



Episode 12: Sophie Cusworth

Transcript

00:00:03,620 --> 00:00:18,780 [Sophie Cusworth]

My vision of 2050 is one where safety isn't something that you have to earn or fight for, or be lucky or privileged to have, but it's just a given. It's just assumed.

00:00:18,780 --> 00:00:51,660 [Female Voiceover]

Welcome to Voices Towards 2050: Ending Gender-Based Violence, the official podcast series of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. Please be aware that this podcast discusses topics related to domestic, family and sexual violence, which may be distressing for some listeners. Support is available. If you need assistance, please contact 1800RESPECT or reach out to your local support services. Thank you for joining us.

00:00:51,660 --> 00:01:04,410 [Micaela Cronin]

Today I'm delighted to welcome a guest whose tireless advocacy has helped shaped the path towards the future that we've been talking about in this podcast. Sophie Cusworth, thanks for joining me for this conversation about the future today.

00:01:04,410 --> 00:01:06,640 [Sophie Cusworth]

Thanks so much for having me, Micaela.

00:01:06,640 --> 00:02:28,480 [Micaela Cronin]

First, I wanna start by acknowledging that today I'm on the lands of Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, where I live. And to pay my deep respects to their elders, past and present, for their care of these lands and communities, and for their ongoing generosity and wisdom. My commitment is to work and live as an ally in this role and always. I just wanna take a moment, Sophie, now to introduce you and the incredible work that you do. Sophie Cusworth is an incredible advocate and leader in the realm of gender equality and the rights of people with disability, and all forms of gender-based violence. I know this from the work that I have done and seen her doing. Sophie is the chief executive officer of Women with Disabilities Australia, where she is at the forefront of shaping policy and driving change for women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities. Sophie has contributed to policy including as a working group member for the National Autism Strategy and NDIS reforms, and many other committees, I know. She also has a background in law, specialising in employment safety and discrimination, and a deep academic focus on gender studies. Sophie's expertise is vast. Thank you so much for joining me. I know that your work has been instrumental in pushing for greater gender equality and access to rights, and a platform for people with disabilities. And I'm excited to speak to you today, Sophie.

00:02:28,480 --> 00:02:31,100 [Sophie Cusworth]

Thank you so much. It's so great to be here.

00:02:31,100 --> 00:02:39,180 [Micaela Cronin]

So, Sophie, let's start with telling me a bit about what motivates you in the work that you do to strive for a different future.

00:02:39,180 --> 00:03:04,299 [Sophie Cusworth]

I think my disability experience and disability identity has actually played a really significant role in motivating this work, and in a number of different ways. Like many other autistic people, I have a really strong sense of justice. And something we talk about in the autistic community is the concept of justice sensitivity, or the idea that many autistic people are really attuned to when something is unfair-



00:03:04,300 --> 00:03:04,460 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:03:04,460 --> 00:03:37,859 [Sophie Cusworth]

... and really motivated to correct injustice, so I think that's been a big part of shaping my motivation. But like many other autistic women, I've also had experiences of sexual harassment and violence, and we know that women with disability experience higher rates and specific forms of gender-based violence. And for autistic women, some studies have indicated that nine out of ten of us have experienced sexual violence in our lifetimes. And we're not just experiencing greater rights of violence, but also specific barriers to support and justice-

00:03:37,860 --> 00:03:38,160 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:03:38,160 --> 00:03:56,600 [Sophie Cusworth]

... and are more likely to have our reports dismissed or ignored. I remember as a teenager, after I'd had a series of experiences of violence from strangers in public, having a psychologist suggest that if I just changed the way I moved or held my body, I could avoid being targeted.

00:03:56,600 --> 00:03:56,880 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:03:56,880 --> 00:04:28,080 [Sophie Cusworth]

But as we know, this isn't about how autistic and disabled women exist in the world. It's about perpetration of violence, and we know women with disability are not inherently vulnerable. We're made vulnerable by ableist attitudes and systems that don't serve us. And we're targeted by perpetrators who take advantage of those system failures, so I'm really motivated to address those systems. And I remember being a university student and hearing the phrase, "The personal is political," for the first time-

00:04:28,080 --> 00:04:28,650 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm.

00:04:28,650 --> 00:04:49,979 [Sophie Cusworth]

... and feeling so moved by the idea that personal experiences can be traced to or shaped by someone's location within a system of power relationships and structures. And that's something that I've held really close ever since in my work, to look at how power structures and systems sustain inequality and cause harm, and how we can change them.

00:04:49,980 --> 00:05:11,659 [Micaela Cronin]

Sophie, that's such an articulate way to describe the connection between the personal and the political, and what, what it is that we need to do to change the structures so that everybody, but particularly the way you've described young women like you are not held responsible for what happens to them, but are able to feel safe in the future.

00:05:11,660 --> 00:05:12,780 [Sophie Cusworth]

Absolutely.

00:05:12,780 --> 00:05:41,880 [Micaela Cronin]

And we know... Look, we know, with the national plan, we do have a national commitment to ending gender-based violence, and there is a focus on that. There has been a great focus on that, in terms of achieving those levels of change in a generation. And of course, also, the Disability Royal Commission and th- the recommendations from that which you have talked about. So, if those... If all of th- that work and the visioning and the planning is successful, what would your vision for 2050 be?



00:05:41,880 --> 00:06:01,599 [Sophie Cusworth]

Hmm. My vision of 2050 is one where safety isn't something that you have to earn or fight for, or be lucky or privileged to have, but it's just a given. It's just assumed. I'd like to see a future in which women and gender diverse people with disability aren't overrepresented as victim-survivors of violence anymore-

00:06:01,600 --> 00:06:02,400 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm

00:06:02,400 --> 00:06:54,072 [Sophie Cusworth]

... but we're really thriving in safe and inclusive and accessible communities. And I think a critical part of this is ensuring that people with disability have the same choices as everyone else, so that where we live, who we live with, where we want to work, what we do with our bodies. And as you've mentioned, Australia's Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disabilities has shown that we have a really long way to go to get there, and to get to upholding the rights of people with disability. It found that we experience significant rates of violence in all areas of life, including our homes, families and relationships, as well as public settings, schools, hospitals, disability services, and that the segregation from the rest of the community that people with disability experience drives and enables violence-

00:06:54,072 --> 00:06:54,192 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm

00:06:54,192 --> 00:07:28,432 [Sophie Cusworth]

... and poses barriers to, to seeking support and, and justice. And we know that in some segregated settings and disability service settings, women with disability are experiencing gender-based violence, but are prevented from seeking help and accessing recognition and redress and recovery. And we also know that in some cases, victim survivors are forced to stay in violent relationships or settings because they risk losing essential disability supports if they leave. So, in that vision, people with disability are no longer segregated from the rest of the community.

00:07:28,432 --> 00:07:29,212 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm.

00:07:29,212 --> 00:07:56,912 [Sophie Cusworth]

Our rights are upheld. We have the same access to health, public and political life, learning, work, having a family, living free from discrimination as everyone else, and we're represented in every community, every public space, every profession. And the disability rep- supports that we receive uphold those rights, our safety, our dignity and our autonomy. And really, women with disability are leading that change in that vision.

00:07:56,912 --> 00:08:00,762 [Micaela Cronin]

And look, Sophie, those people do need to lead, don't they?

00:08:00,762 --> 00:08:00,862 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm-hmm.

00:08:00,862 --> 00:08:08,892 [Micaela Cronin]

Because they are the ones who deeply understand that level of over-representation and, and at the same time, under-representation-

00:08:08,892 --> 00:08:09,592 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm-hmm



00:08:09,592 --> 00:08:32,652 [Micaela Cronin]

... means that there is really unique knowledge and wisdom that is held within those communities about what the problems are, where the things in the systems are that most need to change that will help us get there. So that really, really resonates with me, what you're talking about in terms of the future, women with a disability not being either over-represented or under-represented in, and in every space.

00:08:32,652 --> 00:08:33,192 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm-hmm.

00:08:33,192 --> 00:08:52,832 [Micaela Cronin]

So that's an incredibly s- powerful vision of the future. If you were able to travel to that future, 2050, and spend some time there, spend a few days, what would you be looking for to see what is important in terms of the changes in 2050? What questions would you have? Where would you go looking?

00:08:52,832 --> 00:09:07,892 [Sophie Cusworth]

Hmm, I love this question because there is just so much [laughs] that I want to know. So many questions. I'd want to know how we built the real will and desire to invest in inclusive disability, responsive prevention and response, how we built-

00:09:07,892 --> 00:09:08,051 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:09:08,052 --> 00:09:36,972 [Sophie Cusworth]

... that cultural movement, that momentum, and how we got people to really deeply listen, care and act. I'd want to know how we disrupted the siloing that we so often see in relation to disability and gender issues, where we find ourselves, women with disability, excluded from mainstream narratives, mainstream prevention and response frameworks because our issues are seen as, you know, disability issues for disability-

00:09:36,972 --> 00:09:37,021 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm

00:09:37,021 --> 00:09:57,832 [Sophie Cusworth]

... services to respond to. And we hear this all the time, people being directed back and forth across systems that don't meet their needs because they aren't designed to be both gender and disability responsive at once. So, I'd love to know how we resolve that issue. I want to know how we navigated apathy and backlash, and did it-

00:09:57,832 --> 00:09:57,862 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm-hmm

00:09:57,862 --> 00:10:52,932 [Sophie Cusworth]

... safely, what we did differently in our education systems, media, communities to build knowledge and compassion and that drive to make change, how we mobilised people. And from a disability perspective, how did we work with other movements of marginalised communities to uplift the voices of, of those most impacted? And how have the voices and leadership of people with disability been centred in leading the change? I'd want to know how we change the conditions that enable violence, including segregation for people with disability, and the causes to perpetration and, and the cycle of violence, and how we shifted from treating women with disability as vulnerable and at risk to recognising us as really powerful leaders. And I think, as you mentioned before, you know, experts in our own lives-

00:10:52,932 --> 00:10:53,021 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm



00:10:53,021 --> 00:10:54,952 [Sophie Cusworth]

... and the solutions that will work for us.

00:10:54,952 --> 00:11:33,072 [Micaela Cronin]

That deep listening, really, another guest talked about that deep listening being one of the places to start, because I do think that's such a good list of questions, Sophie. Wouldn't it be fabulous? And we need to really be interrogating because the answers are in the questions that you've raised about where we need to go, breaking down those silos, both in terms of service provision, but also leadership. I think part of what we see is that siloing of focus and leadership in ways that we really need to be learning and collaborating more with each other if we're going to get such fundamental transformational change.

00:11:33,072 --> 00:11:38,512 [Sophie Cusworth]

Absolutely. And I think it comes down to, you know, designing with the most impacted in mind.

00:11:38,512 --> 00:11:38,771 [Micaela Cronin]

Yes.

00:11:38,771 --> 00:11:40,952 [Sophie Cusworth]

And with the most impacted leading the way.

00:11:40,952 --> 00:11:48,812 [Micaela Cronin]

Yes, I absolutely agree. Nobody understands where the real challenges and problems and opportunities and-

00:11:48,812 --> 00:11:48,892 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm-hmm

00:11:48,892 --> 00:12:08,292 [Micaela Cronin]

... benefits are better than the people who are most impacted currently. So Sophie, I'm gonna give you the ability to make any change right now that y- we need to get us on that path from your perspective. What's the one thing you would do, right now, to get us on the pathway towards achieving a violence-free 2050?

00:12:08,292 --> 00:12:22,346 [Sophie Cusworth]

Impossibl... one of the things that I would do is to act on what we already know, what we've heard-

00:12:22,346 --> 00:12:22,386 [Micaela Cronin]

Yes

00:12:22,386 --> 00:13:17,996 [Sophie Cusworth]

... throughout the Disability Royal Commission. And as we're saying, fund and implement those solutions that centre the leadership, the rights, the choice, the freedom, and safety of women and girls in all of our diversity. You know, people with disability who have experienced violence, as you say, they know what the solutions are for them. And we need to talk about how ableism interacts with sexism to shape the realities of violence for women, girls, and gender diverse people with disability, including the specific settings and relationships in which we experience violence. The types of violence we experience, including how disability support systems and services can be weaponised in perpetration of violence. And people with disability know that best, and, and know those solutions. So I, I wanna act on what we already know in really bold, ambitious, transformative ways.

00:13:17,996 --> 00:13:18,376 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm.



00:13:18,376 --> 00:13:36,316 [Sophie Cusworth]

And linked to that, I think I'd wanna change how we think and talk about rights and safety in Australia. So we know our rights, we can assert them, we have better mechanisms for upholding them and accessing justice, redress, and healing when they've been violated.

00:13:36,316 --> 00:13:42,536 [Micaela Cronin]

Mm. I think that that's very powerful. Two, two key takeaways for me. Do what we already know we need to do-

00:13:42,536 --> 00:13:42,876 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm

00:13:42,876 --> 00:13:58,676 [Micaela Cronin]

... just, just act on the recommendations that are already there, and that pace around taking a rights-based approach and listening to those most impacted. If we can get some of those things right. And that's the point, Sophie, is that those things are achievable. We already do-

00:13:58,676 --> 00:13:58,976 [Sophie Cusworth]

Mm

00:13:58,976 --> 00:14:08,616 [Micaela Cronin]

... know a lot. It's, it's how we can unite and be very focused and targeted and, and hold ourselves and each other accountable to achieving those things.

00:14:08,616 --> 00:14:19,996 [Sophie Cusworth]

Absolutely. And doesn't that inspire such hope to think, you know, we do have solutions laid out for us. We do have a roadmap. This can be achievable if we put our minds to it.

00:14:19,996 --> 00:14:43,056 [Micaela Cronin]

Excellent. Well, I look forward to continuing to work alongside and support and amplify your work, Sophie, because I think your voice and the work that Women with Disabilities Australia is doing will really help shine light on, on that hope and the strong, muscular hope about that we need to make these changes for the future.

00:14:43,056 --> 00:14:45,556 [Sophie Cusworth]

Thanks so much, Micaela. It's such a pleasure.

00:14:45,556 --> 00:14:48,436 [Micaela Cronin]

Thank you.

00:14:48,436 --> 00:15:44,896 [Female Voiceover]

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