future generations to know it ever existed.

00:09:43,948 --> 00:09:44,508 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:09:44,508 --> 00:10:39,598 [Yumi Lee]

And I want care, whether it's for older people, children or anyone who's vulnerable, to be rooted in dignity and not denial that it actually happens. And, you know, as, as you know, it's much bigger than aged care. So my vision for 2050 is of a country, Australia, where gender-based violence is not treated as inevitable or, you know, in inverted commas, too complex, but entirely preventable, where we really no longer tolerate the casual misogyny that underpins so much of the harm and that our systems don't retraumatise survivors. And in 25 years, I want our communities to be more caring. So when someone is in crisis, they're met with care and not brutality. I know that sounds a bit crazy, but it... That is true, Micaela.

00:10:39,598 --> 00:10:39,608 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:10:39,608 --> 00:10:40,948 [Yumi Lee]

Because earlier this month-

00:10:40,948 --> 00:10:40,958 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:10:40,958 --> 00:11:12,528 [Yumi Lee]

... when I was briefly overseas, I read about a 46-year-old woman. She's so... That she's no longer young, she's, you know, on the cusp of seriously aging, in Western Sydney, experiencing a mental health episode. Unfortunately, she was naked, she was vulnerable, and very clearly in distress. Now, what happened? Two police officers responded by emptying not one, but two cans of pepper spray on her.

00:11:12,528 --> 00:11:12,848 [Micaela Cronin]

No, Yumi.



00:11:12,848 --> 00:11:23,367 [Yumi Lee]

And then they physically assaulted her. Now, what really cut me to the quick wasn't just the violence, it was that targeted cruelty.

00:11:23,367 --> 00:11:23,738 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:11:23,738 --> 00:11:26,048 [Yumi Lee]

They pepper sprayed her vagina.

00:11:26,048 --> 00:11:26,108 [Micaela Cronin]

Wow.

00:11:26,108 --> 00:11:28,458 [Yumi Lee]

So this... It was not about safety.

00:11:28,458 --> 00:11:28,468 [Micaela Cronin]

No. Yeah.

00:11:28,468 --> 00:12:20,028 [Yumi Lee]

It was about humiliation, about power, and about misogyny. And in 2050, that won't happen not because we've added more training modules, but because we've re-humanised our institutions because people like you, Micaela, the advocates, educators have forced a cultural reckoning and people in power have finally listened. So I know we can't wipe out all harm, but I think we will have thresholds. We'll have reached the tipping point where the culture of abuse is just not tolerated. It's collectively rejected, and where our human rights are not aspirational, but it's automatic. Now, that's the future I want to be 85-years-old in. And so that's what we have to fight for now, really.

00:12:20,028 --> 00:12:21,748 [Micaela Cronin]

Yeah. Exactly. Right now.

00:12:21,748 --> 00:12:22,007 [Yumi Lee]

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

00:12:22,008 --> 00:12:37,835 [Micaela Cronin]

Right now, we have to be. And you are, and many others are. So, Yumi-You get to travel to your vision for 2050 for a few days, what is it that you would, what would you want to know? What would you be curious about when you're there?

00:12:37,835 --> 00:12:53,435 [Yumi Lee]

Um, there's a few things. Number one, I'd start by walking into a news agency, if such a thing still exists, and I want to pick up whatever passes for a newspaper then, and I want to know what are we paying attention to?

00:12:53,435 --> 00:12:53,856 [Micaela Cronin]

Hmm.

00:12:53,856 --> 00:13:33,425 [Yumi Lee]

And what is being considered newsworthy? I mean, are we still obsessed with celebrities and what they're eating and whether they've had plastic surgery, etc., or are we really learning to interrogate the systems that shape our lives? And I want to know how people are understanding our world, and, you know, have we moved beyond the clickbait, and are we learning how to think critically about the forces behind this inequality and violence? And I also want to check the national budget line by line...



00:13:33,425 --> 00:13:33,425 [Micaela Cronin]
[laughs]

00:13:33,425 --> 00:13:38,165 [Yumi Lee]
... and I want to know whether our funding priorities reflect...

00:13:38,165 --> 00:13:38,165 [Micaela Cronin]
Yeah

00:13:38,165 --> 00:14:58,235 [Yumi Lee]
... our human rights, or whether they're still dictated by powerful corporate lobbies. And I want to see a budget that properly pays the social sector workers properly as a central investment in our country's wellbeing. And I want to see aged care, housing, disability support and violence prevention fully funded. And I want to know whether just taxation exists and, you know, so that those who profit the most financially contribute the most. And I want to ask the question, what happened to the boys and men who have been pulled into these toxic currents of online hate? You know, to... What have we done to reach the generations of boys who've been funnelled into the worlds of Andrew Tate, the incel forums and, and violent misogyny? Did we leave them there, confirming their worst fears about themselves and the world, or did we build bridges? Did we create the systems that taught them that their worth isn't tied up in domination and control, but in empathy and connection? So that's what I want to know.

00:14:58,235 --> 00:15:43,575 [Micaela Cronin]
Yumi, you're the person I want to send forward to do the investigating. They're very intelligent questions to be asking and thinking about what we need to do and what we would be looking for. Because that's where the clues are, isn't it? If those things are in place, if those are the things that will help create the future that, that we are striving for, we need to look at what we can put in place now. So, Yumi, you've gone forward and you've seen what those things are that will give us the future in 2050 that you are striving for. If you had the ability to make any change from your perspective, from the things that you're thinking about, what's the one thing that you would do right now to start us on that path to achieving a violence-free 2050?

00:15:43,575 --> 00:16:50,276 [Yumi Lee]
Well, Micaela, apart from a complete brain transplant of people who are in decision-making positions, which is not possible, one thing I'd really love to do would be to completely restructure how our governments operate. I want to have the language of consultation, lived experience and community-led solutions not as slogans and words that have become hollow, but actual realisation of those words, where survivors and marginalised communities are actually allowed and given the power to change and set policies and funding. Because if we're serious about ending violence, not just managing or reacting to it, then we really need to dismantle the scaffolding that keeps power in the, in the hands of those who are unaffected.

00:16:50,276 --> 00:16:50,555 [Micaela Cronin]
Hmm.

00:16:50,555 --> 00:17:56,976 [Yumi Lee]
So that means we embed co-governance at every level of policy development, budgeting and service design. So that means giving women, older women, First Nations women, people with disability, migrants and, and those with lived experience of violence not just a voice, but authority, resources and structural influence. So it's not about symbolism or tokenism. It has to be about effectiveness. We just cannot end violence with systems that replicate the very dynamics of exclusion and control that allow violence to thrive. So that power has to move. That central power has to move, authority has to be shared, and our systems have to be brave enough to be transformed by all of us who have historically been silenced and marginalised. So it has to be built from the ground up.

00:17:56,976 --> 00:18:14,336 [Micaela Cronin]



Hmm. Well, that's kind of transformational change, will, will require some really transformational shifts, and that's, that's a very insightful view about, about where we need to start. I really appreciate your thoughtful contribution to this conversation, Yumi. Thank you.

00:18:14,336 --> 00:18:22,815 [Yumi Lee]

You're most welcome, Micaela. Thank you for giving us an opportunity to have a good look into the future that we want to see.

00:18:22,815 --> 00:18:23,695 [Micaela Cronin]

Thank you.

00:18:23,696 --> 00:19:22,456 [Female Voiceover]

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