

[MUSIC PLAYING] SPEAKER 1: Hello and welcome to the Harvard Center for International Development's weekly podcast. Following the brutal rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi in 2012. Filmmaker Leslee Udwin traveled to India to examine the situation, an attempt to understand what led to such a violent attack.

She released her documentary India's Daughter in 2015, and subsequently founded Think Equal. A non-profit organization with the mission to educate young children, in social-emotional learning to reduce violence throughout the world.

Today on CID speaker series podcast Abali Lateef student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education interviews Leslee Udwin who discusses the difficult journey of making the film. And how this experience inspired her to begin to Think Equal Global Education initiative.

SPEAKER 2: Leslie, thank you for being with us today. I've been looking forward to this interview and I can't wait to introduce you to our audience. Just to give context to this interview at Harvard University, today, we are screening your documentary, India's Daughter. Which you directed and produced. My first question would be what got you there?

SPEAKER 3: What took me there Abila was not the darkness of the event itself. It was the response and the light of the response to that event. The most beautiful protests I've ever seen. Hundreds of thousands of men and women on the streets demanding an end to violence against women. And I was persuaded that there was hope, that indeed this might herald the end.

So I felt I had to go and lend my talents and skills to amplifying those voices of those protesters.

SPEAKER 2: Well that was obviously a long journey. What was the lowest point?

SPEAKER 3: The lowest point I remember vividly as if it happened yesterday. Was a morning where I woke up at around 4:30 AM, in my dingy little guest house hotel room. And I was wet from head to toe. I was shaking, I was shivering, my heart was racing, and I thought I need to get to hospital. There's something very wrong with me.

This episode happened about two weeks after I interviewed a man who had raped a five-year-old girl. And I know that this panic attack, which is what I later realized it was, was related to that interview.

And it was my lowest point but in a way also became my highest point. Because what I did was phone home, working out the time difference thinking, well, the kids will be asleep because it's after midnight. My daughter was 13 at the time, my son 16. And I thought my husband will answer the phone and I will get him to book me on a flight. Or to find me a hospital nearby because I can't stay here and die in this room.

And my daughter picked up the phone because there was no discipline in the house when I was away. And she basically started at the age of 13 talking me down off this panic attack. Telling me to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth and doing this a number of times.

Then telling me to write all my problems down in a list, and start the following day by dealing with the little problems first.

And then she said these words, and I'll never forget them they're etched on my memory forever. She said, "and mummy, you are not coming home because I and my generation of girls are relying on you."

SPEAKER 2: Incredible.

SPEAKER 3: And that was it. That was my lowest point and my highest point.

SPEAKER 2: Incredible. The general sentiment is that it's one of the most difficult documentaries to watch. Do you have any words of encouragement?

SPEAKER 3: Yes, I am so completely and utterly optimistic. Now you're right, it was a difficult film to make, there is no question. But it was the most privileged journey I've ever been on in my life. I don't regret one second of it. And it led me to understand what I personally have to do.

And what I have to do is ensure that ministries of education, governments, teachers, parents, people at large ask this question and answer it. The question is, how can we as a world still exercise an education system in which we are making it compulsory for children to learn numeracy and literacy?

In a world in which we have computers, and calculators, and spell checks, and Google Translate. How can we be focused on that only? And deem it to be optional for our children to learn how to value one another. Or optional for our children to understand how to deal with respect and dignity in relationships and have healthy relationships?

Until and unless we actually bring home the core purpose of early years education, which is to give our children the foundation in that respect and value of other human beings. Until we do that, we are failing our children, we're being negligent and irresponsible. And we are actually partly responsible for them growing up to commit suicide, to get addicted to substances, to rape, to be violent. We have a role to play in that.

Unless and until we give the vaccination against that the antidote. Give them the opportunity to be nurtured in the skills and competencies they need for a positive life outcome.

SPEAKER 2: Thank you Leslie. You started your career as an actress, and a filmmaker, and are now a human rights activist. How and why did you make this transition?

SPEAKER 3: Well, I made the transition because I've come to understand much as I love film and value what film can do. That actually there is a big limitation because films can really only create awareness. And awareness is important of course. But we have awareness, how much more awareness do we need? If you're thinking about violence and I'm not just for this instance talking about gender based violence, any kind of violence. How much more awareness do we need?

About-- the fact that women are being treated as second class citizens. Or boys are being radicalized in many ways to see the other of some form as of less value. The bottom line now for me and it's partly an age thing, it's partly because I can see the end of my life ahead of me.

I'm 62 years old. I have a limited number of years left and all I want now to devote my time to is action, is solutions, enough awareness. Awareness isn't going to really get us there. Mindset change will get us there and it's the only thing that will. And I now have to put all my energies, all my time and efforts toward achieving mindset change. And there's only one way to do that and that is through early childhood education, up to the age of six.

SPEAKER 2: And that is a further transition from human rights activist to now being a founder, CEO of Think Equal. Tell us about your organization and why now?

SPEAKER 3: So Think Equal is an initiative, a program and a movement, very significantly it must be a movement. It addresses what is a major gap in the education system. I believe that numeracy and Literacy are just a small part of the story as far as what our duty is towards preparing our children for their lives.

And numeracy and literacy pretty much prepare them for the labor market. But what about preparing our children for positive outcomes in relationships? Preparing them to respect and value one another. To control their emotions to even know what their emotions are. So there is so much the children need to learn if they are going to be productive, happy, global citizens, who have positive outcomes in their lives.

I mean, if you asked a parent and I am a parent. If you asked me what is more important to have my child happy or rich? I would always say happy, happy is rich. But if my children don't have the basic foundation for happiness, it's relational I mean it depends on other people. You can't be happy by yourself in an island. I would say it is of crucial importance for me to ensure that my child is educated, in a way that leads to that.

SPEAKER 2: The Think Equal Program is a three year program targeted toward three to six-year-olds. Could you tell us very briefly about the neuroplasticity of the brain and the whole architecture of the brain that is behind this age group target that you have set for your program?

SPEAKER 3: Yes. Well, it is a fact that in terms of brain development and the development of the child. It starts before three no question, scientists are now clear that it starts prior to birth. So pre-birth to six is what we should be saying. The reason that we start three is that we recognize how difficult it is to get into the homes. We need a system if we're going to change the system.

And we want to be unrealistic about our ambitions. So there are many countries now where there is a network and organization of preschools. So we start three because where we can get hold of that network that is

where we go in and start to educate at scale. But sometimes we start at the age of five. For example, in South Africa, children don't start learning until six.

And there is one organized pre-K class as well, which is a reception class which starts at five. So in South Africa we'll be starting with the five-year-olds for maximum impact. Because 96% of the schools have reception classes. Whereas the early years centers are still in some disarray and not yet properly registered. So it does depend but the three to six broadly is early years education as a system.

SPEAKER 2: So you clearly reach for as wide an impact as possible, depending on the country. A usual question I'm sure you get is, are the illustrations of the books, and the language, the story customized for different parts of the world?

SPEAKER 3: Some are, but not always because one of our ambitions is to create global citizens. And it's very important for us to see people from all over the world and not fear them from the earliest age. So we have made a point of having our authors and illustrators come from far flung places. Obviously, we can't cover every single country, and every single culture. But we do keep that as sacred.

However, when it comes to books that deal with for example self-esteem, we're very careful to re-illustrate for each country. But in re-illustrating, we are not just showing the dominant look in that country, or the dominant ethnicity or culture. We're showing the diversity because at the end of the day Ubuntu is the philosophy which underlies Think Equal. And Ubuntu is a beautiful African philosophy, which means, you are the other me and I am the other you, and we can only be human together effectively.

So we are very, very jealous of keeping this diversity and celebrating it, across the globe.

SPEAKER 2: Leslie one push back that the social-emotional learning space faces globally is that, there is little evaluation data that can be obtained from such an intervention, or is that true even? Can you share your perspective on this.

SPEAKER 3: I don't think that's true. If you are measurement obsessed, and data obsessed which many in the world now are. Contact me I'll give you a big fat document replete with many evaluations of social and emotional intelligence. And what it has been proven even longitudinally over 25 and 40 years studies to lead to.

And you'll be amazed and I don't of course mean you Abila because you are enlightened I know, you're working with me. But I mean anybody who is thinking Oh, this is hard to measure. It's not hard to measure, we've measured it we've had an evaluation by Dr. Craig Bailey from Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence into our program in Botswana. And let me tell you the three of the eight measures.

And they're very critical measures these, they are reduction of aggression and anger. Reduction of a measure called anxious and withdrawn. And increase of social competence. And the increase in the latter and decrease in the former to are one and a half times the

variable. They are through the roof. Incredibly exciting results and they concur absolutely with the feedback we're getting from the teachers, which I would also joy in sharing with anybody who wanted to see that document.

This is universal. Human beings are much more like each other than they are unlike each other. And this is working across developed countries, developing countries, medium, high and low income countries. It's just astonishing we're in 13 countries and your heart would stop when you hear the stories of the miraculous transformation of children after mere months of this program. Let alone the full three years.

SPEAKER 2: Wonderful. Thank you. What if someone in the audience wants to implement the Think Equal Program in their country, how can they contact you?

SPEAKER 3: Leslee with a double e dot udwin u d w i n @ thinkequal.org. I literally make myself available to anybody who wants to become a Think Equal Warrior around the world. We depend on, we rely on people joining this movement and helping us. It's a big world out there. And we're a small team were three years old as an organization.

We need support and help of every kind. Obviously resources young organizations always need that. The more resources we have, the more people we can hire. But we also need volunteers and people who will take it upon themselves to bring this to their country.

For example, we don't typically deal with single schools. We will give a single school the materials and they will sign a contract to say that they're accepting these materials for free. We don't charge for any of our materials, we don't charge for training but we do expect back the respect that they will implement the program in whole and not in parts. And that we can somehow control quality through this pact.

So we will give the materials electronically to single schools and they can print them up and use them. However, what we really want is, 40 school populations, of preschools or reception classes. 20 of whom will implement and 20 who won't so that we can have a multi-site randomized control test to begin with. That's our model, we start with that. And then we scale the following year hopefully to one city or one district. And then the following year to five districts and so we go until we're filling the entire country.

Because this has to scale this is every single child's right to have this social-emotional intelligence mediated in the early years. And so every child must get it.

SPEAKER 2: Absolutely.

Thank you for offering your time Leslee it was wonderful talking to you and I would like to end by repeating your words to me yesterday, "Yes, it is a forbidding piece to watch but please brave it." Thank you.

SPEAKER 3: Thank you so much. I've really loved being here at Harvard.

SPEAKER 1: If you want to learn more about CID's research and events, please visit cid.harvard.edu. See you next week.

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